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Esperanza Spalding's Grammy hasn't changed her low-key style

By Chris Richards

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Esperanza Spalding, shown here performing in Washington last October, will perform in Frederick, Md. on March 4. (Kyle Gustafson/FTWP)

After shocking the universe by winning a Grammy for best new artist two weeks ago - besting the likes of Justin Bieber and Drake - Esperanza Spalding spent a week touring Japan. Then she boomeranged back to the West Coast to recharge alongside family and friends in her native Portland, Ore. This week, she jets off on a world tour that stops in Barcelona, Paris, Cape Town and . . . Frederick, Md. (She was booked to play Frederick's Weinberg Center on March 4 long before her name was ripped out of that envelope on Grammy night. The show is sold out.)

But here's one place the globe-trotting jazz bassist with the chirpy singing voice hasn't been since her big Grammy win: on the Internet, where overzealous Bieber fans, who thought the teen pop sensation should have won best new artist, have been talking all kinds of digital smack on Twitter, Facebook, even on Spalding's Wikipedia page.

The 26-year-old shrugs it off with the kind of freon cool you can feel through the telephone.

"I've heard about it, but I haven't seen any of it, and I don't want to," she says, making green tea at her mom's house in Portland. "Just to be totally crude, my reaction, honestly, is, 'So what?'"

Spalding has other pressures to cheerfully ignore, too, like becoming the poster child for 21st-century jazz. She's the first jazz musician to win a best new artist Grammy, and many in the genre see her upset as a

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huge stamp of validation from the greater music industry.

Others say the award might not mean much for jazz in the long run. "Whether her victory means that more mainstream attention will be paid to the jazz community around her, and not just to her own career, is doubtful," wrote Patrick Jarenwattananon on NPR's A Blog Supreme the morning after the Grammys. Spalding says she doesn't feel responsible for carrying any torches, anyway. She feels responsible only for her own music.

"I want to get better, because it's fun to be good," she says. "It's fun to be able to express yourself through this medium, but the medium demands a lot of time and attention. So that's where I feel the responsibility."

And while she may be completely new to the masses, Spalding's music has been widely celebrated - and frequently debated - in jazz circles for years. She studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston, became an instructor there at the age of 20, and soon began playing with esteemed artists, including Stanley Clarke, Pat Metheny and Joe Lovano. She released solo albums in rapid-fire succession: "Junjo" in 2006, "Esperanza" in 2008 and "Chamber Music Society" just last summer - each incorporating elements of chamber music, bossa nova and R&B that rankled jazz purists.

The road to her Grammy victory wasn't always easy. Spalding grew up in a single parent household in a tough Portland neighborhood. She was first drawn to music after seeing Yo-Yo Ma play cello on "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," took up the violin, joined a local community orchestra open to adults and kids, earned her GED at 16 and headed off to study music at Portland State University before landing at Berklee.

After school, her national profile rose quickly. She made a fan of President Obama, who after inviting her to perform twice at the White House in 2009, asked her to play at the Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo in December of that year when he received the award.

Spalding says she hasn't heard from the first family since her Grammy win - "I think he has bigger things on his plate," she says - but she admits that the recognition has helped motivate her.

"Those little boosts from outside are like Red Bull for your creative discipline," she says.

By that measure, a Grammy feels like two dozen espresso shots. Spalding draws clear lines between making her music and promoting it and says accepting that little gramophone statue has encouraged her to keep pushing her work to a wider audience.

"With that Grammy, being invited onto a larger playing field and being invited there as my self, I actually feel more free to do exactly what I want to do," she says. "I feel like I can be received as myself."

After completing her tour in April, she'll spend the hot months chipping away at "Radio Music Society," an ambitious new recording that Spalding says will aim to capture the spontaneity of improvisation and frame it in the sonics of contemporary pop. The album is being produced by Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest, and Spalding hopes it will help bring jazz back to the mainstream U.S. airwaves.

"I don't know if that will really happen," Spalding says. "But it's an inspiring objective."

Until then, her tour schedule is booked solid, with little room for the television appearance requests she's been getting since Grammy night. To make more time to be on television, she'll have to cut back watching it.

"Maybe I'll sacrifice a few episodes of '30 Rock' for more practicing," she says.

By Chris Richards | February 25, 2011; 2:00 PM ET
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