

## Hand Habits — *Blue Reminder*

For artists who have built a creative practice centered around vulnerability, what could possibly feel more exposing? For Meg Duffy, the multi-instrumentalist and songwriter known as Hand Habits, it turns out there are things even more daunting than excavating unhappiness or grappling with personal identity.

“For this record I had set out to write less as a way to process grief, dredge up trauma, or consider heartache, and more as a way to tap into something that was surprisingly more challenging — to allow myself to feel into in the given moment-the decision I made to no longer shape shift when it came to the person I become in the face of love,” explains Duffy.

Recorded in Los Angeles alongside co-producer Joseph Lorge, *Blue Reminder* finds Duffy once again collaborating with an impressive coterie of musicians, including Alan Wyffels, Gregory Uhlmann (Duffy’s collaborator in Duffy x Uhlmann), Blake Mills, Tim Carr, Daniel Aged, and Joshua Johnson and Anna Butters of SML. Having spent a big part of the last decade on the road, both as a solo artist and as a touring member of Perfume Genius, Duffy’s affinity for playing live in a room with other musicians was the impetus for the record, which was largely tracked live.

“I recommend playing music with people who are probably better than you are,” jokes Duffy. “All of these musicians are such incredible listeners. They all made me play so much closer to the heart. You know, I learn a lot every time I make a record – about where my comfort zones can be pushed and, maybe more importantly, about trusting the process, trusting other people.

The twelve songs on *Blue Reminder* walk a kind of emotional tightrope between hope and a kind of quiet anxiety, the record itself battling around the question of what one does when happiness actually comes knocking. At the core of these songs the genuine joy of love and self-actualization are always balanced against the potential fear of losing those things once you’ve found them. ‘*I know the love we lose / Informs who we become*,’ Duffy sings on “More Today,” a song whose sentiment seems to infuse the entire record. In tracks like “Way it Goes” and “Wheel of Change” past loves and emotional collapse clear the way for what comes next, while true romantic love — prickly and complicated and deeply illuminating — looms large.

“Of course the weight of the past is always in the room with me when I sit down to write,” Duffy explains, “It is filtered through my way of making even the most precious moments imbued with something blue — the constant reminder is there — but I have spent so much time writing as a means to work through pain, or place blame on myself or others, and I am at a point in my life where I’m more interested in acceptance, forgiveness, and exploring what it means to need and be needed.”

This collection of songs largely eschew the more insular nature of earlier Hand Habits records, instead veering into the guitar-forward vibe of 90’s indie rock, with deftly assured songs that could exist in the same sonic universe with Aimee Mann or Neko Case, with the sort of left of center shifts in tone and lyrical observations that would not be out of place on a Cate Le Bon tune. Throughout the songs, guitars fuzz, drums move to the forefront, and the occasional horn or wurlitzer pass through. Everything feels elevated.

“I think it’s so corny to write love songs,” admits Duffy, who is somewhat loath to think of *Blue Reminder* as simply a love record. “I can’t deny that a lot of these are ostensibly love songs, but they are

also love songs through my very specific kind of lens. It is about how falling in love does feel both terrifying and exciting, but this record is about commitment in a lot of ways. Committing to a person, to an idea, to being a more honest version of yourself.

Nowhere on the record is this fraught emotional state more apparent than on “Dead Rat” – a song that takes on the all-too-familiar renter experience of the dead rodent inaccessibly moldering away somewhere within a wall, and turns it into a gently-strummed metaphor for understanding our own limitations. The smell is overwhelming. It becomes a metaphor for everything gone wrong. Set against a backdrop of guitar and restrained piano, the song ends with a paean to a lover: *“I know it’s because of your love I feel sorted out / When you came back home you opened all the windows / Put your arms around me / Told me it’s Ok to cry / ‘baby let it out”*

While tracks like “Bluebird of Happiness” and “Jasmine Blossoms” might be some of the ebullient songs that Duffy has ever written, there is a reason that “Blue Reminder” is not only the album’s title track, but also serves as the beating heart of the record. *“Will you take me as I am? / Oscillating between / A woman, a child, and a broken man”* sings Duffy, the music swelling around them. It is both the most beautiful song on the record and the most emotionally direct, the song closing with the lines, *“I’m afraid of losing you / I’ll do anything to prove my love is true / I feel lighter now.”*

“That’s the one I’m the most proud of,” says Duffy. “It’s my favorite song I’ve ever written, I think. I worked a really long time on it and was trying to do musical things that, in my previous attempts, I’d never felt quite satisfied with. It just felt like it encompassed everything about the record. It shows all of this vulnerability and it’s really just me showing up as the person who I am — which is a wreck most of the time — and what an incredible experience it has been to be accepted for the person I am.”

While Duffy doesn’t necessarily want the entire narrative around *Blue Reminder* to circle around romantic love, or to perhaps suggest that it’s *only* romantic love that allows us to be actualized or fulfilled, it does feel important to celebrate the joy of such things at a time when queer and trans people are largely being vilified. In a moment where there is so much fear and uncertainty, loudly articulating happiness and giving voice to healthy relationships feels like a profound pushback against all the darkness.

“When I reflect on how society can punish or cruelly imply a brokenness to anyone who lives in the margins of a limited range of what they consider normal, or imply they are the way they are because of a defect or illness, it’s hard not to internalize some of this way of thinking. I’ve done a lot of work to accept myself for who I am, and that I deserve to live as the truest version of myself, and that my mistakes and shortcomings are human, not as a result of my identity. That it is possible for queer/trans people to have healthy, loving, passionate, and functional lives and relationships. That we can be in and contribute to the community. That we can be loved *for*, not in spite of who we are. Even though we are living a nightmare right now in a lot of ways, this record is about living the dream. It’s a reminder that the dream is possible.”