



Lizz Wright

TOTAL DEVOTION

THE ACCLAIMED SINGER-SONGWRITER DISCUSSES
HER ROOTS IN GOSPEL MUSIC, HER LOVE OF
JAZZ AND HER TRANSCENDENT NEW ALBUM

BY ALLEN MORRISON • PHOTOS BY JIMMY & DENA KATZ



Lizz Wright at The Jazz Gallery in New York City, Oct. 8

In late February 2015, about a week before singer-songwriter Lizz Wright went into the studio to record her fifth album, *Freedom & Surrender* (Concord), her Volvo station wagon skidded across 300 yards of black ice on a mountain curve near her North Carolina home, and headed toward a 75-foot ravine.

Wright described this harrowing, “near-death experience” in a recently published essay:

I softened my body and rested my hands in my lap. The heavy car floated silently. ... “OK” was the only thing I could get out in a sigh. I was stopped by a young bellwood tree that grew out of the bank like a hook. I slowed my breathing and meditated in suspension. About 20 minutes later, a young neighbor pulled the door open, reaching in with a strong arm to guide my climb out.

“It was as if it were part of a ballet—everything was moving slowly,” she told *DownBeat* at The Jazz Gallery in midtown Manhattan, where she had just sat for a photo shoot. “I felt weird for about two days. But, in the end, it was really good for me. I remember thinking, as soon as I got back on the ground, that I had to get this record done. I was too untethered from life. I had been in retreat for too long.” She had gone through a period of depression, she said, “but I knew this record would bring me out of it. It was time. It made me feel like I had to be more active in life altogether, and more grateful.”

On the home page of Wright’s website, two striking photographs alternate: one, the cover shot for the album, shows her standing, eyes closed and smiling serenely against a background of clouds; the other is of the delicate pink blossoms of the tree that saved her.

Both earthy and ethereal, the preacher’s daughter from the heart of Georgia can sing jazz with great authority when she chooses to. She has worked with some of the leading jazz artists of the last decade, including keyboardist Joe Sample, drummer Terri Lyne Carrington and soul-jazz singer Gregory Porter. Yet Wright doesn’t consider herself a jazz singer, and for good reason. Her mix of 19th- and 20th-century African American styles, traditional blues, folk and contemporary pop shows the influence of many genres without fitting comfortably into a single one.

Now, after a five-year hiatus—during which she got off the fast track, bought 28 acres in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, suffered some bitter disappointments in love and rearranged her priorities—Wright has emerged stronger, with an album of mostly original

songs that demonstrate a new maturity and a hard-won sense of balance between the secular and the sacred.

Freedom & Surrender is her first album since 2010’s *Fellowship* (Verve), a collection of mostly gospel tunes. It’s her first for her new label, and her first time working with bassist-composer-producer Larry Klein, who’s known for his sensitive work with female singers (including Luciana Souza, Joni Mitchell, Tracy Chapman and Madeline Peyroux).

Although it started out as an album of love songs, *Freedom & Surrender* became something deeper and more expressive of Wright’s life and spiritual development. She co-wrote all but three of the disc’s 13 songs, six with Klein and his regular writing partner, David Batteau, and others with J.D. Souther, Maia Sharp and Wright’s longtime writing partners Toshi Reagon and Jesse Harris. The three carefully selected covers are inspired choices: Reagon’s “Freedom,” the doomed British pop songwriter Nick Drake’s ethereal “River Man” and a gospel-flavored arrangement of the Bee Gees’ “To Love Somebody.”

Klein assembled a brilliant band: guitarist Dean Parks, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, bassist Dan Lutz, percussionist Pete Korpula and keyboardists Kenny Banks and Pete Kuzma, with guest appearances by Billy Childs on Fender Rhodes, Till Brönner on flugelhorn, and Porter, who shares the romantic duet “Right Where You Are.” As in Wright’s live performances, a churchy Hammond B-3 figures prominently in most of the arrangements.

“If I had to summarize her qualities in a word, I’d say she’s an *honest* singer,” Klein said via Skype from his home studio in Los Angeles.

Her co-writer and friend Jesse Harris agreed. When Harris presented Wright with an ASCAP Foundation Jazz Vanguard Award in 2015 for her innovative songwriting, he described her as “the essence of a natural singer. With each breath she takes, warm, joyful and sometimes sorrowful sound comes pouring forth like a stream from every corner of her body. She writes songs in the same way.”

Her gospel roots are evident in everything she sings. “That’s her channel,” Klein said.

“Yeah, that’s probably why I can’t be a ‘jazz

singer,’” Wright explained. “I’ve always got that Southern gospel-blues root thing on it—I can’t get that off! It’s like a good kind of dirt, you know? Not a nasty dirt—a good kind in which you can grow stuff.”

“I think, musically and personally, I stand right in the middle of America,” she reflected. “I know there are pieces of country, folk, jazz, gospel, soul music and blues in what I do, but these styles don’t feel separate to me. They look like the collage of people in my life who have taught me, loved, protected and influenced me.” On the downside, she added, “If you’re this eclectic, you can be made to feel a bit homeless.”

