

MUSIC INTERVIEW

Intense, talented, troubled... meet the raw blues singer fearful of becoming a star

Willis Earl Beal's long journey to a record deal takes in army service, The X Factor and homelessness. Now the balladeer with an ear for Dylan tells [Tim Teeman](#) he isn't sure he wants what comes next

Celebrities regularly, irritatingly, profess to hate fame even when they have plotted to attain it, but few express their revulsion as fiercely as Willis Earl Beal. The 29-year-old musician is not a willing would-be star. Once homeless, he is now on the same record label, XL, as Adele, Radiohead and the xx. A plaintive balladeer in the tradition of his inspirations Tom Waits, Cat Power and Bob Dylan, Beal's second album, *Nobody Knows*, features some of the 130 songs he conceived when he was rootless, or working in a succession of dispiriting jobs, in Chicago and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Beal's vocal style is intimate and raw and on the new album, as the first, takes in rousing soul, in a song like *Coming Through*, and upbeat R&B, through to the mournful bluegrass hue of a song like *Disintegrating*. The rudimentary way Beal makes music, with instrumentation like a basic guitar, scratchy static, pots and pans, is evident on songs like *Too Dry To Cry* and *Burning Bridges*, the lyrics emphasising the many hardships of Beal's life and his survival. Everything *Unwinds* was described by one US critic as "a woozy southern gothic slice of moonlit melancholia built up over a mysterious, undulating ambient lullaby". While considering the wilder details of Beal's biography and the elements of his musical mash-up style, *Spin* magazine called Beal "a strikingly singular performer, synthesising various muses into something deeply unique. Accordingly, it's nearly impossible to turn away."

Today Beal's ambivalence about his new, high-profile life is displayed by the setting: the lounge of New York's swanky Carlyle hotel. Beal is intense and handsome, dressed in a shirt patterned with colourful skulls. He drinks whisky "because someone else is paying", though he prefers cognac. "Too many" people live in New York, he says, swaggering in their pursuit of "acquisition and social status". He moved here to be with his partner, Jessica, a nurse, but wants to leave. He isn't sure if he wants children: "I don't even know how to put one foot in front of the other, let alone raise a human being." Global overpopulation also means "it's a negative thing".

Beal sounds weary and wary: he has been sold by his record company as the homeless guy who became a star, yet hates being packaged and patronised. He claims to have "lost all the money" he made following the release of his first album, *Acousmatic Sorcery*, in 2012. "I didn't buy a car, or have a coke habit. I drank a lot of alcohol and ate a lot of food. This whole industry's about money." He tells how he turned up at a photoshoot with a black mask to wear over his face, "because I'm tired of my face". He is "getting further into 'nobody' ideology and nothingness. I am becoming more antagonistic than I have ever been. I feel limited, pressed down and completely helpless in a machine that just keeps on moving."

But you're here in a smart hotel



Willis Earl Beal: 'Stability is nice but it has a cost.' Portrait by Jamie James Medina

selling yourself, I say. "I walked around as a nobody for my whole life, then somebody tells you you are somebody. But my experiences make me want to be a nobody again, though I am definitely more stable as a human being so these issues are conflicted. Stability is nice but it has a cost." He considers photographs "evil", as they falsely fix a subject in time. Yet he also knows wearing a black mask is "not marketable".

Crikey, relax, enjoy it, you want to say. Beal wants to "touch down on people" with his "message" and be "successful monetarily" to give him more choices. As with photography, he hates singing live as it makes him feel exposed, "trying to recreate the spontaneous moments of inspiration" that led to the songs. "I want to hide in the studio." Beal would listen to Cat Power, a collaborator on *Nobody Knows*, Dylan (particularly *Knocked Out Loaded*, his 1986 album), Scott Walker and Waits as he cycled to dead-end jobs at night: "While their voices played in my head I looked at the road and thought about my life and experiences."

Beal sang on Albuquerque's streets, bought recording equipment and left

LISTEN

Hear from tomorrow a stream of Willis Earl Beal's new album at theguardian.com/music



CDs of his songs in cafes and parks, with pictures drawn on them. The chronology is hazy, but he says at times he slept at the bus station or the car park of a pizza restaurant. He was fired from Burger King for stealing burgers. In Chicago he illustrated flyers and left them around town with his number for people to call if they wanted him to sing for them. He was inspired by Sharkula, a Chicago rapper known for his free-associating verse.

Three years ago a friend put some of Beal's songs on a website; a music writer heard them and wrote about the singer. Beal entered the US *X Factor*, getting through to boot camp, but got "staggeringly drunk" because he was "frightened of everyone. I couldn't remember any of my lines and was dressed like a bum. The judges were like, 'What are you doing?' That was the end of my *X Factor* experience."

