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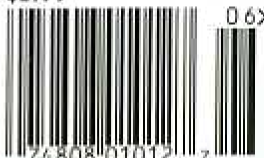

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Northwest Passage

At Only 24, Jazz Phenom Esperanza Spalding Has The Ultimate 'X-Factor'

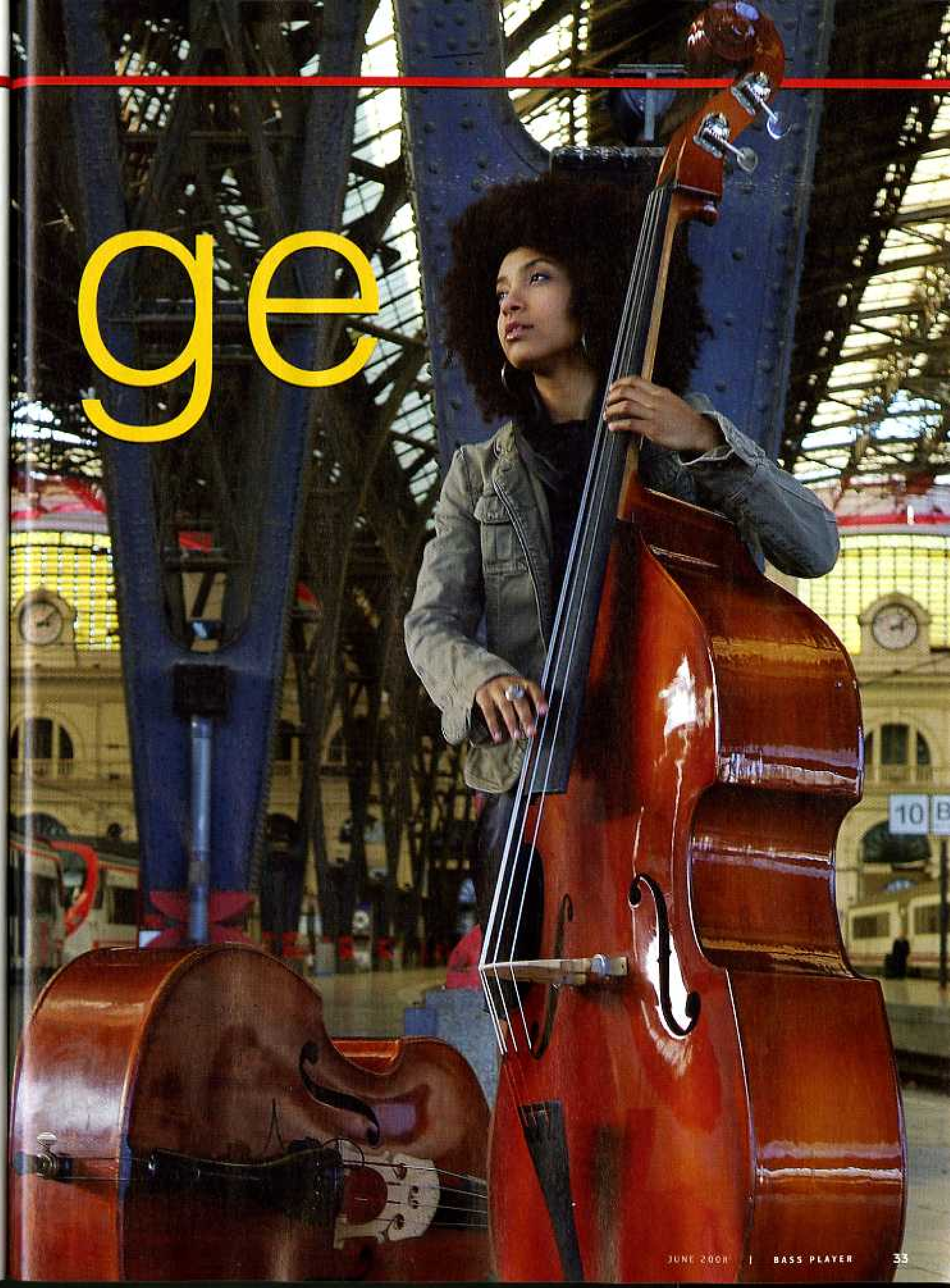
THE BUZZ ON ESPERANZA SPALDING HAS BEEN building since the day she arrived at Berklee College of Music with a full scholarship at age 17, straight from the Pacific Northwest. One moment she was a newbie, motivated to excel but frustrated by a long daily commute and the fiercely competitive nature of Berklee's student life—and the next, she was backing R&B star Patti Austin on the "For Ella" tour celebrating the music of Ella Fitzgerald. "I learned what touring was," says Spalding, 24, about that first-semester gig, which resulted in her first tour of Europe and lasted, on and off, for three years. "You can think it's this fun and amazing thing. But you learn how it really works—how to be on your game every night no matter what. I learned how to play the same music night after night and keep it fresh and interesting. I learned how to accompany a singer, which is very important. Along with the standard American songbook, we were playing a lot of bebop."

