

NEW NOTE

Esperanza Spalding's music.

BY JOHN COLAPINTO

Not long ago, Esperanza Spalding, the prodigiously gifted bassist, singer, and composer, performed at Yoshi's, a posh sushi restaurant and jazz club in downtown Oakland, California. Spalding, twenty-five years old, was playing bass with the pianist McCoy Tyner, who, as part of the John Coltrane Quartet in the early sixties, helped create some of the most influential jazz music ever recorded, including the 1965 album "A Love Supreme." For the Yoshi's gig, Tyner had enlisted Coltrane's son, Ravi, on saxophone, and a brilliant young musician named Francisco Mela on drums. But it was clear from the buzz that attended Spalding's arrival onstage that a considerable percentage of the audience of three hundred and thirty had come to see her.

Female instrumentalists have been a rarity in jazz, and Spalding looked incongruous amid the standard tableau of the jazz concert: dudes in boxy blue suits. A slender, light-skinned black woman with a natural Afro and a serenely beautiful face, she was dressed in a frilled-front sleeveless blouse, black vest, and black pants. When the band began to play, her left hand swarmed the neck of her upright bass, spidering out speedy arpeggios and dashing upward in chromatic runs. When she took a solo, mid-set, on the 1957 Coltrane tune "Moment's Notice," she started slow, mapping out the quick-shifting chords with a comfortable walking bass line high up the neck. Suddenly she was leaning over the instrument, her left hand darting down toward the sound holes, the index and middle fingers of her right hand blurring as she plucked out a furious barrage of sixteenth notes; then she returned to the neck, her head thrown back, eyes closed, as she produced bursts of booming fragmented notes that drew smiles from Tyner at the piano and gasps from the crowd.

After the performance, the last of six nights that the group played there, a line of twenty or so well-wishers crowded a

door at the side of the stage to get Spalding's autograph, snap pictures, and talk to her. One tongue-tied middle-aged man commented on her hands. "They're small for a bassist," he said. Spalding looked into her open hands, which, apart from the thick white calluses on her fingers, might have belonged to a ten-year-old. "They're just small for a person," she said.

When she returned backstage to collect her paycheck, Coltrane hugged her and said, "You sounded beautiful every night." Mela kissed his fingertips, banged a fist against his heart, and pointed at her. A few minutes later, in the greenroom at the end of the hall, Tyner told me that Spalding "understands how to play with this kind of group. She understands the form, where the verses and choruses come, how solos work. She's the real thing."

Jazz thrives on apprenticeship and anointment; before Charlie Parker died, he is said to have told the saxophonist Sonny Stitt that he was giving him the "keys to the kingdom." But, when I repeated Tyner's praise to Spalding a few days later, in Austin, Texas, where she recently set up house, she smiled and said, "Wow, that's great," and then qualified her enthusiasm. While playing jazz standards with the seventy-one-year-old Tyner was "fun and intense," she said, it did not represent her ultimate goals as an artist. "In no way is this meant to discredit or to make him seem less significant for what he's contributed," she said, "but it kind of reaffirmed my understanding of the music—that the most important artist and the most important time is, like, right now. It's the people who are learning now, and creating new things right now. Idol worship doesn't help this music in any way."

In 2008, Spalding released her major-label debut, "Esperanza," which she recorded as a twenty-three-year-old instructor at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston. While the music was

indisputably jazz, it suggested an almost bewildering array of influences—fusion, funk, soul, rhythm and blues, Brazilian samba and Cuban *son*, pop balladry, chanted vocalese—with lyrics sung in Spalding’s three languages: English, Portuguese, and Spanish. An ebullient mash-up of sounds, styles, and tongues, the record seemed like something new—jazz for the iPod age—and it rose quickly to No. 3 on the *Billboard* jazz chart, and stayed on the chart for sixty-two weeks. The freshness and the excitement of her approach have led, inevitably, to her being called the “new hope for jazz.”

