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MERYEM ABOULOUAFA (MAR)

Album: Meryem

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Lightning crashes from the very first seconds of “THE FRIEND,” the opening track of the eponymous album *Meryem*. The artist’s voice envelops you, embraces you, and doesn’t let you go. It’s a new voice, yet somehow already familiar, a disturbing and unforgettable torrent of passions. At a time when women, from Lana Del Rey to Weyes Blood, are ruling the pop genre with their inventive hits, Meryem Aboulouafa is already one of the great revelations of 2020.

Born in Casablanca, where she still lives, the artist discovered music at a young age through her family. Her father introduced her to rock classics, namely the Beatles, the Stones, and Pink Floyd, as well as to the greats of French music, such as Piaf, Brel, and Brassens. As she pursued music theory and violin lessons at the Conservatory of Music, Meryem, a solitary child, took refuge in writing in order to tame her inner storms. Her poems in Arabic and French formed the first step of her writing process.

Before ever thinking about a career in music, Meryem was enrolled at the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca to study interior design. During this time, she wrote her first songs alone on her guitar and, soon enough, her compositions and encounters began opening doors for her. Meryem had her first experiences working in a studio with more sophisticated instrumentations and performing on stage. When her music eventually reached the ears of Manu Barron, head of the French label Animal63 (The Blaze, Myth Syzer, Johan Papa-constantino, Gabriel Auguste), he was bewitched by Meryem’s sublime song “Ya Qalbi,” in which Arabic song is coupled with modern effects that propel it into the 21st century. Meryem accepted the A&R’s subsequent proposition to work together.

The second act of Meryem’s musical life began in 2017, when Manu Barron offered to re-record several of her tracks with new collaborators. This is when she first met Keren Ann, who would prove

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significant for her career. The songwriter helped Meryem sort through ideas and desires, and showed her how to make her texts more fluid. On the production side, two artists tackled the construction and reconstruction of the tracks: Jean-Baptiste de Laubier, aka Para One, known for his energetic techno as well as the more contemplative soundtracks he created for Céline Sciamma's cinema; and musician and composer Maxime Daoud, who produces soft melancholic music under the name Ojard.

The track "Say The Truth And Run," whose lyrical power sets the tempo for the album to come, was born out of Meryem's first session with Ojard. The new team that formed around her spent nine months in Para One's Parisian studio, producing results that reflect their complementarity as well as their differences. «Para One brings a cinematic dimension that suits me, because I visualize my texts and my music a lot,» explains Meryem. "Ojard is all about melody, orchestration, the development of complex and harmonious tones."

The album Meryem attests to the talent of the new team. It manages to reconcile solemn classicism and electronic modernity, especially when both come together in the same song, such as "Welcome Back to Me" or "The Accident", in which the piano and majestic strings form martial rhythms. As for the classic movements of "Say The Truth and Run", they brilliantly create syncopated rhythms. "Je me promets" and "Deeply" rely on the sobriety of the piano, disturbed only by electronic beats, while "Fighting" stands out through its silky groove.

These hybrid productions would be nothing without the voice it serves, a voice that suits introspective texts in which Meryem questions, seeks, and sometimes finds herself, confessing emotions in a society in which sharing her feelings is not always welcome. "Through my songs, I found the context in which I can fully exist," she explains. She can evoke the Muslim prayer and its poetry in "THE FRIEND" and the complexity of the human soul in "Deeply." Her video for "Breath of Roma," which references the myth of Romulus and Remus, evokes the feeling of rebirth Meryem felt when she first fell in love with Italy. "Je me promets," sung in Arabic, is about love and self-acceptance.

On the rest of the album, English allows Meryem to distance herself from the personal topics she otherwise tackles. "Ya Qalbi" remains the only one of the old tracks that hasn't been reworked, keeping all its original magic intact. Produced by Francesco Santalucia, "Ya Qalbi" is a very popular Algerian song from the Arab-Andalusian repertoire. The author of this song is unknown.

With this album, Meryem Aboulouafa excels at what we might call a 'game of references,' as it would be futile to track down her many influences. We can only barely draw parallels with Kate Bush for her limitless imagination, with James Blake for this rare art of creating intimacy and the emotions that

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flow from it, or with Oum Kalsoum, for this ability to hypnotize through a universal language without denying the musical traditions of his origins. Even if the woman and the artist are still asking questions, the answers offered by the magnificent Meryem are enough to create powerful feelings of joy.

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