After touring with her former Berklee teacher, master saxophonist Joe Lovano, and releasing the trio album *Junjo* with pianist Aruan Ortiz and drummer Francisco Mela (also on the Berklee faculty), the Spalding buzz turned into a roar. *Esperanza*, her debut for Heads Up, has the charismatic musician handily demonstrating her talents as a virtuoso instrumentalist, gifted multilingual vocalist, and potent songwriter. She plays and

Continued

By Philip Booth

Photographs by Johann Sauty



sings on a jazz-rooted program marked by catchy if tricky melodies, pliable grooves informed by Latin, Brazilian, African, and bebop rhythms, and multiple bursts of ripping fingerboard work and scat singing.

For *Esperanza*, Spalding is backed by her regular bandmates, pianist Leo Genovese and drummer Otis Brown, and joined by Cuban-born drumming sensation Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez and veteran New Orleans saxophonist Donald Harrison Jr. The group blows through heady originals augmented by Milton Nascimento's bossa-inflected "Ponta de Areia" and a version of the standard "Body and Soul" reborn in 5/4 and sung in Spanish. Her goal: sophisticated music built on jazz but influenced by other global traditions and designed for maximum emotional connection. "I'm trying to make it palatable and grooving—something that someone who isn't schooled in jazz might ingest and appreciate. But it's based on jazz song forms and solos, melodically and harmonically."

Spalding, encouraged by her single mother, began playing violin at age five. A decade later she started playing bass, running blues patterns during Sunday-afternoon nightclub sessions with Portland singer/guitarist Sweet Baby James Benton. The young bassist joined a half-dozen bands, including local indie rock/pop group Noise For Pretend. Prior to attending Berklee, she spent a year studying classical music at Portland State University. In summer 2005, at age 20, she began teaching at Berklee, making her one of the college's youngest-ever faculty members (Pat Metheny famously taught there at 19). On the horizon, she is developing two Berklee courses: one on singing and playing, and another on transcribing as a tool for learning harmony and theory. She's also determined to write more horns and background vocals into her arrangements. "I want to expand the palette that I have for arrangements, and also home in on this counterpoint concept with the bass and voice—trying to use it in a way that's effective, trying to integrate that into song forms and into performance."

HOW DO YOU HELP YOUR STUDENTS GET TO *the next level in their playing?*

By organizing how they're going to practice. A lot of my students are overwhelmed by what they have to do in a week. I have them keep a practice journal so they can keep track of what they've done, and what they need to do the next time they pick up the instrument. They can see where they left off and see what they have to do next. When you do it in that kind of focused way, you learn a lot about your strengths. At home in your room, you refine what you can do.

How do you advise students on making musical connections with other players?

If you've done your homework, you don't have to think much. The fundamental things are that you have rhythmic accuracy and agility on your instrument. Those are the ideals; that's what I strive for. You're going in to listen and converse with what's being given to you. You have to be confident enough in your knowledge of the "topic" that you don't need pre-prepared information. You have your own fundamentals down and, depending on the context, you're open enough that you can literally respond in the moment. If you hear something that someone plays, you know the appropriate way to respond. I learned that playing with Joe Lovano, because he's so free and has really complicated song forms. It's also in knowing the song so well that you allow it to sound like itself.

Are there bass players who exemplify that approach?

All the great ones do that. John Patitucci is an amazing example; he does it beautifully, particularly with *Directions In Music* [with Herbie Hancock, Michael Brecker, Roy Hargrove, and Brian Blade]. With people like Slam Stewart, you think of the more limited role they had then—they managed to do what they did with far fewer words. Ron Carter, Ray Brown, and Christian McBride—they keep an edge of freedom and creativity that keeps it interesting.

Pat Metheny talked about you having an "X factor." What do you bring to the scene?

If I have a sound, I don't know what it is yet. Maybe part of it would be an openness. I'm so new to it, it's still sprouting. When you play, you take on the responsibility of being part of this community. What are you going to contribute, for all that you're taking from it? That's what drives me. I realize that it's a responsibility. As an artist, it's a blessing and a privilege to get up onstage, to be as creative and as good as I can be to make sure that when people come, they experience something that's uplifting and beautiful

TOP PHOTOS BY PHIL FARNSWORTH

and high quality. It hasn't been completely refined yet.