Klein, in a sense, gave her a home for all these styles. “*Freedom & Surrender* was initially supposed to be a record of cover songs,” he said. “But Lizz told me, ‘I don’t really want to do that, but the record company wants me to.’ She wanted to write songs about where she was at—at this point in her life—after taking time away from things. And I thought that was a great idea. So I said, ‘Let’s just start daydreaming together about what we’re going to make, let it take shape while we work, and I’ll keep the record company at bay.’” The writing process stretched out over a year-and-a-half, during which Wright made frequent trips to Los Angeles to work with Klein and Batteau.

Singer-guitarist Toshi Reagon has been a friend and mentor to Wright her since her earliest days in New York. Reagon is the daughter of Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock and a charter member of The Freedom Singers, who gained famed singing at civil rights rallies with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s.

“The term ‘gospel’ doesn’t begin to describe Lizz’s voice,” Reagon said by phone from her Brooklyn apartment. “Gospel is a 20th-century tradition. Lizz’s singing comes out of a much older, 19th-century way of phrasing. When I first heard her sing, I called my mom, who’s also from Georgia, and I said, ‘Mom, you’re not gonna believe this.’ It’s very rare to hear somebody Lizz’s age sing that way.” Wright is, according to the younger Reagon, one of the few contemporary singers her mother has ever heard who has the sound and tradition that she teaches, despite not having been personally taught by her.

“She also has an *insane* instrument. She sings perfectly—she’s the Serena Williams of singing. I feel like I’m a student when I work with her,” Reagon said.

The spirituality in her music has deep roots. “Growing up,” Wright said, “I was not allowed to listen to any secular music, besides classical music. My only exposure to it was through commercials, TV, classmates. To this day, people talk about r&b, hip-hop, music from the ’80s



Wright's new album is titled *Freedom & Surrender*.

and '90s, and I can't believe that I'm 35 and I still don't know about all the main groups."

The Wrights lived in Kathleen, in central Georgia. Her father, an Air Force veteran, is an aircraft mechanic at Robins Air Force Base and a preacher at the non-denominational Community Outreach Ministries, a storefront church in Montezuma, Georgia. "From 5 years old on," Wright said, "I would sing a song or two at every service, right before Dad would preach." By age 16, she had become the church's musical director.

Both parents are musical, though neither had formal training. "My mother would literally go to the piano and lay her hands on it, feel her way through it, and sing. It was like she was massaging the keys. She does so many technically wrong things, but they work—she's very musical." Wright learned to play piano from the age of 5, writing songs and taking lessons from a Baptist minister.

"My father read all kinds of stories to me, Bible stories and African American folktales. After preaching in church, he didn't have enough. We'd have a little mini-church [service] in the house; it was called family devotion. He'd read a story or parable to me, my sister and brother, and give us parts to play. Now I realize how weird my childhood was. As a child you don't care for those kind of things. But now I thank him."

Her older brother is also musically gifted. "He was the first one of us children to start hearing things and figuring out how to play them, knowing nothing about [the piano]. All I knew was Bible stories. I was steeped in Christian logic—miracles, prayers, covenants. So when I saw my brother playing like that, I went in the closet where my daddy prays, and I made a deal with God: 'I will sing for you and play for you. Just teach me how to do that; just give me *that*,'" she laughed.

So how is that deal working out today?

"It's fine! Now, without holding fast to any ideology, I can still say that every prayer is the beginning of your own transformation. So be *really careful* what you ask for. My whole life changed. I started playing all the time. I started listening to [songs] and learning how to play them. Then Dad put me to work in his church."

Being sheltered from the secular mainstream gave her "a hunger for all kinds of music I missed," she said. It may have also caused her to hear things a bit differently from others of her generation. "It allowed me to hang on to an old sound that's really hard to imitate. The old, traditional ways of singing are part of history—that's how people still sing [in Georgia] when I go home."

Wright regards the contemporary gospel movement as her musical salvation. "That period in gospel, the '90s, was amazing," she said. "You had [artists like] Commissioned, The



Wright grew up singing in a church in Georgia, where her father served as a preacher.

Winans, Vanessa Bell Armstrong—a whole world of people who sounded like disco, r&b, even early hip-hop—but they were talking about Jesus. You had a gospel version of every sound and every headliner in secular music.

"But," she added, "when it comes to gospel music, I still like the old stuff. I like it really basic."

Wright studied music throughout her middle and secondary school years, learned choral conducting and attended state competitions. At Georgia State University in Atlanta, where she studied classical voice, she discovered that her range was wider than she thought. "My teachers always made me sing second soprano," she said. "They said, 'In order for you to have vibrancy and for your tone to be really clean, you need to strengthen the top end of your range.' It helped me, and it made singing low a special treat for me."

It took a while for her parents to warm up to her secular career. "I pulled my life away from them and explored it in secret," she said. At Georgia State, she began to explore the possibilities of combining gospel with secular music. She considered singing love songs on a gospel label, or singing gospel on a secular label; she asked her ministers and friends whether that was possible. She got mixed responses.

Now she sees the distinction as artificial: "I think the secular and the sacred are insepara-

ble in nature." She has tried to balance the two ever since, seeking to avoid "too much leaning in and too much doing without."

