

Esperanza Spalding

By
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Portrait
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How the four-time Grammy Award-winning songstress broke music business rules and catapulted her career.

What's in a name? For musician Esperanza Spalding the significance of her first name, the Spanish word for "hope," couldn't be more prescient.

In the past decade, Spalding has won four Grammy Awards, released five solo albums, performed at the Oscars, the Nobel Prize ceremony, and at the White House (for the Obamas). Just this summer, she was guest curator at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in Manhattan—"Esperanza Spalding Selects" is on view through Jan. 8, 2018—and professor at Harvard University, where she will teach composition and performance next spring.

You could call her music experimental jazz, but that would be far too generic. As a composer, bassist, and singer, she takes the genre, breaks it down, and re-creates original compositions in front of live audiences, incorporating funk, soul, and rock with ease, whenever the mood strikes. Her voice is high, light, and ethereal, a counterpoint to the deep bass instruments that anchor her performances.

At 32, she has achieved what most musicians can only dream of accomplishing in a lifetime. Her secret, she says, is knowing when and how to say no. In 2013, having just finished the album tour of *Radio Music Society*, Spalding announced to her 12-person team that she was done. She left her manager and her agent, wrapped a contract with Concord Music Group (which remains her label), and took a year off.

"I just decided to give myself permission to determine what I wanted. In that downtime, I started to take inventory, and realized that a bunch of stuff was *really off* in my life," she says. "Everything was about selling or producing, and the thing I had the least time for was creating."

As Spalding describes it, she was making room for her next step to manifest itself. "The idea of Emily showed up like a bolt of lightning," she says. Emily, which is Spalding's middle name, is a full-fledged alter ego, cast as a heroine taking charge—the complete artist Spalding so badly wanted to become. The





experience of creating Emily became the subject of last year's concept album, *Emily's D+Evolution*, a riotous compilation of songs that won't sit still.

Since then, Spalding has been on an artistic tear, including a solo gig at New York's Carnegie Hall. And for her next act, she's writing and recording a full-length album, titled *Exposure*, during one three-day marathon this September. The album's creation will be streamed live to a web audience.

To put this in context, consider that Spalding spent her entire childhood in survival mode. She was raised by a single mother, on what she calls "the other side of the tracks" in Northeast Portland, Oregon, which was plagued by gang violence and high crime rates during the 1980s and '90s. "I was 'up in the cut,' for sure," she says. "Meaning, I was a poor student with a real insubordinate streak." She was a teenager running with street punks and playing in garage bands at local bars when she dropped out of high school. Her future looked bleak.

It's no wonder, then, that a major recurring theme in her work is evolution.

When we meet, Spalding is dressed head-to-

toe in Oregon vintage, sitting comfortably inside a tricked-out recording studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, called Big Orange Sheep. She's come to record songs to accompany her exhibition of visual art currently on view at the Cooper Hewitt. Her mix of eloquence and poise is disarming. She's clearly reached the other side of hardship, and can look back with ease.

"We can't just ride on what we thought was working. We have to see the available alarms, which are calling out the true desires inside of us," she says, in the same rhythmic cadence that pervades her lyrics. "Everything at all times has to be explored, for the sake of growth and change—which is inevitable."

Her phrases are filled with optimism and hyperbole—the musings of a self-made musician. But we lean in, and listen. Because, against difficult odds, it is Spalding who has been able to say no when it mattered, to take control over her own path, and to achieve her musical potential. Which, we hope, will continue to thrive for years to come.

