

PLAYING IT BY EAR

Moments after Esperanza Spalding finished singing "Precious" on NBC's "Late Show With David Letterman" in early June, the host strode right up and anointed her "the coolest person we've ever had on the show." **Heads Up Records** president Dave Love must think she's pretty cool too. Her label debut, "Esperanza," debuted earlier this month at No. 3 on Billboard's Top Contemporary Jazz Albums chart and soon rose to No. 2.

The album, which blends jazz harmonies, Brazilian boss nova and R&B backbeat, is an accurate reflection of the 24-year-old's musical personality. "I was very adamant about how these songs were

going to sound," Spalding says. "I wanted it to have a jazz feel, but I didn't want it to have a jazz sound."

With her big, billowy Afro and disarming smile, Spalding comes across as simultaneously assertive and inviting. She gives the same impression with her music. And her story is one of serendipity mixed with a self-confident sense of adventure. As a child, once she saw Yo-Yo Ma perform on the PBS show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," she took up the violin. In high school, after eyeing a bass in an empty auditorium, she walked over and began playing.

Spalding soon found herself studying at the Berklee College of Music, and by the age of 20, she

was on the school's faculty. Her skill at rendering the Portuguese lyrics to, say, Milton Nascimento's "Ponta de Areia" on her new CD owes to a long-ago month spent in Rio with a boyfriend, when native poetry moved her to "take a class or two" in the language.

While at Berklee, Spalding had a chance to collaborate with guitarist/educator Pat Metheny, who told her that, beyond her obvious talent, she had an "X factor" that would make her connect with audiences in a special way. Heads Up's Love got a sense of that when he sent out an early promotional DVD. "It was pretty much just her talking," Love says, "but the response was overwhelming. People called to book her on TV without even hearing the music." *—Larry Blumenfeld*

