

RAINBOW KITTEN SURPRISE



Sam Melo (lead vocals) - Darrick “Bozzy” Keller (guitar, vocals) - Ethan Goodpaster (lead guitar, vocals)
Charlie Holt (bass, vocals) - Jess Haney (drums)

Nearly every Rainbow Kitten Surprise song unfolds in a dizzying rush of words, feverish yet finespun lyrics that feel both intimate as confession and mythic as a fable. Throughout their forthcoming album *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, the Boone, North Carolina based five-piece set those lyrics to a thrillingly unpredictable sound that transcends all genre convention, endlessly changing form to accommodate their constant shifts in mood and spirit. But while Rainbow Kitten Surprise push into some complex emotional terrain, the band’s joyful vitality ultimately makes for an album that’s deeply cathartic and undeniably life-affirming.

Produced by Grammy Award-winner Jay Joyce (Cage The Elephant, The Head and the Heart, FIDLAR) and recorded at Neon Cross Studio in Nashville, *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall* marks Rainbow Kitten Surprise’s debut release for Elektra Records. In creating the album, the band immersed themselves in a deliberate sonic exploration that made heavy use of the studio’s treasure trove of vintage instruments, infusing their music with the kinetic energy of discovery. And in sculpting the inventive arrangements and ever-morphing textures of *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, Rainbow Kitten Surprise embedded each track with indelible melody and chilling harmonies with a long-lingering power.

A distinctly vocally driven band, Rainbow Kitten Surprise offer a lyrical depth that leaves the listener torn between an urge to read along with every word and the instinct to simply be swept up in the songs. That dynamic is reinforced by frontman Sam Melo’s captivating vocal approach, a chameleonic intensity that equally recalls the rambling eloquence of classic folk and the seamless flow of his own hip-hop idols, who include ScHoolboy Q and Frank Ocean. But whether he’s intoning soulfully or spitting out lyrics in a stream-of-consciousness style, *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall* continually reveals Melo’s hypergraphic tendencies. “I’m a compulsive writer,” he says. “As soon as something’s done, I don’t even listen to the last cut—I’m on to the next thing. It’s like an addiction for me.”

As the main songwriter for Rainbow Kitten Surprise, Melo brings an autobiographical element to *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, often drawing from his Pentecostal upbringing. Although he was born in the U.S., he spent ages eight to 15 in the Dominican Republic, where his parents served as missionaries. “Where I grew up in the Dominican Republic, there’s a substantial belief in spiritual warfare and the power of the occult—the idea that God and the Devil and angels and demons come in and out of our dimension, and very actively influence the lives of humans,” says Melo. The notion of possession and exorcism informed such songs as “Fever Pitch,” a track that drifts from delicate piano balladry to groovy rock-and-roll stomp, all while turning out lyrics both unsettling and sly (“Don’t let the fever get you/Got got already/Lost my soul in the Seventh Heaven/Making out on Aisle 11”).

On “Holy War,” a darkly charged track that channels unrest in its rattled falsetto and ominous harmonies, Rainbow Kitten Surprise examine the long-brewing disaffection that helped shape the current political climate. Initially sparked by North Carolina Amendment 1 (a state-constitution amendment that prohibited same-sex marriage), “Holy War” steadily evolved into an elegiac meditation on the backlash against progressive politics and “the effort to reclaim some kind of quintessential America,” according to Melo.

One of the most epic and anthemic moments on *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, “Hide” builds a euphoric glory from its bouncing rhythms, fluttery guitar lines, and unabashedly romantic lyrics (“I’ve got a radio heart and you’re the only thing that’s coming in”). As Melo explains, the song sprang to life soon after he’d come out to his closest friends, at age 23. “In the Dominican Republic—which is a hyper-masculine culture, even more so than the Southeastern United States—gay people were outcasts and horribly mistreated,” he says. “I knew I didn’t want anything to do with being treated that way, so I just buried how I felt.” Inspired by a trip to a music festival and his experience in being a part of “this free-spirited community of people that exists for one brief moment,” Melo began the push toward self-acceptance. “I worked up the courage to tell all my guys that I’m gay, and they were just like, ‘Yeah—we know,’” he recalls. “I was so terrified, and it was nothing to them. That’s when it hit me that everything was okay, and that’s when I started writing ‘Hide.’”

Elsewhere on *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, Rainbow Kitten Surprise move gracefully through infinite sounds and tones: the haunting a cappella harmonies of “Pacific Love,” the full-throttle frenzy of “Matchbox,” the tender psychedelia of “Moody Orange,” the tumbling folk of “Painkillers.” In working through such a kaleidoscopic sonic palette, Rainbow Kitten Surprise show the sharp musicianship and powerful camaraderie they’ve developed since forming at Appalachian State University, where Melo studied dance. The band first began to take shape when he and Keller started collaborating on songs and self-recording, as well as playing open-mic nights at the campus coffee shop. Right before one of those gigs, the duo visited a close friend who was being treated for bacterial meningitis at a local hospital, and asked him to name their band. Having recently undergone a spinal tap—and still loopy from his morphine drip—the friend instantly christened the band Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

Eventually adding Goodpaster, Holt, and Haney to the lineup, Rainbow Kitten Surprise soon signed to their school’s record label. Along with releasing two EPs and their 2015 full-length debut, the band gradually took on a rigorous touring schedule, booking their own gigs and sometimes getting paid in cases of beer. It wasn’t long before they’d gained a devoted following – amassing over a million streams on each song from their self-released catalog – and word had spread about their unforgettable live show: a blissed-out free-for-all that typically finds Melo jumping right into the audience, building an unbreakable connection with the crowd. Having delivered stand-out sets at major festivals like Bonnaroo, Firefly, Sasquatch, and Austin City Limits in 2017, Rainbow Kitten Surprise inked their deal with Elektra Records later that year.

In reflecting on the making of *How To: Friend, Love, Freefall*, Melo notes that the album marks a major evolution for Rainbow Kitten Surprise, on both an artistic and personal level. “Before this record, I’d feared that opening the lines of communication would destroy the ecosystem of this fledgling world I was building,” he says. “I didn’t want to let anyone else in until it was fully developed, because otherwise it would be compromised or get watered down. This was the first time that everyone had a hand in building that world before and during our time in the studio, and it ended up being the most solid work we’ve ever produced.”

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