

RETHINK MUSIC 2012

Case Studies from Berklee College of Music

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assistance from Nick Susi

Portugal. The Man Esperanza Spalding

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Nick Susi and Roger Brown
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Portugal. The Man: An Introduction by Roger Brown

The pathways to success as a musician have always been complicated and unpredictable. But, today's musicians have to bushwhack new trails to recognition, audiences, and commercial success. With the rapid decline of recording music in physical form and the decline in the inclination and ability of record labels to invest in breaking new acts, the artist or band and the manager are assuming that role themselves. In many ways this is a good thing. The age-old complaints about record labels making artists do things they abhor will diminish. And perhaps many new pathways will be discovered, creativity and innovation will be more highly valued and great new music will be produced.

The current state of affairs is open and evolving. At one extreme, you have artists who discover ways to use the Internet to achieve massive recognition and are attempting to convert that celebrity to enduring career success. At the other extreme are artists who are "touring their brains out" and using live performance to slowly build a dedicated, personally connected fan base.

Portugal. The Man may be the best example of the latter. Here is band that found a tough-minded manager, the one who made the fewest promises and brought the mentality of a Marine Drill Sergeant to the task. Together, they decided to out-work every other band on the planet. And it seems to be paying off in strong, original music, growing success, and dedicated fans that have a personal connection to the band.

Portugal. The Man

*"This is not rocket science. You can't over play. You can't record too much music. You can't connect with your fans too much. Rest assured, most bands will not do it enough. Most of them all have the same problem. They are lazy. Most adults wake up 5 days a week and go to work. They work somewhere between 40 and 70 hours a week at their job. Very few bands work this hard."*¹

These are the words of Rich Holtzman, manager of the psychedelic rock band Portugal. The Man. Formed in 2004, the band has been reinventing the sounds of progressive rock and hard rock from the 1970's. Comprised of singer/guitarist John Gourley, bassist Zach Carothers, keyboardist Ryan Neighbors, and drummer Jason Sechrist, the band believes their music will span a legendary legacy. Their name is derived from an effort to invent a larger-than-life character; similar to how David Bowie is Ziggy Stardust and The Beatles are Sgt. Peppers. It seemed only fitting to create such a paradox through imagining an entire nation as a single person. So how does a band like Portugal. The Man even begin to strive to achieve a legendary status? What are their secret strategies and tools to their current success?

The Early Years

Before the formation of Portugal. The Man, John Gourley lived in Wasilla, Alaska and worked as a carpenter with his father. His friend Zach Carothers was also originally from Alaska, but currently lived in Portland, Oregon pursuing a career in music. In 2002, Zach formed a band called Anatomy of a Ghost and called John to join the band in Oregon as their singer.

"I have no idea why they asked me to do it. I didn't know how to sing," John mused. "I was pretty shy growing up, so I just tried to avoid anything that would ever put me in front of people. But I really loved music. And it was kind of one of those things where I did everything I

would never do in my life, and I did it within two days. I just said, 'Alright, I'm going to Portland.' I never wanted to leave home before, but I just kind of did it. And I'm glad I did."²

Anatomy of a Ghost was signed to Fearless Records, an alternative rock label in Westminister, California. Unfortunately, the band broke up relatively quickly so John and Zach returned to Alaska. John had a side project called Portugal. The Man and eventually enlisted Zach and a few other friends to join his musical endeavor. In the summer of 2004, the members of Portugal. The Man moved back to Oregon with the intentions of recording a few demos and touring.

The band rejoined their label mates at Fearless Records and embarked on a tour with post-hardcore band Chiodos. The original line-up of Portugal shifted, and Jason Sechrist joined the band as their drummer. On January 24, 2006, the band released their debut record *Waiter: "You Vultures!"*

During the band's initial tours, they had little to no money. They did not have a home, and instead, lived out of a van that they had bought together. Each band member would budget themselves to about \$2-3 per day for food. Fearless Records would occasionally lend them \$50 per gig for tour support, and they would only make about \$50 per gig from the venue. The band was determined to continuously tour with bands like Horse the Band, Circa Survive, and Thursday, mostly because it was the only way for them to make money to stay alive.

Rich Holtzman

Portugal quickly realized they needed a manager to gain success. In March 2006, they scheduled meetings with two different managers. During the first meeting, the prospective manager took the band out to a fancy restaurant for lunch. He was a loud and energetic personality, yelling at the waitress to bring the band shrimp and anything else that they wanted off the menu. Since the band was living off of such a restrictive budget at the time, they were appreciative of the gesture.

The prospective manager told the band that he could land them a deal with Warner. He promised the band placements on popular late night television like *Saturday Night Live* and major festivals like Lollapalooza. Portugal had never considered these opportunities, but they were excited that the manager believed in them.

The second meeting was with Rich Holtzman. Rich had been active in the music industry for many years. He started as an intern at IRS Records while in college. Upon graduation, he worked at independent record label 4AD for about ten years as a label manager. In 2003, he took the reins of record label Reincarnate Music, which did distribution for Fearless Records. One of the owners of Fearless helped Portugal with management, but he felt conflicted acting upon both management and label roles. Knowing that Portugal was seeking a manager, he recommended that they meet with Rich.

