Let's face it: There's no such thing as “real life”. There is only experience and the negotiations we undertake in order to share it with other people. On her second album *Blue Raspberry*, the New York-based songwriter Katy Kirby dives headlong into the artifice of intimacy: the glitter smeared across eyelid creases, the smiles switched on with an electric buzz, the synthetic rose scent all over someone who's made herself smell nice just for you. An exegesis of Kirby's first queer relationship, *Blue Raspberry* traces the crescendo and collapse of new love, savoring each gleaming shard of rock candy and broken glass along the way.

Originally from Spicewood, Texas, Kirby was living in Nashville when she started writing *Blue Raspberry*'s title track, the first of the album's songs to take shape. "'Blue Raspberry' is the oldest song on the record. I began to write it a month or so before I realized, *I think I’m queer*," she says. "There’s a tradition of yearning in country love songs. I like the male yearning songs better, usually. I started writing 'Blue Raspberry,' and I was thinking about, if I was in love with a woman, what would I love about her? Especially if she was someone that I couldn’t touch, but that I was pining for. What would I be caught on? And I thought that I would probably be particularly charmed by the choices she made on how to look after she woke up in the morning. I thought about tackiness, and the ways that’s a dirty word. That’s where the title comes from -- loving someone *for* those choices, for the artificiality."

*Blue Raspberry* follows Kirby’s acclaimed debut album *Cool Dry Place*, which was also recorded in Nashville and released in February of 2021. While the songs on that record unfold amidst Kirby finding her voice, *Blue Raspberry* is a polished and confident sophomore effort that deepens the questions that bubbled through *Cool Dry Place* about how people can reach each other despite all the hazard zones where human connection caves in.

After realizing that her romantic interest in women went beyond the confines of a songwriting exercise, Kirby kept writing songs that sought to untangle that false binary between the real and the fake, to celebrate the spectacles people put on for each other when they're falling in and out of love. She committed herself completely to the work of drawing out these songs, often stealing away to her van to write immediately after playing an opening set while on a 2021 tour with Waxahatchee. For the first time since she started writing songs, Kirby stopped tamping down on her impulse to craft ornate, generously embellished music. "I felt less embarrassed about just wanting to write really gorgeous songs," she says. She started weaving more intricate chord progressions and melodies into her work, and in turn she felt emboldened to hold onto the more baroque flourishes of her lyrics without whittling them down into plainer lines.

Many of the songs that make up *Blue Raspberry* stemmed from a single page of lyrical fragments, words and phrases that kept their hold on Kirby even as she slipped them into multiple settings. Images repeat on different songs throughout the album: cubic zirconia gleaming at a woman's throat, the lab-grown substitute indistinguishable from earth-crushed diamonds; salt crystallizing as seawater dries on reddened skin; teeth that shine in a grin and then bite till they bruise. These refrains and reprises lend a tight narrative cohesion to the record, elevating its sharp queries into all the unlikely shapes love takes as it surges through you.

To underscore *Blue Raspberry*'s lyrical themes, Kirby worked with her band to develop a newly lush sonic palette replete with orchestral gestures arranged by her friend Rowen Merrill. "I felt like I was intending to write love songs for the first time. Once I realized they were queer love songs and celebrating artificiality, I wanted them to sound like they were bidding for a spot in the wedding reception canon," she says. "It was more fun to just go for it than to try to restrain ourselves. Especially if we were just accepting the fact that we were trying to make objectively beautiful music, whatever that means."

Together with producers Alberto Sewald and Logan Chung, Kirby looked to albums like Andy Shauf's *The Party* and Lomelda's *Hannah* as models for *Blue Raspberry's* abundant but spacious gorgeousness. Piano and strings echo together on the gentle ballad "Salt Crystal," while scrapes of cello punctuate each heartbroken line of "Alexandria," a song about the dissolution of Kirby's first queer relationship and recorded live in one take. Cymbals and organs stagger across the offbeat "Drop Dead," one of the album's most playful songs that highlights the sly humor in Kirby's lyrics: "There’s no virgin territory for a body like hers." On the album's title track, Kirby sings trailed by a pitch-lowered echo of her own voice, her guitar chords hanging in the air like question marks. Her imagery seizes upon the bright, garish colors of mass-produced material, homing in on its sensory intensity while casting aside any judgment about its source. "Her eyes burn white as Styrofoam right into me," she sings, rendering a cheap, disposable substance into shocking magic.

"Why wouldn't that be enough?" Kirby sings throughout the album, a question that's never answered and never drops. Every attempt at love strains toward the idea of the real thing, that totalizing force that makes everything around it perfect forever. But if no one ever gets there, why wouldn't the straining itself suffice? *Blue Raspberry* shivers with the idea that the key to the treasure is itself the treasure -- even if it's plastic, even if its gold coating flakes off at your touch, even if despite all your searching you never find the lock.