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Music Review | Esperanza Spalding

Charismatic and Soulful, a Maturing Star of Jazz

By [NATE CHINEN](#)

Esperanza Spalding carried herself like a worldbeater at Central Park SummerStage on Sunday afternoon, and resistance was largely futile. In her ebullient singing and her agile bass playing, Ms. Spalding radiated a cyclone-force charisma, along with the fresh-faced self-conviction that only precocity can bestow. But the hourlong show was more than a reminder of her talent. It was heartening confirmation of her recent growth: as an artist, a bandleader, a vocalist and a star attraction, if not always in that order.

Ms. Spalding is 24, and she has been gathering accolades since her student years, initially from other musicians. Her second album, "Esperanza" (Heads Up), changed the game by focusing chiefly on her vocals. At a time when most jazz falls outside the borders of mainstream culture, Ms. Spalding grabbed the spotlight and held it; last month she joined the handful of musicians who have performed, so far, in the Obama White House.

At SummerStage she was second on the bill, appearing after the lanky, young New Orleans pianist Jonathan Batiste and before the powder-keg R&B singer Ledisi. In each case the juxtaposition was instructive. Mr. Batiste, singing from the piano as he led an underrehearsed large group, exposed the pitfalls of the jazz prodigy turned singer: sloppiness, overconfidence, deficiencies in endowment or judgment. (His cover of "Billie Jean," mashed up against [Curtis Mayfield](#)'s "Move On Up," was disastrous.)

Ledisi's set delivered a harder jolt of personality, with the strident clarity of her voice set against moving currents of gospel and funk. Her band left nothing to chance, muscling through each groove. And while her lyrics could be ruminative — "Everything Changes," from an album due out in August, preached enlightened resignation — she was intent on keeping energies high. During a [Stevie Wonder](#)-like jam on "Today," she plunged into the crowd to hector personally any people still sitting on their picnic blankets.

If Ms. Spalding's background marks her as a kindred spirit to Mr. Batiste, her instincts place her squarely in the Ledisi camp. Her performance was an exercise in bedazzlement, beginning with a supple hip-hop reinvention of "Jazz (Ain't Nothin' but Soul)," a song associated with Betty Carter. The busy briskness of the melody, together with the stop-start patterns in the arrangement, established the groundwork for her set.

Ms. Spalding is savvy enough to recognize her vocal strengths: a clear, lightly sultry timbre and a springy flexibility within her range. So "She Got to You," an original, found her pattering over a samba churn. She sang the standard "Body and Soul" in breezy but relaxed 5/4 swing. Her prowess was mainly expressed through rhythm, though she ended certain phrases at a half-crouch, hitting a stentorian high note and then drawing it wide.

Elsewhere, with her adaptable crew — the pianist Leo Genovese, the guitarist Ricardo Vogt and the drummer Otis Brown — she explored a crossroads of Latin music and jazz-funk, wisely leaving out her own more callow songs. One original that she did include was "I Know You Know," at the set's close. The last line she sang was "I'm not going away," and she had to know how shrewd it sounded.

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