When the band arrived at his office, Rich was busy on the phone and told them to wait five minutes. They waited in the lobby, and twenty minutes later, Rich finally emerged from his office looking exhausted. He slumped into a chair and asked the band what they wanted. Portugal wanted to play better shows, so Rich bluntly told them to fire their agent and hire a new one. They mentioned that the other manager promised them performances on talk shows and in festivals, but he said their live performance was not ready. He listened to their debut record, but he said it was just okay and that it needed work.

Portugal was taken aback by his direct responses. They did not expect him to shut everything down. The band left the meeting feeling depressed, but they soon realized they had to be realistic with themselves. Rich would be an honest and trustworthy manager. He would not let them exploit an opportunity prematurely. Consequently, Portugal and Rich drafted a formal management agreement on March 24, 2006.

Approaching Airballoons

Their debut record received a surprisingly positive response in Germany, so the band traveled to Europe to capitalize upon the demand. At that time, they had never performed longer than a 30-minute set. In Germany, however, they had to perform hour and a half sets each night, so it forced them to work together and quickly write a significant amount of songs while traveling. Their new writing style led to the new sound and songs that characterized their releases in 2007.

They released their second album, *Church Mouth*, and an EP, *It's Complicated Being a Wizard*. Fearless Records released *Church Mouth*, which effectively ended their two-album agreement. The EP was also released during the band's term with Fearless, however, it was independently released on Portugal's own record label/publishing company called Approaching Airballoons. The company's title was derived from the name John originally wanted to call his band—"Portugal. The Man and the Approaching Airballoons." Through the grassroots fan base that Portugal had built through a few years of extensive touring, the independent release sold between 15,000 and 20,000 copies. The allowance for independent releases was specifically negotiated in their contract with Fearless, and the EP's success became a critical testament to the band's yearning to take their career into their own hands.

When Portugal began recording their third album, *Censored Colors*, in 2008, a few labels approached the band with new record deals. Portugal did not need a label to release *Censored Colors*, but Rich knew the band had considerable bargaining chips to negotiate a new deal in their favor. For instance, the band had already completed recording, mixing, and mastering *Censored Colors* without the funds of a label. Touring plans were already being crafted for the next ten months, and the band was already paying for its own publicist for the record. Portugal had secured their own distribution through SonyBMG, and they were on schedule to release the album themselves. Long time touring member and keyboardist Ryan Neighbors had recently officially joined the band, and members of the psychedelic rock group Kay Kay and His Weathered Underground were collaborating as arrangers and producers, which contributed to a fresh sound for the new album.

Rich negotiated a deal between Approaching Airballoons and independent rock label Equal Vision Records. Under the terms, Portugal would keep all rights to their master recordings and publishing. Equal Vision would provide the band with a few extra team members to help with their marketing, distribution, and accounting for three albums. With Rich's prior marketing and label management experience, Equal Vision's additional team members, and Portugal's determination to play by their own rules, *Censored Colors* was successfully released on September 16, 2008. The album peaked at #10 on the *Billboard* Heatseekers chart, and John won Alternative Press magazine's 2008 Best Vocalist of the Year.

Bonnaroo 2009

Since the band's inception, Portugal had been eager to perform at major festivals. Rich advised them to focus on their normal touring instead and to continue developing their live show. The band followed his guidance, concentrating on improving their communication and tightness together on stage. After about five years of meticulous touring and practicing, Rich and Portugal agreed that the band had arrived at a point where their live show was undeniably good. In the summer of 2009, they finally played their first festival—Bonnaroo.

Portugal hit the stage with an hour-long set of their strongest songs, and the audience was immediately taken by surprise. Many audience members could not believe that they had never heard of the band before. During the summer of that year, they continued performing at other festivals, including Lollapalooza and others in Europe, and they experienced the same audience reaction each time. The band's patience and determination had paid off.

Breaking The Glass Ceiling

Legendary producer and engineer Paul Kolderie had mixed *Censored Colors* and was scheduled to produce Portugal's fourth studio album, *The Satanic Satanist*. The majority of the material on their previous albums was written on the spot while in the recording studio. This was primarily because their extensive touring schedule did not allow for a long period of time spent in the studio. With the chance to work with Paul who has produced Radiohead and The Pixies, however, the band made a conscious effort to focus on pre-production. Portugal began to shift their concentration to the premeditated songwriting and arranging of more mature tracks.

On July 21, 2009, Portugal released *The Satanic Satanist* under Approaching Airballoons/Equal Vision Records. The band was very pleased with the album and its developed songwriting, especially their single "People Say." The record debuted at #81 on the *Billboard* charts, as well as several other Alternative charts. Despite positive feedback from fans and blogs, "People Say" did not receive the radio play that they had anticipated.

