

## Esperanza Spalding - Esperanza (2008)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 19 June 2010 09:15 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 13:32

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01. *Ponta De Areia*
02. *I Know You Know*
03. *Fall In*
04. *I Adore You*
05. *Cuerpo Y Alma (Body & Soul)*
06. *She Got To You*
07. *Precious*
08. *Mela*
09. *Love In Time*
10. *Espera*
11. *If Thats True*
12. *Samba Em Preludio*

Esperanza Spalding - electric bass, acoustic bass, vocals    Leo Genovese - piano, Wurlitzer organ (7), Fender Rhodes piano (10)    Jamey Haddad - percussion    Otis Brown - drums    Horacio Hernandez - drums (4, 8)    Ambrose Akinmusire - trumpet (8, 11)    Donald Harrison - saxophone (6, 11)    Gretchen Parlato - background vocals (1, 4)

Bassist, vocalist, and composer Esperanza Spalding's eponymous release on Heads Up International is touted on the Concord Label Group's website as her debut recording. This is patently untrue. In fact, if it weren't for her actual debut, 2006's *Junjo* on Spain's Ayva imprint, this set may not have existed at all. *Junjo* showcased Spalding as a leader, playing in an acoustic trio with pianist Aruan Ortiz and drummer Francisco Mela singing wordlessly over bubbling Latin and Afro-Cuban melodies and rhythms. Though written by Brazilian legend Milton Nascimento and featuring backing vocalists and additional percussion to the bass, piano, and drum format, Esperanza's opening track, "Ponta De Areia" resembles the sound and M.O. of the earlier album quite a bit. This is on purpose, as Spalding simply nods to one of the many places she comes from musically. The track, with its languid, nursery rhyme-like melody and beautifully understated instrumental accompaniment, gently opens the listener to an aural experience that's quite unlike anything else out there. Spalding sings in three languages here --

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English, Spanish, and Portuguese -- she plays bass, does the arranging, and acts as her own producer on this wildly diverse and exceptionally well-executed set. How does a 23-year-old get all that control? Simple: she's a prodigy; she is a seasoned session player (she's worked with Joe Lovano, Pat Metheny, and Patti Austin to name just three), and she's a faculty member at the Berklee College of Music.

The ambition on display on *Esperanza* is not blind; it's deeply intuitive, and her focus brings out the adventure on the album in all the right ways. By a lesser musician, even attempting something like this would have been disastrous. A core band consisting of pianist Leo Genovese, percussionist Jamey Haddad, and drummer Otis Brown backs Spalding. She follows the *Nacimiento* cut with her own fingerpopping midtempo ballad "I Know You Know," where her crystal clear contralto walks a phrasing tightrope between near scat, classic jazz, and Latin soul singing. The layers of hand percussion and knotty pianism fill the middle as her bassline and drums hold down a constant skittering thrum for the lyrics to balance on. But she can write and sing straight ballads as well. "Fall In," a seemingly simple duet where her voice over Genovese's piano are the only ornaments, is a stellar example and also displays a very sophisticated and slippery sense of wordcraft and a gorgeous melodic sensibility. "I Adore You," featuring Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez in one of his two appearances on drums, offers another example of Spalding's wordless vocalizing; it is a popping Brazilian samba-cum-rumba with a snappy backing chorus of Brown, Gretchen Parlato, and Theresa Perez. They help her move the smoking piano and the shuffling, time-shifting drums of Hernandez on the choruses. Spalding's bass part here is anything but basic, it's startling in its rhythmic and lyric invention as it adds another harmonic counterpart to the piano and percussive textures. New Orleans saxophonist Donald Harrison performs in one of his two guest spots on the provocative and sassy jazz tune "She Got to You." With a quick, even-burning tempo, there are traces of Betty Carter, Ella Fitzgerald, and even Blossom Dearie in Spalding's phrasing. For all of the hard-driving percussion and the track's boppish tempo, it is wonderfully accessible. "Precious," played with her trio (including some nice Rhodes work by Genovese) is like a mirror image; it's lithe, new-soul melody line flirts with jazz in the arrangement but stays on the pop side of the fence. If radio would get behind this it would be a monster. "Mela" is a wailing, post-bop instrumental with Hernandez on drums and guest Ambrose Akinmusire on trumpet. Check Spalding's bass solo here, it, like the tune, is a burner. In sum, *Esperanza* sounds like the work of a much older, more experienced player, singer, and songwriter. Spalding not only has these gifts in natural abundance but is disciplined in her execution as well. On this recording she seeks to widen her musical adventure at every turn, but she does it with such with taste, refinement, and a playful sense of humor that virtually anyone who encounters this offering will find not only much to delight in, but plenty to be amazed by as well. ---Thom Jurek, Rovi

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