

## Patrice Jégou Biography

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Remember the first time you heard Streisand or Renée Fleming, Celine Dion or Adele? Yes, the voice was arrestingly beautiful, but there was more: a distinctiveness that made that moment of discovery uniquely thrilling. Each is blessed with “that little something extra,” as James Mason so aptly described it to Judy Garland in “A Star Is Born,” that signifies true star quality.

Hit “play” on track one of *Speak Low*, the debut release from classically-trained mezzo-soprano Patrice Jégou, and you immediately feel that same effect; that ineffable *je ne sais quoi* that separates the great from the merely good. Across 15 wide-ranging tracks, spanning Broadway, Nashville and beyond, and blurring jazz, pop, classical, country and gospel, Jégou is assisted by an all-star assortment of musicians, including Take 6, gospel superstar Andrae Crouch, saxophonist Kirk Whalum, bassists Victor Wooten and David Finck, drummer Shawn Pelton, and guitarist Paul Jackson Jr., with production credits that include Take 6’s Mark Kibble and the Manhattan Transfer’s Cheryl Bentyne.

The story of Jégou’s serpentine career path, including the evolution of *Speak Low*, is as compelling as the album itself. Born in the Newfoundland capital of St. John’s but raised on the opposite side of Canada, in Red Deer, Alberta (the province’s third biggest metropolis, a prosperous oil-and-cattle town located equidistant between Calgary and Edmonton), Jégou grew up in a house filled with music—her mother was an amateur guitarist, keyboardist and vocalist. At her mother’s insistence, she begrudgingly took piano lessons, but was much more interested in sports. A natural athlete, she excelled at baseball, volleyball and particularly ice skating.

Eager to expand her horizons beyond Red Deer, Jégou began skating professionally, coaching in New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, and touring Mexico with an ice show. But at age 23 she decided to hang up her skates. The show she was appearing in had reached Monterrey, and there was a cast change. Among the newcomers was a fellow from Vancouver with an impressive background in musical theater. One day, while the cast was fooling around during intermission, singing various tunes, he took special note of Jégou’s voice and urged her to take singing lessons.

Intrigued, Jégou returned to Red Deer and sought out a prominent local voice teacher—a nun originally from Jamaica—and also enrolled at Red Deer College, where she joined the jazz choir. From there, she progressed to the music program at the University of Calgary. Two years into her studies, she decided to try out for a soloist role in Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*, being presented by the Calgary Philharmonic under the direction of Maestro Hans Graf. Midway through her audition, Graf stood up, dashed down the aisle, ran up on stage and said, ‘You’re so good! Sing it again,’ and began coaching her on the spot.

A short while later, her voice teacher at U of C, who had studied with the celebrated pedagogue Richard Miller, urged her to continue her education in the U.S. So, Jégou found herself in Nashville, studying with Miller protégé Shirley Zelinski at Belmont University, acquiring her Masters in classical voice and ultimately teaching there. Though eager to remain stateside, an application to extend her work visa was rejected and Jégou found herself back in

Alberta, teaching at the University of Lethbridge. While she loved academia and savored working one-on-one with gifted music students, she hungered to do her doctorate. An internship through NATS (the National Association of Teachers of Singing) at upstate New York's SUNY Fredonia led to an opportunity to work with master teacher Judith Nicosia at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where Jégou completed her doctoral studies in 2011.

In the summer of 2005, prior to relocating to New Jersey, Jégou entered and won a prestigious international singing competition in Peru. Part of the prize was a concert presented by ILAMS (the Iberian Latin American Music Society) in the UK. The repertoire for the recital included Shostakovich, Brazilian tunes by Ernani Braga, Argentinian folk songs by Ginastera, and black folk songs by Montsalvatge. The following year, a Rutgers classmate, Spanish multi-instrumentalist Cristina Pato ([www.cristinapato.com](http://www.cristinapato.com))-who makes a most unusual guest appearance on *Speak Low* – invited Jégou to join her in recording that same eclectic repertoire.

Settled in New Jersey, now studying for her doctorate at Rutgers University, she met and married Yinka Oyelese, an accomplished physician, whose own musical background includes membership in an immensely popular a cappella vocal group in his native Nigeria. The spark for what would eventually become *Speak Low*, executive produced by Oyelese, was ignited not long after their wedding, when, in 2008, Jégou returned to the Peru competition to serve as an adjudicator. While there, she was asked to give a master class and a recital. Working alongside a Costa Rican pianist, she remembers singing “a Schubert set, a Debussy set and a Swedish song. But I thought I should also include something a little more popular, so I prepared ‘Till There Was You’ from *The Music Man*, and did it as an encore. Well, the audience applause was so enthusiastic that the pianist leaned over and whispered to me, ‘Do you have another song?’ I whispered back, ‘no,’ and he said, ‘well you’ll have to sing it again,’ which I did!”

A short while later, a retirement party was being planned for Jégou and Oyelese’s church minister and she was asked to sing. Again she chose “Till There Was You,” and again the reaction was extraordinary. “People were cheering and crying and were so excited by the song,” she recalls, “that Yinka turned to me and said, ‘you know, honey, I think you should record a non-classical album.’” Jégou proposed a living-room session using Apple’s GarageBand as the recording software. Fortunately, Oyelese had a much grander vision.

Inspired by Charlie Haden and Hank Jones’ *Come Sunday* and Kathleen Battle’s exquisite work with pianist Cyrus Chestnut, they briefly considered doing an entire disc of spirituals, but nixed the idea, since Patrice felt that an album of spirituals by a white Canadian may not do well. About the same time, jazz pianist Ted Labow, originally from Toronto, whom Jégou had previously met while preparing her doctoral dissertation on the music of Jewish-Canadian composer Irving Glick, entered the picture.