Spalding belongs to a growing movement of young musicians (among them Chris Potter, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Brad Mehldau, and Jason Moran) who have taken a less traditional approach to the music. For years, young jazz musicians adopted a near-slavish devotion to sounding like players from jazz’s golden age (anywhere between the nineteen-twenties and the arrival of the Beatles in America, in 1964), rejecting the pop, rock, and fusion experimentation that came in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. The members of the Young Lions movement, with Wynton Marsalis the most visible among them, fetishized staunchly non-commercial “pure” jazz.

Though the movement gained some early attention—in 1993, the saxophonist Joshua Redman was sponsored by DKNY, and appeared in *GQ*—it proved not to be a prescription for the long-term health of the art form. Attendance at jazz concerts has been declining for years; a hit jazz album today might sell forty thousand copies worldwide. “*Esperanza*” has so far sold more than a hundred thousand. This is, in part, because Spalding hews closer to dance rhythms than many of her contemporaries do. (Jazz has become increasingly complicated, piling on odd meters and abstruse melodies.) It is also because she sings; for audiences put off by the cerebral rigors of instrumental improvisation, her pliant alto voice gives them something to hang on to. But her original songs sacrifice none of the melodic sophistication and harmonic interest of jazz; and, as her gig at Yoshi’s showed, she is as technically adept, and as serious a student of the



Spalding is “trying to make music for the people.” Photograph by Ethan Levitas.

music’s history, as the most dutiful of the Young Lions.

Spalding has a complicated relationship with Marsalis, whom she professes to admire, but whose philosophy of jazz is, she acknowledges, diametrically opposed to her own. When I asked her about him, she shrugged and said that she’d met him only twice—in passing, at a New York club, and, more formally, when he arrived, unannounced, with his entire big band at a gig she was playing last year in Minnesota. “But he didn’t come to enjoy himself,” she said. “He was checking out if I was legitimate.” Marsalis has never commented publicly on Spalding—a surprising omission for a man who, as the artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, is the leading promoter of the

art form in America. (He declined, through a spokesperson, to comment on Spalding for this story, citing his busy schedule.)

But beyond jazz circles Spalding has attracted considerable notice. Prince invited her to Los Angeles to jam and write with him; she was photographed for a Banana Republic advertising campaign; she appeared on the “Late Show with David Letterman” and “Jimmy Kimmel Live.” She recently signed on to co-star in a crime movie—making her one of the first jazz artists since Louis Armstrong to be taken up by Hollywood.

Spalding is passionate about bringing fresh influences, voices, and idioms to the music, to prevent jazz from becoming merely “a museum piece,” as

she put it. She found encouragement in the work of Wayne Shorter, the jazz saxophonist and composer who left Miles Davis's quintet in 1970 to found Weather Report, an electric band that abandoned the verities of straight-ahead jazz—standards, acoustic instruments, swing—for an experimentalist music that combined rock, funk, and world-beat rhythms with dark, sophisticated chords and melodies. She also drew inspiration from a book she read on the return flight from Oakland to Austin after the Tyner gig—"The Rest Is Noise," the *New Yorker* writer Alex Ross's history of twentieth-century classical music. In particular, she was galvanized by something that Richard Wagner wrote in a letter to Franz Liszt. She dug out the Kindle that she'd been given for Christmas and read aloud: "I have felt the pulse of modern art and know that it will die! This knowledge, however, fills me not with dependency, but with joy." She read on to the end of the passage: "'We shall live only in the present, in the here and now and create works for the present age alone.'

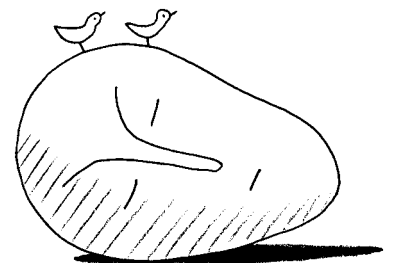
"I relate that to how I feel about jazz music," she said. "Music is intended to be for people. And circumstances and people change with the decades, and that's O.K. And I think that's what Wagner was saying, too. It was, like, 'Let it go, let it breathe, let it move, you know? We're trying to make music for the people.'"

