

Following praise from *Paste* and *No Depression* for the release of their first, eponymous LP in 2017, Blue Cactus did what stellar country acts do: they toured a lot. Along the way, the North Carolina duo graced festival stages from Nashville's Muddy Roots and Raleigh's Hopscotch to NC's own annual State Fair, and shared dates with the likes of The War & Treaty, Sarah Shook & the Disarmers, Lilly Hiatt, and Junior Brown among others-- building a fanbase that cherishes their singular, but familiarly rewarding take on classic country.

Somewhere in the milieu of that tried and true path, however, Steph Stewart and Mario Arnez found themselves exploring less-traveled terrain. Their sound grew taller and wider - their guitars began reaching for the stars, and, with the aid of their vibrant band, they unlocked deep, contagious grooves on stage. Alongside this sonic evolution, their songwriting took on a keener, more incisive form. Where they used to rely heavily on transient charm and wit, they began confronting heavy concepts head-on and putting pen to paper with newfound confidence. "Throughout the course of touring and playing these songs live with our band, they came to life, and we knew we had found the people who needed to make this record with us," recalls Stewart.

After a string of singles in 2020 (with the Trump takedown "Finger On The Button" spending months at the top of Spotify's Vintage Vibes playlist) their evolution is made plain on their second LP, *Stranger Again* released May 7, 2021 on Sleepy Cat Records.

In Stewart and Arnez's own words, the record is a dive into the realm of Cosmic American Music, and songs like "Radioman" certainly send the listener to what feels like astral heights. "Radioman / right on time / Radioman / leave the world behind," Stewart and Arnez sing in a bold harmony, honoring the connective power of the radio while simultaneously delivering its eulogy in the modern age of digital streaming. On some of the records' mellower moments, such as the spaciouly produced duet "I Can't Touch You," a dim sense of vastness is palpable.

Even as the album lifts itself up and out of the atmosphere, Stewart and Arnez's voices keep things grounded and relatable. The record finds them mincing no words when singing about the all-too-Earth-bound complexities of relationships, manipulation, sacrifice, estrangement, and jealousy. Songs like "Stranger Again" and "Come Clean" remind the listener that you can only float around in vacuous bliss for so long before life's gravity reels you in and forces you to confront the truth.

A theme of relationships and their perpetual states of change runs throughout the album.

"Relationships shape who we are. We long to connect with others, and the relationships we have with each other, with ourselves, with culture...they all inform the ways we move through the world," says Arnez. "The loss of a relationship ('Blue As The Day'), the longing for a relationship that was an integral piece of our lives ('Worried Man'), those negative spaces can keep us from getting close to others even when we know we would be happier for it ('I Can't Touch You.')

These songs are about when we have to work on ourselves ('Come Clean', 'Enough'), when we have to work on our relationships ('Stranger Again'), when it feels like that work is paying off ('Rebel'), when we strive for the world to care ('Rodeo Queen'), and when we long for the world to commune ('Radioman.')