It seemed as if the band hit a glass ceiling, and Rich knew something had to be done to break through it. After the release of *The Satanic Satanist*, Portugal continued to receive offers from record labels, although the majority of the offers were not to the band's liking. Atlantic Records, however, seemed to share and understand Portugal's vision and goals. Rich knew that *The Satanic Satanist* could have been a larger success with a wider reach and more funding, and signing to Atlantic could launch the band to the next level. Rich began negotiating a deal with Atlantic, which took seven to eight months.

During the negotiation, Portugal continued their extensive touring and released their fifth studio album, *American Ghetto*, on March 2, 2010. The record was positioned as a limited edition album reserved for superfans. Only 15,000 physical copies were printed worldwide. The album was not solicited to press or radio, and promotional copies of *American Ghetto* were not pressed.

American Ghetto was the third album released with Equal Vision, which effectively ended their agreement. On April 2, 2010, their new deal with Atlantic was finalized and signed. Under the new agreement, Portugal reserved the right to release albums and EPs independently from Approaching Airballoons. The agreement also included hyper-accelerated album cycles, due to the band's rapid pace of recording a new album every eight to fourteen months. Atlantic began working on *The Satanic Satanist* and landed "People Say" in the Top 15 on the Alternative charts. The benefits of the band's relationship with their new label quickly revealed themselves.

Portugal immediately began recording their sixth album, *In The Mountain, In The Cloud*. By this point in their career, the band had become accustomed to having a large amount of freedom in the studio and allowing their instincts to guide their playing when tracking. Their previous producers, like Paul Kolderie, had always been accommodating to their process. For *In The Mountain, In The Cloud*, they began working with John Hill, producer of megastars like Shakira, Rhianna, and Christina Aguilera. Portugal chose to work with Hill because of his production and writing on Santigold's debut album. Unfortunately, Portugal had difficulty adjusting to the new relationship. The band felt that his criticisms and suggestions to change melody and arrangement ideas were based upon an attempt to gain writing credits on tracks. Due to their frustration, Portugal lost the ability to rely on their instincts in the studio and hit a severe writer's block.

Since the band was still in the middle of touring, they were forced to leave the studio sessions incomplete. In order to continue their work on the album while traveling, they had to record tracks in five different studios across the world. Abruptly stopping and restarting the creative process made it difficult to overcome the writer's block. Due to the massive amount of recording sessions and gigs, each member slept for only one to three hours per night. After eight demanding months, the band experienced a break through in their writing and completed the album.

On July 19, 2011, Portugal released *In The Mountain, In The Cloud* through Atlantic. The album debuted at #42 on the *Billboard* Top 200 chart and #2 on the *Billboard* Tastemakers chart. The album also received recognition on the *Billboard* Rock, Digital, and Alternative charts. The band's determination to power through their struggles and decision to team with Atlantic was worth it. They had broken the glass ceiling.

Fan Relationships

Portugal believes in treating their fans like friends. They rarely stay back stage at their shows, instead spending their time in the audience with their fans. "I don't think Portugal. The Man fans like the band just because of the music," John explains. "It's like high school—people choose their friends based on their similar interests in music, movies, and pop culture. We have similar interests as our fans."³

Their social media pages are not only full of acoustic performances and behind-the-scenes photos of the band. Their posts also include photos of their fans, any artists and songs they are currently listening, and YouTube videos that they enjoy. The band responds to social media messages and emails that they receive, as any friend would do. Occasionally, the band will schedule one-on-one Skype sessions with their fans. They have sent thousands of handwritten thank you letters, as well as personal gifts to fans chosen at random.

"We do not view social media as simply a marketing tool," Rich explains. "It is our vessel to share who we are at our core, and it is just as much a part of our lives as tuning a guitar."⁴

Portugal ensures that their fans feel like they are a part of a secret club. They allow a limited amount of fans to hear their albums before the official release date. They send exclusive videos to the core of their fans, knowing that they probably will not be seen by anyone else. A large portion of their merch does not have the band name on it, so only fans of Portugal can recognize each other.

On August 8, 2011, while the band was at Lollapalooza, they received a phone call from their tour manager that their trailer had been stolen. Their trailer contained nearly \$100,000 worth of instruments and performance gear. They immediately posted the tragic news to Twitter and Facebook, including a list of their gear with photos. Their fans were infuriated—they felt personally robbed due to their strong bond with the band. The story rapidly spread to the Chicago police department, television, newspapers, and radio.

Within a few hours, the police found the trailer, but the contents were missing. On August 12, the police caught a man with most of their gear in his home. He claimed to have purchased the gear at a flea market, with the intention of reselling the equipment. Due to the media's mass coverage, however, the gear was too risky for him to sell. To show their appreciation, the band sent five-dozen doughnuts to the Chicago police department. Portugal triumphantly posted to their website, "It is more than just a win for Portugal. The Man—it is also a win for Twitter, the world of social media, the Chicago police, and old school journalism."⁵

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Touring Strategy

By the end of 2011, Portugal will have played 124 shows over the course of the year, and 838 shows over the course of their career. These statistics do not include the numerous acoustic and radio shows that the band has performed since 2004.

