Cécile McLorin Salvant

The world first learned of the incredible vocal artistry of Cécile McLorin Salvant when she won the prestigious 2010 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. In just under the span of a decade she has evolved from a darling of jazz critics and fans, to a multi-GRAMMY® Award winner, to a prescient and fearless voice in music today.

In life and in music, McLorin Salvant's path has been unorthodox. The child of a French mother and Haitian father, she was raised in the rich cultural and musical mix of Miami. She began formal piano studies at age five and started singing with the Miami Choral Society at age eight. Growing up in a bilingual household, she was exposed to a wide variety of music from around the world through her parents wide-ranging record collection. While jazz was part of this rich mix, her adolescent and teenage years were focused on singing classical music and Broadway. Following her desire to study abroad, she enrolled in college (Aix-en-Provence in the south of France) to study opera and law. Ironically, it was in France that McLorin Salvant began to really discover the deep roots of jazz and American music, with the guidance of instructor and jazz saxophonist, Jean-François Bonnel. Bonnel's mentoring included bringing McLorin Salvant stacks of CDs, covering the work of jazz and blues legends as well as its lesser-known contributors. Working through these recordings, McLorin Salvant began building the foundation needed to thrive and occupy a special place in the august company of her predecessors.

Three years later, McLorin Salvant returned to the US to compete in the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. On the urging of her mother she entered the contest, but with little sense of what was awaiting her. The expatriate American jazz singer from France, surprising everyone (herself included), took top honors in the jazz world's most demanding competition. An illustrious panel of judges—Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dianne Reeves, Kurt Elling, Patti Austin and Al Jarreau—noted her impeccable vocal technique, innate musicality, and gifts as an interpreter of popular song. "She brought down the house," reported the *Washington Post.* Yet, as music critic Ann Midgett observed, "Her marathon is just beginning."

Since 2010, McLorin Salvant has soared to the top of the music world, garnering praise and gathering awards. "She has poise, elegance, soul, humor, sensuality, power, virtuosity, range, insight, intelligence, depth and grace," announced Wynton Marsalis. "You get a singer like this once in a generation or two." She has been honored with top spots in *DownBeat's* critic's polls in the categories of "Jazz Album of the Year" and "Top Female Vocalist." NPR Music has awarded her "Best Jazz Vocal Album of the Year" and "Best Jazz Vocalist." Her debut album, *WomanChild* (2013), received a GRAMMY® nomination. And her following releases, *For One to Love* (2015) and *Dreams and Daggers* (2017), both won GRAMMY® Awards for "Best Jazz Vocal Album."

McLorin Salvant is a singer whose unique style demonstrates a keen sense of the history of jazz and American music. Among her peers she is unique in the breadth and depth of her repertoire. She fearlessly performs songs from jazz's roots in minstrel shows and ragtime, like Bert William's "Nobody" and Jelly Roll Morton's "Murder Ballad." She digs deep into blues queens like Bessie Smith and Ida Cox, bringing out the mix of jubilation and sorrow that is at the core of the blues. She sings from both the center and the periphery of the Great American Songbook, unearthing forgotten songs while offering fresh interpretations of well-known standards and enlivening Broadway gems with jazzy accents. Beyond the borders of American music, she also is an expert interpreter of Francophone chansons and cabaret numbers, tracing the influence of jazz across the globe, and retracing her own personal path as a musician from America to France and back again. If that weren't enough, McLorin Salvant is also a gifted composer whose moving additions to the repertoire reflect her unique perspective on love, life, and womanhood.

Her gifts as an artist are rooted in her intensive study of the history of American Music and her uncanny ability to curate its treasures for her audience. Her albums are explorations of the immense repository of experience and feeling that abound in popular song. She understands the special role of the musician to find and share the emotions and messages in music that speak to our past, present and future. "I am not interested in the idea of relevance," she explains. "I am interested in the idea of presence. I want to communicate across time, through time, play with time."

