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Jazz review: Esperanza Spalding at the Orpheum Theater

October 1, 2011 | 1:06 pm



This post had been corrected. See note at the bottom for details.

Even though it's been the better part of a year since Esperanza Spalding shocked a nation of Justin Bieber fans on Grammy night, there was still an impressive level of anticipation in the air going into her show at the Orpheum Theater Friday night, her second L.A. show since winning best new artist.

Because thanks to that win, which still resonates as one of the most satisfyingly daring moments to come out of the Recording Academy in recent memory, there aren't many bigger names in today's mainstream jazz, particularly among artists still in their 20s. Though she's been recording the follow-up to her Grammy-winning "Chamber Music Society," Spalding has remained on the music scene with appearances that included two shows at the Newport Jazz Festival in August, a date with the Roots in Philadelphia and two nights opening for Prince during his late-spring residency at the Forum.

And while curiosity is running high as to where Spalding will go next with the upcoming "Radio Music Society" (produced by A Tribe Called Quest's Q-Tip, an intriguing pairing that surely raised eyebrows among jazz traditionalists), Spalding offered no previews of what lay ahead in Friday's performance. Kicking off a cross-country tour with her "Chamber Music Society" ensemble, which included a three-piece string section, Spalding primarily drew from the album that delivered her Grammy breakthrough mixed with dashes of theatricality.

Spalding entered at the side of the stage with the curtain still drawn, pausing to slip off her shoes and jacket as she sank into a plush chair for a sip or two of red wine. As the lights dimmed, the curtain rose and string trio swelled to life, pulling Spalding to the front of the band through the sweetly languid "Little Fly." With Spalding plucking out a gently elastic bass line countered by pizzicato violin, it was striking how still the theater had become in her hands as her voice twisted and dipped through the music, as delicate as a falling feather.

An arcing vocal note held atop "Knowledge of Good and Evil" earned cheers, though Spalding's active, ambitious scatting sometimes got lost in the roiling music behind her. A stormy take on "Wild is the Wind" captured her album version's ominous, unsettled atmosphere, and a brief spoken-word introduction to "Short and Sweet" transformed into a twisting vocal improvisation that gave way to a swinging brushed rhythm from drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. Mainstream pop honors or not, this was taut, ever-evolving jazz, and Spalding's audience was ready to follow wherever she led.

"Winter Sun" marked one of the more upbeat moments with a driving, Latin-tinged beat that had Spalding swinging her signature cloud of hair back and forth as she worked up and down the neck of her bass. At the close of the insistent, cyclical pulse of "Really Very Small," Spalding's buoyant vocal improvisations coalesced into words atop Leo Genovese's bright piano lead. "I guess I'm starting to believe it," she sang with a lilting, sunny voice. "It ain't so bad."

After the song closed, she returned to slump into her seat at the side of the stage as the curtain fell behind her. Spalding sat up slowly, as if first waking up while the diverse, multi-generational crowd at the Orpheum came to its feet. It was no dream.

[For the recordm Oct 3: An earlier version of this post referred to this show as Spalding's first appearance since her win at the Grammys. She performed at USC's Bovard Auditorium on February 26 of this year.]

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-- Chris Barton

Photo: Esperanza Spalding performs at the Newport Jazz Festival in August. Credit: Eva Hambach / Getty Images

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Bob Myers

No respect for her audience. Showed up late, no connection with all of us who sat there wondering where she was for 30 minutes. Never connected with the audience throughout the 90 minute set. Great musical performance, with no personality. She was disrespectful to us all. Left the stage without one acknowledgment of the audience. SAD. Will still listen, just never in person again.

Read more at Jacksonville.com: <http://jacksonville.com/entertainment/music/2011-03-13/story/concert-review-hushed-feverish-esperanza-spalding-captivated#ixzz1Zl6EQgBx>

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Sara Ikeda · Redondo Beach, California

It was a great show, I do have to complain about the seats though.. I can't imagine being a tall person sitting in those seats at Orpheum because the distance between the seats and the next row is pretty small. The place is beautiful though and fit the music! As for the actual performance she was great in person. At times the music itself kind of overpowered her voice but maybe that was because I was near the back? My husband wasn't really familiar with her music and was worried about being sleepy during the performance. Well, after the show he said he was glued to the performance the whole time and said it was amazing and that she was definitely a gifted person. :) I'm so happy there were some tickets left the day before the show!

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Shazzar Kallie · California State University, Long Beach

Esperanza Spalding performed the exact same show with "theatrics" back in February at USC with her Chamber Music Society, so this was not her first show in Los Angeles since winning the Grammy. Her sold out show at USC's Bovard Auditorium 02/26/2011 was. I've been an admirer of Esperanza Spalding ever since her "Juno" album. Good to know other people are finally appreciating a creative musical genius! Nice to know she's working with Q-Tip, so we can expect some added flavor for her new album hopefully with a Hip Hop vibe entwined! God is Love!

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Abiy Engida

It was an excellent performance despite the uncomfortable seats at the Orpheum.

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