"Portugal. The Man logged over 800 shows in five years," wrote The San Antonio Current. "To put that into perspective, consider the road hogs Dave Matthews Band. In January, Annie Lowery (of Slate) logged Dave Matthews Band as having played 1,692 shows in 18 years. At Portugal. The Man's annual rate, they'll log the same amount six years faster. The band quits working for about a month every December."⁶

"Touring is one of the few real and sustainable avenues that an artist has direct control over," Rich advises, "It's viable for long-term success because it actually exists. It's not like a viral YouTube video. All of those things are virtual and are good for a very short-term success.

I called it the Juicy Fruit Syndrome. The gum is the best tasting thing for two minutes, but then you want to throw it away immediately.”⁷

With an arsenal of lights, lasers, fog machines, extended jam sections, and guitar solos, there is no question that Portugal pays a great deal of attention to building their live show production. Portugal has always dedicated the time necessary to develop their live performance. They recognize the importance of traveling to both major and secondary markets. The band values the physical connection that they can have with fans at shows, drinking a beer and hanging out with them before and after their performance. Touring is an essential aspect of the band because it created foundational skills of stage performance and audience interaction.

Carefully calculated planning and routing has always been a part of Portugal’s touring strategy, but the sense of community that the band has built within their team has also been crucial. When Rich signed as the band’s manager in 2006, they established a clear plan—all money earned by the band would be invested back into the band. Simply put, all guarantees, splits, buyouts, album sales, and merch sales were used for every expense. If the band needed lights to add to their live production, the band would pay for the equipment. If a band member got sick or needed stitches, the band paid for the doctor. If a band member needed new equipment, the band paid for the gear. If the band needed food, they would go to dinner and pay for the meal together.

A system of a secure community was quickly established. Even their tour manager, Ian Shaw, has been with the band for over five years and is considered a part of the family. This sense of community is essential to the band’s ability to cooperate and work together over extensive periods of touring and studio recording. Due to the constant cycle of reinvestment, the band is a continuously growing force.

Portugal’s extensive touring amounts to the majority of their income. Roughly 75% of the band’s income is derived from touring, 15% from synch licensing, and 10% from recording revenue. During the band’s most recent tour, they performed at venues with a 750–3000 capacity, and the average ticket prices were \$20. Portugal typically kept 60% of the total ticket sales, so the band earned about \$9,000 to \$36,000 per night. Even at Portugal’s current level of success, their most recent tour was one of their worst grossing tours. The band did not turn a large profit because they invested a considerable sum of money into the lighting and production of their live show to deliver serious value for the ticket price paid by their fans.

Work Ethic

Since the band’s formation in 2004, the band still does not have a home, nor do they desire one. They live out of their tour bus, and they have never had to pay rent, mortgage payments, electric bills, and cable bills. They constantly tour because it keeps them in business and it is what they love. “If they’re not touring, they’re recording. If they’re not recording, they’re staying with family and friends. If not that, they’re back to touring,” Rich describes.⁸

The band abides by Malcolm Gladwell’s philosophy in his book *Outliers*—that the key to success in any field has nothing to do with talent. It’s simply practice, 10,000 hours of it – 20 hours a week for 10 years.⁹ Portugal strives to achieve five years worth of work in one. They tour for almost half of every year. They view each album as a documentation of their progress. When Portugal initially formed, they could barely play their instruments, and yet, they were still determined to leave a legendary mark on the history of music. Rich advises:

“Traction can and will happen if you are doing something compelling and actually working hard to get it. If you expect it to happen without hard work, you are expecting luck. I am not one to generally believe in luck. It is pretty simple. You need to work hard, play as many shows as possible and connect with your fans. Do it and then do it again and again.

“This is not rocket science. You can’t over play. You can’t record too much music. You can’t connect with your fans too much. Rest assured, most bands will not do it enough. Most of them all have the same problem. They are lazy. Most adults wake up 5 days a week and go to work. They work somewhere between 40 and 70 hours a week at their job. Very few bands work this hard.

“Once you have that traction, you need to keep doing it over and over again. With Portugal. The Man, we use the reference of John’s upbringing. His father built houses for a living, and he would build a few houses a week. Most bands have trouble making one record every two years. We think that is somewhat pathetic. When creativity is flowing, you need to capture it. If it’s not flowing, you need to try everything to start it flowing again. The output should be virtually constant.”¹⁰

Endnotes

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Nick Susi and Roger Brown
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Esperanza Spalding: An Introduction by Roger Brown

Shortly after she graduated from Berklee, Spalding approached me about the possibility of teaching here. I was certainly open to the possibility, but advised her that in my opinion, her destiny might be out in the larger world. Little did I know how quickly she would be on the trail of that destiny.

