

Will anybody know that I was here?

THE SONGS OF BEULAH ROWLEY BY MARY LEE KORTES

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“Just because I made this all up doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” - Mary Lee Kortés

In these exacting times, the search for music that is different, something that enthralls, that’s new, yet somehow familiar and strange at the same time can seem like a forlorn task. It is with great pleasure that we present to you *Will Anybody Know That I Was Here: The Songs of Beulah Rowley*, an arresting, involving and really quite brilliant new album by American singer-songwriter **MARY LEE KORTES**. Comprising twelve original compositions, the album was produced by the late **HAL WILLNER**, the last single-artist album project that he worked on before his death in 2020.



Will Anybody Know That I Was Here: The Songs of Beulah Rowley is a multi-faceted and genuinely immersive set of songs born out of Kortés’s desire to expand the format of the ‘album’, to make her next long playing project less a bunch of loosely connected songs, and more of a cohesive work with a sense of character and purpose – something which could incorporate her love for writing fiction. “I went to sleep one night while on tour with all of this on my mind,” she says “and I woke up in the morning with this woman in my head named Beulah Rowley, a depression-era singer-songwriter, from the Midwest like me, and I immediately started writing the song ‘Born A Happy Girl’. From that initial spark sprang a compulsion to explore and understand the character on a deeper level.

The story Kortés wrote is one of tragic brevity: Beulah Rowley found regional fame throughout the 1930s playing at county fairs and her father’s Michigan movie theatre, performing original songs she wrote and stored locked inside a custom-made, wrought-iron piano bench. At just twenty-one years old, she died in a house fire with her husband and infant daughter - but the piano bench, and her songs, survived, and would be passed down over generations and through flea markets and families before ending up with Mary Lee Kortés. On her tenth birthday, Kortés asked her father to open the bench, and came upon all of Beulah’s handwritten melodies and lyrics, alongside her personal diaries. It was then she decided to one day bring her story and songs back to the world where they belonged.

The resulting record, *Will Anybody Know That I Was Here: The Songs of Beulah Rowley*, released on vinyl and CD in Europe for the first time on **Friday, October 18th, 2024**, on the **East Central One** label (ECONELP1) tells her story in all its joy and sorrow. Marrying haunting compositions true to the style of early twentieth century folk music with lyrics both timely and timeless, *Will Anybody Know That I Was Here* meets listeners in a present era of tumult and uncertainty, one not at all dissimilar from that of its protagonist. Within its lost album concept, it reminds listeners of whose voices in particular are more often lost than others, while landing on an optimistic note in spite of all the heartbreak it doles out: some voices may be harder to find, but they don’t always stay lost forever. The way Kortés sees it, “your voice may be heard, even if you don’t know it. Everybody wants to feel heard, whether they know it or not, and Beulah didn’t get heard because she died. But because I discovered her music, she’s being heard now. Yes, I know, I talk about her like she’s real, but she is real, very real, to me.”

Just as the discovery of Beulah Rowley’s long-lost music would take time, so too would the passion project of delivering her stories to the world. Over the years, Beulah Rowley’s songs evolved from a story residing in Kortés’s head to home studio demos to a live performance piece, with Kortés interspersing readings from her biography of Beulah Rowley between songs. In 2009, Kortés met with legendary producer **Hal Willner**, who admired her demos: “I don’t know how you did this,” he told her. “I’ve never seen anything like this.” After a successful crowd-funding campaign, Kortés and Willner convened in the studio in 2015 to record a full-length album. “It was so touching and moving to work with him,” she says of the legendary Willner, and what would become his penultimate album - and last single-artist album. “He came up with great ideas for restructuring some of the songs. He was hearing the whole album, and instrumentation that I wasn’t hearing yet, a process I wasn’t hearing yet. When we finally did get into the studio to do the basic tracks, it felt like a religious experience”.



On *Will Anybody Know That I Was Here: The Songs of Beulah Rowley*, Kortés crafts an arresting and uncanny work that couples her gift for sharply written, observational storytelling with her talent for interpreting the works of others. Though the album may be an interpretation of a fictional voice of her own creation, its themes - trauma and grief, dreams of life beyond small Midwestern hometowns, mortality and legacy - and the emotions at its heart are deeply personal. Kortés says it best: “Just because I made this all up doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

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