

A Conversation with Esperanza Spalding

Artist Interview by: [Kevin Cox](#)

"My name means 'hope' in Spanish", says bassist/vocalist/composer Esperanza Spalding, "and it's a name I want to live up to". Indeed, her recently released debut CD, *Esperanza*, is imbued with a spirit of hope, optimism, and passion. At 24, Spalding is a rising star in the jazz world.

JazzReview: *Esperanza* is your debut CD, but having played with several established artists, you are already familiar to many jazz fans. You've played with Joe Lovano, and Patty Austin, for example, and I saw you play a wonderful set with Donald Harrison last summer at Newport. What has it been like, playing with such amazing artists?

Esperanza Spalding: They are generous, funny, kind people. So, it is easy to be around them. Performing with them is only about 5 percent of time spent with them, and the rest of time, we just hang like people

JazzReview: You're already a highly regarded bassist - and with this CD fans will discover your wonderful voice - but you started out playing violin at a very young age, a child prodigy...

Esperanza Spalding: Hmmmm. No-one around now knows how good I was or wasn't on violin. I mean, wow, I know a lot of kids that play violin, and it sounds terrible! It's just an instrument. Fortunately for me, that wasn't my only means of expressing music, which is really what we're talking about when we say "prodigy". It means, someone has an advanced ability to naturally express their inner music. In that sense, I don't think I was or am a prodigy; I just wasn't corralled into a strict method, or ideology of music, so I was free to find out about sound and expression in my own way. I think that freedom carried over rapidly to the bass and voice. And, I am sure now, more than my technique on either instrument that is what people will be drawn to and even impressed by; my expression and heart in the sounds

JazzReview: How and when did you become enamored with the bass, and did that coincide with your developing an interest in jazz?

Esperanza Spalding: Well, right away when I picked up the bass, I loved how the sound resonated through the instrument. I would lay my head on it's shoulder and let the notes vibrate through my head. Other than that, right away I was able to communicate and play improvised music with people. That I had never really experienced before. So, that was another draw. My desire to learn more about how to better uphold my role as a bassist in that communication lead me into listening to jazz.



JazzReview: You've mentioned elsewhere that you have an extraordinary relationship with your mother. she's an amazing woman, isn't she - A single mother who made sure that you not only survived, but thrived under some difficult circumstances?

Esperanza Spalding: You know, I am hesitant to answer that question because I don't want to patronize her. That is the objective of all single mothers. Some have access to more resources than others, some are more resourceful than others. My mother is a phenomenal woman, as many women who sacrifice some of their personal wants and devote their life energy into the well being of their child. If I announce that like it's special in my mother, I fear it may sound like I view it as an anomaly. But, in fact, that happens all around the world every day. And, thank god for the strength of the human spirit that in the types of situations mothers like mine, and thousands of other have experienced, they were able to keep themselves afloat and raise healthy, strong-headed children.

JazzReview: And I bet that she is not at all surprised by your success.

Esperanza Spalding: It's funny. She is proud, but, it's not as important to her as you might think. She would be just as proud if I had a big thriving garden, a dog, 2 kids and a good husband, and treated other people with respect, love and honesty. She is happy with my success if it makes me happy, and if it helps me do good in this world. It's actually funny. Sometimes, I'll tell her about something that a friend would get really excited about. Like, "Mom, I get to play with the person, or for this event." Her usual response is, "Oh, how nice!" Then we start talking about the news, or the election. It's good for my keeping my feet on the ground. She's still way cooler than me, no matter what I do.

JazzReview: On *Esperanza* you sing in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. How do you determine the language in which you will sing a given song?

Esperanza Spalding: Well, it's usually in that language to begin with, or someone with some authority in the recording process asks me adamantly to do a version in a specific language. (yes you sense a drop of spite). Poetry usually loses something when you translate it. And, if the poetry was written to match the melody, the listener loses even more when you change how the inflection and syntax of the prose aligns with the melody.

JazzReview: Do you have a favorite track on *Esperanza*?

Esperanza Spalding: I have three favorites because they encompass three different sounds. One of my favorites is "If That's True", and another of my favorites is "I adore you". My third favorite is - well, it's a tie between "Mela" and "Ponta De Areia". Those four songs represent the four favorite sounds that I have that are represented on that record. There' no other song there that's even mildly like "If that's True" because it's our jazz song - completely creative improvised communication... "Mela" kind of alludes to that, but it's more in a Cuban vibe with more of a structure. That also translates into "I Adore You", but it's vocalese arranged with kind of the sound of a community all singing together. The vocalese thing and the community vibe translates into "Ponta De Areia" which has lyrics and is much more structured but you still have the free feeling of everybody just singing - I like to give that feeling because when you hear voices singing in unison you always feel something.

JazzReview: Who are some of your influences as a bass player?

Esperanza Spalding: That's a really hard question for me because I don't really study too many bass players. If I hear a tune and the counterpoint that's happening with the bass player and other instruments is impressive then I'll learn what both parties are doing - so, like if I hear something and I'm like "Damn, how did Ron Carter think up those notes when he heard Herbie do this" - I'm always interested in the counterpoint, so I'll transcribe it trying to learn what they were doing together. Maybe I'll sing what Herbie's playing on piano and learn on the bass what Ron Carter is doing...When I was younger I used to transcribe a lot of [alto saxophonist] Cannonball Adderley. He definitely influenced my playing because the range of the alto, where it is on the bass is in this area that's known as the blackout zone - this area where you're crossing from thumb to regular position without thumb - and because the range where he always plays is in this area and I used to transcribe a lot of his solos, I think it gives me a type of freedom in that area that allows me to play differently than other players. I don't know, but I notice that I play differently in that area than other bass players, and I'm sure it's because of all the Cannonball that I transcribed. So, he definitely influenced my bass playing a lot. Again, all the bass players that I love, I love them because of how they interact with the rest of the band. I've never been a bass line transcriber.

JazzReview: Who are you listening to now?

Esperanza Spalding: The four CDs with me now are Stan Kenton, Eric McPherson's CD *Contuum*, Wayne Shorter's CD *Atlantis*, and Stanley Clarke's record *The Toys of Men*. At home, I'm always listening to Stevie Wonder and I just got the Brian Blade Fellowship record - that's amazing, and I'm really into Earth, Wind, and Fire right now, and I've been listening to a lot of Betty Carter.

JazzReview: I've found that most music lovers are also art lovers. What artists from other mediums have had a strong influence on you?

Esperanza Spalding: Picasso, his evolution as an artist, his life as an artist - Like, when you look at how he started and where he ended up, it so inspiring! But, the art that really, really inspires me is ancient art because it's so selfless. We don't even know who those people were...what blows my mind is mastering your art and doing for something completely outside of yourself. I think that to be a great artist you have to have an element of that - you're not doing it for yourself, and you're not doing it for recognition. If you can remember when you doing your art that you are cultivating your skill in a selfless way...that's the goal. I'm still working on that.

For more information:

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