

PHOTOGRAPH BY TINA TYRELL

Ace of bass

Esperanza Spalding counts President Obama and Prince among her biggest fans and is being talked about as one of the greatest talents jazz has ever seen. MICHAEL A GONZALES meets the double-bass player who is a superstar apparent

Last month Esperanza Spalding became the first jazz musician to win a Grammy Award for Best New Artist. It had been assumed that the teen pin-up Justin Bieber was a shoo-in for the prize. And no sooner had Spalding snatched it from under his button nose, than a global army of furious 'Beliebers' were vandalising her Wikipedia page and bombarding Twitter with anti-Esperanza messages. The most common, and most withering, put-down was simply, 'Who is Esperanza Spalding anyway?'

Three weeks before the Grammys, on a freezing afternoon in New York City, I meet Spalding at the Bowery Hotel – a building that smells of old wood and new money – and it is true: most of the world has never heard of her. 'I didn't get into music to be a star,' explains the 26-year-old composer, double-bassist and singer. Gazing down from the fourth-floor window, she watches pedestrians on the gentrified streets of this formerly rough area.

Spalding is phenomenally talented – and a rarity in the male-dominated jazz world. Her calloused hands look hardly big enough to hold a double-bass, let alone play it as breathtakingly as she does. At 20 she was hired to teach at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, just after graduating from there. In 2006 a tiny label released her debut album, 'Junjo', an exhilarating hybrid of jazz and Latin rhythms. And two years later a follow-up album, 'Esperanza', came out and her fortunes took a sharp upward turn.

Between that and her most recent release, 'Chamber Music Society', Spalding has been on stage with Prince, performed twice at the White House, played at the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony, starred in a Banana Republic advertising campaign and appeared on various American talkshows. Having seen her play in Central Park in 2009, where she opened for the soul singer Ledisi, I can confidently say she is something special.