

05 octobre 2009

MUSIC

The New Jazz Singers



Esperanza Spalding

BY ANDREW BAST AND ANITA KIRPALANI

ONCE UPON A TIME, THE EMBLEMATIC jazz singer was an African-American woman, serenading a smoke-filled room. Think Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. Today, a talented crop of cosmopolitan young singers are creating a new breed of jazz vocalist: the globalized chanteuse. They come from multicultural backgrounds, live all over the world, and are infusing the traditional American sound with new energy. Take today's rising star, 26-year-old Sophie Milman. Born in Russia, she fled with her family to Israel at the age of 7, then settled in Canada at 16. Now she sells out the Blue Note jazz club in Tokyo. Her roots and her reach are global. In looks and language, she couldn't be further from the pioneers who came more than a half century before.

Yet Milman and others like her are redefining jazz by drawing on the American songbook. In his book *The Jazz Singers*, Scott Yanow argues that among 21st-century jazz vocalists, only "a few manage to reinvent standards in new

ways," which is exactly what this new class is doing so well. Milman—who's fluent in French, English, Russian, and Hebrew—sings Cole Porter's "Love for Sale" in a clear, valiant alto that booms down low and reaches effortlessly up high. Elisabeth Kontomanou, who is Greek and Guinean, insists on knowing the African-American roots of the music she plays. "Jazz is innovation, but with all the culture and the understanding of what has already been done," she says. "If you don't look at that, you get a tasteless, odorless, and colorless music." On her last CD, *Brewin' the Blues*, she follows her own rules by revisiting less famous songs by jazz icons, such as Billie Holiday's "Tell Me More and More (and Then Some)."

Language has proved no barrier to these women; all sing in English. Virginie Teychené comes from the south of France but learned English with her

father, who used to show American Marines the French way of life. "French doesn't lend itself to jazz," she says. "Words can often fall flat, as it is hard to sing in French on rhythm." Teychené, who was named a "new revelation" at France's Juan-les-Pins jazz festival last year, covers songs like "Take the A Train" in her pure, low voice. Born and raised in Turin, the Italian chanteuse Roberta Gambarini recorded Swedish folk songs early in her career but has lately turned to the romantic era of American jazz. Her new record, *So in Love*, revolves around sweet renditions of tunes like "That Old Black Magic"—a song Sarah Vaughan made famous in the '40s. "The bulk of good songs that allow you to improvise happen to largely be part of the Great American Songbook," she says.

That's not to say that these vocalists aren't pushing boundaries. Esperanza Spalding, who was born to a Welsh-Hispanic-Native American mother and a black father and raised in the States, sings in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. When recording the 1930s standard "Body and Soul," she renamed it "Cuerpo y Alma," and pulled off a fiery Spanish rendition. "You always create something new even when you use vocabulary from the past," she says.

A group of multicultural singers are taking jazz back to its roots.

Ultimately, this return to the roots of jazz has to do with authenticity and accessibility. "I like when people come see me at the end of a concert, surprised that this is actually jazz and that they can enjoy it without really knowing the culture," says Teychené. Yet if asked where the winding road of fame starts, these singers give a traditional answer. "If you live deep in the heart of

China and you want to be a jazz musician, you still have to go to New York or New Orleans and play jazz," says Kontomanou. Then you move to another country and share it with the world.