Spalding was born in 1984 in Portland, Oregon, to a single mother of African-American, Asian, Native American, and Hispanic ancestry. (Her mother asked not to be identified by name for this article.) Spalding spent her childhood, with her mother and brother, who is seven years her senior, in the King neighborhood of northeast Portland. Made up mostly of lower-middle-class black and Hispanic families, the neighborhood declined sharply in the nineteen-eighties, when members of the Crips and the Bloods moved up from Southern California and began fighting for control of the local drug trade. After a child was killed by a stray bullet that entered a neighboring house, Spalding's fam-

ily began sleeping on the floor. Eventually, they fled across town. "There we found the same thing but with a white face on it," her mother said, "and instead of heroin and crack it was meth."

Spalding's mother worked several jobs—carpenter, security guard, dishwasher, day-care worker—but there was never enough money. The family was reduced to near-homelessness many times, and on at least one occasion was forced to live in the attic of a friend. Yet Spalding says she was largely unaware of the difficulty of their situation. "You can grow up with literally nothing and you don't suffer if you know you're loved and valued," she told me. "A lot of people I grew up with, by the time they were eight they were completely disillusioned with the world. They already felt this system is wrecked and it's hopeless." Spalding's mother, convinced that the local public schools fostered such disillusionment, removed her in the middle of fifth grade and successfully applied to have her homeschooled. Because her mother worked full time, Esperanza effectively educated herself from sixth grade through eighth, checking books out of the library, completing lesson plans, and taking tests. "We had to do that, legally," she said, "so my mom could keep 'homeschooling'—quote unquote."

Spalding was drawn to music early and listened to the oldies radio station: Sam Cooke, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, the Monkees, the Carpenters, Earth, Wind and Fire. "That's the most influential stuff because you're little, you're not 'assessing' it, it doesn't have a value beyond if you like it or not," she said. Her mother had a piano in the apartment, and when Spalding was four she heard her struggling with a simple piece by Beethoven. Afterward, Spalding climbed onto the bench and played the piece by ear. Soon she



was writing her own songs on the piano. When she had a completed melody, her mother said, “she’d arrange it in every style of music you could imagine, from bluegrass to classical to jazz. She’d call me over, and say, ‘Look, I can play it this way. And I can play it this way, and then I can play it *this* way and *this* way.’”

At the age of five, she saw Yo-Yo Ma play cello on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and told her mother she wanted to do that. Her mother had enrolled her in a free community-band program that offered loans of donated used instruments, but there were no cellos available. There was a violin, which Spalding took up. Though lax about practicing (for several years, she feigned sight-reading and learned her parts by ear), she earned a spot in an advanced youth orchestra, the Chamber Music Society of Oregon, and by fifteen was the orchestra’s concertmaster. She also earned a full scholarship to the Northwest Academy, a private arts high school in downtown Portland. There she caught the attention of Brian Rose, who taught jazz-improv classes and electronic music. Rose recalls once coming upon her when she was writing out a symphonic score for strings and horns while listening, on headphones, to Latin music. “I said, ‘You can’t do that!’” Rose recalls. “She said, ‘Oh, the stuff I’m writing is all in my head. I don’t need to hear it—I already know what to write.’”

By this time, Spalding was playing an array of instruments—piano, oboe, clarinet, guitar, violin—but Rose urged her to pick one and concentrate on it. One day, he heard her play a few notes on a cheap plywood standup bass in his classroom. “I could just tell: O.K., that’s the instrument,” Rose told me. “She just had that look in her eye. The connection was obvious.” Rose taught her a simple blues progression, and Spalding was fascinated. She returned daily to fool around on the bass. “It’s like waking up one day and realizing you’re in love with a co-worker,” she once said.