Patrice and Yinka decided to do a very simple, voice-and-piano album, with Labow on the piano, laying down five tracks at the famed Avatar Studios in NY: “Till There Was You”, the traditional Irish folk song “Down by the Salley Gardens,” Michel Legrand and Alan and Marilyn Bergman’s “The Summer Knows,” , the jazz standard “Lullaby of the Leaves” and the Patsy Cline classic “Walkin’ After Midnight.”

Around the same time, Jégou had developed a habit of casually singing “This Little Light of Mine” around the house. Oyelese decided to capture it, with just Labow and guitarist Thomas Guarnieri Jr. But the understated result, clocking in at two-and-a-half minutes, wasn’t powerful enough. It would steadily grow, with new layers continuously added, ultimately expanding to a five-and-a-half minute showstopper.

Meanwhile, Oyelese thought some of the Labow tracks needed strings. So, never shy about seeking out the best help possible, he contacted the renowned Nashville String Machine. Off to Nashville he and Jégou headed, to work with string arranger and conductor Conni Ellisor to sweeten “Till There Was You,” “Down by the Salley Gardens” (with a bagpipe solo by Pato subsequently added), “The Summer Knows” and also record four new tracks with full orchestra: a second Legrand song, “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life,” “Speak Low,” an alternate orchestral version of “The Summer Knows” and “What a Difference a Day Made,” which, nodding to the song’s bolero origins, Jégou sings in both English and Spanish. Labow also contributed his talent in arranging the strings for “Lullaby of the Leaves,” and the Nicaraguan folk song “Niño precioso”.

While in Nashville, Oyelese decided it couldn’t hurt to round up some top local players and add horns—trombone and trumpets—to “This Little Light of Mine”. Still, the track wasn’t quite grand enough. So, he recalls, “I said to Patrice that the greatest gospel choir on earth are the Andraé Crouch Singers, who did Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror”, so let’s see if we can get Crouch to add vocal backing. I wrote to him, his manager wrote back asking for a demo of Patrice’s voice, and then Andraé said he’d be happy to do it.” Ah, but the tinkering still wasn’t complete. Yinka felt “This Little Light” needed an instrumental solo, so he asked Grammy winning saxophonist Kirk Whalum to make a guest appearance. Whalum, in turn, delivered a blistering saxophone solo.

At this point, says Oyelese, “we were 90 percent of the way there, but it still wasn’t good enough and we didn’t want to compromise in any way.” Calling in another favor, he contacted his pal Mark Kibble from Take 6 and asked him to arrange Irving Berlin’s “I’ve Got the Sun in the Morning” from Annie Get Your Gun. Though Kibble wasn’t familiar with the song, he shaped a dazzling rendition, featuring the entire Take 6 crew. Nor did he stop there. “Yinka is a good friend,” he says, “and given Patrice’s background in classical music, I thought [the project] would be a nice marriage of her classical training and the jazz direction she wanted to go in. I like things that are slightly out of the norm and present a challenge, and I thought I might be able to bring something interesting to the table.”

He thought right. Kibble also arranged and, with brother Joey, sings on “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree,” a tune he’d first learned from an old Bugs Bunny cartoon. “The song is so simple,” he says, “that the challenge is ‘where can you take this?’ I knew we could blow it out and it would be a killer, and Patrice just wore it out. I was amazed by what she was pulling off in the studio!” Kibble then added vocal accompaniment to “Lullaby of the Leaves.” But his crowning achievement is the finishing touches he added to “This Little Light,” transforming it into a marvelous party. “Well,” he laughs, “I was a little late to that party. It was the biggest challenge because of the way it had grown. We had to put our thing in after it had already become pretty big; [but] we rose to the occasion. It was just a matter of bringing out its true essence as a gospel song. This was a whole new ball of wax for Patrice, so we had to dig deep for the gospel roots. It became tremendous fun.”

“But,” says Oyelese, “the story gets even more complicated.” Jégou decided to enter the inaugural Sarah Vaughan Vocal Jazz Competition. For her demo she recorded “From This Moment On” and “Every Day I Have the Blues.” Though she did not reach the contest’s final rounds (despite having received the second highest tally from the voting public in the preliminary round), she and Oyelese agreed that both songs belonged on the album. So back to Nashville they flew, re-recording the two tunes, the first with a hard-swinging big band arrangement by renowned Nashville arranger Chris McDonald, featuring trombonist Conrad Herwig and guitarist Vic Juris, and the second with pianist Pat Coil (from Jégou’s first Nashville session), noted for his work with Michael McDonald, Carmen McRae and Olivia Newton-John.

At last the album was complete, though there is one additional chapter. Prior to the final Nashville date, Oyelese had suggested to Jégou that she get some guidance from a non-classical coach. “I didn’t have any contacts in the popular music world,” Jégou confesses, “but Yinka and I are big, big fans of the Manhattan Transfer. So we contacted Cheryl Bentyne and sent her a demo. She was willing to teach me, so Yinka arranged a mini-workshop with Cheryl in L.A. I’m telling you, she really helped me; so much so, that, at her suggestion, we re-recorded the lead vocals for “I Got the Sun In the Morning,” “Lullaby of the Leaves” and “Walkin’ After Midnight” with her engineer, Tom McCauley.

Prior to the final mastering, Jégou and Oyelese agreed it was paramount they keep total control over the music. “I’d started my own label [Prairie Star Records] a year ago,” says Jégou, “so we’ll keep it as a husband-and-wife DIY project and release it on my label.” Ideally, though, they hope to partner with a larger label, for assistance with marketing, promotion and distribution. “It has,” says Oyelese, “been an incredible adventure. It wasn’t done from the viewpoint of making money, but to perform music that Patrice and I love and want to share. It is truly a labor of love.”