First and foremost, Spalding is a gifted musician. Long before she was composing and singing publicly, she was hired by Joe Lovano to play bass in his trio. Joe is among the preeminent tenor sax players in the jazz pantheon. This vote of confidence gave her a foundation as a player that has been important in her growth as an artist. Many jazz musicians would have been delighted with such credibility as a “sideman,” but Spalding took her natural musicality and her creativity and forged a sound, combining voice and bass in a seamless and original way, and infused musical ideas from Brazil, from American soul and funk, from Western European classical music traditions, and from straight ahead jazz into a sound distinctively her own.

Of interest is her desire to stay grounded by playing with artists she admires, like Mike Stern, Bobby McFerrin, and Herbie Hancock, where she is not Esperanza with a capital “E,” but just another young player, growing and learning as an artist.

As far as lessons for other up and coming artists, I would point to Spalding’s pure focus on the love of music making. While she certainly has had to address business and marketing aspects to her work, she was always about the music first. While she clearly is an attractive person with a recognizable “look,” she had that at seventeen and I think it emanated from her love of music and was never contrived. The bottom line is that she is immensely talented, courageous enough to be original, and charismatic enough to have star power in the relatively under-recognized world of jazz.

She has built her career on collaborations that both showcase her musicality and challenge her as an artist. Ironically, through this natural instinct for collaboration, she has emerged as a singular jazz artist.

Esperanza Spalding

“She was playing in bands with some of the major creative musicians in the scene. Recording with them. Touring with them. The more that happened for her as a young player, more people heard her and realized, ‘Oh, wow, this cat has got something to say of her own.’ She may be a bass player, but you’re not just hearing a bass player. You’re hearing Esperanza Spalding.”¹

These are the words of Grammy Award-winning saxophonist Joe Lovano. Bassist, vocalist, composer, collaborator – they are all apt titles for the multi-talented Esperanza Spalding. Her music calls upon a wide palette of influences, including jazz, funk, and Latin music. She constantly strives to broaden her audience and gain a deeper understanding of her craft, all while staying true to her art and creating her own voice. Born into a single-parent home in Portland, Oregon, she displayed a natural gift for music from an early age. Now, Spalding has won a Grammy for “Best New Artist,” and she has built a strong team of support behind her. How did she make that leap to a respectable commercial success in the notoriously difficult genre of jazz? How did her relationships in the industry, passion for performing and love for collaboration launch her music career?

The Early Years

In Portland, Spalding grew up in an “economically adverse” neighborhood. Despite the tough circumstances, her mother was a beacon of encouragement and hope. Her mother used to be a professional singer, and she realized the talent and potential of her daughter. She watched Spalding teach herself how to play the violin at the age of five, and she knew her daughter’s skills could be enhanced in more formal music education.²

“She went out of her way to find any programs that might be beneficial to me, finding instruments, finding teachers, any program on the weekend, in the summer,” Spalding recalled. “I sort of think of her as my saint.”³

Even at her young age, Spalding began performing with The Chamber Music Society of Oregon. The orchestra supported children and adult musicians in the local community. By the age of 15, she developed immensely and rose to become concertmaster. Soon after, she left the orchestra and began to experiment with the upright bass. The new instrument broadened her education beyond classical music. She began improvising. She began composing songs. She began singing along as she played. She began performing small gigs with a band. The addition of the bass to her repertoire provided her with newfound opportunities.

During these early years, while Spalding flourished in music, she struggled in traditional academic environments. She was homeschooled for several years, and she was used to teaching herself how to play instruments. Her creative learning style did not bode well in high school. Consequently, she dropped out of the Northwest Academy at the age of 16.

After being awarded a scholarship, Spalding moved on to attend Portland State University. She was the youngest bassist in the music program, and she had only been playing the instrument for less than two years. Most of her peers in the program had been performing for several seasoned years. Spalding was undeterred, however. Her teachers saw something unique in Spalding. They suggested that she should audition at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Berklee College of Music and Joe Lovano

During her Berklee audition, when she finished playing, the adjudicator told her she would be awarded a full scholarship. Despite the aid, Spalding was still concerned about her living expenses. She had never dreamed of moving across the country. Her friends in Portland convinced her to raise money through a benefit concert. The show earned Spalding enough money to ship herself and her bass to Boston.

In 2002, Spalding embarked on her journey across the country and began her education at Berklee. During her first semester, the Berklee performance department placed her in a special ensemble directed by renowned saxophonist Joe Lovano. Like Spalding, Lovano came from a family with musical roots and attended Berklee to develop his craft.

“Right from the first tune we played together, I felt she contributed to the flow of the piece. She made the music take shape,” said Lovano. “From that first moment, I felt Esperanza was a natural. She played the bass as a young lady with an instrument that was twice her size. But she wasn’t intimidated by things like that. She was really driven.”⁴

Spalding made a remarkable first impression on Lovano. Her passion for music was clear in her playing—not only in jazz but also in all styles of music. Lovano was impressed by her unique melodies and her communication with the other students in his ensemble.

Lovano was not the only faculty member that was astonished by the young Spalding’s bold personality and talent. Guitarist Pat Metheny, bassist John Lockwood, and vibraphonist Gary Burton all took an interest to her. She participated in an ensemble assembled by Burton for his former protégé Pat Metheny, who rehearsed and produced a concert by a small group of students. As a result of her high aptitude in music, she won the 2005 Boston Jazz Society scholarship. Berklee continued to recognize her by hiring her as a faculty member immediately after graduating at the age of 20, the youngest faculty member since Metheny taught at age 19.

