



Woman Child

CÉCILE McLORIN SALVANT

Almost exactly one hundred years before this recording was made, the word 'jazz' first appeared in the American vocabulary. The term was initially used to describe almost anything exciting or different—a new kind of curveball thrown by a baseball player, a stylish fashion adopted by the younger generation, or just a bold way of acting. But increasingly the word referred to the most daring music of the day.

And what exactly made this music jazzy? In an article from April 1913, a journalist tried to capture it in words. Jazz, he explains “means something like life, vigor, energy, effervescence of spirit, joy, pep, magnetism, verve, virility, ebulliency, courage, happiness.”

What a wild list of ingredients!

Even today, jazz artists want to evoke those same qualities in their performances. But it's harder than ever to do it after a hundred years. Everything slows down after a century or so, no? Yet once in a while, a new jazz artist arrives on the scene who reminds us of the power and glory of this music, and shows how jazz can still stir our emotions and get our pulses racing in the present day.

Cécile McLorin Salvant is that sort of artist.

Don't just take my word for it. Listen to Wynton Marsalis, who praises McLorin Salvant for her “poise, elegance, soul, humor, sensuality, power, virtuosity, range, insight, intelligence, depth and grace.” That's another formidable list of ingredients. Or trust the famous judges—Patti Austin, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Kurt Elling, Al Jarreau and Dianne Reeves—who picked Cécile as winner of the Thelonious Monk Jazz Competition.



Better yet, listen to the music on this album. McLorin Salvant shows on track after track the same poise and vocal chops that earned her the top prize in jazz's most illustrious contest. Each song here is fully conceptualized, infused with a distinct personality almost the same way an actor brings a role to life on the stage. McLorin Salvant's intonation and clarity of expression are impressive, and although she doesn't show off her range in flashy ways, it's spacious, both on the high and low ends. But I'm most impressed with her phrasing, the way she uses dynamics and rhythmic flexibility to bring the words of her songs to life.

But let me tell you what you won't find on this album. There is nothing faddish or commercially calculated here. No bandwagons are jumped upon. Crossover formulas were crossed off the list. Samples were left un-sampled. No pre-packaged beats or software effects were allowed into the studio. If music came with a "100% natural and organic" sticker, this CD would have it on the cover. This is music of the human heart. Undiluted. Timeless.

And time-tested. The opening song "St. Louis Gal" was recorded by Bessie Smith 90 years ago, and comes from the pen of J. Russel Robinson, born in 1892, who started his career making player piano rolls. His song is not as famous as his employer W.C. Handy's tune about another St. Louis woman, but McLorin Salvant shows how sassy and sultry this lesser known lady can be. "Nobody," once the signature song of the immensely popular African-American performer Bert Williams, dates back to an even more distant day; in fact, it's older than jazz itself—first appearing in the 1906 musical Abyssinia. McLorin Salvant not only makes it sound fresh and new in her version here, but somehow manages to combine the paradoxical possibilities in this song. "Nobody" can be presented comically or as a heart-on-your-sleeve confession, but how many young singers could manage to bring out both the qualities in the same performance?

But these songs are still bold even when they're old. When I mentioned to Cécile that she was the first jazz singer to record "You Bring Out The Savage in Me" since 1935—when Valaida Snow released her version of the Sam Coslow song—she responded: "I thought that might be the case." Not many modern vocalists would know how to handle this spirited song built on the "jungle music" stereotypes that were prevalent in the marketing of jazz music back in the 1930s. But McLorin Salvant finds a way to make this song work on her own terms, even while bringing out the zany energy in the tune. "I think you can make fun of the idea of jazz as 'savage music' even while wanting to be primal," she explains.

