



Anne Hills **“Beauty Attends : The Heartsongs Of Opal Whiteley”** Collective Works Records

“Beauty Attends : The Heartsongs Of Opal Whiteley,” Anne’s first solo release since **“Bittersweet Street”** [1997], is a collection of thirteen songs, two musical interludes and a closing reprise that, mostly, draws on the text of **“The Story Of Opal”** by Opal Whiteley [1897 - 1992]. The supporting melodies have been penned by Anne’s long time friend and studio, songwriting and stage collaborator, Michael Smith. Prior to delving into the songs, I think it may prove worthwhile to highlight a few details about Whiteley’s life.

Opal was born in Colton, Washington on December 11th 1897. At the age of five her parents relocated to a logging camp near Willamette Valley in neighbouring Oregon. Between the ages of 6 and 7 Opal wrote the ‘secret diary’ on scraps of paper, and hid them in a hollow log near her home. One of her sisters found ‘the diary’ when Opal was a teenager and promptly tore up her work. Although heartbroken, the story goes that Whiteley retained the countless scraps in a hatbox at the home of a sympathetic neighbour. Years later Opal was diagnosed as a schizophrenic, although these days the accurate terminology would be autistic, nevertheless Whiteley was acknowledged as highly intelligent and aged nineteen entered the University Of Oregon. Supported by Ellery Sedgwick, publisher of the Atlantic Monthly, Whiteley’s ‘reconstructed’ diary - **“The Story Of Opal”** subtitled **“The Journal Of An Understanding Heart”** - was published in 1920. An instant bestseller, within a few years it was claimed Whiteley’s tome was a fraud – the principle issue being ‘did a six year old genuinely write this?’ Devastated and lacking the ability to defend herself against the onslaught Opal left America, is known to have visited Europe – she also claimed in her diary to be the daughter of French naturalist Henri d’Orleans - and India. Whiteley resurfaced in England just after WWII and was soon committed to a mental home. Opal Whiteley died in Napsbury Mental Hospital on February 16th 1992, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery.

At the outset I mentioned Anne’s **“Bittersweet Street.”** That recording and its predecessor **“Angel Of The Light”** [1995] presaged this collection, with Hills’ 1997 album featuring a rendition of Opal’s “Cloudships,” while “Brown Leaves” appeared on the 1995 album. The latter collection also included the insight that theatre director Kyle Donnelly had introduced Anne to Whiteley’s work during late 1985/early 1986 while she was appearing in his stage production of **“Quilters.”** Based on the foregoing it appears that **“Beauty Attends”** has been in gestation for two decades. By the way, “Cloudships” and “Brown Leaves” reappear in this collection.

In “Blue Hills,” the opening cut, Opal/Anne introduces us to a quartet of [major] characters/pets who featured in her pre-teen life, Brave Horatius [her German Shephard dog], Lara Porsena [a crow], Thomas Chatterton Jupiter Zeus [a wood rat] and Peter Paul Ruebens [a pot-bellied pig]. The pre-teen, already much inspired by poetry, named her pets after fictional characters, or historic ones - ancient kings, poets and painters. Opal’s natural world journey [filled with engaging expressions of innocence] continues with “I Went To Look For The Fairies,” following which she imbues “Potatoes” with human characteristics – *“I think they must see a lot of what is going on in the earth, They have so many eyes.”* In the latter, Petito’s arrangement of Smith’s melody perfectly captures the ‘naivety and purity’ of Opal’s vision. “Brown Leaves” is a wonderful [astute, nay mature for her age] eulogy, and it’s followed by Whiteley’s skyward observation “Cloudships.”

Sound effects from the natural world grace a number of tracks, for example a crow is heard at the outset of the suitably sombre, “Now It Is Winter,” which is sung in English and French. If Opal’s ‘world lies asleep’ in the latter, then “Larks Of The Meadow” is a prayer for the renewal that comes with Spring. Curiously “Lichen Folk,” which follows, once again references winter, and in that regard should possibly

have preceded “Larks...” “William Shakespeare” was her nickname for the family’s workhorse, and in this piece, underpinned by a New Orleans style funereal solo clarinet intro, Whiteley poignantly recalls the animal’s passing.

The sound of a passing train introduces the sound-scape “Interlude,” and it’s followed by the excited anticipation of “Glad For The Spring.” The spirit of annual renewal continues through “Thoughts In Flowers” and “Song Of The Brook.” The words to “She Is Dead” are taken from Whiteley’s self-published book of poems “**The Flower Of Stars**” [1923], and the album closes with the almost thirty second long “Bass Interlude” and the tantamount to one minute long “Blue Hills Reprise” featuring the joyously melodic chorus “*Now we are going, going the way, the way that does lead to the Blue Hills.*” The morning after writing much of this review, I myself unconsciously humming the melody and singing the foregoing words.....a certain sign that I’d been hooked.

Hills is accompanied on this project by long time studio collaborator and album producer, Scott Petito [guitar, bass, perc.], plus Michael Smith [guitar], Eugene Friesen [cello], Peter Vitalone [piano], Barbara Rizek [flute], Peter Davis [clarinet] and Ann Churukian [horn, oboe]. Track-by-track the overall effect of combinations of the foregoing instruments, aided by Petito’s arrangements, is a crisp, clear sonic backdrop – sometimes sombre, occasionally joyous, constantly engaging - that perfectly embrace Anne’s pure as a mountain stream singing voice, and the ‘innocent words’ of Opal Whiteley’s world.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 09/06.