

# GREGORY



# PORTER

## 'I STARTED BEING ME'

By Allen Morrison | Photo by Jack Vartoogian

### GREGORY PORTER DOESN'T MEAN TO PREACH.

He just can't help it. It's in his DNA. Porter's parents were both preachers in Bakersfield, California. After they divorced, Porter was raised by his mother, Ruth Porter, a local businesswoman who preached in a storefront church and devoted much of her time and money to personally helping indigent and disabled people. When you speak with Gregory, it is unusual if the conversation goes for five consecutive minutes without him mentioning her profound influence on his life and songwriting.

On the phone recently, he quoted lyrics from his

new song "Don't Lose Your Steam," imparting a message about tenacity and self-reliance, a message that he got from his mother: "If the bottom falls out, if the bridges fall down/ Don't lose your head of steam, don't lose your dreams." It's a message he's passing on, he said, to his 3-year-old son, Demyan.

The song is the first single from the acclaimed soul-jazz singer's new album, *Take Me To The Alley*, his second for Blue

Note, following last year's *Liquid Spirit*, which netted him a Grammy Award in the category Best Jazz Vocal Album.

That disc also helped him top the Male Vocalist category in both the 2013 and 2014 DownBeat Critics Poll. More strikingly, in an age of relatively puny album sales for pop music—let alone jazz—*Liquid Spirit* sold over 1 million copies worldwide. It also became the most streamed jazz album ever, with over 20 million streams.

Porter's music has an elastic quality that allows him to reach across genres; he has dramatically expanded his audience through keen partnerships with r&b artists and musicians from the world of electronic dance music (EDM).

His first surprise club hit was a 2012 remix of "1960 What?" by Stockholm-based electro-funk producer Opolopo. Porter also collaborated with the British EDM duo Disclosure on "Holding On," the lead single from its Capitol album *Caracal* (a disc that also features Lorde, Sam Smith and The Weeknd). A straight-up r&b version of the song is the opening track of Porter's new album.

The singer's success is no surprise to his mentor and friend, the saxophonist and educator Kamau Kenyatta, who discovered his unique talents when Porter was a student at San Diego State, which he attended on a football scholarship. Kenyatta has since co-produced all four Porter albums. "He'll probably kill me for this," Kenyatta said, "but my nickname for Gregory when I met him as a young man in his twenties was 'The Matinee Idol.' I never thought of him as anything but a star. He was unknown at the time, but I knew. I could feel his presence and charisma and a certain magic along with his musicianship. I'm not that surprised by his great success. It's not just his voice—his writing keeps improving."

Kenyatta helped arrange the new album, along with Porter and pianist/musical director Chip Crawford, leading a sparkling band that includes alto saxophonist Yosuke Sato, tenor saxophonist Tivon Pennicott, trumpeter Keyon Harrold, bassist Aaron James, drummer Emanuel Harrold (Keyon's brother), organist Ondrej Pivec and singer Alicia Olatuja.

DownBeat caught up with Porter by phone from Le Havre, France, where he was performing with his band.

**DOWNBEAT: YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A TWO-MONTH EUROPEAN TOUR. IT MUST BE HARD TO BE SEPARATED FROM YOUR WIFE AND SON FOR EXTENDED PERIODS. HOW DO YOU HANDLE THAT?**

It is difficult, but I feel their energy in my music. Some of the songs on the new album actually came about by way of missing home. But there are some positives to [touring]—I'm fortifying our future, building the career and the catalog. It's difficult but beautiful at the same time, a mixed blessing.

**DO YOU FEEL THAT TAKE ME TO THE ALLEY IS YOUR BEST ALBUM YET?**

There are some strong messages on it, but ... it takes me a minute to say something like that. So many artistic insecurities come up in your head. My 'tastemakers,' people like Kamau and my family, have listened to it and feel it's my strongest work. But for me it's hard



to say. It does feel good, though. I hadn't listened for a couple of weeks; then I put it on. I have a full-house stereo system, and I was walking from room to room and thinking, 'Hmm, I enjoy this! Yeah, this is good!' [laughs]. And my son started singing along—that's a good sign.