The face on the cover of *Nobody Knows* is a replica of a tattoo Beal got when homeless. "The teeth are clenched, the eyes are pluses not X's, explaining the enlightenment you feel before you die. I wanted something I could say I represented." Did he feel suicidal? "I feel suicidal all the time, but I've never tried it. I look at suicide as a distant, soft fantasy. Maybe I don't want to die. Maybe I think there's something left." He isn't depressed, he insists, rather aware that "life is derivative, people judge me on how I look", his skin colour.

I ask about a scar on his face: Beal got it in a fight in Nottingham in the UK he says, but demurs at giving further detail, so we talk about growing up in Chicago. He "didn't care" when his parents broke

up when he was young. "My mother would cry and tell me her problems while we watched *The Price Is Right*. I cared about them. Dad tried to be a nice guy. They did not neglect me." Beal's grandmother raised him and his younger brother. He drifted through school, a *Buffy* fan who cut his fingernails to sharp points, painting them black. He drew comic strips. His mother sent him to a therapist when he was 17. Another time she sent him to a church preacher who spoke in tongues as two men placed their hands on him ("Everyone rejoiced around me, the idiots"). At 22 Beal joined the army, "thinking maybe I could become the tough guy and get organised". But he says he was court-martialled several times, his pay was docked, he had fights ("I was called a disgrace to my country") and was discharged.

Odd jobs in Chicago followed, then, "drawn by the desert", Beal went to Albuquerque. He drank heavily and became homeless at 23. "I hate my backstory," he announces. He says he wants to get on with his life, not regurgitate it. He says some songs on *Nobody Knows* are about feeling "crushed and disintegrated" by sexuality, which is a "soul-sucking thing, a fucking prison. It's everywhere. Women wearing shorts up their asses. For addictive personalities like myself it's hard to see a way around it." Another song, *Hole in the Roof*, recalls his time working at a water treatment facility, his nightshifts punctuated by the screams of ostriches from an adjacent farm.

"It was madness," Beal says. "It's so fucking melodramatic it embarrasses me. I wanted to kill something, but I ended up singing, thank God." And if he hadn't? "I'd be a criminal indubitably, or some manner of sociopath. I'm not

THE REAL BEAL

His story so far...



1984 Born in Chicago, Illinois.

2006 Beal moved to Missouri to join the US army. He was discharged on health grounds.

2007 Moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and did odd jobs. During this time, he was intermittently homeless, and he started recording music with drummer John Mulhouse and guitarist Emily Nelson.

2010 A keen illustrator (above), one of Beal's flyers was discovered by *Found* magazine, who put Beal on the cover.

2011 Having received four "yes" votes at auditions, Beal reached the bootcamp stage of *The X Factor* in the US, before leaving the competition.

2012 Beal signed a recording contract with Hot Charity, an imprint of independent record label XL Recordings, and released his first single, *Evening's Kiss*, as well as his debut album, *Acousmatic Sorcery*.

2013 His second album, *Nobody Knows*, is released next Monday.

trying to glorify mental instability – that used to be a very romantic notion for me, the mentally fractured artist. I'm not insane. I just had a few hard times in my life and a bit too much solitude, and it pushed me to the edge."

Jessica now pays for Beal's therapy in New York, which is "very good, though I wonder why my girlfriend has to pay money for me to talk to a logical person." Scotch is Beal's medication, he jokes. He got into drinking after reading Charles Bukowski, "who wrote so highly of it". When he first met Jessica in Albuquerque, "she realised I lived in complete squalor and I was completely insane. She works 12 hours a night, then has to come home to deal with a sensitive artist. She's more the man in the relationship than me."

Next Beal will record a deluxe edition of *Nobody Knows* with 11 extra songs. When he makes enough money he says he'd like to open a Christmas tree farm and an organisation advising "misfits, like paedophiles and potential murderers. The way to stop a terrible crime is to talk to someone."

Will Beal receive the right counsel himself, you wonder. He performs best when he is vulnerable he says, "and I'm always vulnerable. Conveying emotion makes me resentful, which is why I drink whisky on stage, but that fucks up my vocal cords." We look at the clenched face of *Nobody Knows*. "That face is my face, the face of humanity. 'Nobody knows' means nobody knows anything. Not one person knows." Perhaps he also intends it to mean nobody knows him. But with greater fame they shall, and Beal will have to fashion a wholly original hiding place.

Nobody Knows is out 10 September on Hot Charity/XL Recordings