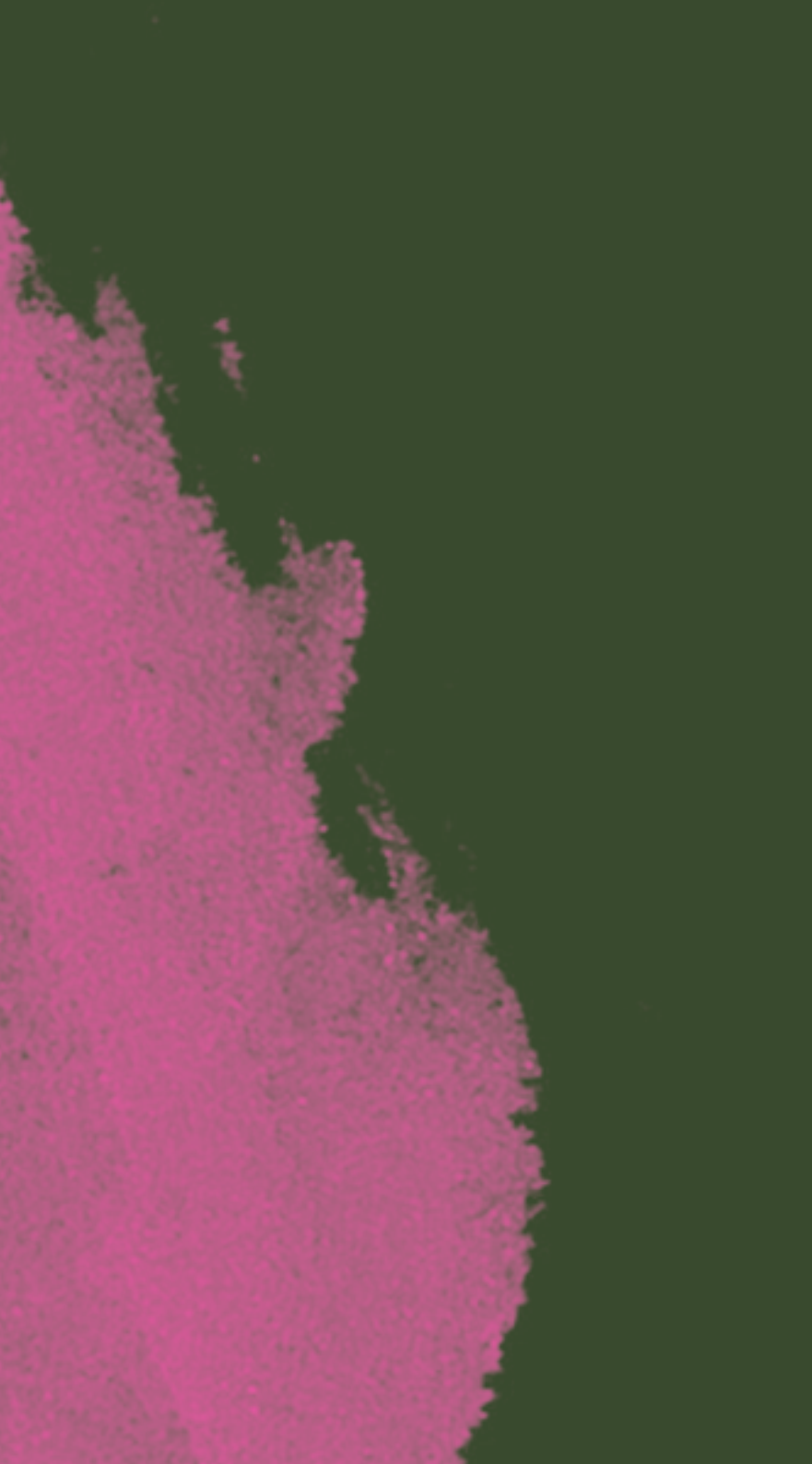
With "John Henry," McLorin Salvant goes back even deeper into the African-American tradition, into a past so shrouded in mystery that we still don't know when this song was composed or exactly where it came from. As on many of the tracks here, the arrangement adds to the magic of the performance, with a pert percussiveness that reminds me of the hammering songs that gave birth to the "John Henry" ballad. On the other extreme, McLorin Salvant adds her own new musical setting to the "Le Front Caché Sur Tes Genoux," a poem written in the 1930s by the Haitian poet Ida Salomon Faubert, a woman who—like McLorin Salvant herself—developed her aesthetic sensibility while living in France. Here the tradition blends seamlessly with the new, and the blues-ish poetic yearnings of a young woman of the past serves as the foundation for a moody new millennium waltz.