**DID YOU SET OUT TO DO ANYTHING DIFFERENT FOR THIS ALBUM?**

My albums are a document of what I'm feeling at the time. There's a lot going on in a writer's head, and there are choices you have to make. Do I wanna be a jazz-head? A soul man? But when I'm writing, I don't think about that. The songs and the words just come out the way they do. I had more songs, different songs; these are just the ones I brought this time.

**HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHICH SONGS TO INCLUDE AND WHICH TO LEAVE OUT?**

Even when I'm doing a concert, I have a kind of subconscious governor ... [to avoid doing] too much of one thing. It's like when you're making a soup: Sometimes you taste with your hands. [Assembling an album or show] is like tasting with your ear. I'm thinking about being well-rounded, in a way, including the ideas, dealing with different aspects of love—family love, my son, romantic love. Then there's the political content.

When I was singing in clubs, earlier in my career, I remember thinking I had to be "this type of artist" or "that type." There was a point at which I decided to go back to my roots and bring my gospel experience into my jazz thing ... That's when I started being me.

I [also] decided to not run away from the massive effect that my mother had on my life. At that point, the lyrics and ideas began to flow

more easily. With all of my records I'm just regurgitating what she put in me. For example, "Don't Lose Your Steam" was a message I got from my mother.

**I BELIEVE I HEAR YOUR MOTHER'S INFLUENCE IN THE SONG "TAKE ME TO THE ALLEY," TOO. I IMAGINE SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN PROUD OF THAT SONG.**

Very. That's how she rolled. I was thinking about how she always helped the homeless, the hungry, the handicapped, anybody who needed some elevation. I thought about it for years. But how do I get that out in a song? [He quotes the lyrics to "Take Me To The Alley":] "Oh they build their houses, in preparation for the king/ And they line the sidewalks with every sort of shiny thing/ They will be surprised when they hear him say/ Take me to the alley /Take me to the afflicted ones." That is how my mother operated—she would go to the alleys, to Skid Row, and try to help people.

**YOU HAVE SAID THAT YOUR PRODUCER, KAMAU KENYATTA, HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN TAKING WHAT YOU HAVE AND REFINING IT. HOW DID HE HELP YOU WITH THIS ALBUM?**

I have so many ideas ... [but] sometimes it takes a partner to catch some of the goodness that's coming out of an artist. For example, at the end of the song "Holding On," I thought I'd just repeat the line like a mantra. But Kamau said, "Be a jazz singer. Don't overthink it—just do what you do." And that's why I sing the line differently each time. He encourages me to trust my artistry, my musical ideas—and capture them. It was the same with the horn arrangements—he'd say, "Just scat something," then he'd say, "That's better than what I wrote—let's use that!"

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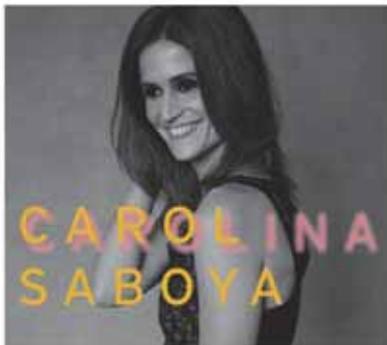
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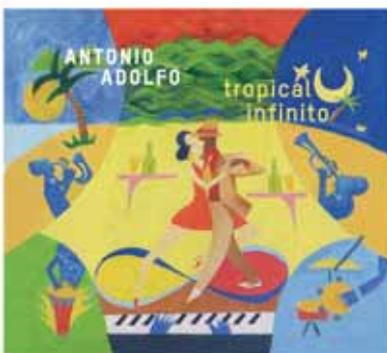
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**YOU'VE BEEN INTERNATIONALLY FAMOUS FOR A FEW YEARS NOW. WHAT HAS CHANGED ABOUT YOUR LIFE, AND WHAT HAS STAYED THE SAME?**

I moved my family back to Bakersfield, California, where most of my [seven] brothers and sisters still live, just to have that family support while I'm traveling. My son has cousins to play with, and uncles and aunts. And [Bakersfield] is like coming back to my mother's energy; it's an experiment, in a way. I'm seeing what it means to be where she was. A lot of what I'm singing came out of my experiences in Bakersfield.