After receiving a scholarship to Berklee, you headed a benefit concert to pay your way to Boston. How did that happen?

A friend let me use his gallery, and I paid him a rental fee out of the money I made from the concert. All my friends and their bands played for free. I put that thing on to fly myself and my bass out and have a little money in my pocket to live on. I didn't realize at the time how hip that was!

What did you emphasize in your studies at Berklee?

I got a professional music degree, where you make your own major. For my senior project, I made a record and was promoting and leading my own band. I would take arranging, composition, vocal classes—all the things I wanted to have strong in my band—and courses in different musical styles, like world music, South American music, Brazilian music.

How did you make the connection with Joe Lovano?

I was in his nonet ensemble at Berklee. He had a trio gig, and my teacher, John Lockwood, couldn't make it. At first it was Francisco Mela and him, just a trio with me. Then there was a quartet with a piano player, James Weidman, for a few years. Last year he started touring with US5, a quintet with two drummers. We played the Vanguard [in New York] and did a little mini-tour in California.

What kinds of things did you learn from working with him?

Joe doesn't talk much about what he wants you to do musically. One thing I learned from him is how to learn without having to ask anything. He'd say really esoteric things, like, "Make a landscape. Just relax and follow the lines." So I thought, How can I be an active participating observer and learn from what he's showing me in his playing? He has this intense creative and free edge in everything he plays. He really means it—make landscapes, be creative, make up stories as you go, give him something to feel in and walk through and dance to.

Do you reach for that edge of creative freedom in your own music?

I'm getting into more structured song forms. *Junjo* is pure creativity; we're just making it up as we go, and responding. That's always a huge element. I don't think my strong suit is knowing all the idiosyncrasies of all the periods of jazz, and I might not know all the cues. I get through it by using my ears and being creative. That's a big part of my playing, and I'm sure it applies to everything I do. I don't know if that was strengthened by playing with Joe or if it came from playing with Joe.

What kind of impact did your mother have on your music?

I listened to a lot of music. But the way my mom helped to shape my growth was that she would always let me play. If I wanted to play music, she'd be all for it. She was extremely supportive of whatever music was coming out of me. She went to college briefly, because she wanted to play jazz guitar. Going with her to her class, I would sit under the piano. Then I would come home and I would be playing her stuff that her teacher had been playing. I was probably about eight.

How'd you get to the bass from the violin?

It's like waking up one day and realizing you're in love with a co-worker. I went into this [high school] music room because I was skipping classes, and I was just messing with the bass. The first time I went in, a music teacher showed me how the blues worked, and from that day on I would always go there every day and play the bass. I was falling in love with it and didn't even know.

My whole life, I wanted to play cello, and I sometimes thought that the violin was going to turn into the cello. But it went too far and got stuck as the bass.

What kind of impact did your hometown scene have on your playing?

There are a lot of great musicians in Portland that don't have much to do but hang and teach and be phenomenal resources. I was good enough to pass, and people may have thought I had potential that wasn't being cultivated. I got lots of opportunities to play beyond my level, which is the best way to get better. When people kick your butt, you feel that pain and go home and practice, and you hope that will alleviate your pain. I think that's been the case in every band I've been in.

There were so many phenomenal bass players in that city at that time, I never got a taste of mediocre fledgling musicians. They were all great: Dave Friesen, Phil Baker from Pink Martini, Glen Moore from Oregon, and my personal teacher, [Oregon Symphony bassist] Ken Baldwin. I was constantly striving to be on the level of these guys. I was playing gigs with people they played with.

When did you start singing and playing at the same time?

It started with Noise For Pretend. I would play simple bass lines and sing simple melodies. Then I started getting into playing them more independently and more creatively. Often at home I'd be practicing tunes and singing the melodies

to see how they all worked together. Through that process I started wanting to sing tunes live.

What is the relationship between your singing voice and your voice as a bassist?

When I'm singing, in my mind I'm always thinking of harmony. I'm always hearing different types of chords or progressions imposed on my singing, and I allude to those. On the bass I hear a lot of melodic lines, probably from listening to vocal lines. I'm always talking about counterpoint. It's the yin and the yang; the bass tends to imply whatever the melody is. It's about making the right kind of contrary motion.

Are there parallels between the way you phrase vocal lines and the phrasing of your bass lines?

