

It's been a 20-year slog from Washington DC to first CD for Nailah Porter. She's worth waiting for, says Robert Ryan

Jazz, by its very nature, is not a lunchtime activity. Whenever I see its musicians in daylight, I am reminded of a quote from the documentary *A Great Day in Harlem*, when a photographer from *Esquire* magazine describes trying to get the cream of New York's players to assemble for a morning photoshoot: "You gotta remember, most of these guys didn't even realise there were two 10 o'clocks in the day."

The unearthly hour notwithstanding, some of British jazz's finest are assembled in the basement of the Soho Pizza Express for a noon "showcase", the private gigs put on by record companies to increase the buzz surrounding a particular artist. Looking around the room, it isn't hard to tell that word is already out about Nailah Porter. I can see the DJ and tastemaker Gilles Peterson, the singer and pianist Ian Shaw and the trumpeter/arranger Guy Barker. These are people who have seen and heard countless female jazz singers, especially over the past post-Norah Jones and Diana Krall



'I'm like a deer in the headlights':
Nailah Porter

Long time comin'

decade (spawning the weary joke, "How many female jazz singers does it take to do Summertime? All of them, apparently"). There is something different about Porter, though, as we can hear the moment she hits her first notes and toys with the opening phrases of her song. She quickly establishes that the names carelessly dropped to describe her antecedents – Sarah Vaughan, Nina Simone, Cassandra Wilson – are not so wide of the mark, and that she has a story to tell. And it begins with Teflon-coated bullets.

Rewind 24 hours and we are sitting in the lobby of a west London hotel. Porter is wearing

a swirling, eye-catchingly vibrant dress, vertiginous heels, a new afro ("I just thought it rocked") and a smile that could light up the most crepuscular of clubs. She seems genuinely thrilled to be in town. Most jazz singers of her age – she is coy about what that age is, but she has two children, aged 8 and 11, back home with dad in Los Angeles – have been around the block a few times, playing every city and venue on the circuit. For Porter, this is all fresh.

"I'm like a deer in the headlights," she says, in a husky Southern drawl. "When I walked into the Blue Note in Japan for the first time last November, I just burst into tears. I couldn't believe I had finally made it over there, after all these years."

"All these years" is right. It has been a long, slow burn. Born in North Carolina to a church-going, music-loving family, she was the first of them to attend college, earning herself a law degree and eventually a position as a lawyer and lobbyist in Washington DC, in the 1980s. "It was the time of cop-killer bullets. The National Rifle Association was saying it spoke for law enforcement, yet it was against banning these Teflon rounds that could penetrate armoured vests. So groups such as the National Black Police Association said, 'The NRA does not speak for us,' and set up their own lobby. I worked for that."

Pounding the corridors of the Senate, Congress and the White House in the best Aaron Sorkin West Wing style, Porter worked on the hate-crimes bill, the Brady bill and the assault-weapons ban. And the singing? "Yup, at Christmas parties, weddings, birthdays... and in Washington clubs every night they would have me." Jazz at night,

lobbying by day – doesn't sound like too many hours spare. "No, I didn't sleep much. Coffee helped."

Eventually, though, burnout beckoned. "The endless deals and compromises you have to make exhausted me mentally. And there was something in here" – she puts a fist to her breastbone – "that still wasn't satisfied. I wanted to make music full-time. So, I packed up and moved to LA."

That meant a job in Lady Foot Locker, selling trainers, followed by administrative posts at Def Jam and Motown, and teaching property law at college. Porter continued to play small clubs and did studio sessions, backing vocals with a funk band and, while heavily pregnant, a tour with Beck Hansen. Then, 18 months ago, technology intervened. "I got this phone call saying that Gilles Peterson was tweeting about me. Now, I knew who Gilles was, I just didn't know about Twitter. But I opened an account and, sure enough, he'd heard a song of mine on MySpace and was being very complimentary."

I asked Peterson what made him pluck Porter from the thousands of vocals that clutter up cyberspace. "I heard a real sense of freedom and commitment and passion," he said. "There are lots of pretty young girls singing standards out there, and there's nothing wrong with that, but someone like Nailah comes along and you know she's the genuine article."

From Peterson's exposure came tours with the Italian composer and band leader Nicola Conte – and, at last, 16 years after arriving in LA, a self-penned album, *ConJazzNess*. "Say it fast and it sounds like 'consciousness'," she explains. I wrinkle my nose at this contrivance. "Corny, eh?" she laughs. "Yeah, it's corny. I don't care." I don't care much, either, because it is a fine album that melds not only jazz, but Southern soul, gospel, folk and down-home Bill Withers sentimentality. True, parts of it flirt with smooth jazz, but her voice has a refreshing rawness, which, along with her deft phrasing and some exhilarating instrumental moments, steers it well clear of that ghetto.

It's been a long time coming, but if the old trope about jazz singers having to pay their dues is true, Porter has money in the bank. As we part, I ask her about her name. "It's Arabic," she explains. "It means 'One who attains.'" Another, slightly rueful, grin. "It just doesn't say when that will be." Well, it looks like it's now. **B**

ConJazzNess is out on May 3 on Emarcy