**Stage Intro Bio:**

Laurel Lewis is an acclaimed vocal performer, multi-instrumentalist, recording artist, and songwriter. Equipped with her words and music and hard-won old soul, she uses her gifts to speak to the darkness in others, easing their burdens by shining a light on the tender things that try to hide there. She has performed with and worked alongside world-renowned musicians such as Iris Dement, Rodney Crowell, and Billy Strings. Her self-titled second full-length album will be released in 2024.

**Longform Bio:**

Laurel Lewis is a morning songbird, singing into the murky twilight to give hope to the world as it wakes from a long, dark night. Thrumming with the comfort and assurance of an artist at home with herself, the warmth of her deep voice takes center stage in her performance, supported by the quiet confidence of her virtuosic guitar picking and strumming. There is nothing showy or ostentatious in her presentation—rather, it’s clear that she sings because that is what she was made for. She joins in the symphony of everyday things and finds the melodies there, picking them out and piecing them together to share with the world.

Laurel Lewis may be young, but she’s been in the game for longer than some musicians twice her age. “I was humming before I was talking,” says Lewis. As with many of her peers, music flowed through her house like blood through her veins. Her mom always had the radio on, filling her young ears with the powerhouse vocals and songwriting of artists like The Cranberries, Tori Amos, and Gillian Welch. Her aunt, with whom she and her family lived for a few years during her youth, was a musician herself—giving the young Lewis a template for what a life of song could look like. She grew up in the hallowed ground at the center of the jam circle, cocooned by the love, community, and artistry that keeps people enthralled with folk music generation after generation.

Surrounded as she was, she also knew the work and dedication it took to succeed as an artist. This too gave her a leg up—she began learning piano at four years old and wrote her first instrumental tune at age six. Her first live performance was that same year at London, Kentucky’s *Thursday Night Live* performance series. That first moment in the spotlight sealed the deal. “I felt confident onstage; I wanted to do it more,” she says.

As a child growing up in an unstable household, that was a powerful thing. Her parents loved her, but not always well and not always how she needed them to. It forced her to grow up fast, and often left her feeling painful and overwhelming emotions without the tools she needed to address them. So she wrote them down.

Her first album, titled *Back to the Blue* and released under the name Madison Lewis, reflects this stage of her young life. Produced by her first and only guitar teacher, Ken Holbrook, it paints a picture of an artist in flux. In it, you hear more of the jazz and blues motifs Holbrook was training her on, ensuring that her technical skills could match her creative expression. Her voice, strikingly mature at the green age of just 13, is smoky, low, and round. Even then, it was her trademark.

But she still had plenty of learning to do. It would take a few more years yet for her to grow into her full potential. Over the coming years, she tried on different voices and styles and learned what resonated with her core. She had trained in classical and jazz styles, but she had grown up surrounded by bluegrass, old-time, and classic country. As she grew into herself, she found herself drawn more and more to these rootsy sounds. She cites the influence of her stepfather in particular, noting that it was he who introduced her to songwriting icons like Willie Nelson and Roger Miller. But she needed one puzzle piece from the modern era to truly find her voice.

“All that happened going from jazz to Americana was getting a Spotify account,” she says laughing. Something clicked for her—she had found her home. “I heard ‘Live Oak’ by Jason Isbell and realized that was the direction I wanted to go.”

This was also how she first became musically acquainted with Americana icon—and her future mentor—Rodney Crowell. Inspired by his music and songwriting, she enrolled in one of his private songwriting camps at 18. This time, it was Crowell who was the one to be inspired.

“He emailed me one day after the camp ended,” said Lewis, pulling the message up on her phone. “He said: ‘You’re as good a performer as you are a songwriter, and I wanna know more about what you’re up to.’”

Soon, she would be sitting on Crowell’s patio, eating homemade banana bread, and listening to unreleased demos from his personal archives. Despite his towering professional stature, Crowell was mindful to uplift and empower Lewis to trust her own artistic instincts. Together, they would build Lewis’ self-titled second full-length album.

Released under the name Laurel Lewis (in honor of Lewis’ hometown, nestled in the heart of Laurel County, Kentucky), the album features a collection of songs for the struggles of everyday people. “Most of the album came to life through my own experiences growing up in Appalachia and in the people I’ve met,” she says. Despite its deeply personal storytelling, it is nonetheless broadly relatable. Maybe the listener can’t specifically walk in the shoes of a proud child-free woman, as featured in “Family Woman,” but perhaps instead they can relate to its core of choosing to live a life of your own, even if the world doesn’t understand or approve. Maybe they don’t see their family living in “Magnolia Holler,” but they do know what it’s like to be disempowered and left to fend for themselves against an unfeeling world.

It’s a level of insight and empathy that may be surprising coming from a young person and one that speaks to the challenges Lewis has had to overcome in her life—a childhood lived with unstable parents, an adolescence spent reckoning with the chemistry of her brain, now fledging into the brave new world of independent adulthood. These experiences may have been grueling and unforgiving, but they gave her the gift of healing—of being able to speak to the pain in others and ease their burdens by shining a light on the things that try to hide in the darkness. “For so long, I didn’t enjoy my life. I felt miserable and anxious and like there wasn’t any reason to keep going,” she says. “I have to remember that everything gets better in the morning. Everything always gets better when the sun comes out.” Now, equipped with her words and music and hard-won old soul, Laurel Lewis is that dawn—cracking through the curtains and beginning to let the light in for all to see.

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