Since their formation in 2015, Rachael & Vilray have achieved a certain timeless quality with their singular take on traditional pop. Though rooted in the language of an earlier age, their songs transcend nostalgia with wit and a flair for the theatrical. On their latest album, *West of Broadway*, vocalist Rachael Price (also of Lake Street Dive) and guitarist/singer/songwriter Vilray evolve some of their music’s previous dreaminess to achieve a refreshing angularity built on left-of-center instrumentation (exemplified in vibraphone and alto saxophone coasting above the dark and moody strains of baritone sax and trombone). The Brooklyn-based duo’s third full-length unfolds in a series of sharply drawn vignettes inspired in part by a fascination with classic musicals—bringing their luminous vocals to offbeat characters, and tales of love and heartache along city streets.

Recorded at the legendary Sear Sound in Manhattan, *West of Broadway* took shape with the help of renowned musicians like saxophonist Steve Wilson (a former member of Chick Corea’s Origin sextet), drummer John Riley (Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie), and trombone player Adam Dotson (Japanese Breakfast, Jon Batiste). Like all of Rachael & Vilray’s output to date—including their 2019 self-titled debut, hailed by NPR as “Tin Pan Alley meets the Lower East Side in a smoky bar,” and its 2023 follow-up *I Love A Love Song!*—the album finds Rachael & Vilray working with arranger Jacob Zimmerman and producer Dan Knobler (Allison Russell, Bahamas). But while their first two LPs leaned toward big band-style arrangements, *West of Broadway* mines inspiration from the West Coast school of cool jazz and arrives at a lush and effervescent sound utterly distinct to the duo. “Instead of attempting to recreate a big band section with a smaller number of musicians, I wanted to get a little wild and slightly weird with the instrumentation and trust that it would make for an interesting record,” says Vilray, who composes all of Rachael & Vilray’s material.

One of the first songs written for *West of Broadway*, a breezy but rapturous piece called “Love Comes Around” set the direction for the album’s musical foundation with its lavish use of vibraphone (courtesy of esteemed jazz multi-instrumentalist Warren Wolf). “That song was a commission from a widower who thought he was done with love but then fell in love again,” Vilray recalls. “As I was writing I could hear an arrangement that had the colors of West Coast cool—something angular with rich harmonies and vibraphone instead of piano, which adds a bit of a penthouse jazz flavor.” A trained jazz singer, Rachael lights up the track with a particularly dazzling and soul-stirring performance revealing her finely honed instincts as a vocalist. “Once I figured out how to get the phrasing in the pocket, I could focus on bringing out the character of the lyrics,” she says. “It’s a very joyously written melody, and if you get out of the way it almost sings itself.”

An entirely different strain of love song, the delightfully warped “Is it Jim?” emerged from a hypothetical scenario devised by Vilray. “If you woke up one morning and all your partner’s belongings were still there but there was a tortoise in your bed instead of your lover, what would you assume had happened?” he asks. “I first posed that question to Rachael when we made our last record, and eventually I decided to turn it into a song where the main character embraces the idea that her lover has somehow become a tortoise.” In a shining example of Vilray’s ingenious songwriting and Rachael’s supreme vocal talents, “Is it Jim?” inhabits a tender melancholy even as its lyrics skew toward the sublimely absurd (e.g., “We stroll contentedly tonight/But lord, he takes his time”). “That was a tricky character to figure out, because this person’s not trying to be funny: she’s coming to a ridiculous conclusion based on the heartbreak of the situation,” says Rachael. “I needed to give it a certain balance, so that it’s swinging but in a sad way.”

In many ways a valentine to New York City, *West of Broadway* takes on a saltier tone on the fantastically moody “My Key to Gramercy Park.” “Anytime I’ve ever passed by Gramercy Park, I’ve thought how awful and unjust it is that—in a city of very limited green space—there’s this beautiful park that you can only access if you’re rich enough,” says Vilray. “As a songwriter I have almost no power, but I do have the power to write about an unlovable rich person who’s suspicious of everyone because they think they’re all just trying to get their key to Gramercy Park.” And on “Off Broadway,” golden-voiced comedian Stephen Colbert joins Rachael & Vilray for what the duo refers to as an “oddly grumpy anti-Broadway screed.” “Because the overall tenor of this album is ‘kooky people with hard opinions,’ I had the idea to write about the type of New Yorker who refuses to go to Times Square,” says Vilray. “When it comes down to it, all their reasons are built on ignorance—they’re anti-tourist, or they think all the musicals are terrible now because they’re not Rodgers and Hammerstein. I thought it would be extra-funny for Stephen Colbert to be an ignorant bum about show business, especially since he’s literally on Broadway.”

Thanks in part to the colorful detail and extravagant personality of Rachael & Vilray’s storytelling, *West of Broadway* fully immerses the audience in their exquisitely out-of-time vision of New York. “There’s so much imagery in the lyrics, and I think a fun way to listen to the record would be to go for a walk and let the songs play out like a little movie in your mind,” says Rachael. And for the duo themselves, the album’s creation cemented their ability to make their most outlandish visions come to life. “Going into the studio, there was a bit of a question as to whether we could bring together all these different elements that aren’t really connected, like West Coast jazz and Broadway musicals and all the crazy characters and flavors within the songs,” says Vilray. “But it showed us that even if the themes don’t feel unified at first, they’ll feel unified by the end—just as long as you’ve done your work, and you’ve got a room full of great musicians to knock the whole thing out of the park.”