Purr - *Who is Afraid of Blue?*

Between 1966 and 1970, the American artist Barnett Newman painted a series of four large scale paintings titled *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*. They’re simple, but produce a whole register of feelings, emotions — the color is the subject, the paintings do not represent anything, but only express themselves. How can a canvas saturated in red synthesize something as complicated as fear? It just does. That painting series’ title was a reference to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a play from the 60s by Edward Albee, which was in itself a reference to *"*Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf*?*", the song from the 30s immortalized in Disney cartoons.

These Newman paintings are the conceptual backdrop of ‘Who Is Afraid of Blue?*,’* the sophomore album of lifelong New Yorkers Eliza Barry Callahan and Jack Staffen’s project Purr. It is in many ways a record about these abstract registers of fear — saturated with emotion, introspection, and that very sense of overwhelm.

Callahan and Staffen started writing this record in late 2019, shortly before the release of ‘Like New*,’* the group’s debut, and following shows supporting acts from Weyes Blood to Maggie Rogers. But just as they began writing, Callahan started to suddenly and rapidly lose her hearing. She was told she could be deaf in a year’s time. It did not seem like there was a cure. 2020 rolled around, the duo canceled their tour so she could take care of her health. A few weeks later, the pandemic began. In the following months, it seemed improbable that they’d write music together again. Callahan couldn’t be around music anymore; it became too painful.

“Music became a live wire,” she says, “it wasn’t physically bearable.” These events took their own toll on Staffen too. The duo had a reckoning with their art. They shelved the few things they had begun to write. Callahan focused on finding a way to get better. A year later she entered a medical trial and months later against odds entered remission. Then the pandemic started to lift. They got back to work. “We began working together again, intensely and quickly,” the pair says, “It was a life leveling moment, an opening moment. Time suddenly felt way more valuable.” They made what would become the record from start to finish in half a year. Enter ‘Blue.’

‘Who is Afraid of Blue?’is not a record about Callahan’s confrontation with a loss of a sense, but it is a record aboutfear, about trying to outrun loss and longing— it’s knotted up with love. It’s also about the inverse — finding liberation in the blue, in the great wide open, in beginning again. Just as with the title, the lyrics across the record often ask questions of the listener. Callahan says, “This record ended up being more about writing a sensation than telling a story. Each song has its own specific entry point.” This isn’t a concept record, but it is a record of a specific, isolated moment.

To make it, the duo teamed up with their close friend, producer Jonathan Rado (Weyes Blood, Father John Misty, The Killers), whom they worked with on ‘Like New*.’* They went to his North Hollywood studio, a small building behind his home. This was during Omicron, so they kept recording small, just the three of them in a room for most of the time. Programmed drums on an 808, that kind of thing. While they recorded, they screened movies. Ranging from Barbara Loden’s *Wanda,* to Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia,* to *Dr. Strange* and *The Avengers*. It all provided texture to the songs. Like making a score. “It’s a really hermetic record,” says Staffen, “which ended up feeling really special.”

“Guessing,” was recorded to *Wanda,* a film about a woman with limited options who inadvertently goes on the run with a bank robber. Staffen takes the lead on the vocals over layered harmony. The song is muted, searching. Keys flicker like votive candles. The bass is brilliantly clear. Air-like. Lyrically, it’s a direct address, “about wanting to be taken, worn, loved” says Callahan. There are images of going out for breakfast, shaking off daydreams, longing.   
  
“Hesper” was written from the perspective of a star,” Callahan says, “A star that has a one-way conversation with someone looking up at it—asking what they’re looking for, wishing for, what they’re afraid of, what they’ve had enough of. This star, it seems, was once a person too.” On the song, a barrage of noise leads to the quiet shuffle of a drum machine that gradually expands into a swirl of shoegaze, Callahan singing lead. “It’s a fear portrait,” she sings, “are you scared of it?” There’s the album’s titular track which plays upon the “the best way out is through” sentiment which in this case is through the blue. Staffen sings: “I’m homesick for my life/When it felt just like open skies/So real and just mine/But have I lost my luck? /Have I felt it enough? /Have I felt it too much?”

Sonically, ‘Who is Afraid of Blue?’isn’t beholden by genre. It is an omnivorous record—you can hear glimmers of Aimee Mann, Radiohead, the Cocteau Twins which is fitting because ‘Blue’ is in some ways a record of their process of falling in love with music all over again. “Drift,” a song about wanting someone you love to help themselves, even if it might hurt, has a touch of ‘The Bends’ with the runs of bass, the urgency of the guitar. The song has live drums, courtesy of Father John Misty drummer Dan Bailey, one of the few musicians on the record other than Purr and Rado. “Cave,” is sunny and a little freaky, with big bright guitars and super resonant bass. “It’s about caving in and the flip of caving in—resisting,” says Callahan, “Resisting is its own form of fear and this type of fear, it’s a fear of what we want…”.

‘Who is Afraid of Blue?’also exists lightly in conversation with a short novel Callahan wrote (forthcoming via Catapult, 2024), an auto-fiction document of a woman losing her hearing. And all of it comes back to those Newman works: Purr makes music that functions like those large-scale paintings so very saturated with color. ‘Blue’ is a vast record, with lyrics that bend towards abstraction. But make no mistake: in that abstraction there is intense clarity. Blue is blue: a color, a feeling, a signifier, a way of looking at the world.