

# Esperanza Spalding Knows Music Can Heal. Now She Wants to Prove It With Science.

The Grammy-winning singer-bassist's '12 Little Spells' charts her search for music's therapeutic power. Now she's going to grad school to study the data.

Larry Blumenfeld / June 6, 2019



Jack Vartoogian/Getty Images

When she arrived at that castle, Spalding had been dealing with stress through reiki, the Japanese spiritual process centered on energetic healing, and reading a lot of poetry. She'd been thinking about how trauma and healing are transmitted from body to mind and back, and how music figures into that process. Her "spells" began as small thing—"motivated more by intuition and trust than any real plan," she said—but it just kept growing.

Back in Brooklyn, she recorded the compositions with a musical cast that kept expanding. The album's title track opens like an overture; her core seven-piece band is augmented by a 10-piece "orchestra" including flutes and piccolos, trumpets, trombones and French horns, and a string section. In the Fall, she began releasing a dozen spells online, one at a time, weekly, with accompanying videos.

Later, she mounted a brief tour, singing barefoot in dramatic gowns on a circular platform before ever-shifting video projections—a dozen shows in 11 cities, no two exactly the same. This Spring, she began performing taut quartet versions of these songs.

With her album's physical release, Spalding added four new recently recorded spells, totaling 16 in all.

The accompanying booklet reads less like liner notes than an alternative-medicine guide. "Thang," which sways like good gospel and features some of Spalding's loveliest singing on record, is prescribed for "release of, or rejection of, tension in the hips... with sense of sinking into the mechanism of the hip sockets' natural range of motion while walking." "The Longing Deep Down," a complex piece that begins a cappella, is meant for the abdominal portal—"between your crotch and belly button," she explains. Spalding means her instructions as both literal and metaphorical. She seeks to stimulate personal healing while also addressing societal ills. In "Dancing the Animal," she sings: "Have you prayed to your phone today?"

Beginning with *Junjo*, released when she was 21, Spalding has emerged as a vocalist, bassist, and songwriter firmly grounded in but also treading ever so lightly on jazz tradition. She rose to mainstream stardom in 2011 by beating out Justin Bieber and Drake for the best-new-artist Grammy Award. She won three more Grammys in quick succession. She has collaborated with musical royalty and performed repeatedly at the Obama White House.

On the phone from her apartment in Brooklyn, Esperanza Spalding reflects on living in a pigsty.

It's not that her place is untidy. She means the beautiful studio that served as home for a month last summer, converted from the former pigsty of the Ranieri castle, a once-fortified circa 16th-century structure in Italy's Umbria region. There Spalding was inspired to create the series of incantations—each one meant "to activate a spell for each body part"—that form her latest release, *12 Little Spells*.

If Spalding began her career wearing jazz like the loosest of garments, she has by now, at 34, mostly shaken off the trappings of any genre definition. Her songwriting bears traces of many influences: Joni Mitchell's story-like drama; Prince's ecstatic thrust; the scratchy surfaces and stuttering rhythms of Radiohead; the wily allure of Shorter's melodies. Yet her music sounds like no one else's. If there's a through-line from Spalding's start through *12 Little Spells*, it's simply one of unrestrained ambition and a magnetism that radiates within any context.

Spalding grew up in a loving but chaotic single-parent household in a hardscrabble part of Portland, Oregon. She was introduced to music's transformative power early on—first by her mother and then by local musicians such as trumpeter Thara Memory, in whose American Music Program she studied.

"As a child, I learned that music could be a nurturing, healing thing," she said. "I've never forgotten that." Now Spalding, who is now on Harvard University's faculty, wants to fortify that message with empirical data and to spread it far and wide. She's intent on studying music therapy and its potential for healing trauma. She wants to prove her point with hard science, and to become a different kind of practitioner.

We spoke about her conjuring of musical spells and her grander ambitions.

### **How did you start down this creative path?**

I don't really even remember the process. It was very concentrated and intense. I had a fellowship in a castle in the hills outside of Umbria, Italy last summer. I was staying in converted pig's sty, and I had four weeks to write music. I was using a lot of reiki and poetic inspiration, tracking things in my body and what I knew about pain and emotions. It was not analytical at all. It was intuitive. And it happened fucking fast.

When the idea struck, I had no idea what I was talking about. I just thought: Oh, 12 little spells—that would be a cool next project. I wrote that idea down. Each one would be written to activate a spell for each body part. I started writing titles down, and they'd be connected, just like parts of our bodies are connected. But I didn't recognize at that moment how other things I had been studying for years were finally sprouting into that idea.

### **What things?**

I've been loosely studying psychology, especially as related to trauma—its anatomical and neurological aftermath, and the anatomical aspects of healing. One book in particular was important to me, *Healing Developmental Trauma*. The authors propose something called "the Neuroaffective Relational Model." That sounds like a slick and garbly mouthful, but that phrase is sort of the foundation of everything I'm moving toward. I've been focusing on performance and measurable healing, where therapy and anatomical transformation takes place—the space where music and these processes interface and amplify the potency of each other.

### **Are you speaking about your own experiences with trauma?**

Well, yes, my own deep reckoning with my own life—healing and addressing troubling things with my family. But it's much more than that. This is work that we all need to do because social justice and public health are intrinsically linked to individual health and dealing with injustices on a personal level.

### **You're making me think of your lyrics to "With Others": I've been learning about psychology neurobiology and the rest/ now I can't rest 'cause everything reeks of basic needs... Is that what you mean?**

Yes, that's it. It has to do with my experience of being a part of our culture. We all grow up in our nation pretty insecure that we're going to have our needs met. And that's not just true for poor people and people of color, but it's especially true for those groups. There's this feeling of—Who's looking out for me? Anyone have my back? How will I survive? How can I get my basic needs met? The answers to those questions are big and complicated but they also involve healing on a personal level.

### **What is this grand hypothesis?**

I don't want to state it yet because we're fine-tuning it. But I am already working in that field. We have a consortium committed to the task of integrating and applying science-based research around how best to apply music therapy for the explicit purpose of anatomical healing of developmental trauma. [The consortium includes: Linda Nathan, Executive Director, Center for Artistry and Scholarship; Tess Plotkin, Conservatory Lab, Boston; Michelle Williams, Dean, Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University; Eric Bethel, Principal, Turner Elementary School, Washington, D.C.; and Holly Bass, National Director, Turnaround Arts, Kennedy Center.]

The point being that a lot of things are required right now. Like so many artists, when I look around, I'm asking, "What the hell can I do?" I'm not a doctor. I don't know climate science. I can't make an appeal to my representative about why a coal ash pit must be sealed. I don't have those specific skills. But I have music and performance and creativity—how do I use these things to truly help?