It would be easy to do these heritage songs in a retro or postmodern fashion, and we've gone through a couple of decades during which jazz players would play tunes of this sort with lots of irony, mocking the tradition even as they drew on it. Or, at the other extreme, loyal traditionalists would aim for absolute authenticity, which usually meant quasi-rote imitations of role models from the past, almost as though jazz were a museum and they were the curators. What is much harder is McLorin Salvant's approach—namely, to inhabit these songs, to give them emotional depth and presence. To make them feel as raw as this morning's heartache or as immediate as last evening's kiss.

McLorin Salvant is ably assisted in this regard by a world-class ensemble. Pianist Aaron Diehl is a rising star in his own right, and in his musical associations with Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra has shown that, like McLorin Salvant, he can move with ease over the full range of the jazz tradition. Drummer Herlin Riley, who has also worked with Marsalis and the JALC Orchestra and a host of other jazz stars, is the perfect drummer for this project, a percussionist whose swing, dynamics and taste are nonpareil. Bassist Rodney Whitaker is not only an exceptional performer and composer, sharing many of the same musical associations as Diehl and Riley, but also a prominent jazz educator who has served on the faculties of University of Michigan and Juilliard. Guitarist James Chirillo brings some four decades of experience to his work here, not only knowing the music of the jazz pioneers, but in many instances having played alongside them—in stints with Benny Goodman, Benny Carter and other leading lights of the music.

Yet McLorin Salvant's background is the most unusual of them of all. Although she was born and raised in Miami, Cécile grew up speaking French around the home. The daughter of a Haitian father and French mother, she moved to France at age 18, where she studied law as well as music. Here she first began a serious involvement with jazz, under the tutelage of clarinetist Jean-François Bonnel. Perhaps this unusual apprenticeship helps explain why Cécile McLorin Salvant sounds so little like the other singers of her generation. Or perhaps this is just part of her personality, the sign of a confident individualism that set her on her own way at an age when others are mostly following in the familiar paths others set for them.





Those who have been waiting for McLorin Salvant to make a recording ever since her impressive Monk Competition triumph will not be disappointed. But I can't help speculating where she will go from here. She shows on three tracks her growing maturity as a songwriter, and I suspect that this will be an area of focus for her in the future. But McLorin Salvant tells me that she is continuing her longstanding training as a classical singer—which actually predates her involvement in jazz—and I wouldn't be surprised if she draws on this different set of skills in future projects. She also is developing her skills on the piano—you can hear her accompany herself on “Jitterbug Waltz”—and perhaps this too hints at the future evolution of her music.

But don't let these musings distract you from the music at hand. This is a mature artist, even if she is still in her early twenties. And though Cécile McLorin Salvant will surely do different things in the future, she is already a singer who needs to be reckoned with.

Even more, she is a singer to be enjoyed. Or put another way: jazz may be a hundred years old, more or less, but it wears those years lightly when you're listening to these tracks.

~ TED GIOIA

(Ted Gioia is the author of eight books on music, including *The History of Jazz*, *Delta Blues* and *The Jazz Standards: A Guide to the Repertoire*.)

