

Gregory Porter

The Storyteller

By Allen Morrison / Photography by Jimmy & Dena Katz

*The
singer-songwriter
overcame many obstacles
on the road
to fame*

ONLY A FEW MINUTES INTO

Gregory Porter's homecoming gig at Subculture—a brick-lined basement performance space on Bleecker Street in New York's East Village—the audience begins cheering. Porter, natty in a beige sport coat, black vest, bow tie and pocket hankie, topped off by his ever-present head stocking and black hat, is belting out the final chorus of his song "Painted On Canvas" backed by his rhythm section and, on this Monday evening, three horn players.



He has started the song, which he describes as an impassioned plea for mutual respect, in a reflective mood, but now, after two increasingly urgent horn solos by his sidemen, he wails the line, “Can I use the colors I choose?,” stretching the last syllable of the word *colors* over several bars with a soulful flourish. A fan shouts out, “Yes!” as a wave of applause sweeps over the crowd. Porter has been singing for a grand total of three minutes.

The show has a heartfelt, celebratory vibe. This is the first time Porter, 41, has given a headlining performance in the city in months, and it sold out quickly. Only a couple of years ago—before the critical acclaim and the world tours—Porter played a regular Thursday gig at Smoke, an Upper West Side supper club where he packed them in for three sets a night with no cover charge. Some of the fans from Smoke (as well as older fans from his house gig at the late St. Nick’s Pub in Harlem) have now crowded into this showcase at Subculture.

“Can I get an amen?” Porter says, grinning.

Porter’s updating of a classic soul-jazz sound has attracted a host of famous admirers, including Dianne Reeves and Wynton Marsalis. Audiences instinctively respond to the pure charisma of this imposing, former San Diego State linebacker who is not afraid to show his sensitive side. A natural showman, he projects big emotions fearlessly, singing with the fervor of a storefront preacher. He comes by it honestly; both his parents were ministers.

Although Porter has great technical strengths as a singer—a round, sonorous baritone, effortless intonation and clear elocution—his appeal is not purely musical. It’s more about filling an ancient human need for a storyteller. Porter is a natural one, and something even rarer in jazz: a genuine singer-songwriter.

His r&b- and gospel-tinged music and often impressionistic lyrics pour forth out of his life experience as an athlete, chef, singer, actor and playwright. Before his recording career took off, Porter spent 10 years in musical theater. He wrote and starred in a well-received play titled *Nat “King” Cole and Me*, which told the true story of Porter’s early life. As a boy, he was soothed by Cole’s voice, especially the song “Nature Boy,” with which he identified. Cole’s tender baritone became a substitute for the voice of his absent father, who had divorced his mother before he was born. The play, which had a successful two-month run in Denver, included his uncanny evocation of Cole on stage singing his hits; it also contained six original Porter compositions.

His first big break came in his mid-twenties when Kamau Kenyatta, the San Diego saxophonist, educator and arranger, became his musical mentor and, in some ways, a surrogate father. Kenyatta has gone on to produce or co-produce all of Porter’s albums. When he first met Porter



some 20 years ago, Kenyatta recalls, “He was a young person with an old soul.” In 1998, when Porter was gigging occasionally and working as a chef, Kenyatta introduced him to his friend, flutist Hubert Laws; at the time Kenyatta was arranging and producing a Laws tribute album to Cole.

When Laws heard him sing, he decided to put him on “Smile,” the album’s only vocal track. Laws says, “Gregory not only had a wonderful voice but a certain charisma, a glow that gave that track something special. I’m very happy I got him on that record before he became so expensive!”

That recording led to Porter being cast in the Tony-nominated Broadway musical *It Ain’t Nothing But the Blues* in 1999 and more theater work, including the Cole show. His singing career really took off after Motéma Records President Jana Herzen saw him and his band at St. Nick’s Pub in 2009. Porter’s first Motéma album, *Water*, earned him a Best Jazz Vocal Grammy nomination and impressive reviews and sales. His sophomore release, *Be Good*, was another solid hit with both critics and the public, gaining hundreds of thousands of YouTube views for several songs including “Real Good Man,” that song secured him a second Grammy nomination, this time for best Traditional R&B Performance. The success of the first two albums and his growing reputation as a powerhouse live performer were key factors in his wins in the 2013 DownBeat Critics Poll: He was named Rising Star—Jazz Artist and Rising Star—Male Vocalist.