Since Lovano and Spalding had developed a close relationship, they continued to perform together. He offered her the bass chair in his band, and tapped Berklee faculty member Francisco Mela to be the drummer. The trio played their first gig together at President Roger Brown's inauguration ceremony in 2004.

Through touring with Lovano, Spalding was exposed to her first major national to international performances. They toured Europe together. They played the Village Vanguard in New York City together. They performed on the BBC together. The many years of touring with an experienced artist like Lovano became the launch pad for Spalding's professional career as a musician. The opportunities that Lovano provided her gave her credibility as her own individual artist.

Launching a Solo Career

Meanwhile, eager to transition to the role of a solo artist, Spalding began to build a team of support around her. She signed with Montuno Producciones, a management company in Barcelona, Spain. At the time, Daniel Florestano of Montuno managed the legendary Cuban music collective Buena Vista Social Club. Florestano also worked with Lovano, which is how Spalding first came in contact with Montuno.⁵

Florestano called his good friend Scott Southard, who founded International Music Network (IMN), an agency for jazz and world music in Massachusetts. Southard helped build the career of Lovano, as well as major jazz artists like Wynton Marsalis and Herbie Hancock. Florestano recommended that Southard contact Spalding and become her agent. Upon listening to Spalding, Southard was taken by her charisma and energy on stage, and he signed her to IMN in 2005.

Southard and Florestano immediately began shopping Spalding to record labels. At the time, Southard was working with Michael Brecker and The Bad Plus, who were signed to Heads Up International Records in Cleveland, Ohio. Heads Up supported independent jazz and contemporary instrumental records, and it was founded by Dave Love, a friend of Florestano and Southard. The company's operations moved at an aggressive pace, and Southard believed that Heads Up could successfully break Spalding as a new artist.

During a phone conversation, Southard pitched Spalding to Love, but he was reluctant to sign her. Spalding had yet to prove herself as an independent artist. She was a female bassist attempting to be recognized as a front man. Her positioning was unusual and Love feared it was too much money to gamble on her.

Despite Love's reservations, he and Southard had worked together with the same artists for about 25 years. There was a sense of mutual trust between them. Love had seen Esperanza perform before, with Christian Scott, and he truly did believe in her musicianship.

"The few times that I saw her," Love recalled. "I bought that she was really the one that was shining through for me."⁶ He overcame his reservations, took Southard's word and signed Spalding to Heads Up in late 2007.

Within a few years, Spalding had built the support of a manager, an agent, and a label around her who not only believed in her, but also had experience working together with other up and coming artists. The three had a strong sense of compatibility and trust with one another.

Florestano sent Love a video that he had produced for Spalding. The video featured footage of her live performances, as well as an interview. She spoke about herself, her upbringing, and her vision for her music. Love thought the video provided great insight on her talent and personality, so he had Heads Up send the video to the press. The media was immediately impressed by Spalding's poise and intellect, craving to discover more about this new artist.

On May 20, 2008, Spalding released her debut album on Heads Up, titled *Esperanza*. Although the album was a solo release, she collaborated with numerous jazz musicians to bring the album to life, including drummer Otis Brown and vocalist Gretchen Parlato. *Esperanza* quickly became the best internationally selling album by a new jazz artist in 2008. The album charted on *Billboard's* Top Jazz Albums for several months. The positive reception

led to coverage from major press like *The New York Times* and appearances on late night television like the *Late Show with David Letterman*.

"If there was a day that defined when it turned, it was the day that Dave and Danny and I decided that we would work on this together," Southard said. "It was two years with her first record of really just dogging it. Getting her out there. Doing all the public appearances. Playing for \$500 gigs and losing money. But we stayed on a vision and worked hard. And no body works harder than Esperanza Spalding. Thankfully, she has the energy, the ambition, and the drive to do it."⁷

With the overwhelming response, Spalding's credibility within the jazz realm flourished. The addition of Florestano, Southard, and Love proved to be an invaluable asset to her career.

Commercial Success and The Grammys

Following *Esperanza*, Spalding began to create *Chamber Music Society*. The album ventured toward a new sound—one that paid homage to her classical upbringing, while still incorporating her love for jazz and world music. She strove to innovate her art, weaving string arrangements into each composition. Her singing achieved a greater focus. Once again, although *Chamber Music Society* was a solo record, Spalding collaborated with musicians like composer Gil Goldstein, drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, and legendary songwriter Milton Nascimento.⁸

On August 17, 2010, *Chamber Music Society* was released to critical acclaim. The album was met by more media attention and festival appearances. Her unique niche was solidified. Love's initial concern about the risk of investing in a female bandleader who plays upright bass had evaporated entirely by this point. In fact, the very uniqueness of combining bass and jazz became her signature.

