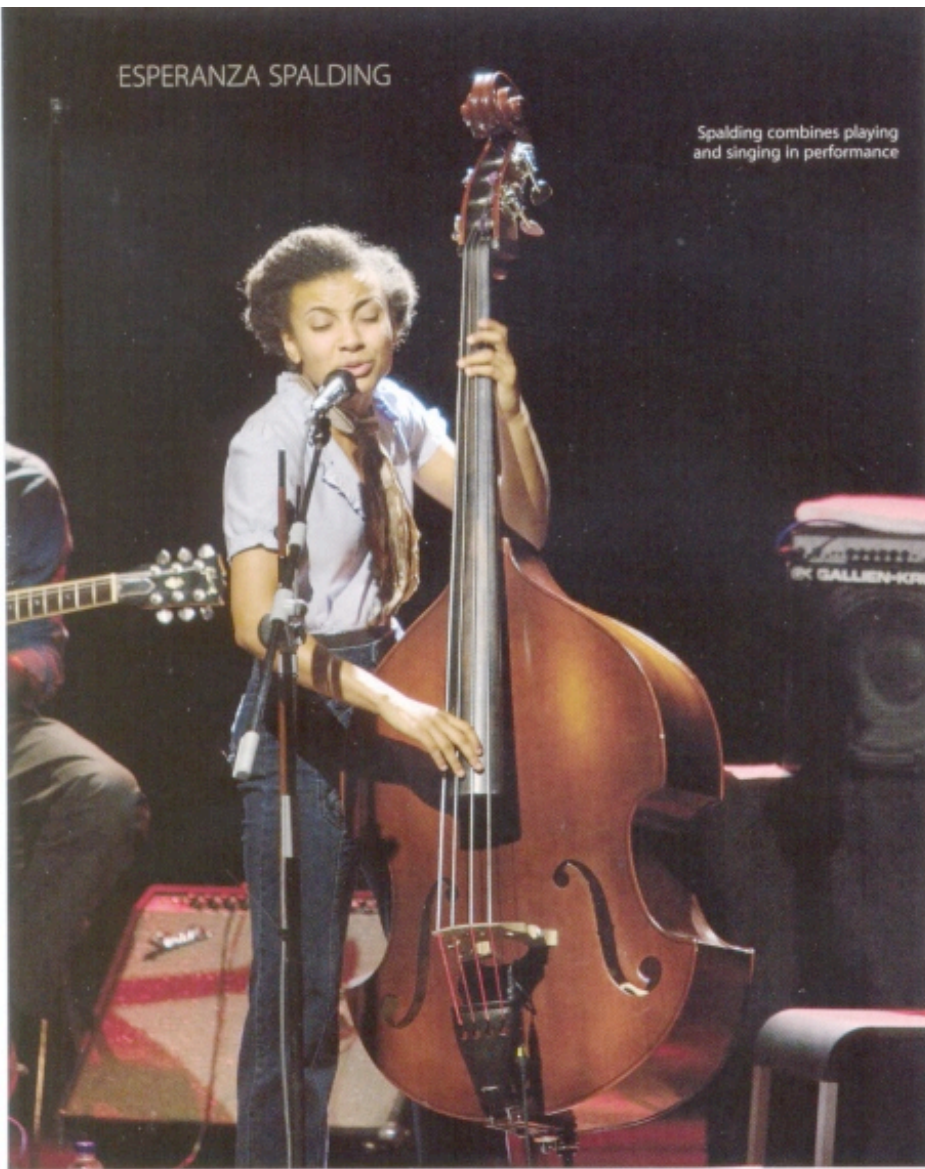


## ESPERANZA SPALDING

Spalding combines playing and singing in performance



CLAUDIA BROWN

finally occurred to me that I love chamber music and I would love to hear a combo that integrated a string ensemble – not just in parts, but one that really integrated the arrangements of the strings into the compositions. So that's what I decided to do.

'I wrote all this music for a string trio (violin, viola and cello) and a rhythm section trio (bass, piano, drums). I had a lot of the tunes already written, but something was missing. I worked with Gil Goldstein, a phenomenal musician who helps jazz players make sense of their arrangements, and we recorded this music. The three string players are really creative players: even though they're playing the parts, we asked them, "Please, breathe your life into it" – and it's really special, really alive.'

**THERE IS MORE TO THE PROJECT** than just revisiting personal stylistic influences, as Spalding explains. 'The whole idea is of integrating local string players wherever we are – we're not going to travel with strings. We do a lot of educational activities, so the whole concept is that, if there's a group of students at a conservatory, and they like the music, we can send them the charts,

they can learn it, we can rehearse, and then we can really reach people.'

Nevertheless, Spalding is aware of the potential bear-traps of classical-jazz crossover, and she has had to overcome some embarrassment about trying to do just that. 'There really is a willingness in the classical world to play this music. I remember always having the feeling in college that if I wrote something for strings, they wouldn't be willing to try it if it wasn't perfect, and that's not the situation at all. That's part of it too, wanting to bring in that world.'

So is the idea of reaching out to new audiences something she feels strongly about? Again, the answer is hardly a stock response. 'I think all musicians are trying to do that, and they're either well received or not. Ornette Coleman was making music for people – it just didn't have the reaction that it was meant for, at the time that he delivered it. But of course now, audiences can open themselves up and really receive what he's giving with his playing. I think all musicians are doing that. I want my music to touch and reach people, and in my mind, everything I do has that objective.'

**THE STRING ALBUM** will be released sometime this year, and is a bold

venture for an emerging artist who has found such success in a very different format. But Spalding is far from blasé about her fortunes. 'I guess I'm just lucky that my intention matches the reception right now, but that may change. Hopefully for a while, we'll be on the same path, but you never know. I guess that's the advantage of growing up listening to a lot of radio music. When I write music, I want to hear something that might sound like Stevie Wonder or TLC. Fortunately a lot of other people also want to hear that, so if it's in the music then they can relate to it.'

Judging by Spalding's performance the following evening, her ascendancy is also down to her irresistible powers as a performer, allied to a fearsome musicianship. There is a natural exuberance to her stagecraft that is somehow enhanced, rather than tempered, by juggling heavily syncopated bass lines and agile vocal lines as she bobs and sways. There's an engagement, too, with creating inventive music that avoids proclaiming its complexity. Don't be surprised if Spalding is still drawing crowds in ten years' time. And don't be too surprised if she's playing a cello. ■

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