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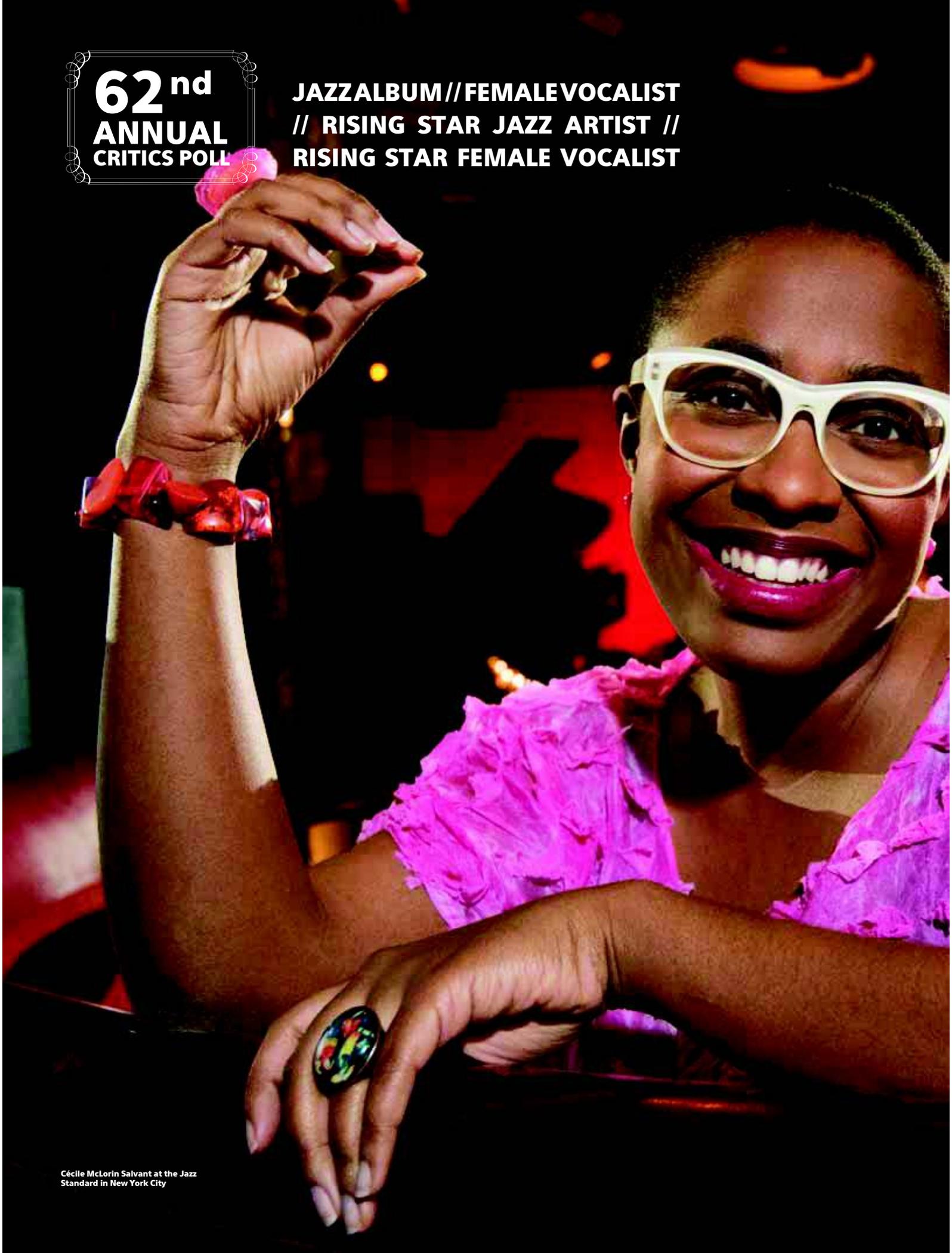
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Cécile McLorin Salvant at the Jazz Standard in New York City



CÉCILE McLORIN SALVANT

YOUNG PROVOCATEUR

By Allen Morrison | Photo by Jimmy & Dena Katz

Eighteen months ago, hardly anyone knew who Cécile McLorin Salvant was. Now *everybody* in the jazz world knows her name. In May 2013, she released her U.S. debut album, *WomanChild* (Mack Avenue), which became a Grammy-nominated best-seller. She has enchanted crowds at jazz festivals across the United States and Europe and appeared in multiple venues at Jazz at Lincoln Center, which used her as a cover girl for its New York City subway posters and 2013-'14 season brochure. It's no wonder Salvant has been compared, more than once, with some of the greatest jazz singers of all time.



