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ROLLING BLACKOUTS COASTAL FEVER (AUS)

Album: «Sideways To New Italy»

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Web: <http://www.rollingblackoutsband.com>

EPK: irascible.ch/releases/rollingblackoutscoastalfever/sidewaystonewitaly

After enough time away from home, even the familiar starts to feel foreign. For guitar-pop five-piece Rolling Blackouts Coastal Fever, returning to Melbourne after long stretches looking out at the world through the windows of aeroplanes and tour vans lead to a dislocation, like being the knot in the middle of a game of tug-o-war. Their second record, *Sideways to New Italy* (Sub Pop), sees the band interrogate their individual pasts and the places that inform them. In clicking the scattered pieces back into place, they have crafted for themselves a new totem of home to carry with them no matter where they end up.

Lead by singer-songwriter-guitarists Tom Russo, Joe White and Fran Keaney (and rounded out by bassist Joe Russo and drummer Marcel Tussie), the band began grasping for something reliable after emerging from relentlessly touring their critically regarded debut *Hope Downs*. For Keaney, that translated into writing "pure romantic fiction" and consciously avoiding the temptation of angsty break-up songs, while Russo looked north to a "bizarre place" that captured the feeling of manufacturing a sense of home when his own had disappeared.

The eponymous New Italy is a village near New South Wales's Northern Rivers – the area Tussie is from. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it pit-stop of a place with fewer than 200 residents, it was founded by Venetian immigrants in the late-1800s and now serves as something of a living monument to Italians' contribution to Australia, with replica Roman statues dotted like souvenirs on the otherwise rural landscape. The parallel between these remnants of home and the band's own attempts to maintain connections and create familiarity during their disorienting time on the road were not lost on Russo. "These are the expressions of people trying to find home somewhere alien; trying to create utopia in a turbulent and imperfect world."

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In addition to that specific place, the songs on the record exist variably in Darwin (Cameo), Melbourne (Beautiful Steven, Cool Change), the tiny town of Rushworth (Not Tonight) and the driver's seat of a car at a drive-in movie (Cars in Space). Rolling Blackouts are well-versed in a detailed and cinematic style of songwriting, where landscapes, interactions and memories materialise as characters and stories that reflect the tight, swirling guitars that emote alongside the trio's voices. The record's lead single Cars in Space is emblematic of the band's approach to songwriting. After arriving at an instinctual space while jamming, they bottle the specific chemistry that comes of the five of them locking into one another, and reverse-engineer them into what White describes as "weird pop songs". The panicky helplessness of realising a break-up is imminent is brought to life not just through Keaney's lyrics, but sonically through a spiral of three guitars, dueling and dancing around one another in a way Rolling Blackouts have mastered.

The record's very present geographic identity emerged from the band losing their grip on their own, whether that was through the pressure of touring, the dissolution of relationships, a frustrating distance from their daily lives – or some combination of all three – that came from being slingshotted all over the world, playing sold out headline tours and festivals including Coachella, Governors Ball, Primavera Sound, All Points East and Pitchfork Music Festival. "I felt completely rudderless on tour," Keaney says. "It's fun but you get to a point where you're like, Who am I anymore? You feel like you're everywhere and nowhere at the same time. And no one in particular." Russo adds, "We saw a lot of the world, which was such a privilege, but it was kind of like looking through the window at other people's lives, and then also reflecting on our own." Rather than dwell in the displacement, Keaney was determined to channel how he was feeling into something optimistic. "I wanted to write songs that I could use as some sort of bedrock of hopefulness to stand on, something to be proud of. A lot of the songs on the new record are reaching forward and trying to imagine an idyll of home and love."

Home, for Russo, manifests in different ways: there's Melbourne, where he and brother Joe grew up, but also Southern Italy where the forebears of their family originated. As members of the band individually visited the Mediterranean and returned home to Melbourne's inner-north, where waves of European migrants forged a sense of home since the 1950s, they realised the emotional distance between the two was miniscule. The prominent and romantic Greco-Roman statues that sit outside tidy brick homes in Brunswick represent, for Russo, an attempt to "build a utopia of where your heart's from." The same can be said of this record, where White's early attempts at writing big, high-concept songs were abandoned in favor of love songs ("She's There," "The Only One"), and familiar voices and characters filter in and out, grounding the band's stories in their personal histories. On "Second of the First" the voice of a close friend joins White's partner in delivering a spoken word passage; the chorus from "Cool Change" began its life in a song the trio played in an early band, over

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a decade ago; the chords from "Cameo" were once in an eventually abandoned song called "Hope Downs"; an early version of "Falling Thunder" featured a reference that only their friends would recognise.

"We tried to make these little nods to our friends and loved ones, to stay loyal to our old selves," Russo explains. "I think we were trying to recapture some of the innocent weirdness of our very first recordings," Keaney adds of the "Cool Change" chorus. There's something comforting, too, in knowing the next time they're buffeted from stage to stage around the world, they'll be taking the voices of their loved ones with them, following cues from their neighbours and ancestors and anyone else who responded to their newfound displacement by crafting a utopia in their own backyard.

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