

B I O G R A P H Y

SPENCER DAY

Vagabond

Vocalist-songwriter-pianist Spencer Day is an artistic vagabond, a modern-day musical nomad.

Born in Utah, raised in rural Arizona, currently living in Los Angeles with extended residencies in New York and San Francisco, Day has called many places home. Along the way, he has wandered amid the expansive and diverse landscape of American music, developing an artistic sensibility that borrows from numerous sources: jazz, musical theater, cabaret, soul, folk, traditional pop and contemporary pop are just the tip of the iceberg. Day uses intuition and improvisation as his primary tools to craft a sound that is traditional and familiar, yet fresh and innovative at the same time, creating a blend too subtle to parse into neatly defined categories. *Vagabond*, his new release and his first on Concord Jazz, cements his reputation as a balladeer for the new century whose creative voice is distilled from the best elements of the previous one.

“I wanted to create a musical hybrid,” says Day. “I’ve drawn from the Great American Songbook quite a bit in the past, but I really wanted to infuse this album with a more contemporary aesthetic, and also draw on some influences from the early ‘60s, like Burt Bacharach, Roy Orbison and Dusty Springfield. I wanted to create a sound that could stand alone and not be easily put into one category, but at the same time appeal to a broad range of listeners.”

The aforementioned itinerant lifestyle of Day’s youth is very much a part of *Vagabond* – his third release in five years, following the self-distributed *Introducing Spencer Day* (2004) and *Movie of Your Life* (2005). “That was the concept that I wanted to convey here – the idea of leaving home, going out and finding myself outside of those familiar contexts,” he says. “I wanted to make that a universal theme that people could relate to. My goal is to make a record that means something to me personally, but is still open enough that people can find their own relevant messages in it. The best songs are the ones that leave things open to interpretation, as opposed to telling the listener how to feel every step of the way.”

By his own account, Day got a bit of a late start on his journey of artistic self-discovery. Largely self-taught, he grew up listening to a wide cross-section of composers, including Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Joni Mitchell, John Lennon and Paul Simon. He also counts “all those old MGM musicals” he watched as a kid among his primary influences. He didn’t start performing in public until age 21, mostly singing standards in piano bars and retirement homes. “I was probably three or four years into that when I realized that that wasn’t totally satisfying to me,” he recalls. “I realized that I needed to write as well.” That’s when things got into high gear.

While his debut album was primarily a collection of standards, the title track from the followup recording, *Movie of Your Life*, won San Francisco Academy of Art University's 2005 competition for best original song. The resulting video was selected by Dolby Laboratories as a demonstration video for the global launch of the Dolby 7.1 system.

That same year, he collaborated with improv actor Rafe Chase on a musical, *Someday, Love*, which premiered at San Francisco's New Conservatory Theater. In addition to writing the score, Day also starred in the show.

Day performed at the 2007 San Francisco Jazz Festival, and has been a recurring headliner in a number of high-profile Bay Area clubs, including Yoshi's, the Plush Room, the Great American Music Hall and the Herbst Theatre. On the opposite coast, he has earned raves for performances at the Town Hall, Joe's Pub and the Canal Room in New York City, and the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

In the past year alone, he has opened for Rufus Wainwright at the Napa Valley Opera House and appeared at both the Monterey Jazz Festival and the Tanglewood Jazz Festival.

All of which brings Day to the release of *Vagabond*, an album that he considers "a marked departure" from his previous work. "I have very eclectic tastes, and they're reflected in this record," he says. "But I really pulled in the reins on this project to focus on a sound and create a texture that is more consistent than my first two records."

Vagabond hits the road with "Til You Come to Me," a clever tune that's part ode and part plea to a former lover who has recently moved on. The mix of lyrical imagery and urgent rhythm suggests an undercurrent of desperation – a feeling that's emphasized by the strings and the expressive guitar work of guitarist/cellist/background vocalist Yair Evnine, Day's collaborative partner for several years. "You'll often find someone who's a killer jazz player, but they can't play a simple three-chord jam to save their lives," says Day. "Conversely, you'll have people who are really good at the simple pop stuff, but they haven't developed the sophistication of jazz – the unusual time signatures, the key changes, all those things. That's one of the things I appreciate about Yair the most – how versatile and well rounded he is. He sings, he plays guitar, and he's a fantastic cellist."

Further in, the poignant "Weeping Willow" is the story of a roadside tree that sees the world from a melancholy perspective, as evidenced in the refrain: "There is so little time for sorrow, when your life is just passing you by..." For Day, this kind of supernatural imagery is fair game if the end result is a genuine emotional response: "I tend to like the more dreamy pastiches – the little mood pieces that I feel are very unique to my style, and have chord changes that go to interesting places."

"Joe" is the story of a young man leaving home to make his way in the world. He leaves behind some misunderstandings and resentments, and takes with him plenty of warnings about how hard the world is likely to treat him. In the end, Joe's fate remains a mystery.

Or does it? The title track, which follows immediately, is in many ways a companion piece to “Joe,” with its declaration of a wanderlust that comes with no apologies. The tempo here is subtly elastic, thanks to the rhythm section of bassist Jon Evans (Tori Amos) and drummer Scott Amendola (Charlie Hunter), both of whom move just slightly in and out of the pocket throughout the track – not unlike the wayfarer who refuses to stay on the path. “It’s been very humbling for me to work with these guys, because they’re total badasses,” says Day. “All through the process of making this record, I felt as though I was able to grow a lot just by being around them and being around their talent.”

“Little Soldier” comes from Day’s distant but lasting memory of his mother sending him off on his first day of kindergarten, but the theme of parting and lost innocence resonates on a number of other levels for those who have heard the song in Day’s live performances. “It’s a song about a young child leaving home for the first time,” he says, “but given that we live in a country that’s been at war for several years now, some people have taken a different meaning from it, and I’m totally fine with that. The important thing is that the song touches you in some way and makes you feel something.”

“Tuesday Morning (Maybe)” rattles off a series of questions that are at the very least disjointed, and at times a little bit frantic. “I wanted this song to come from the perspective of someone having a panic attack,” says Day. “It’s intended to be kind of funny. You’re asking all these questions because you’re just kind of freaking out. One morning you wake up and the whole world is bearing down on you, and it all seems like a huge, apocalyptic nightmare. But eventually you come back down from it.”

The set closes with “Better Way,” a call for change that’s upbeat and optimistic, without being heavy handed or preachy. “Ultimately, I want to touch people, and I want them to feel something,” says Day. “If I can get people to examine the present moment a little more closely – even if just for a couple minutes – and maybe step outside of their mindless routine, or pick up the phone and call someone they haven’t talked to in a while, I feel like I’ve done something worthwhile. An awareness of the present – for myself as much as for anyone listening to this record or experiencing one of my live performances – is something I really encourage. I don’t intend to tell people how to feel, or how to get to a certain place. It’s more a matter of inviting them to come along with me...It’s a one-way ticket. You don’t get to turn around. So make sure you’re paying attention and enjoying it.”