Rose put together a jazz group with a few Northwest Academy students, including Spalding on bass, and they began gigging around the city. Within a year, she was playing jazz, blues, pop,

funk, and hip-hop on the local club circuit, absorbing knowledge from some of the most seasoned players in the city—often men three times her age. One important early mentor was Thara Memory, a jazz trumpeter who had played with Natalie Cole, Joe Williams, and James Brown. Memory taught classical music in Portland’s community-band program, and had begun teaching Spalding when she was eight years old. “You’ve got to learn what is music and what is not music—what is cacophony,” Memory told me about his teaching method. “She learned at a very young age what is and what ain’t.”

In the course of a year, Spalding plays a hundred and fifty concert dates around the world; in 2009, she played three times for President Obama, including, at his request, at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, in Oslo. The schedule has constrained her private life (she says that she is now too busy to have romantic relationships), and it sharply limits the time she has for writing new material and practicing. She moved to Texas last fall in part because it offers seclusion for working and writing.

She lives in what she calls the “rich hippie” neighborhood of southwest Austin, where she rents a large one-bedroom apartment in the house of a musician friend, Lian Amber. Spalding’s apartment is a quiet, comfortable place with Japanese fans as lampshades, papier-mâché masks on the wall, a divan draped in exotically patterned African fabric, and shelves crammed with books and CDs. A drum set is assembled in one corner; a fabric-draped upright piano that Spalding bought for two hundred dollars on Craigslist sits in another. On a nearby music stand was a two-page handwritten list of “To Do” items, which included the injunctions “When I do practice bass, practice things directly related to my show”; “Little lyric writing everyday”; “Voice work and agility technique.”

I sat with Spalding one day in early January. She was on a tight deadline to finish the string arrangements for a song she had written for a new record to be released this summer, which she

calls “Chamber Music Society.” The song, “Apple Blossom,” was a ballad, sung with the Brazilian musician Milton Nascimento. Using her Mac laptop and the GarageBand application, she played it back—a spare, melancholy tune featuring just her voice and Nascimento’s over a Spanish-inflected guitar. Spalding had written the lyrics to fit precisely into the rhythm, but Nascimento had sung his part *rubato*—a speechlike tempo, slowing slightly and speeding up—and Spalding, in singing her part, had followed his lead. She now decided that the song could use something to tie down the rhythm. “I thought it would be nice—since it’s kind of unpredictable where things are going to land—to just spice the song with these inhales and exhales with the strings,” she said. She had written out string parts on staff paper, but the lines had seemed too emphatic. She decided to try improvising them with her voice. She replayed the song on her computer, and, in the pauses between her and Nascimento’s singing, she leaned toward the Mac’s built-in microphone and sang a series of notes—“La leee-laa-laaaa”—then fell silent when the melody returned. She made five or six passes through the song, overdubbing, creating unexpected harmonies that tugged the mood into deeper melancholy. “What I’ll do is continually go back and listen to the ideas I threw out so far,” she said. “I’ll go ‘Mmm, that’s exactly the kind of thing I need.’ Or ‘That’s almost it, maybe I’ll try another pass at that one section’—try to sing toward it until I nail the idea I want.”

When I asked Spalding about the rarity of female instrumentalists in jazz, she said, “It’s tricky. It’s programming. Jazz is kind of like a boys’ playground.” She pointed out that women began to be accepted into orchestras only a few decades ago, and believes it is only a matter of time until the jazz world is as integrated. “When a woman musician can really play, people are, like, ‘Man, she’s a monster, she sounds like a dude!’ Something is wrong in the mind right there. Because actually that quality of power and strength and quickness—and a wittiness that’s necessary—that’s not a masculine trait. It’s just that it’s such a boys’ club that

when a woman comes in and exhibits those qualities it’s automatically associated with her having more testosterone.”

