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MUSIC REVIEW

A shoeless Esperanza Spalding, on solid footing at the Lincoln Theatre

By Mike Joyce Tuesday, October 5, 2010

Esperanza Spalding had the best seat in the house at the Lincoln Theatre on Sunday night. Shedding her jacket and scarf moments after the lights went down, the 25-year-old jazz bassist-vocalist sat at a corner table onstage, tossed off her heels and poured herself a glass of wine. A few sips later, still barefoot, she led her Chamber Music Society ensemble through an imaginatively arranged collection of tunes that not only showcased her remarkable vocal range but also her gift for infusing ballads with a soulful or dreamy aura.



DUAL TALENT: Esperanza Spalding showcased her fluid musicality at Lincoln Theatre. (Kyle Gustafson For The Washington Post)

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While the show opened on a theatrical note, what immediately won the crowd over was sheer musicality. When singing or scatting, Spalding often reveled in the tricky intervals associated with bebop, but her phrasing was more syncopated and spirited, sometimes bringing to mind the likes of Al Jarreau and Flora Purim. When playing upright bass, Spalding seldom took on the conventional role of underpinning the chord progressions. Instead, she used the instrument to frame and echo her vocals or to provide a resounding pulse for modal interludes. Meanwhile, the cozy ensemble sound (bass, viola, violin and cello) grew in size and texture, with the addition of vocalists, keyboards and drums.

A dissonant edge distinguished some of the music, but a hushed rendering of Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Inutil Paisagem" was pure enchantment (thanks in part to guest vocalist Gretchen Parlato), and keyboardist Leo Genovese found numerous ways to subtly tweak the arrangements. Spalding also performed moving -- and vocally challenging -- renditions of "Wild Is the Wind" and "Apple Blossom."

Presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society, the concert ended as it began. Spalding retrieved her shoes, wrapped her jacket and sweater around her and walked offstage to a richly deserved standing ovation.

Joyce is a freelance writer.

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