



Musician Esperanza Spalding bends the genre rules

By Gail Mitchell Gail Mitchell – Fri Jul 30

LOS ANGELES (Billboard) – Most people wouldn't associate the term "modern" with classical chamber music. But if anyone can pull off the pairing, it's bassist/vocalist/composer Esperanza Spalding.

"Chamber Music Society," her album due August 17 from Heads Up International/Concord Music Group, draws from the same wellspring that inspired her 2008 debut, "Esperanza." It's the second chapter in the evolving career of the 26-year-old, who has been touted as a breath of fresh air within the contemporary jazz establishment -- and a telling example of an artist who harbors no qualms about following wherever her muse leads.

"I might have felt pressure," Spalding says about emulating the jazz, funk and Brazilian rhythms -- accented by multilingual vocals and scatting -- that propelled her first album. "Esperanza" spent 78 weeks on Billboard's Top Contemporary Jazz Albums chart, debuting at No. 3 and peaking at No. 2. "But I didn't respond to it. My objective is to evolve and grow. After my first album, I was feeling this, and that's what I answered to."

What Spalding felt this time is the music she first gravitated to growing up: classical. The self-taught violinist, who graduated from and became a faculty member of the Berklee College of Music, spent 10 years with the Chamber Music Society of Oregon in her native Portland, where she became concertmaster at 15. That training provides the foundation for the musical prodigy's modernized take on chamber music: accenting the intuitive spontaneity of improvisation with string trio arrangements combining elements of jazz, folk and world music.

Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, pianist Leo Genovese, guitarist Ricardo Vogt and percussionist Quintino Cinalli are the core group backing Spalding, who co-produced the set with Gil Goldstein. Legendary vocalist Milton Nascimento also guests. Spalding says, "I'm emulating something that chamber music used to do: Bring friends together to play music or listen to others play and enjoy the experience in an intimate setting."

The versatile Spalding -- who has performed at the White House, the Newport Jazz Festival and the 2010 BET Awards tribute to Prince at the request of the Purple One himself -- switches to the electric bass for her upcoming third album, "Radio Music Society." Originally intended as the second half of a double CD with "Chamber Music Society," the upbeat set is slated for next year.

"I wanted to find a way to incorporate jazz elements I find appealing into fun songs that could make it on the radio," Spalding says.

Currently performing overseas, the artist returns to the United States in August, and will tour intimate venues this fall.

"I don't want to be pigeonholed," she says. "My job is to do justice to the music that's speaking through me."