JACK VARTOGIAN/FRONTROWPHOTOS

It is therefore a measure of how much all this has *not* gone to her head that, when asked to name some of her favorite experiences from the past year or so, she cited the unheralded little moments behind the curtain—not the honors, acclaim and standing ovations.

“There were certain moments when I was in rehearsal with my band,” she said. “I could feel that we were going to this sonic place I had in my head that had seemed not tangible or possible. [At that point] it’s not even about the music anymore: We’re on this next level of communication, which is pretty crazy—and rare. There were certain songs we would rehearse and feel that kinship, a serious spiritual connection. It felt like we were doing something really special.”

In a dressing room at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Rose Theater, Salvant had just returned from the stage, where she ran through a rendition of the Ella Fitzgerald/Chick Webb lark “A Tisket, A Tasket” with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. It was her featured number for the following night’s annual JALC charity gala, which would include performances by Wynton Marsalis and the orchestra, Marcus Roberts, Dianne Reeves, Billy Crystal and Bill Cosby. She spoke between bites of her lunch, a turkey sandwich from the Whole Foods Market downstairs in the Time Warner Center.

Only 24, Salvant has already achieved a level of success in the jazz world that is rare for players of any age. Her remarkable showing in this year’s Critics Poll—not only topping the Jazz Album and Female Vocalist categories but also Rising Star–Jazz Artist and Rising Star–Female Vocalist—is the exclamation point to a meteoric rise that

began four short years ago with her surprise win at the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition in 2010.

In the audience at that event was Ed Arrendell, an artist manager with, at the time, a single client: Wynton Marsalis. Arrendell had attended the event every year but was usually “underwhelmed” by the young singers. “Cécile was different,” he said by phone from his office in Washington, D.C. “She had a sincerity, a soulfulness. There was something in her sound that let you know this was somebody who understood the tradition that she was representing.”

It was her mother who had advised her to enter the Monk contest, Arrendell noted. Later on, after Salvant had accepted his offer to manage her career, her mother suggested to Arrendell that he introduce Cécile to Marsalis. According to Arrendell, it was a natural step to take, but a risky one. “Wynton is very particular,” he said. “He’s very supportive, but he is unimpressed more often than he is impressed with talent. I think what really got Wynton’s attention about Cécile was that she *listened* to his advice.”

And what was that advice? Salvant put it this way: “I rehearsed with Wynton before one of his concerts in Paris. He talked about rhythm—that might have been what impacted me the most—and about not having a passive role with the band as a singer—that I could drive the band rhythmically as well. He told me to check out Louis Armstrong’s singing.”

Salvant grew up in Miami, her father a Haitian-born doctor, her mother a French educator and founder of a bilingual school. She’s fluent in French, English and Spanish. After years of

classical piano and voice lessons she made a crucial decision: to study music at the Conservatoire Darius Milhaud in Aix-en-Provence, France, where she was initially interested in French Baroque music but came under the influence of the jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Jean-François Bonnel. She found herself deeply immersed in the records of Bessie Smith and other great jazz singers who followed.

Following the Monk Competition, Salvant’s career skyrocketed as she began to collect extraordinary reviews. She is instinctively wary of all the praise. “I don’t read *any* articles about me. *Never*. And I don’t listen to my own music or watch my own videos,” she said. “It’s uncomfortable for me.”

When reminded about the comparisons to Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, she shook her head. “That’s pretty crazy,” she said in a measured way. “I have friends who get *The [New York] Times*, and when they read that, they freaked out. It was *scary* to be compared to those people, but it was a great honor. I guess for me it just means that whoever wrote that thinks that I’m a jazz singer. I try not to think about it too much—I certainly do not compare myself to them.”

Her collaborator and close friend, 28-year-old pianist Aaron Diehl, said he sees the connection, however. He enumerated her gifts in a Skype call from Bern, Switzerland, where they were on tour. “She’s special in so many ways—a brilliant musician, a brilliant mind,” Diehl said. “Very mature. Not just a singer. She’s a jazz musician.”

Diehl cited her propensity for starting an improvisation on the bandstand, just like any other band member. “She can take the

music anywhere, really," he said. "She instinctively channels the entire continuum of jazz history, but without letting it overshadow her own personality."

In conversation, Salvant was modest, even admitting to intermittent doubts about her own validity.