She picked up a fretless five-string electric, sat on the edge of the divan, and set an alarm on her watch to go off in half an hour. Then she hit the play button on her iPod, and the Stevie Wonder song “Boogie On Reggae Woman” began to play, its compulsively funky rhythms filling the room. The bass line, which on the original recording was played on a Moog synthesizer, is baroque in its complications. It begins with a series of slipping, grunting notes that Spalding reproduced by repeatedly sliding her finger on the neck, before exploding into a finger-tangling series of speedy turns and riffs. Her head bobbed, and the fingers of her left hand fluttered and moved on the neck in synchrony with the recording—until about thirty seconds in, when she encountered a passage that repeatedly stumped her. “Aacch!” she screamed. She poked the iPod button,

reversed the song a few seconds, and tried it again.

From the time she started playing bass, teachers have enjoined her to learn by transcribing bass lines from classic jazz recordings, but Spalding has resisted. “Ideally, they were made in the moment for what was most appropriate for that music, for that groove and that group of musicians making that music,” she said. “I’m trying to come at the bass from every other angle.” Accordingly, she has spent hours transcribing horn solos, and lately has taken up drumming. “Listening to drummers, I heard how percussive it is, it sounds so natural,” she said. “They’re toying with this natural bounce and interplay of movement and momentum with the tension of the skin on the drum and the inertia they’ve put into the drumstick—and I wanted to be able to emulate that natural rhythmic sound on the instrument.” She says that practicing simple drum patterns on the set in her living room has evened out her bass playing. She has also taken to

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Always on the make to make more money

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Free American men obsessing about margins

Machine Products Automatic Screw

Selling every day of their God-damned lives
To some Liberty Brass Turning Company

Products Automatic Screw Machine

Until they were screwed into boxes
And planted in plots paid and unpaid

Automatic Screw Machine Products

—Edward Hirsch

adapting piano inventions by Bach, playing one of the melodies on the bass and singing the other with her voice, working to produce divergent melodic and rhythmic lines with the voice and fingers.

Her watch alarm went off. She hit the iPod stop button and shook the cramp out of her left hand. "I just love everything about that bass line," she said. "It's super-funky—they're playing really interesting notes of the chord scale. I'm kind of training my hand to make those kinds of shapes—and training my ear. If I'm hearing a kind of groove like that, and I'm hearing those shapes like that, my hand knows how to find it." She laughed. "You won't learn that from playing scales."

She reset her watch timer and began again.

There are eleven thousand eight hundred and fifty-seven songs on Spalding's iPod, ranging from classical music to Jimi Hendrix, from Joni Mitchell to Deee-Lite, from Stevie Wonder to Nirvana. After her practice session, she played me a song that she wrote and recorded when she was sixteen, as a member of a Portland indie band called Noise for Pretend. The song featured churning fuzz-distorted electric guitars over which Spalding, in a low, deadpan voice distinct from her current style, sang about a children's go-cart race. When it ended, she checked her laptop, then said, "On iTunes, the category is 'Rock'—so I guess I used to be in a rock band!"

She joined Noise for Pretend during her final year at the Northwest Academy. She was introduced to the band's founding members, Ben Workman, a guitarist and singer, and Christian Cochran, a drummer, by her teacher Brian Rose, who had recorded a CD of their material in his home studio. "They needed a bass player," Rose told me, "and I said, 'There's this girl you ought to try out.'" At her audition, Spalding was asked if she could play bass and also sing background vocals. Though she sang casually at home, Spalding did not consider herself a professional vocalist and had never sung along to the bass. She told Workman and Cochran that she could do it.

"And then I had to figure it out," she said.

Once hired, Spalding showed her new bandmates some songs she'd written. Influenced in part by such indie rock bands as *Cibo Matto*, the songs had twisty, unexpected melodies and spare arrangements that lent a haunting edge to Spalding's lyrics about childhood and the recurring theme of escape through art and imagination. The band promptly incorporated her songs into their live set.