1. ST. LOUIS GAL [3:01]

J. Russel Robinson • EMI Mills Music Inc. (ASCAP)

2. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TIME IT WAS [6:07]

Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart • Chappell & Co;
Williamson Music Company (ASCAP)

Arranged by Aaron Diehl

3. NOBODY [3:23]

Bert Williams, Alex Rogers
Edward B Marks Music Company (BMI)

4. WOMANCHILD [6:07]

Cécile McLorin Salvant
Violette and Mimi Publishing (BMI)

WomanChild staggers
A hesitant step
How can they expect a girl to walk in stride
She can't stand erect without someone beside

WomanChild falters
Clumsy on her feet
Wonderin' where she'll go
When her time has come
Good she'll never know
Until she comes undone

5. LE FRONT CACHÉ SUR TES GENOUX [5:11]

Cécile McLorin Salvant • Violette and Mimi Publishing (BMI)

Lyrics courtesy of Ida Faubert from the poem "Rondel"

Arranged by Frederic Nardin

Le front caché sur tes genoux
J'ai sangloté toute ma peine
Il faisait sombre autour de nous
Et le soir sentait la verveine

Mon cœur battait à tristes coups
Comprenant sa tendresse vaine
Le front caché sur tes genoux
J'ai sangloté toute ma peine

Tu me disais des mots très doux
Mais je les entendais à peine
Je revivais l'heure lointaine
Où je faisais des rêves fous
Le front caché sur tes genoux

**6. PRELUDE/THERE'S A LULL
IN MY LIFE [5:14]**

Aaron Diehl, Mack Gordon, Harry Revel

Real Diehl Music (BMI);

EMI Robbins Catalog Inc. (ASCAP)

7. YOU BRING OUT THE SAVAGE IN ME [5:07]

Sam Coslow • EMI Mills Music Inc. (ASCAP)



8. BABY HAVE PITY ON ME [3:21]

Clarence Williams, Billy Mol

Shapiro Bernstein & Co. Inc. (ASCAP)

9. JOHN HENRY [5:12]

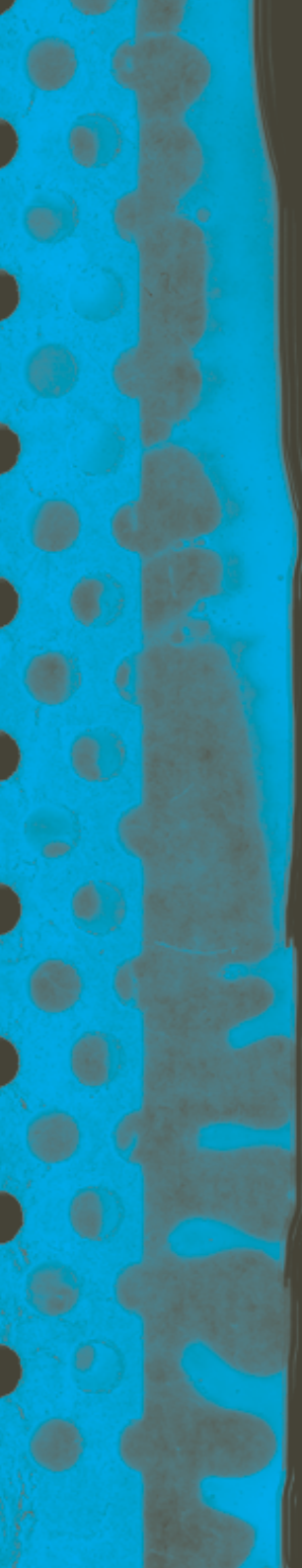
Traditional/Folk

John Henry was a little baby sittin' on his Papa's knees
Well he picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel, said
"This hammer's gonna be the death of me
This hammer's gonna be the death of me"

John Henry said to his Captain
"Now a man ain't nothin' but a man
Before I let your steel drill bring me down
I will die with that hammer in my
I'll die with that hammer in my hand"

John Henry said to his shaker,
"Now shaker, why don't you sing?
Shakin' twelve pounds from my hip bone down
Now don't you hear that cold steel ring
Don't you hear that cold steel ring"