"I've often asked myself, what's the point of this?" she said. "Sometimes I think, 'Gosh, there is no point. What am I doing? This isn't worthwhile; it isn't contributing anything substantial to the world.' Which sounds crazy, maybe, but I deeply feel that way sometimes." The feeling lifts, she said, when she and the band have one of those moments that make her say, "Wait, we're actually doing something that's important."

The *WomanChild* album captures more than a few of those moments. Recorded in the studio with Diehl on piano, Rodney Whitaker on bass, Herlin Riley on drums and James Chirillo on guitar and banjo, it's a mix of old and new, including rarely heard gems from Bessie Smith, Valaida Snow and turn-of-the-century vaudeville star Bert Williams; mid-century delights such as "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" and "What A Little Moonlight Can Do"; and a few of her own compositions that show a diverse array of modern influences from the jazz and classical worlds.

"There were a couple of moments during the session that were really special for me," she recalled. "One where I was recording [Smith's] 'Baby, Have Pity On Me' with just James [Chirillo] and Herlin [Riley]. There was something about the way they played it that I really dug." Another was Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz," which she performed at the piano alone. "For me, that was overcoming my biggest fear: playing the piano in front of other people." The track affords a special window into her musical soul: "It sounds like what I do when I'm working on things at home," she explained.

Salvant started playing piano at age 4. "My mom forced me to study piano until I was 18," she said. "I was always really nervous about it. I never practiced except for one hour before the lesson. When I moved to France and started singing jazz, my mom met the jazz teacher and told him that I used to play the piano." Thereafter, she played in class with a trio. "He taught me some basic things, but I had to learn a lot on my own, and figure things out by playing and transcribing and listening to pianists."

Salvant always liked to sing, performing a solo in her kindergarten class production of *Oklahoma!* Later on, she said, "I heard Charlotte Church on TV, and I was completely dumbfounded by the idea that this 13-year-old could sing in front of an orchestra and move an audience to tears. And I thought, 'I want to be a classical singer, and I think I could do it.' I was about 10 or 11. It was very much like an 'astronaut' type of dream. I loved the idea of opera, the challenge of that repertoire and how dramatic it is. But I was really into Disney movies, too, and I liked that Broadway type of singing."

WomanChild exudes a sense of artistic confidence and self-assurance. It's a myth, she insisted.



JIMMY & DENA KATZ

"During the recording I was super into it; I thought it was cool. The doubts crept in later. About a week later, I started having a panic attack. *Doubt*. I'm a very self-doubting person, I guess. I remember thinking, [*slipping into a low whisper*] 'Oh, what have I done? I've made a terrible mistake. Wrong repertoire, wrong arranging, wrong everything.'"

There was considerable anticipation for her U.S. debut album, and Salvant was aware that, if she were lucky, people would actually listen to it. "I was worried what people would think of me," she said. "I was particularly afraid people might think I was lazy. I thought people might think it wasn't inventive enough, or raw enough."

Many high achievers in the arts and elsewhere suffer from "impostor syndrome"—the feeling that you're faking it, despite ample evidence to the contrary, and fear that at any moment they will be revealed as a fraud.

"I actually did literally wake up in a cold sweat a couple of weeks ago, thinking the exact same thing. It's not a joke. I know the feeling." All that insecurity, however, can inspire higher achievement, she said.

For all her humility and self-doubt, part of Salvant's emerging identity is as a provocateur. She likes to rediscover unusual, sometimes outlandish material from the last century—like Bert Williams' signature hard-luck song, "Nobody,"

and the decidedly un-politically correct “You Bring Out The Savage In Me,” originally sung by the underappreciated jazz vocalist Valaida Snow—and examine it in a postmodern light. Her approach is to inhabit the song without judgment, leaving it up to the listener to evaluate.

“I didn’t think of them as risks, because I love those songs,” she said. “These are interesting songs and they pose interesting questions.”

A true jazz aficionado, Salvant said she plans to keep mining the past for under-heard songs that are cultural markers.

“I’ve started getting into listening to overtly

sexist songs,” she said. “Maybe not really sexist, but songs in which the woman is in this very domestic role.” She cites a current favorite, “When I’m Housekeeping For You” by Jazz Age sweetheart Annette Hanshaw, which includes the lyrics:

“My baby likes bacon / And that’s what I’m makin’ / While I’m cooking breakfast / For the one I love.”

“I’ve also been listening to ‘coon songs,’ very racist material. And folk songs—Jean Ritchie and Skip James, getting back into rural blues. But I don’t listen only to old songs.”