In Atlanta she began to hear jazz—on NPR, at first—then at jazz clubs. She sought out fellow students who played it, and asked them what records she needed to study.

"I went around interviewing people with a notebook," she recalled. She began sitting in with local musicians, many of whom shared her background in church music, and joined a gospel group called In The Spirit. The group's manager, Ron Simblist, helped her make a demo and get it to Ron Goldstein, the president of Verve Records. She was 21.

Executives at Verve liked what they heard, agreeing to put her into an artist development program and paying for lessons in New York with Dr. Richard Harper from The New School. He had her singing spirituals in the classical style. She says the work helped her integrate classical technique into singing more secular and contemporary material. "It helped me get more force out of my voice and more stamina," she said.

"Then Norah Jones happened—and people were inspired by that. It was a blessing that she happened before I did, because the palette of what the labels considered workable, and where jazz could go, got broader." It suddenly was acceptable for Wright not to sing straight-ahead jazz. "Norah happened to meet a great need for

comforting music, for gentle stories and music that was related to jazz,” but without what she calls “the studied recall”—harkening back to the spirit and the phrasing of the past while lacking personal authenticity.

“There’s a way to study jazz, and be so exact about what it’s supposed to be, that it feels like you’re visiting a museum, and I can’t take that,” she said.

It’s not that she doesn’t admire artists who mine traditional jazz and keep it alive. “It works for some people. I’m still learning the tradition. But I have a lot of interesting things in my heart and head . . . and I’m trying to say something with my music about what I see and feel right now.”

With *Freedom & Surrender*, her songwriting has achieved a new level of honesty and accomplishment, encouraged by co-writers of a similar bent, especially Reagon, Harris and now Klein. Her friendship with Reagon is special. “Toshi’s presence in my life is very different from anyone else,” Wright said. “She and her mom—they sound like *home* to me. Toshi’s just honest. There’s a thing about people from Georgia and how they sing, how they sit inside of a tempo in a way that’s *country*. She gets that from her mom, I guess. We write things together that sound like where I came from.”

Reagon’s solo composition “Freedom”—a fervent prayer set to a compelling funky riff—opens the album. “It was written with Lizz in mind,” Reagon said. The song came to her out of the social and racial turmoil of the past year, but it has a special relevance to Wright for more personal reasons. The idea of having “the courage to be free” was a theme Wright began sounding with the very first track of her debut, 2003’s *Salt*.

“I want to be free,” she said, “but I want to keep the continuity with my past. I’d like the people who heard me sing when I was 5 in my father’s church to be like, ‘Yeah, that’s her; she still sounds the same.’”

“Right Where You Are” is a soulful duet with Porter. “I had toured with Gregory in 2013,” she said. “It was kind of an arranged marriage. People were telling me, ‘You have a musical soul mate.’ It was awkward at first. But now that I’ve hung out with him, I understand that.”

While running on Venice Beach one morning, during one of her writing visits to L.A., Wright was thinking about the song when the idea of Porter popped into her head. Co-writer J.D. Souther had wanted to sing the harmony part, “and that would have been fine,” she said. But she had wanted to duet with Porter for a while, and suddenly she could hear it. She stopped in the middle of her run and texted Klein.

They tracked Porter down in Paris and arranged for him to record his vocal at a studio there. “He has so much power and color in his voice—it’s like a place you can walk into—it’s huge. The care he took with the song, and the tenderness in his voice, was a very clear message to me. We are good forever.”

Wright is no longer concerned about whether she’s considered a “jazz singer” or not. She seems grounded in her personal life and in her new creative space.

In reality, she’s part of an old folk and blues tradition. “I’m heavily influenced by jazz—I studied the way Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald delivered lyrics, the pacing and use of space of Shirley Horn. I have borrowed wisdom from a lot of places, but I’m still a storyteller, because that’s what my father is.

“I don’t know how the ‘jazz darling’ thing happened,” she reflected. “I never earned that. I understand the music, have studied it, and I love it. But it doesn’t come out of me like that.” Instead, she thinks of herself as “a people’s singer.”

“I like artists who have careers like Bonnie Raitt and Keb’ Mo’ and Odetta—those are ‘people’s singers’ to me,” she said. “I come from a place where gospel and country, and jazz and blues, can cross, naturally. Because I’m on a jazz label, it’s been a big cloud to run from under. Yet it’s showered me with so many gifts. It’s a strange thing. But the truth is, I can talk to anybody, and I can sing to anybody, and I want to have a song for anybody.”

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The advertisement features a large photograph of musician Bakithi Kumalo, a Black man wearing a white fedora and a dark jacket, smiling while holding a large, orange-colored electric bass guitar. The text "NS DESIGN™" is prominently displayed at the top in a large, white, stylized font. To the left of the photo, the name "Bakithi Kumalo" is written in orange. Below the main photo, a row of five different models of orange Steinberger guitars is shown. The text "REDEFINING CLASSIC™" is written in white above the guitars. At the bottom, the website "www.NedSteinberger.com" is displayed in white. A vertical credit "K-LA Photography" is visible on the right side of the main photo.