

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

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## Black music matters, now more than ever: Lamar, Spalding release masterpieces

By Jeff Miers, Pop Music Critic



Esperanza Spalding has released her 4th album, "Emily's D+Evolution".

Now is the time when Kendrick Lamar is supposed to go soft, to start caring more about his brand than his band, to disappear up his own ego. High-profile success at the Grammys, accolades from some of the greatest living musicians, the top slot in critic's 2015 best-of lists around the globe, all based on that rarest of rare beasts – an album that is both artistic masterpiece and commercial powerhouse, in the form of "To Pimp a Butterfly" – have placed Lamar at the head of the hip-hop class.

Now he can start hanging out with the pop elite and avoiding the hoi polloi, indulging in fame and money, and phoning it in. This is what's expected of him.

This is not what Lamar plans to do, however. That much became clear on Friday, as his surprise release, "untitled unmastered" (Aftermath/Interscope), hit the stream-iverse and made all of its mainstream hip-hop peers' efforts look like exactly what they are – half-baked and lazy attempts to keep the brand alive.

So "To Pimp a Butterfly" was no fluke. This new album – shrouded in the delicious mystery that our absurd age of "tell me everything, at all times" has made into an anomaly – carries on where that earlier effort left off. It's another complex, challenging, dense, disturbing, genre-bending, jazz-informed peek into Lamar's troubled (but clearly agile) mind.

"Untitled unmastered" lives up to its title by offering no credits, no notes, no song titles, even – each of its eight tracks is given a number, and a date, which may or may not refer to the day of its recording, and that's it. Lamar makes no effort to guide the listener.



The recent releases of Kendrick Lamar, pictured, and Esperanza Spalding have been key for black music. (Angelo Merendino/Getty Images)

The album starts with a breathy, Isaac Hayes/Barry White-like piece of purring pillow chat that is frankly more creepy than sexy, before a lush chordal wash propelled by upright bass and piano stabs provides an ominous bed for Lamar's aggressive rhythmic spitting.

Like "Butterfly," this is forward-looking music, unsettling at times, but frankly gorgeous at others – the breakdown that leads to an ethereal jazz-soul bridge during "untitled 01: 08.19.2014"; the soulful Latin-jazz strut "06:30.2014," a killer jam that's bolstered by the interplay between CeeLo Green's vocals and Lamar's deep-in-the-pocket rhyme; the late-night, lo-fi atmosphere of the Prince-informed funk-jam "09.06.2015," for example, all offer as much honey as they do vinegar.

Rather than follow the comparatively linear narrative flow espoused by "Butterfly," here, Lamar offers fractured snapshots, the world viewed through a busted and splintered iPhone screen, seemingly random images and observations connected by an undercurrent of despair and an air of impending doom.

Lamar matters so much because he's bringing new musical values to a form that in the past simply appropriated the melodic themes of pre-existing pop, soul and funk tunes and then concentrated on rhythm and text. Lamar's approach – the conjuring of harmonic landscapes as specific and detailed as their textual and rhythmic counterparts – is the most musical one in the idiom's history. And the abundant commentary on relevant issues – race prominent among them – avoids grandstanding or the mere offering of bumper sticker-style platitudes, favoring thought-provoking nuance and observations redolent of genuine struggle.

It would've been absurd, a few days back, to assume that Lamar would be dropping another gem of a record just as he's supposed to be sitting back and enjoying the post-Grammys sales bump for his last album. But that's exactly what he's done.

Like Lamar, Esperanza Spalding has a lot to live up to, but this time around, she's outdone herself.

Even if you've spent time with the 2011 Best New Artist Grammy winner's brilliant "Chamber Music Society" (2010) and "Radio Music Society" (2012), both of which brought various influences to bear on what was at heart jazz and neo-soul, you might not be prepared for the full flowering of Spalding's talent and compositional skills represented by "Emily's D+Evolution."

When Spalding stole the Best New Artist trophy from Justin Bieber five years ago, it felt like a victory for organic music-making, a blow against the empire of corporate pop. “Emily” delivers on all of the promise suggested by that victory. A serious jazz bassist and composer, Spalding spreads her wings even further, adding elements of progressive rock, indie, alternative and pop to her palette, and filtering all of this through an adventurous compositional acumen fully steeped in the sophisticated harmony and telepathic interplay between musicians that only comes from serious study and performance of jazz.

Much like Joni Mitchell’s albums “Mingus” and “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter,” Spalding’s “Emily” treats pop as a sophisticated and hip format, and vocal melodies as figures that would sound wholly natural played on a saxophone.

This is not throw-back material, however. “Emily” is a wholly modern affair, so if “Earth to Heaven” marries soul to jazz, “Good Lava” brings the knotty complexities of King Crimson and Radiohead to the party, and somehow, these stylistic disparities come across as wholly congruous when the album is listened to as a whole – which is clearly how Spalding (and the universe) intended it to be listened to.

Spalding the lyricist is equal to Spalding the composer and musician here. Her ability to offer statements on race and sexuality in a wholly poetic language that seems to spring from the sonic, rhythmic and imagistic properties of the music itself is a talent that cannot be over-valued.

Many African-American pop artists are making statements on race these days, but most of them are relying almost solely on visual signifiers to get their points across. Lamar and Spalding don’t need music videos or teams of dancers to say what they have to say, which is more than plenty. The message is ingrained in the music itself, and is more powerful for that fact.

*email: [jmiers@buffnews.com](mailto:jmiers@buffnews.com) (mailto:jmiers@buffnews.com)*