A follow-up to *WomanChild* is now in the

planning stages, as Salvant and the band try out new material on the road.

“I’m thinking a lot about recording an old song called “What’s The Matter Now,” which Bessie Smith used to sing. It’s really sassy and very ... powerful. But the next album is going to be a little different. There’s going to be a lot more Great American Songbook stuff, and more original compositions, too. I like it when the audience is a blank slate and they haven’t heard the song sung by Nat ‘King’ Cole or whoever. I like the idea of having people discover something.”

The album concept will be mostly songs of unrequited love, she said. “My favorite music has always been on that subject. And I just wrote a lot of songs about that.” As for covers, Salvant said she’s leaning toward recording “So In Love” by Cole Porter. “I loved that when I first heard it,” she said. “It’s got a very unusual structure. We’ve been doing it at gigs.”

Like many of her arrangements, “So In Love” evolved over time, with contributions from Diehl, drummer Rodney Green and bassist Paul Sikivie. “I love Cole Porter—his music is really sexy and funny. We’re also doing ‘Most Gentlemen Don’t Like Love.’ Not the typical Porter songs.”

Pressed for more possible titles, she said they might include an arrangement by Diehl of “Something’s Coming” from *West Side Story*. “Oh, and we’re leaning toward recording [Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s] ‘Wives And Lovers’—on the sexist theme,” she said.

In fact, it’s one of the first songs that comes to mind when thinking of so-called “sexist” material.

“Yeah!” she says with enthusiasm. “That song is great—a gem, my gosh! It’s so crazy!”

But won’t it make some people’s skin crawl?

“I hope! When I first heard it, I was like, wow! I laughed. I won’t assume the persona. I’m just going to sing it. I mean, there are certain songs I know I can’t sing—certain ‘coon songs’ in particular that I would love to sing, but I know I can’t. I wouldn’t want anything to be misconstrued.”

Salvant said some material might just be too inflammatory. “When I sang ‘You Bring Out The Savage In Me’—that might be the furthest I can go, as far as singing racist material. I never thought of that song as a risk. I started singing it in France—I just thought it was funny—that kind of a perception of a black woman.” On *WomanChild*, she has fun with the idea, including a modified Tarzan-yell, inviting the audience to laugh at the original sentiment while still digging her campy, pitch-perfect performance of it.

“I hope they’re laughing,” she said.

Although she’s become well-known for mining material from the early 20th century and even older, as in the case of the folk ballad “John Henry,” Salvant is a musical omnivore. She admits to being curious about punk rock and shock rock—“all this repertoire in the ’80s and ’90s ‘Riot Grrrr’ movement ... women singing sometimes really gruesome songs. It’s intense and hardcore, but there’s a strong message behind it. You have to hope that people get what you’re trying to put out there.

“I used to be really into grunge in high school, and then I moved on,” she continued. “I used to be a big Alice in Chains fan.” She sang those songs, but only in her room. Her current listening includes

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"I've been listening to Joni Mitchell lately. I used to really *not* dig what she did. It was just that *every* jazz singer was listening to Joni Mitchell and freaking out about her. I didn't want to get in on that. And then I heard *Blue*, and I thought, 'Wow, this is great, beautiful writing.'"

One wonders how different Salvant might sound today if she had gone to a good jazz program in the United States. "To be honest, I would have sounded like everybody else," she said. "I'm a bit of a sponge and adapt to my environment." Although she learned to sing the usual standards in France, her mentor Bonnel also introduced her "to a whole world of singing that people here don't know—people like Valaida Snow and Bessie Smith. I mean, everybody *talks* about Bessie Smith in schools, but it's superficial. You're not expected to spend six months listening to only that, day in and day out. And I *did* that in France. Not because my teacher expected me to do it, but he gave me her whole discography and said, 'You should check it out.' And I became obsessed."

Salvant is happiest when she is totally immersed in her musical obsessions. They could lead her anywhere, she said, even back to classical singing. And she's working hard at becoming a better songwriter. Asked about her writing process, she said she doesn't have one yet. "I'm not experienced enough. I'm just trying to learn how to write. I'm trying a lot of different things."

She reflected on her continuing development: "For me, the sound I'd *like* to have, I don't have yet. I'd really *like* to have it. When I feel like I'm getting close to that—those moments are amazing." **DB**

Salvant, seated here at the Jazz Standard in New York, admires Bessie Smith and Joni Mitchell.



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