

‘After the first few minutes of touching the bass I was like, “Damn, this is good, this is it.”’

She’s a fearsomely gifted performer, one of Berklee’s youngest professors, and she’s injecting new life into string jazz – but Esperanza Spalding never even intended to be a bassist. **CHRIS ELCOMBE** met her

**T**here’s the memorable name, of course. There’s the story of a mixed-race child brought up in a single-parent family in a tough part of Portland, Oregon, learning the instruments available on free tuition programmes and picking up on her own what group classes couldn’t provide. Then there’s the fact that she was appointed one of Berklee College of Music’s youngest ever professors upon graduation in 2005, at the age of 21. There’s the female jazz bassist angle, enhanced by the fact that she sings, and properly, as she plays. This is all valuable background colour but not, as listening to her music reveals, the main reason for Esperanza Spalding’s burgeoning success, marked in June 2009 with the Jazz Journalists Association’s up-and-coming artist of the year award.

Her second and most recent album, *Esperanza*, really announced her arrival as a heavyweight creative force, and is a fingerprint of what she’s about as a writer and performer. Steeped and rooted in jazz language and improvisation, the album also incorporates Latin, R&B and funk influences, the former a reflection in part of her own Hispanic ancestry and multilingual upbringing, the last two testament to her love of listening to pop music on the radio as a child. It comprises sophisticated grooves and improvisation, sassy lyrics, a singing

voice capable of many colours, and a dazzling bass technique, all bound up in an abundance of youthful zest.

This energy and enthusiasm transmits itself off-stage too, as I discovered when I met Spalding the day before her recent appearance at Ronnie Scott’s as part of the London Jazz Festival. Her music is as inventive as it is vibrant. The perpetual smile and gleam in her eye as she talks, and the off-the-cuff sparks of narrative decoration that pepper her conversation, frame a considered, thoughtful appraisal of what she’s about. ‘I come to it from the understanding that the music is already there,’ she explains. ‘When I’m writing a piece, it’s a process of revealing, figuring out where to dig, where to brush away, to expose the music that’s already there. It’s like parenting – you think you’re being creative, but you’re really just reacting to what your kid needs. I feel the same way about music. To incorporate a new sound, or incorporate a different way of singing, it’s always got to feed this entity, this music that has been a part of my life since I was a little kid.’

**SPALDING’S FIRST MOMENT** of musical inspiration came aged four, when she saw Yo-Yo Ma playing on television. But this was far from a fairy-tale start to her musical career. ‘He was speaking >