In February 2011, Spalding was nominated as "Best New Artist" for the 53rd Grammy Awards ceremony. Justin Bieber, Florence + the Machine, Mumford and Sons, and Drake were among the other new artists nominated that year. She co-hosted the pre-telecast event with Bobby McFerrin, later performing with the Grammy Jazz Ensemble.

As the winner of "Best New Artist" was announced, no one expected the jazz artist who grew up in a rough Portland neighborhood to emerge victorious. In fact, Spalding became the first jazz musician ever to win "Best New Artist." Having bested pop artists Justin Bieber and Drake only added to the drama. Spalding's graceful handling of the backlash from disappointed Bieber fans demonstrated her maturity and intelligence.

Many viewers of the awards show were shocked by the outcome, questioning how Spalding could have won. Each year, record labels submit their artists to be nominated for specific awards. The members of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) vote upon which artists become the Grammy nominees and winners. The members consist of musicians, producers, and industry professionals in all styles of music, including pop, hip-hop, jazz, classical, and country.

"It's not a popularity contest," said Love. "It's not based on record sales. It's based on your peers. And when your peers are made up of classical musicians, country musicians, jazz musicians, rock musicians... I was really not surprised that she won."⁹

With the commercial success of her album and her award, her newfound fame became a double-edged sword. As an increasingly recognized figure, security and privacy became an unforeseen concern. Caution was used in venues, hotels, and airports to keep Spalding safe from unexpected encounters with reporters or fans.

During a show with Lovano at The Village Vanguard, a fan approached Spalding in between sets. "He comes in and he's really excited," recalled Lovano. "He wants to shake Esperanza's hand. He came in for the second set, so he had been standing in line. He hadn't even heard us play yet. He comes in and starts going off and raving about seeing Esperanza. He says loudly, 'I came all the way down here to see you. I wanted to see you. I wanted to see you.' And she starts getting really nervous. She doesn't know this cat. I stepped in and said, 'Hey man, I think you better go out there and sit and *listen* to her. She doesn't need you to see her.'"¹⁰

Indeed, Spalding did not reach her remarkable commercial success through the packaging that often accompanies pop music success. She built an audience and won a Grammy through her own perseverance, intellect, and talent. She developed a unique sound, composed very original music that fused disparate elements like classical, jazz and blues, and worked tirelessly.

Live Performance

Live performances have been a key strategy for Spalding to gain and keep traction. Touring with Lovano provided her with valuable exposure, as well as a reasonable income. When Spalding began performing as a bandleader and working with Southard's agency, building her own audience became a slow and steady process. In 2006, Southard booked his first few jazz club gigs for Spalding in New York City. They paid little to no money at all, and they functioned purely for her exposure to a new audience.

"You put the artist in exposure situations in the right environment where the right people are going to see it," commented Southard. "It's just slowly building, brick by brick, an audience to put her in front of. You never know which are going to be the ones where some Hollywood producer shows up at The Village Vanguard. Or the sponsorship person is in Dayton, Ohio watching you in the club. Or the festival booker for the London Jazz Festival happens to be there the night you're playing a 40-seat room. Those are the kinds of unexpected opportunities that actually contribute to making a career."¹¹

The biggest challenge was money. Oftentimes, Spalding's jazz ensemble required an acoustic piano. If the jazz club did not own and provide a piano, renting a piano for one gig cost more than the band made in a night. Even as her touring and income increased, Spalding and her team were forced to invest a considerable amount of time and money into her career, hoping that their sacrifices would pay off in the future.

"If you're out there playing for \$600 to \$700 to \$1000, there are airline ticket costs, hotel costs, bus ticket costs," continued Southard. "You stay with friends to make ends meet. Managers and record companies subsidize the budget, borrowing against your future earnings. That's the big impediment. Investing in yourself. Having the confidence that if you're asking people to invest money into your career that it's all going to work out. For Esperanza, it wasn't about the money. It was about her art. Her commitment was inspiring, for her to say, 'I'll stay here as long as it takes to make it work, even if I'm not making money doing it.'"¹²

Fortunately, the investment did pay off for the whole team. Spalding's show and audience continued to grow steadily. In 2009, Florestano enlisted the help of tour manager Dan Hallas. Hallas was vastly experienced in tour managing artists in all genres, including metal, country, jazz, and classical. He used to be a musician himself, so he had a great understanding for Spalding and her needs.¹³

Before Hallas, Spalding did not have a live road team. She toured in small jazz collectives, so she did not have a significant need for a tour manager. As her live show expanded, particularly during the *Chamber Music Society* era, her band's instrumentation became varied. Sets and production were added to the performance. With the aid of Hallas as a tour manager, he allowed her to continue developing and evolving her music and her show.

Her performances were rich with her bold personality. Her music displayed her technical ability to maneuver her bass and her voice, as well as her ability to write memorable melodies. Her intimate and personal engagement with her audience was strong and natural. Ultimately, her performances encompassed a full entertainment package, not just music.