"We really kind of took off quickly once that happened," Workman told me. "We were getting a lot of attention and getting really good shows." But there was a downside to playing with a bassist and singer who was only sixteen. "Most of the press we got at that time was really focussed on her age, which really took away from what we were doing—like a novelty thing," Workman said. Nevertheless, Chad Crouch, the owner of a small independent record label, Hush, saw one of Noise for Pretend's shows and the next day offered them a record deal, but he suggested that Spalding, and not Workman, fill the role of lead singer on most songs. "It must have been really painful for him in a way," Spalding said, "though he never took it out on me or anything."

The band released its only full-length LP, "Happy You Near," in 2002, but broke up soon thereafter. Thara Memory had told Spalding that in order to reach her potential she needed to get out of Portland, so in the fall of 2002 she moved to Boston to attend Berklee College of Music, where she had been accepted on full scholarship. She drove herself hard, graduating in just three years while gigging constantly, first with the singer Patti Austin's band and later with the saxophonist Joe Lovano. In her second year, she was chosen to play a concert with the guitarist Pat Metheny; later, he said that Spalding was "unlike any musician I had ever run across before. Her unique quality is something that goes beyond her pretty amazing musical skills; she has that rare 'x' factor of being able to transmit a certain personal kind of vision and energy that is all her own." Berklee hired Spalding after she graduated from the school at the age of twenty, making her one of



"I'd like to see you do this online."

the youngest instructors in the college's history.

That year, she wrote and recorded a jazz album, "Junjo." Though released by a tiny label in Spain, the record caught the ear of aficionados. In the hope of wider distribution for her next album, she submitted a new demo to Blue Note Records, home of many top jazz musicians, including Cassandra Wilson and Bobby McFerrin, as well as another racially mixed female singer, songwriter, and instrumentalist with jazz roots—Norah Jones. But Bruce Lundvall, then the president of the label, passed on signing Spalding. "They wanted the next Norah Jones," Spalding told me. "And he decided I wasn't the next Norah Jones." Lundvall says that he "goofed" in not signing her, but says, "I really try to look for original artists. I'm looking for someone that's not another Norah Jones or a sound-alike." He added, "The demo just wasn't good—but what a mistake I made, that's for sure."

She signed, instead, with Heads Up, a label based in Cleveland, and in late 2007 began recording "Esperanza." From the opening seconds of the record, it is clear that this is the product of an omnivorous sensibility. A chorus of women's voices lightly chanting over a syncopated percussion section of cro-

tales and hadjini drums gives way to Spalding's swinging bass and Leo Genovese's piano, before Spalding breaks into singing, in Portuguese, the Milton Nascimento number "Ponta de Areia." Later, "I Know You Know," an original, begins with a stuttering funk bass line that would not sound out of place on a James Brown record. "She Got to You" starts with what sounds like a rock drum fill, before morphing into a samba in which Spalding dresses down a lover who spurned her, singing, "Damn—that's cold!" Some critics thought the record was an almost too exuberant display of Spalding's gifts. A reviewer for the Web site All About Jazz wrote, "There is a lot of ground covered here; and while she's brimming with ideas, this album is crying out for some judicious editing." Others specifically praised the eclecticism of Spalding's approach.

"She is one of the most pure and more sterling representations of what jazz should have developed toward," Greg Osby, a jazz saxophonist who has toured through Europe sharing a bill with Spalding, said. "She's saying, 'I'm a young person, I'm coming up in the so-called 'post hip-hop' generation.' She's informed by music videos, the Internet, and digital immediate global ac-

cess. Her music is representative of that, as opposed to somebody her age trying to sound like they were at their peak in 1945 or 1959."

