

MAN ON MAN, *Provincetown* (Polyvinyl, 2023)

You remember your pandemic project, don't you? Maybe it was baking bread, cultivating a garden, or finally committing to Proust? But for Roddy Bottum and Joey Holman—back then, a new couple of longtime musicians, en route from New York City to California to care for Roddy's ailing mother—it was writing songs, meant only to entertain themselves in those suddenly idle days. Joey, after all, had his guitar in the car; during the road trip west, they ordered a microphone, waiting for them in California where they'd live and work from a cozy beachside A-frame. They got to work but, really, to play, shaping a dynamic string of new-love songs about tender infatuation, the ache of all-consuming lust, and the excitement of a full future, together. "It's so fun," they cooed in content unison, "to be gay," their own birds-and-bees ode to joy. Those songs stuck around, accreting not only into an album but into the band MAN ON MAN, lauded by *Rolling Stone* and loved for music videos that documented the real romance of two fully grown gay men. That pandemic project? Suddenly, a little hit.

MAN ON MAN's triumphant and pop-powered return, *Provincetown* is the result of an accidental band moving with sudden intention and two once-new partners growing into a deeper relationship. Written largely in that tip-of-the-Cape haven that gives the record its name, *Provincetown* cavorts even as it poses complicated questions about what it means to be queer, alive, and in love in the first quarter of this anxious American century. There are peppy hookup-app blues, queer history lessons set to contagious electroclash, unfettered celebrations of sex and summertime fun—glitter bombs all, set off to light up these often-dark times. "Windows down, let 'em see/We've got nothing to hide," they sing during the enormous and insistent "I Feel Good," boldly answering the title's refrain with "I feel great/In these United States." It is, like all of *Provincetown*, a massive rainbow flag in the ground—not a statement of existence so much as a proclamation of defiant thriving. Cum, if you will, and take it.

If MAN ON MAN's self-titled debut represented the start of their relationship, *Provincetown*—finished just as they neared the four-year mark—represents its steady maturation and the gifts therein. They now know what about the other makes them tick better. For Bottum, a veteran of big-time rock bands, Holman represented the first time he felt fully embraced by a collaborator, that he didn't have to scream for his ideas to be heard. (And it's not, mind you, because they share the same tastes. Holman loves Silverchair. Bottum is a Sparks superfan.) For Holman, meanwhile, it's Bottum's ability to reduce thorny ideas, whether lyrically or musically or emotionally, into more digestible notions.

That ability is key to *Provincetown*, which does not shy away from difficulty but delivers it always with pizzazz and efficiency. Take opener "Take It From Me," a fluorescent disco-grunge anthem about decades—no, centuries!—of exploitation of queer culture, from dudes who talk about their wives only *after* sex with a man to rising rents that push LGBTQ people out of spaces they helped make vital. It's a doctoral thesis condensed into three minutes, then loaded with a defiant credo: "You'll *never* take it from me." And then there's "Piggy," a radiant rock strummer about the internalized self-hatred of someone too scared of being queer to show their face on an app, only their torso. "You gotta first love you, if you wanna fuck me," they sing in a hook that would have been all over rock radio in an alternate and inclusive version of the '90s. (By the way, speaking of guitars and the '90s, yes, that's J Mascis you hear roaring on closer "Hush.") Those same sentiments curdle in "Gloryhole," a monstrous shoegaze jam about the

vexing contrast between being gay online and in real life, or between being ardent digital activists and meatspace meatheads. The good times and the good fight, Holman seems to say, must commingle.

There are, of course pure and unadulterated thrills here, songs that echo that rush-of-love esprit of MAN ON MAN's debut. In fact, while touring those early songs, especially while opening for the dudely crowds of Dinosaur Jr., they learned how much fun they could have leaning into their livewire tendencies, a realization that shaped this record's explosive sense of wonder. Named for Provincetown's famous weekly variety show, "Showgirls" testifies to the pleasures of learning one another's love-and-lust languages. Sexy, seductive, and dangerous, it's a rock song about exploring *and* expanding each other. "Don't say maybe/when you take me," Holman sings. "Turn an amateur/into a connoisseur." You want in on these lessons. All this wisdom funnels into the wonderful "Kids," a soft, swaying dance tune about recognizing you're no longer, well, a kid on the cutting edge of queer culture. But MAN ON MAN respects the advances the new generation will make and the fun they will have; they're here to watch them party *and* change the world.

In their music videos, Bottum and Holman have made out under a deluge of honey, kissed while fully clothed in a shower stall, and deep throated a banana. On the cover of *Provincetown*, they are, again, barrel-chested and bare-chested, offering a rejoinder to the way we often see gay men in love. This is all playful and fun, of course, worth a wink and a chuckle. But MAN ON MAN is not a joke band, doing it just for laughs. This happy-sounding music explores serious and increasingly urgent topics in American life. "Cry lots, laugh more," they sing on "Feelings," a bit of cultural criticism that doubles as a thesis for their unabashed honesty. "Get comfortable with your feelings." *Provincetown* is not only the sound of MAN ON MAN stepping fully into their shared lives and shared band, but also into their role as two singing seers of a current American concern—the ability to exist as yourself, to love who you love how you love them, with self-respect and dignity intact. And, of course, to have fun doing it.