If nothing else, people say that I'm really rhythmic when I sing. Donald [Harrison Jr., saxophonist] says that my playing is really free. Sometimes I get in trouble that way: I feel like anything I can sing, I can play on the bass, which is definitely not true.

Is there a tune on Esperanza that particularly captures where you are as a musician?

Compositionally, I think "I Adore You" is a good representation of the way I'm going now. It has a form that comes back, verse-chorus-verse, but I'm playing with form. The excitement of the song isn't only in the solo section—there are rich arrangements and interesting forms and lots of melody, and a counterpoint interaction between the voice and bass. "She Got to You" has a lot of the same elements, but I'm trying to make it rock out. It has lyrics, too. I'm trying to get back to having fun and writing how you see and what you think and writing how you talk.

Have any particular pop songwriters influenced your songwriting approach?

I loved French music for a while—Edith Piaf and France Gall. And I had a Wurlitzer [electric piano] in my room because I wanted to be a keyboardist for a little while. Lyrically, most music I heard was in a language I didn't understand—either Portuguese or French. Then, when I started to listen to jazz, it was [Duke Ellington lyricist] Billy Strayhorn. More important than lyrics, though, have been song form and harmonic things. I like Mario Laginha, a Portuguese composer. And Wayne Shorter. I like a lot of sus sound—suspended major 7.

Do you plan to emphasize your singing more?

I will, as I focus more on my voice. I never thought of myself as a singer. I love the people we all love: Sarah Vaughn, Betty Carter, Dakota Staton. As for being a vocalist, leading a band from the bass chair is totally different from leading from the vocal chair. I'm learning a lot from people like Richard Bona—how he plays in a band as a bassist and singer. Playing takes up so much emotional and mental energy. How do you have enough left over for singing?

What areas did you explore on Esperanza that you didn't have a chance to with Junjo?

Junjo was like a collaborative effort; I put my name on it and toured under my name. But right away I realized that the tunes I had in mind to do at first weren't working with those guys. With *Esperanza*, I'm trying to reach a broader audience with a lot of influences that have shaped my musicianship, that normally you can't share in a jazz show. Sometimes I go to the Vanguard; it's so hip, but there are so many people that jazz is foreign to. The objective of this music isn't twisting and bending set rules that you need to know ahead of time.

How did you decide to sing songs in Spanish and Portuguese?

I usually sing songs in their original language. With Portuguese songs the phrasing of the melody is intrinsically linked with the language, and it's beautiful.

Why do you have such strong feelings for Brazilian music?

They have some hip stuff happening. There's innocence, beauty, depth, and simplicity. I think that's what captured all the jazz musicians. There's something in the heart.

There's a real feeling of melancholy.

There are many versions of "Ponta de Areia," but they all have such a deep story. That country has such an amazing and intense history—even in Rio, poverty and suffering is juxtaposed with a beautiful city.

What made you decide to do "Body and Soul" in Spanish, and in 5/4?

Dave Love, CEO of Heads Up, really wanted a song in Spanish. Off the cuff I said that we could do "Body and Soul." That song is so beautiful; the English lyrics are simple and poetic. I said, "All right, here's what we're gonna do. Let's see how we can make Spanish really sing in a swing jazz tune. And just for shits and giggles, let's see if we can do it in five." We're trying to make the Spanish phrasing really sink in. I do speak Spanish; my mom is Welsh, Hispanic, and Native American, and my father is black.

What do you attribute your success to?

You never know why things happen the way they happen. I'm blessed. I think it's the hand of fate; I don't take full credit for it, because that would be arrogant.

Is there anyone whose career you'd like to model your own after?

I'm drawn to extremes of successful musicians. Ornette Coleman heard a sound and knew he had to be the forefather of that sound and that music. Someone like Herbie Hancock—of course his degree of musicianship is unbelievable, but he's always been at the front of every wave of music. He's with each new generation of musicians in terms of technology and new ways of expressing his soul. He has to adapt his style or instrumentation to be successful, and he does. Maybe a cross between Madonna and Ornette Coleman: She completely reinvents herself, but it's all her.