Bennett Studios, in Englewood, New Jersey, is a state-of-the-art recording facility housed in an abandoned train station just off the town's main strip. In mid-January, Spalding spent a few days there, overseeing the recording of the string arrangements that I had watched her sketch out a couple of weeks earlier. Present at the sessions was Gil Goldstein, a jazz accordion player and Grammy-winning arranger and producer who has worked with Paul Simon and Bobby McFerrin. Hired as an arranger for Spalding's "Chamber Music Society" album, Goldstein had tweaked Spalding's string parts for "Apple Blossom," the tricky Nascimento duet. Although the two had worked smoothly through most of the session, Spalding balked at the changes to the song.

"Your string parts are too busy," Spalding told him, as they sat on a sofa in the studio's control room.

"Busy?" Goldstein echoed, laughing. "No way!"

"It's so delicate—I don't want it to get too dense."

Spalding insisted on reverting to her earlier, simpler arrangement. Goldstein assented, then went into the soundproofed studio and began conducting the trio of violin, cello, and viola. But Spalding was not hearing what she wanted. She took the baton from Goldstein, who surrendered it without complaint. (He later told me that he likes it when a musician knows what he or she wants, and that it makes for a better recording.) She put on headphones and, following the sheet music spread out in front of her on the conductor's podium, guided the musicians through the session. At one point, she demanded a retake when she wanted the violinist to play a certain note with an upward bow motion, rather than a downstroke. Later, she asked the violinist to play a series of notes by plucking the strings. She was unsatisfied with the sound.

"Maybe make that plucking more like bells—*ting, ting, ting*," she said.

The violinist mimicked the motion

she had mimed at the podium and brought out a bell-like sound.

“Yes!” Spalding said.

A few weeks later, at the end of January, she played a show with her band at the Grand Opera House, an ornate theatre in downtown Wilmington, Delaware. Nothing seemed to be going right. Spalding’s regular drummer had broken his arm, and she was using a sub, her friend Terri Lyne Carrington. Also, a few days earlier, one of Spalding’s wisdom teeth had erupted through the gum and become infected. She had not had time to see a dentist, and it was excruciating for her to open her mouth to sing.

Onstage, though, she projected an almost incandescent joy in playing and singing. With her Afro teased out to a giant nimbus and wearing a halter top, high-waisted gray pants, and high heels, she wielded her big-bellied acoustic bass like a dance partner, swaying, eyes closed, as she plucked out rhythms and melodies on the strings and threw open her mouth to sing

ecstatic high notes. Between songs, she kept up a steady, intimate patter, at one point telling the audience, “This is a transitional period for me. I’m going to gain a lot of insight—I’m getting my wisdom teeth pulled.” Musically, the set was like a declaration of Spalding’s new-jazz philosophy: along with her own songs, she played the chestnut “Body and Soul,” but rendered it nearly unrecognizable by stretching the melody over a Latin 5/4 rhythm. At one point, she announced to the audience that she was going to play “Endangered Species,” a Wayne Shorter song—“probably my favorite song in the world.” When the crowd failed to respond with sufficiently vigorous clapping, Spalding mock-admonished them, “That’s not nearly enough applause for Wayne Shorter!” For one of her two encores, she strapped on her electric bass and played “I Can’t Help It,” the Stevie Wonder song made famous by Michael Jackson on his 1979 album “Off the Wall.” The crowd roared.

After the show, in the hall’s basement greenroom, Spalding looked drawn and

tired. She used a microwave to warm up a plate of food, then sat at a table with her bandmates, eating gingerly, barely able to open her mouth to insert the forkfuls of food. Talk turned to the large group of fans who had greeted Spalding when she got offstage.

“What did you think of Wynton’s manager?” Carrington asked.

“What?” Spalding said. “Marsalis’s manager?”

“Yeah,” Carrington said. “That guy who just left—that was Wynton’s manager.”

“Don’t fuck with me,” Spalding said, chewing carefully.

“Yeah,” Carrington went on. “Wynton’s manager drove two hours to hear you play.”

“Whoa,” Spalding said. “He say why?”

“I asked him,” Carrington said. “He told me, ‘Hey, I’m still a music lover.’”

Spalding thought about this for a moment, then said, “That’s cool.” ♦

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