

Esperanza Spalding (1984-)

By Ted Jamison

Esperanza Spalding's fierce talent in double bass and vocal work earned her a Grammy in 2011 for Best New Artist, making her the first jazz musician to win that award. She won three more Grammys in 2013 and 2014, one of them shared with her mentor, Portland jazz trumpeter Thara Memory; a Grammy in 2020, as well as 2022; and most recently the Best Instrumental Album Grammy in 2023. Not only did Spalding master singing while playing bass, but she also distinguished herself as a woman in the male-dominated jazz genre within the even narrower pool of female double bass players.

Spalding was born on October 18, 1984, to a single mother in the working-class King neighborhood of Northeast Portland's Albina District. She grew up in a neighborhood with a history of disinvestment, speculation, and real estate redlining, a neighborhood that suffered from incidents of drug trafficking, gang warfare, and abandoned houses. For Spalding, a fragile child who was home-schooled due to bouts of sickness, opportunity came in the form of music.

At age four, Spalding became fixated on stringed instruments after watching Yo Yo Ma perform on *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*. By age five, she began teaching herself the skills that would eventually land her a place in Portland's Chamber Music Society of Oregon youth program under Dorothy McCormack, violin pedagogue and cofounder of the society. She also frequently sat in on her mother's community college music classes. "I would come home and try to mimic on our piano the things I heard in her music lessons," she wrote in 2008.

By age fifteen, Spalding was the concertmaster violinist for the youth orchestra. The same year, she began playing the upright bass. In an interview, she said: "When I...picked up the bass, all of a sudden I got a taste of improvised music....I felt like my voice was going to come out through this instrument." Jazz was the music that "spoke to me," she said.

At sixteen, Spalding committed to music fulltime. She left high school, completed a GED, and enrolled in the music program at Portland State University. By then, she was a member of four bands and was playing the Portland club circuit. She refined her talent under the tutelage of such local jazz masters as Thara Memory, Darrell Grant, Ron Steen, Greg McKelvey, Stan Bock, and Janice Scroggins. Spalding transferred to the Berklee School of Music in Boston in 2002, graduating in 2005. She accepted a teaching position there at age twenty, the second youngest instructor in the school's history. The same year, Spalding released her debut album, *Junjo*, off the Spanish label Ayva, followed by *Esperanza* in 2008, which earned a spot on the *Billboard* jazz chart for over a year. She has performed for President Barack Obama at the White House on multiple occasions.

Despite the distance her talent has taken her from Oregon, Spalding maintains a warm connection to the state. She has performed in the annual Portland Jazz Festival, and named her first Grammy-winning album, *Chamber Music Society* (2010), after the Portland ensemble where she got her start.

In addition to maintaining a regular schedule of tour dates and live shows, Spalding has collaborated with several major artists, including jazz drummer Jack DeJohnette on *Sound Travels* (2012). In 2014, she released the single "We Are America," which called for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba; the music video featured appearances by Stevie Wonder, Janelle Monáe, Savion Glover, and Harry Belafonte. Spalding lives in New York City.

Sources

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