

# LAURA CORTESE & THE DANCE CARDS

**Laura Cortese** might best be described as a sonic magpie: a curious and resourceful adventurer traversing great distances, collecting melodies and rhythms that glitter like jewels in the sun. Driven by the gravitational pull of human connection, her tendency towards exploration and collaboration have led her into countless niches, each providing its own unique feather with which to decorate her distinct and ever-evolving sound. But all of these explorations have one thing in common: the power of strings. This may seem limiting to some. To her, it is anything but. “Strings are at the core of what I do,” she says. “Genre is secondary to that palate.”

Starting as a young child picking up the fiddle for the first time, **Cortese** has used these strings to tie herself to others, forging connections across age, genre, and identity. After a Californian childhood filled with Celtic music camps, **Cortese** went on to attend Berklee College of Music in Boston and formed her first band, Halali, in 2000. When graduation rolled around, the band dissipated onto their own individual paths—which for **Cortese** meant investing in herself as a solo artist. She began to record and tour under her own name in 2004, soon followed by the start of a career as a songwriter in her own right.

Solo, she reveled in the freedom to explore new collaborations as opportunities came to her. “I always had the mindset of, when I meet someone and we enjoy playing together, we take advantage of that moment for however long it lasts,” she says, noting that these moments always wind into and out of her own projects.

Her early career explorations didn’t end with performance though. **Cortese** also adopted the philosophy of learning by teaching, co-founding a music camp from which to grow community and artistry. Alongside Shannon Heaton, **Cortese** co-founded the Boston Celtic Music Festival in 2003, which she describes as “kind of a thank you to the community that had nurtured me and that I grew up in.” To this day, this festival celebrates and uplifts the deep Celtic folk music traditions that exist within Boston’s music scene, honoring the shared repertoire and musical vocabulary of the artists that perform and jam there. Conversely, in 2011, she partnered with Kristin Andreassen to found Miles of Music Camp, which brings together repertoire-based folk musicians with contemporary songwriters. The goal of this camp is not only to introduce these diverse musicians to new genres and musical catalogs, but to build community and spark creativity. “The two groups are in awe of each other and they start to work together,” notes Cortese, describing the unique magic that is found among the attendees and instructors at Miles of Music camps, “They find their own connections.”

All of these threads have joined together, culminating in her work leading the musicians’ collective known as **Laura Cortese & the Dance Cards**. Here, she showcases all of her varied experience and expertise—as a master fiddler, an instructor, a leader, and a musical collaborator—using it to craft a new sound from whole cloth: a nearly symphonic hybrid of countless traditions and influences, full of layered vocal harmonies and rich interplays of virtuosic string instrumentation.

With their first recording, *California Calling*, released in 2017 on Compass Records, **Cortese** held the reins. Starting with a suite of skeletal songs, the collective joined together with producer Sam Kassirer to compile disparate tracks into a cohesive album, filling in the soundscape with individually composed harmonies and instrumentals to accompany **Cortese’s** initial sonic

sketches. Now, on their most recent release, *Bitter Better* (2020 Compass Records), we see the full power of the hivemind of the collaborative. Composed together in **Cortese's** home in Ghent, Belgium, the Dance Cards, again with producer Sam Kassirer, took melodic fragments and pinhole snapshots of lyrics, piecing them together into an acoustic mosaic held in place by the mortar of their combined decades of experience in a rich variety of styles. The result is dazzling. Infused with the love and empathy of a group of people who've lived through the isolation and upheaval of the past several years, this album faces the challenges and darkneses of the modern world head-on without any despondency or cynicism. Instead, these artists have built a bonfire for us to gather around. "I wanted to give people a way to fill their cups and refuel to continue doing important work," says **Cortese**. "Music provides an outlet to experience cathartic emotional moments. One way to always do that is to move your body, to dance—it gives people a way to shed their sadness." And so *Bitter Better* is stacked with danceable tunes: an open invitation to leave hardships at the door and give in to the moment, to let the music literally move you.

Nowadays, her focus has laid a little closer to home. Even as she has angled to return to touring and sharing her music with the world in her transcendent live performances, **Cortese** has also devoted herself to her community, collaborating with the creatives that live and work alongside her in Ghent. During the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, she took to co-writing commemorative songs with her partner, Bert Ruymbeek, taking the hallmark events of her friends and loved ones and putting them to song, serenading them from the street to celebrate even in the darkest of times. She has also begun performing locally under her own name alongside Belgian musicians Gertjan Van Hellemont and Cleo Janse, whom she originally met during an accidental double booking on the very first **Dance Cards** tour in Eugene, Oregon.

**Laura Cortese** has built a career weaving together a musical tapestry as diverse as it is masterful, highlighted with experiences like playing the Newport Folk Festival with Pete Seeger in 2009, standing onstage at the iconic Carnegie Hall in New York with Band of Horses in 2009, and a stint touring alongside Uncle Earl in 2007. She has recorded with artists ranging from Aoife O'Donovan and Brittany Haas to Tao Rodriguez Seeger and Session Americana, and has released 7 albums under her own name—*All in Always* (2016), *Into the Dark* (2013), *Simple Heart* (2012), *Two Amps 1 Microphone* (2011), *Acoustic Project* (2010), *Blow the Candle Out* (2007), *Even the Lost Creek* (2006), and *Hush* (2004). She has toured across the globe, acting as an ambassador of American music on behalf of the US State Department by performing and teaching in India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Estonia, Greece, Ukraine, and Montenegro. Now, she holds space and builds community for musicians in Belgium as the co-founder of the monthly Bright Lights Session in Ghent. As always, her vision is as expansive as her background. "We're working to basically write a new folk tradition," she says. Were it anyone else, you'd think it impossible. But with **Laura Cortese** at the helm? It just might come true.

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