John Henry hammered in the mountain
And the mountain it was so high
And the last words that I heard that poor man cry, he said
"Give me a cool drink of water before I die
Give me a cool drink of water before I die"



John Henry went down that railroad track
With a twelve pound hammer by his side
Yes he went down the track but he never came back
Because he laid down his hammer and he
He laid down his hammer and he
He laid down his hammer and he died

John Henry had a little woman
And the dress that she wore was red
And the last words that I heard that poor girl said, she says
"I'm going where John Henry fell dead
I'm going where John Henry fell dead"

10. JITTERBUG WALTZ [6:51]

Charles Grean, Maxine Manners, Fats Waller
Chappell and Co. (ASCAP)

11. WHAT A LITTLE MOONLIGHT CAN DO [8:14]

Harry M. Woods • Warner Bros. Music (ASCAP)

12. DEEP DARK BLUE [1:56]

Cécile McLorin Salvant
Violette and Mimi Publishing (BMI)

A fool did sing of sweet love
And everything that Spring could bring
But what of days gone by
And what of all the silence
That feeling with no name

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Gretchen C. Valade
PRODUCTION MANAGERS: Will Wakefield + Gina Fabiano

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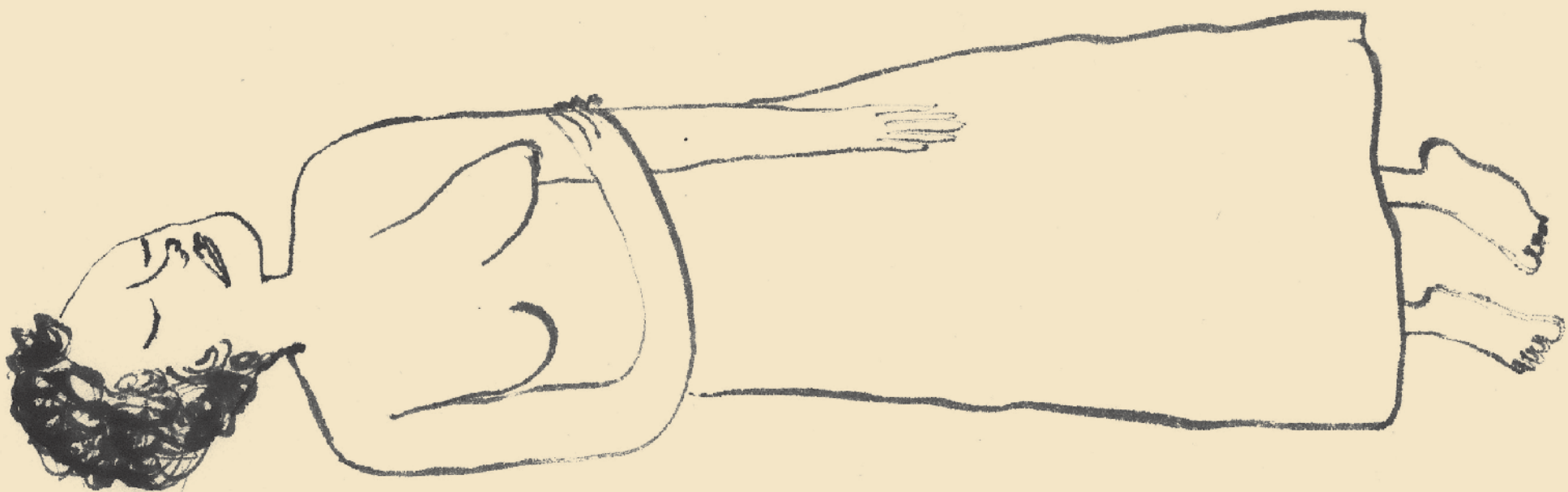
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Dedicated to Lena and Jean-François.

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Cécile McLorin Salvant - vocals, piano (track 10)
Aaron Diehl - piano
Rodney Whitaker - double bass
Herlin Riley - drums
James Chirillo - guitar, banjo

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