Porter reflected on his career during an interview at the three-story brownstone in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood that he co-owns with his brother—an actor and the pro-

prietor of a local coffee shop. As we walk to the café that afternoon, nearly every person we pass says hello to Porter; he’s like the mayor. When not performing all over the world, Porter lives there with his wife of a year-and-a-half, Victoria, whom he met while touring Russia, and their 9-month-old son, Demyan.

What follows are excerpts from the interview, including comments on his album *Liquid Spirit*, to be released by Blue Note on Sept. 17.

DownBeat: A lot of folks at last night’s gig seemed to know you and your material.

Gregory Porter: It’s interesting. I haven’t performed in New York in months. And sometimes that energy can build up. But I’m always surprised by [the sell-outs]. I’m like, “Where do these people come from?” But there are some friends from Smoke, and some fans who’ve been with me since St. Nick’s Pub. A lady I didn’t know told me I had to do “Painted On Canvas.” I enjoy that song; it’s like a palate cleanser for me.

That song has a melody that sticks to your ribs.

Yeah. And however cryptic the meaning of the lyric, I’m essentially just talking about mutual respect. That’s something that I think comes across in a lot of my lyrics. People respond when I say, “Can I choose the colors I use?” and “Do I have some say what you use?” Allow *me* to define who I am. Don’t look at me and say, “This is what you are.” I am more than people say that I am.

What was it like for you growing up in Bakersfield?

Bakersfield is its own thing. It’s definitely not the Bay Area or L.A. I think about some of the stories of my childhood, and it doesn’t seem quite right that it was California.

Was it very segregated?

Yes. When we moved there, it was to an all-white neighborhood. And most of my experiences were beautiful—good friends, eating baloney sandwiches, swimming in the pool. But when you’re the first black friend of a white kid, you get this stuff ... it’s not racism but curiosity. You know, feeling your hair, and “Does this wash off?” My mother knew we would have to be like little ambassadors, so she would say, “Let ‘em touch ... and then say, ‘It’s cool, isn’t it?’ But don’t let them put you down about anything.”

But that can happen as well. No matter what you did, if you won in sports, if you hit a home run, there was one way the kids could get you. It was, “Well at least I’m not black.” And it would hurt you every time.

I know it sounds like something out of the 1960s South, but they burned a cross in our front yard when I was 8 or 10. This may sound strange, but I was fascinated by the construction of the



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The Value of Loyalty

Don Was, the veteran producer and now president of Blue Note Records, remembered the first time he heard Gregory Porter.

"I was driving in Los Angeles, listening to the local jazz station," he recalled. "And I heard that song 'Illusion' from his first album [*Water (Motéma)*]. It was actually the lyric that grabbed me first: 'I've been trying to find my footing / On the slopes of the illusion / That I lost it when you left me.' It took me a second to unravel the line. I thought, 'Jesus, that's brilliant writing.' I loved the fact that he was telling the story so conversationally. And then, of course, he has incredible technique, yet he never uses it for the sake of demonstrating technique—it's all done in the name of storytelling. He writes these incredible songs, then delivers them with relaxed, unaffected directness. There aren't many folks who do that."

Not long after that, Was slipped into the New York venue Smoke, sat down alone at a table and watched Porter captivate the crowd through three sets. "It was maybe the best show I'd seen in 20 years," he said. Signing Porter was one of the first decisions he made upon becoming president of Blue Note.

Porter's sound brings to mind jazz and soul artists like Joe Williams, Donny Hathaway and Bill Withers, but also a wide range of African-American singers including Les McCann, Lou Rawls, Leon Thomas, and Eddie Jefferson ("Moody's Mood for Love," for which Jefferson wrote the indelible lyrics, was an early inspiration, he has said). His occasional forays into politics are reminiscent of songs by Curtis Mayfield and Abbey Lincoln. But perhaps his most important influence is that of his early idol, Nat "King" Cole, whose warmth, melodic gifts and excellent diction he echoes.

