

The New York Times

A NIGHT OUT WITH | ESPERANZA SPALDING

Up to Her Ears



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

IMMERSED The jazz singer and bassist Esperanza Spalding spent a recent night hearing other bands at West Village clubs.

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Published: July 27, 2008

WHEN Esperanza Spalding, the jazz singer and bassist, appeared on [David Letterman](#)'s show in June, Paul Shaffer called her “the coolest guest we’ve ever had.” At 23, she has already been sidewoman to the likes of [Herbie Hancock](#) and [Pat Metheny](#), and three years ago became the youngest faculty member ever at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

None of which means she can get into a sold-out show at the Village Vanguard without reservations. On a recent Sunday evening, Ms.

Spalding was pleading with the doorman at the West Village club before a set by Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band.

“Are you sure there isn’t any space at the bar?” asked Ms. Spalding, who had earlier professed that she was “musically in love with” Mr. Blade.

No room, the doorman told her. He’d try to squeeze her in for the second set.

After popping into a nearby salon for a quick eyebrow waxing, Ms. Spalding, a self-described “jazz nerd” who started on the club circuit in Portland, Ore., when she was a teenager, decided to visit Smalls, a more laid-back club three blocks away. She tried calling a couple of friends to see if they would meet her. A week earlier, her manager gave her a cellphone and made her promise she would use it for a year.

Having taken in a quick set at Smalls, Ms. Spalding headed to Cachaça, a jazz club on West Eighth Street. A group of young men carrying instrument cases greeted her outside.

“I’m going to put a G.P.S. on you since you don’t have a cellphone,” said Igmarr Thomas, a trumpet player and fellow Berklee grad. At that, Ms. Spalding whipped out her new phone, eliciting a collective gasp from the guys.

“I gotta get your digits,” Mr. Thomas said.

“I don’t even know my own number!” Ms. Spalding answered.

Though she was due back at the Vanguard, Ms. Spalding ducked inside Cachaça for the beginning of the set. “Just four bars, then I’ll leave.”

Sixteen bars later, she was back on the street. At the Vanguard, a line stretched down the block and Ms. Spalding seemed to know everyone in it. She hugged two musicians, chided one of her band mates, Otis

Brown III, a drummer, for cutting the line, and spoke in Portuguese to a Brazilian pianist.

“I spent a month in Brazil,” she said, explaining her fluency. (On her new album, “Esperanza,” she sings in Portuguese and Spanish.) At 11:30 Mr. Blade and his band took the stage. From her seat at the back of the club, Ms. Spalding punctuated the set with sounds usually reserved for an R-rated rendezvous: “Mmm,” “Ohhh,” “Uh-huuuh.” After a particularly animated saxophone duel, she fanned herself with her hand.

“I was about to cry up here,” Mr. Brown said after the show.

“Me, too!” Ms. Spalding said. “The first song, I was tearing up.”

While they waited for Mr. Blade to emerge from the dressing room, the two leafed through a copy of Hot House, a jazz night life guide, and found the listing for Ms. Spalding’s August appearance at the Newport jazz festival. “Esper-Aynza,” Ms. Spalding said, deliberately mispronouncing her own name, as if reading it for the first time. She smiled. She was ready to play.

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