

EMPRESS OF *-Me*

"Can I make it clear?" Lorely Rodriguez asks within the opening moments of her debut album, *Me*. If clarity is what she seeks, Lorely has found it: her voice upfront, every word audible and strong. Her singular voice is the centerpiece of *Me*, her first full-formed vision of an album, following her previously shorter and more abstract releases as Empress Of. "Don't tell me who I am," she sings seconds later.

On a cold January morning, Lorely sits at the kitchen table at her current sublet apartment, sifting through a composition book, pages of lyrics stained by coffee and cognac, shuffling through photo prints from the trip to Mexico where she wrote the initial sketches of the record. The album is filtered through imagery from this 5-week retreat, a lens through which Lorely looks both inward and outward, reflects and looks forward, finds strength and vulnerability.

Where her previous recordings worked in moody abstractions, layered soundscapes hinting at a voice deep under the surface, *Me* plays out like diary entries from one female voice musing on the personal, the political, and all the middle ground between. "I've been living below the standard with a hunger that feeds the fire / I've been eyeing your plate of diamonds," sings Lorely on "Standard", a reflection on privilege and entitlement.

Before and after, she sings candidly on street harassment and water scarcity, but mostly Lorely's lyrics are more introspective; songs of broken relationships, new ones starting, and ultimately, self-reliance. "I just need myself, need myself, to love myself, to love myself," she sings on "Need Myself".

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In 2015, at age 25, Lorely has found herself traveled a long ways from her childhood. Born in L.A. into a family of immigrants from Honduras, she grew up on the music of Latin America, Mexico, El Salvador, and her family's country; music driven by rhythm, music to dance to, drums and bass. "I started singing when I was 11, and was super into jazz," she says, recalling how as kid she would spend days searching the Internet for rare jazz recordings.

Obsessed with music, Lorely spent her childhood living between Pasadena and San Fernando Valley, attending a 10,000 person high school and multiple others before eventually being admitted to LACHSA, the LA county arts high school. She says it "saved her." She became a competitive jazz singer, and after high school received a full-ride scholarship to an East Coast music school, but quickly rejected the formality of it all. "My first semester of college, I got a laptop and was like, these jazz classes are such bullshit," Lorely says. "I started making beats in Reason and just wanted to make electronic music and write songs."

Over the summer of 2013, Lorely finally channeled those impulses into a song-a-day project while living in Boston. Every day, she'd sketch out a new song idea, make a scrappy home-recording, and post 1-minute YouTube videos she called "colorminutes" -- little snippets of her gorgeous, ethereal pop songs set to different color screens. The mysteriousness intrigued certain corners of the underground music world and on blogs. "I feel like artists today feel so determined to present a polished product and I just wanted to let people in to my personal process as a creator," she said in an interview with the *Boston Phoenix* at the time.

A 7-inch would soon be released for her first proper 3-minute Empress Of Single, "Don't Tell Me", which was adapted from one of the colorminutes. Soon after her first EP was released by Terrible Records who will also release *Me*. The industry immediately wanted to team her up with a producer, but Lorely felt like the whole process was drowning her voice out: "It just ended up sounding like that person's music. I thought, 'this is my first record, I need it to sound like it's coming from me.' At that point I decided, I'm doing this myself."

The roots of *Me* start in an empty practice space in Brooklyn in the fall of 2013, where Lorely is dancing alone next to a little spinning silver disco ball. "After touring the EP, I realized I wanted to make music that was fun to perform live," she says. "So as I was writing, I would make a beat and pretend I was performing." But ultimately the city put her in a less-than-inspired headspace: "When I started writing it, a lot of the songs were about how much I hated living in New

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York, how much I hate capitalism, and Starbucks, and condos. And how every apartment has rats. I thought, 'I can't tour a record for two years that's about hating New York.'"

Her intuitive search for a more introspective and isolated writing experience led her to unexpectedly life-changing and mind-bending solo trip to Mexico, where she holed up at a friends' family's empty lake house near Valle de Bravo -- that means "Valley of the Brave" in Spanish. "It's the best thing that ever happened to me as an artist, as a human," she says. "I spent so much time writing. I had no internet, I barely had a phone. It was like being on a silent retreat.. It's in the middle of nowhere, an hour away from Mexico City. There are people there, people have vacation homes there, but it was during a season when nobody's there."

The isolation sent her deep inside her head, to pull out everything she wanted to pour into *Me*. "Every lyric on the record, I could tell you exactly what I was doing when I wrote it," she says, flipping through an envelope of photos from the trip, which look more like postcards - a huge lake, big windows, a Monarch butterfly reserve in the backyard.

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It's New Years Eve and Lorely is by herself in Mexico, alone on the lake with a pile of fireworks and thinking about water - the water around her, the water she can drink and can't drink, and "Water Water", the song she was working on. "I went into the village and bought tons of illegal fireworks and blew them off in the dark off a bridge by myself ... I brought in 2014 making music, working on that track, and then I just made music the rest of the year."

"*Water water is a privilege, just like kids who go to college,*" she sings on the track. "Water is this thing that's taken for granted, she says. "You don't realize how badly you need it until there's no clean water coming from the faucet."

During the writing process of *Me*, the power in the village of Valle de Bravo would go out a lot, and she quickly had to teach herself how to make fires. "The first night I was there the power in the village went out. I had to make a fire, but I didn't know how, so I threw a bunch of cognac onto wood and threw a match at it." And that was just one of the obstacles to overcome during a trip that was ultimately an enormous learning experience.

"Kitty Kat" was inspired by her experiences walking around Valle de Bravo and being cat called constantly - just like in New York. It's an aggressive track with huge drums taking down the seemingly inescapable social norm. "I close the set with that song and I just scream," she says. "It's my empowering moment live. I hope a lot of women feel empowered by it." And "Threat" was born out of a different type of fear. "I'd been by myself for two weeks," she says of her trip to Valle de Bravo. "And had this really scary conversation with the cleaning lady one day. She seemed worried knowing I was there alone. I started sleeping with a machete I found in the laundry room under my bed."

"Need Myself" picks apart an old toxic relationship with an unresponsive partner, while "Everything Is You" details the beginning of a new one. "How Do You Do it" is a sex-positive, dance song about positive relationships, while "Standard" is a reflection on living in New York. The album's final track, "Icon", is a metacommentary on the solitary process of writing a record: "It's lonely, but I like having control of all my creative thoughts," she says.

"I wanted to write songs that gave me this feeling of reliving moments, of looking at photos," says Lorely. "As a musician I started out by hiding behind a bunch of reverb, layering my vocals because I was not a confident singer. I think that comes with being young and not being vulnerable. ... There is a bunch of doubt that comes with putting yourself out there. Overcoming the doubt is a lot of what came out of writing these songs, writing these melodies and producing it myself."

"This record is not about Mexico .. it's about me," she adds. "It's very much about my experiences. I learned how to let my voice out through this record. I learned how to record, how to produce. I learned how to write way better songs. I didn't realize this until i was almost done with it, but it was all about growth, and all about kind of being selfish and taking time for myself to really understand what events in my life have shaped me as a person."