Liquid Spirit, Porter's first album for Blue Note, is, like his previous two albums, mostly composed of strong original writing, including the joyous gospel of the title cut, the neo-Philadelphia soul of "Hey Laura" and several dramatic ballads, including the standout "Water Under Bridges." There are three covers—Lincoln's swinging "Lonesome Lover," an oddly refreshing revival of Ramsey Lewis' 1965 classic "The In Crowd" and a stark, emotional rendition of Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne's "I Fall In Love Too Easily."

Album producer Brian Bacchus, who also produced the Grammy-nominated *Be Good (Motéma)*, likened Porter to artists from a previous generation of soul songwriters. "To just call Greg a jazz singer would be too limiting," he said. "It doesn't speak to him as an artist. Greg is writing stuff that's very much 'now,' but it really is tied to a golden age of songwriting."

Porter's band—pianist Chip Crawford, drummer Emanuel Harrold, bassist Aaron James, alto saxophonist Yosuke Sato and tenor saxophonist Tivon Pennicott, with occasional

help from trumpeter Curtis Taylor—has been together since they met at jam sessions at Harlem's storied St. Nick's Pub five years ago. His allegiance to them has yielded audible benefits, providing him with a distinctive and flexible soul-gospel-jazz sound that works equally well in the studio and on world stages.

The North Carolina-bred Crawford is Porter's secret weapon. "He's a unique player, and he knows a lot of songs," Porter said. "He's played in the black gospel church, played with The Four Tops. When I want to go to a place, there's no conversation—he just knows how to do it. He knows how to go to that Church of God in Christ sound, he knows how to go to a Motown sound."



Co-producer Kenyatta said, "Greg and Chip have a very intimate musical relationship, and a lot comes from what happens between those two musicians." Kenyatta helps arrange horns and rhythm parts, "but Greg is very involved in the arrangements," he said. "He's like a pitcher shaking off signs from the catcher—I'll make suggestions, but he knows exactly what he wants."

Crawford agreed. "I might flesh out a chord here or there," he said, "but it's not like I totally arrange anything for Greg—he's got it pretty much in his noggin."

At this stage of his career, Porter can work with more celebrated sidemen if he chooses. "Look," he said about the jazz greats, "I'm going to play with them, I do play with them, and I hope to record 100 albums, much of that with different and unusual musicians." But, citing their unique sound and comfort level with each other, he remains loyal to his band.

"I keep running across masters who say, 'Stick with this group.' Harold Mabern told me, 'Stick with Chip.' We opened for Herbie Hancock, and he was like, 'Y'all got a vibe—just keep going.' Sanctioned by Herbie and Harold Mabern—that's pretty cool. And [my bandmates] know me. When we play 'Mother's Song,' there's a sensitivity. They know about my mother, my voice and my story."

—Allen Morrison

cross—it was so well done. And they wrapped kerosene-soaked, ripped-up jeans around it; and wire wrapped around that. And the wood—it was jointed so well. It took time. That's what got to me as a kid—it wasn't sloppily done.

How did your mother handle it?

[sighs] She grew up in Texas and Louisiana, so she could deal with it ... but she knew it was Bakersfield—this interesting little transplantation of the South. ... But when I say "they" burned a cross—it was a [certain] group of people. And again, the majority, the seasoning of my life was pretty pleasant. It was throwing oranges in the alley, because there were so many of them falling from the trees.

Yes, I have been called "nigger" so many times that the word was defused; it didn't mean anything to me. And in high school, I couldn't take the girl I wanted to go with to the prom. She was white. Her family, just as straight-faced as could be, said to my face, "Cameron is special, and she cannot go to the prom with a black person."

But my mother was just so strong. She was on it. Five boys and three girls. Any time somebody got in our face, she was in our face pushing in the other direction. "Your skin is beautiful. You are just as good—not better—but just as good as anybody."

Your mother has a presence in quite a few of your songs. Tell me about that.

She was a spiritual force, so much so that she could be hard to understand. I have a song on the new album, "When Love Was King"; she's in that. It's Demyan's bedtime story. "I remember when love was king ... of hungry children, first he'd think / To pull their lives from the brink." I once watched my mother pick up a homeless man who had urinated on himself, and then put him in the front seat of our new Cadillac. For her it was just matter-of-fact. She cleaned him up; he stayed with us for two weeks.