"To put them all together and to do it with such joy and commitment, that's a pretty extraordinary talent that cannot be taught," marveled Southard. "That's a gift, and she's got it."¹⁴

In 2012, Spalding's tour schedule will have grown to about 200 shows per year. For a jazz musician at her level, if the artist plays a small 225 capacity jazz club for \$30 per ticket, a sold out show grosses \$6,750. The artist typically earns 60 to 70 percent of the gross, taking roughly \$4,500 per night of the series. If the artist plays a large 2,000-seat theater for \$40 per

ticket, a sold out show grosses \$80,000. About 50 percent of the gross is deducted for expenses of the venue, advertising, sound, and insurance. Consequently, \$40,000 is allotted to the artist, their management, and their tour expenses. The smaller tours often lose money. Once an artist reaches the ability to fill a 2,000-seat theater, the artist can financially sustain a career.

An Openness to Collaborate

Even after winning a Grammy, Spalding still felt the urge that she needed improvement. She practiced constantly while on the road. She collaborated with various artists, seeking to learn from and be inspired by her peers. Refusing to limit herself, she worked with any artist and in any style, purely to discover more from music. She continued to perform bass as a sideman in gigs.

"Esperanza has risen to this crazy star position on the scene," explained Lovano. "So her name can't be advertised, unless if it's a really serious gig. But she wants to play. So she'll sneak in and show up on the scene."¹⁵

Her passion to collaborate was not a recent breakthrough. In fact, her openness to collaborate was possibly her most effective strategy to expand her network of musicians and her audience. As her web of contacts grew, future unexpected opportunities increased. Clearly, her relationship with Lovano led to her first major touring experiences and the team of support behind her.

Her ability to adapt to all musical and nonmusical situations benefited her greatly. She was invited to perform at the White House multiple times, and in 2009, performed at President Obama's Nobel Prize Ceremony in Norway. Around the same time, Spalding played with legendary pianists Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner. She had the opportunity to perform with Stevie Wonder, and Prince invited her to open for him. Collaborating with acclaimed artists allowed new audiences to discover her music.

Spalding had collaborated with drummer Terri Lyne Carrington on *Chamber Music Society*, and in return, Carrington had Spalding play bass on her album, *The Mosaic Project*. In February 2012, after their work together, *The Mosaic Project* won "Best Jazz Vocal Album." Moreover, Spalding played bass on Lovano's album *Bird Songs*, which was nominated for "Best Jazz Instrumental Album" that same year. Although she did not win a Grammy for herself in 2012, her contribution to Carrington and Lovano helped them gain Grammy recognition.

Continuing in the vein of collaboration, Spalding reached back to her old mentors in Portland for her Spring 2012 release, *Radio Music Society*. She worked with her teacher Dr. Thara Memory and his American Music Program children's choir. Spalding recognized the influence that her mentors had on her, so she gave a similar opportunity to this group of high school students. She could have recorded with professional session players, but instead, she found a new collaboration – one that gave back to those who had helped her along her way and the next generation of young musicians.

Radio Music Society explores a new direction, incorporating funk music, horn sections, and electric bass. Spalding collaborated on a few tracks with rapper Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest. Her new live tour includes music videos for each funk song. Commenting on Spalding's enthusiasm to perform and collaborate, Lovano remarked:

*"She was playing in bands with some of the major creative musicians in the scene. Recording with them. Touring with them. The more that happened for her as a young player, more people heard her and realized, 'Oh, wow, this cat has got something to say of her own.' She may be a bass player, but you're not just hearing a bass player. You're hearing Esperanza Spalding."*¹⁶

Endnotes

- 1 Lovano, Joe. Personal Interview. 7 February 2012.
- 2 "All About Me - Esperanza Spalding." *Esperanza Spalding*. 2012. Web. 04 Mar. 2012. <http://www.esperanzaspalding.com/cms/?page_id=10>.
- 3 Metz, Jennifer, David Muir, and James Wang. "Person of the Week: Esperanza Spalding, Finding Her Voice Through Jazz." ABC News. ABC News Network, 18 Feb. 2011. Web. 04 Mar. 2012. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/PersonOfWeek/person-weekesperanza-spalding/story?id=12948441>>.
- 4 Lovano, Joe. Personal Interview. 7 February 2012.
- 5 Southard, Scott. Phone Interview. 3 February 2012.
- 6 Love, Dave. Phone Interview. 24 February 2012.
- 7 Southard, Scott. Phone Interview. 3 February 2012.
- 8 "All About Me - Esperanza Spalding." *Esperanza Spalding*. 2012. Web. 04 Mar. 2012. <http://www.esperanzaspalding.com/cms/?page_id=10>.
- 9 Love, Dave. Phone Interview. 24 February 2012.
- 10 Lovano, Joe. Personal Interview. 7 February 2012.
- 11 Southard, Scott. Phone Interview. 3 February 2012.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hallas, Dan. Phone Interview. 11 February 2012.
- 14 Southard, Scott. Phone Interview. 3 February 2012.
- 15 Lovano, Joe. Personal Interview. 7 February 2012.
- 16 Ibid.

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