All of McLorin Salvant's study, training, creativity, intelligence, and artistry come together in her voice. The sound of her voice, to borrow a phrase, "contains multitudes." It covers the gamut from breathy to bold, deep and husky to high and resonant, limpid to bluesy, with a clarity and richness that is nearly unparalleled. When she first burst onto the jazz scene, many listeners were struck by her ability to recall the sound of Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughan, or Betty Carter. Yet with each new album, McLorin Salvant's voice has become more her own, more singular. While conjuring the spirits of the ancestors, her references are controlled, focused, and purposeful. Her remarkable vocal technique never overshadows her rich interpretations of songs both familiar and obscure.

Critics praise McLorin Salvant's gifts as an interpreter of popular song. "The marvel of Cécile McLorin Salvant is the complexity of her point of view as an artist," writes David Hajdu in the pages of *The Nation. "*Like most jazz and cabaret singers, she works in a milieu that is essentially interpretive…But she chooses her material so astutely, and interprets it so adroitly, that the songs come across like the personal expression of an idiosyncratic individual with an utterly contemporary sensibility." She inhabits the inner life of a lyric, shading them with subtle, often ironic poignancies through the use of vocal inflections, improvisations, varied phrasing, and articulation. Fred Kaplan of the *New Yorker* praises her "emotional range" and her ability to "inhabit different personas in the course of a song, sometimes even a phrase—delivering the lyrics in a faithful spirit while also commenting on them, mining them for unexpected drama and wit." In McLorin Salvant's own words, "I think there is a lot of room for improvisation and

surprise while still singing the lyric, and when that is successfully done it can express a great deal of emotion and reveal the different layers in the music and in the text all at once."

Onstage, her persona is often compared to that of an actress. But, as McLorin Salvant notes, "jazz would not be what it is without its theatrical origins, vaudeville, and minstrel shows." Through her selection of repertory and brilliant interpretations, she "plays with time," making the musical past speak to our contemporary world. Her unflinching performance of songs from the minstrel tradition, such as Bert William's "Nobody," challenge us to think harder about race in America today. Her ironic, even sinister, rendition of songs like "Wives and Lovers" explore the complex intertwining of sex, gender, and power. Her blues numbers are bawdy and vibrant, melancholic and forlorn, insistent and emancipatory. She sings of the ecstasy and agony of love, of jubilation and dejection, of desire and being desired, of fearlessness and fragility. "I want to get as close to the center of the song as I can," McLorin Salvant explains. "When I find something beautiful and touching I try to get close to it and share that with the audience." Immersed in the song and yet completely in control, McLorin Salvant brings her immense personality to the music—daring, witty, playful, honest, and mischievous.

Each new recording by McLorin Salvant reveals new aspects of her artistry. *WomanChild* and *For One to Love* established her style, her command, and interpretive range. *Dreams and Daggers* is a work that highlights her fresh and fearless approach to art that transcends the conventional—live and in the studio, with a trio and with a string quartet, standards and original compositions—held together by a vocal delivery that cuts against the grain, ever deepening, intensifying, and nuancing the lyrics.

Her newest release, *The Window*, an album of duets with the pianist Sullivan Fortner, explores and extends the tradition of the piano-vocal duo and its expressive possibilities. With just Fortner's deft accompaniment to support McLorin Salvant, the two are free to improvise and rhapsodize, to play freely with time, harmony, melody, and phrasing.

Thematically, *The Window* is a meditative cycle of songs about the mercurial nature of love. The duo explores the theme across a wide repertory that includes Richard Rodgers and Stephen Sondheim, the inner-visionary Stevie Wonder, gems of French cabaret, and early Rhythm and Blues, alongside McLorin Salvant's brilliant, original compositions. Just as a window frames a view—revealing as much as it hides, connecting as much as it separates—each song on the album offers a shifting and discerning perspective on love's emotional complexity. McLorin Salvant sings of anticipation and joy, obsession and madness, torment and longing, tactics and coyness. *The Window* traverses love's wide universe, from the pleasure of a lover's touch with its feelings of human communion, to the invisible masks we wear to hide from others and from ourselves.

Touched at every moment by McLorin Salvant's brilliance, *The Window* is a dazzling new release from an artist who is surely, to quote Duke Ellington, "beyond category."