I remember it so well. I used to have these mirrored sunglasses. When we got that car, I used to sit in the passenger seat and act like my mother was the chauffeur. I think I was 7. And she stops the car and tells me to get in the backseat. And she puts this urine-soaked man in the front seat and proceeds to drive to our house. And I'm like, "Really?" We don't do that now. But she did. Up till the day she died. [On her deathbed] she said, "Hand me my purse." She was trying to get \$600 to some family who needed it to pay their rent. Now I understand. ... She knows she's dying. And the very last thing she wants to do, is to give. I think about ... how dangerously close we came to stopping her from giving being the last thing she did. But we let her do it. That was her essence. She was powerful.

Onstage last night, you said that you have your father's voice, and maybe a small bit of whatever else he had. What did you mean?

[laughs] I didn't want to say I'm just such a charismatic person, but he was a charismatic dude. I learned a lot about him at his funeral. My mother and he had three children together, but they divorced when she was pregnant with me, so I never knew him.



Did your father sing?

He did. He was that style of preacher that sang his message.

So you come by the "preaching" part of your show honestly.

It's just a little playful thing I do, but in a way it's like going home. Black audiences get it immediately. There's a thing that happens at the end of a service when you've been in church for three hours and everybody's ready to go home. The preacher leans on the pulpit and says, "I'm not gonna hold you long ... but I got one more thing to say." And

you know when he says that, he's gonna talk for another half hour [laughs]. A lot of times I'll say that when it's time for the encore, and the black audience all understand that.

Did you ever get a chance to spend time with him?

No, not much. ... When he was in the hospital, I gave my father an opportunity to say something to me that would send me on my way in life and make me feel good about him. And he just totally failed the test. I told him, "I really enjoy singing. I want to be a singer." And he said, "Aaah, there's a lotta good singers out there." I just threw him this softball, and he totally missed it. I sang a song for him there in his hospital room. All he had to do was just say, "Yep!" But, who knows what kind of suffering he was under at that time. That moment I had with my father is represented in the play [Nat "King" Cole and Me]. At 30 years old, I needed an apology from my father. He was dead, so I couldn't get one. So I created one. And he apologized to me onstage. I know it sounds crazy.

It doesn't sound crazy; it sounds like theater.

Yeah. And it felt real. I forgave my father during the run of that [play]. And I was able to move on.

(Porter describes his early musical explorations under the tutelage of U.C. San Diego professors George Lewis, the trombonist and composer, and Kamau Kenyatta, both of whom saw the young Porter's musical potential, and gigging around town with Kenyatta and San Diego jazz legends Daniel Jackson and Gilbert Castellanos.)

Kamau was substituting for George in a jazz

ensemble class. ... Kamau pulled me to the side after class and said, "Man, you got something—I want to help you and work with you." At our first meeting, he made six or seven charts of music in my key; songs that he thought would be good for me to learn. You hang around that community and see where you fit in. I knew I had a unique voice in terms of my style, my tone, my upbringing. At some point I felt the comfort to bring my gospel understanding into jazz. ... Then I found songs that were right in my wheelhouse.

Like what?

Like, "The Work Song," "Moanin'." That hard-bop stuff that was taken directly from the church. That helped me realize that one of the pillars of [jazz] was where I was coming from as well. Yes, there's European tradition; there's blues tradition; there's gospel tradition. I found my place in it.

That strong Southern soul and gospel element in your work sounds so new, for some reason, in 2013, but it's really not.

This is what [the song] "Liquid Spirit" is about. "Un-reroute the river / Let the dammed water be / There's some people down the way that's thirsty / Let the liquid spirit free." There's a spirit, an energy and a soulful expression that people want, and once they hear it, they're like ... "Aaah!" I've heard people say—and I'm not saying they're talking about me—"Where can I find more of this, more of your kind of music, this sound?" Something has been missing in their ear. If I supply a little of it, they say, "I want some more of that." **DB**

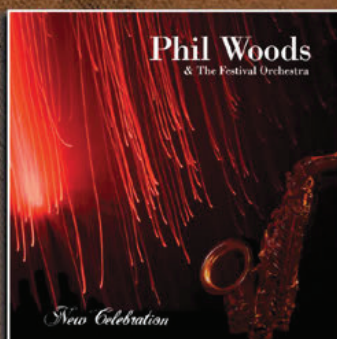
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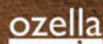
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