**YOU'VE BEEN INTERNATIONALLY FAMOUS FOR A FEW YEARS NOW. WHAT HAS CHANGED ABOUT YOUR LIFE, AND WHAT HAS STAYED THE SAME?**

People have been nice; they want a picture, and I always oblige. There was a time when the young crowd didn't know me at all; it was an older crowd, a jazz crowd. But now [with the club hits] they're younger. I got surrounded by a group of British and German students in Bristol, when I had a concert there. They all gathered around and wanted a picture. It was funny; after I left the kids, a police officer stopped me. Maybe he thought I was selling drugs. He asked me why all the kids had gathered around me. I told him, "I'm a singer." He Googled me right then and there." [laughs]

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR COLLABORATIONS IN THE DANCE/ELECTRONICA GENRE?**

It was a great experience working with Disclosure. We wrote "Holding On" around a piano, organically. They put a dance beat on it later. It has definitely put me in the ears of a lot of young people. We did one performance in the U.K. before 50,000 young people, bouncing up and down, with a massive bass beat behind me. The next night I was doing it *my* way in concert, with my audience.

**WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOME JAZZ PURISTS WHO MIGHT LOOK ASKANCE AT THOSE TRACKS AND SAY THAT IT'S NOT JAZZ?**

Well, I take my cues from Herbie Hancock. That audience that hears [the re-mixes], some of them are going to come to your thing . . . It's an extension of what I'm doing. It's not the meat. My live shows are still jazz shows, guaranteed. However you get 'em, it doesn't matter; you get 'em. My voice is a jazz voice, but it's also a soul voice. For instance, in Washington, D.C., when I'm playing a sold-out show, I'm sure that more than half the audience is a jazz audience. But I'm also sure that half the audience never goes to jazz shows. And I like that!

**THERE ARE SOME MEMORABLE DUETS ON THE NEW ALBUM. DO YOU SEE YOURSELF DOING AN ALBUM OF DUETS AT SOME POINT?**

I normally do my own thing vocally, but Alicia

[Olatuja] has such a pure tone. As soon as she walked into the room, we started to harmonize. It was never a singing contest. When I sang tenderly, she sang tenderly. When I got louder, she got louder.

There are a lot of things I'd like to do. I want to do something with a symphony orchestra, and a duet album. One project that's in the works is a re-mix of the song "Insanity" for the urban market, as a duet with Lalah Hathaway. We're also re-mixing "Holding On" as a duet with the r&b singer Kem.

**YOUR SONGWRITING IS FULL OF INTERESTING MELODIES THAT DEVELOP, UNLIKE SO MUCH POP MUSIC THESE DAYS. DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS PART OF AN OLDER TRADITION OF NOT JUST R&B BUT THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK?**

I don't put myself into the Great American Book of Standards quite yet [laughs]. But I do have some songs . . . that may [last]. I like the idea of that, and I hope it does happen, for my retirement!

**WHAT OLDER SONGWRITERS DO YOU DRAW INSPIRATION FROM?**

I'm connected to those soulful voices that wrote their own songs—Sam Cooke, Donny Hathaway, Marvin Gaye, Oscar Brown Jr. and Curtis Mayfield. You might not describe them as jazz singers, but everything they did was just on the edge of jazz. And of course Stevie Wonder. I say those artists first, but, it's almost a given, all of the American Songbook masters, from Carmichael to Gershwin and Kern. The poetry they laid down has lasted through the years because it's so great.

**WITH ALL THE TURMOIL IN AMERICA TODAY, YOUR MESSAGE OF LOVE AND MUTUAL RESPECT COULDN'T BE MORE TIMELY. ARE YOU FOLLOWING THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN AMERICA?**

I am. Some of my musical ideas come directly from . . . the protests that were happening in the U.S., which I watched on television while I was touring in France and Germany. It's heartbreaking to see some of the protests go violent . . . I hope that the message of [my song] "Fan The Flames" is understood. The title is provocative, but if you listen to the lyric, it's "Fan the flames of love," which is not really what's happening right now. If Trump makes it to the White House, maybe I won't get invited, but whether he knows it or not, he's fanning the flames of a hatred that he may not be able to take back. Be careful what you say, because words are extremely important and powerful.

**YOU'VE BEEN TREMENDOUSLY WELL-RECEIVED IN THE JAZZ WORLD. HAVE YOU BEEN SURPRISED BY THAT ACCEPTANCE?**

I'm extraordinarily thankful to the community of jazz for accepting me just as I am. **DB**