The beautiful thing about someone like Miles or Ornette or Madonna is that they never have to prove anything because they just *are*. They know the value of the work that they do. I heard a Miles recording from '66, a live recording of "'Round Midnight," that was really uptempo. I asked Joe, "What the hell is this? I've never heard him play it this way before." He said, "Oh, that was the year some critic told him he couldn't play." I really admire that. BP

See Lesson, next page

GEAR

Basses Esperanza's main bass is a 19th-century ¾-size French flatback with a carved top, purchased about four years ago "at a steal" from a friend in Boston, after the neck on her previous bass kept breaking. "It's killing," says Esperanza. "I'd heard someone else playing it and it sounded amazing, so I assumed it would sound that good with me. It didn't at first. With some basses, you can hear their age; they sound seasoned. I like hearing the history in a bass. It's like the difference between hearing a 17-year-old sing a ballad and a 70-year-old singing a ballad; this one has a depth and resonance that only comes with age. Air France started harassing me [about the bass's size], so I gave up on flying with it, although sometimes if it's a special gig I'll bring it. I usually just ask for a bass when I get there. If I'm in Europe, I might ask for a Czech bass." Esperanza uses Thomastik Weichs for the *E* and *A* strings and Thomastik Spirocores for the *D* and *G*, and plays an unspecified German bow. She amplifies the bass with a Fishman Full Circle pickup.

Spalding also uses an Eminence Portable Upright Bass with a David Gage Realist pickup. "When I travel, I put it in a golf case so people won't give me a hard time about it being a bass. I always take it with me as a carry-on."

Finally, she plays a fretless acoustic bass guitar made by Mike Doolin in Portland. "It's like a mariachi guitar with a flat back. He had a booth at the Montreal Jazz Fest two years ago, and he had the bass out on display. We ended up chatting. I'd never played an electric before. My music didn't need it, so I thought, Why even bother? But when I heard the tone of this one, I wanted that color; it sounded amazing. It's so hard to get that type of instrument to sound good, especially with a pickup. I use it more for chords, like more as a guitar, for specific colors. Last summer in Montreal, Mike let me play it at our gigs. That's the first one he's ever made; he's supposed to be building me one of my own, because this is a little big for me. It's longer than a typical fretless bass, and the body is too fat for me."

Rig Gallien-Krueger MB150, with pickup/amp sound blended with miked acoustic sound. "I'm using more amp than mic now, just for the sake of consistency."

DISCOGRAPHY

As a leader *Esperanza* [Heads Up International, 2008]; *Junjo* [Ayva Music, 2006]. **With Noise For Pretend** (both on Hush) *Blanket Music/Noise For Pretend* [2001]; *Happy You Near* [2002]. **With Stanley Clarke** *The Toys of Men** [Heads Up International, 2007]. **With Nando Michelin Trio** *Duende* [Fresh Sound New Talent]. **With M. Ward** *Transfiguration of Vincent* [Merge, 2003]. **With Miroslav Vitous** [ECM, forthcoming].

*vocals only

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Sing & Play The Spalding Way

ESPERANZA SPALDING'S UNCANNY KNACK FOR COMPOSING contrapuntally is the key to her melodic bass playing. "I hear two melodies at once when I write," she reveals. "Then I usually go back and edit the lower melody to function more as a bass line." Coupled with her Afro-Cuban-enhanced rhythmic sense, it makes Esperanza one of the freshest voices on acoustic bass.

Ex. 1 contains the main two-bar groove of "I Know You Know," which Spalding played on her fretless Doolin acoustic bass guitar for her new release, *Esperanza*. "It's more R&B-rooted than Brazilian; I just wanted to come up with a funky bass line to go with the tune." Ex. 2 shows four bars of the main upright groove and scat-vocal melody of "Mela." "The tune was inspired by the great Cuban drummer Francisco Mela; he plays a lot of melodies on his bass drum, and this bass line is in his rhythmic style." Spalding always records her vocal and bass line together, and then goes in for a separate vocal take, often leaving much of the original vocal if the band is playing well off it. She advises, "If you're going to sing and play the bass line, there are different ways to approach it. Here, I would say learn the two-bar bass phrase until you've internalized it, and then start working on the vocal."

Ex. 3a has the upright bass line and vocal melody from the first two measures of the A section of "Espera." Again, Spalding's recommendation is to learn the 7/4 bass-and-double-stop ostinato first, and then attempt the vocal. Ex. 3b is from the song's funkier B section, back in 4/4 time. While the vocal is a catchy bebop phrase, dig the bass line, with its upper-register 3rd-and-7th reach in beat *two* and classic open-string enharmonic pivot points in beat *four*. The following measure boasts an octave harmonic, while the turnaround on beat *four* is pure vocal-inspired melody. **BP**

Ex. 1

Funky samba
♩ = 86
Am7♭5 D7 Gm6 D♭6

Ex. 2

Cuban jazz
♩ = 108
Gmmaj7 C7 Gmmaj7 C7

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Ex. 3a

Med. Latin jazz
♩ = 78
Amaj7 Am7

Ex. 3b

♩ = 78
B♭m7 E♭7

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