

## The 'Loving Defiance' of Vocalist Lizz Wright

INTERVIEW, NEWS, FROM THE MAGAZINE, LIZZ WRIGHT

By Aaron Cohen | Dec. 4, 2018

Vocalist Lizz Wright has much to be proud of, including her latest accolade: Her latest release, *Grace* (Concord), topped the Beyond Album category in this year's Readers Poll. But Wright is not one to call undue attention to herself. She talks in the same way that she sings—with an engaging openness and warmth. Rather than brag about her musical chops, though, she likes to show off her skills as a gardener.

Wright's fruits and vegetables thrive in small plots near the outdoor tables of the Carver 47 Cafe, part of the Little Black Pearl Art & Design Academy in the Kenwood neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. She moved to the city in 2017 to serve on the board of the institution, which offers arts education and technical training courses. Wright plans the menu at the cafe with the same consideration she gives to her performances.

"When I started falling in love with Chicago and the community here, I said I could not be anywhere without a garden," recalled Wright, a Georgia native. "I also needed to be on the receiving side of music, trying to hold a space where I interact with strangers who don't know me, because I don't carry myself in 'Lizz mode' here. And to think about the music in the space I share with them, where they don't know me, don't care, they just want to be served and to feel something that makes their day here. It's helped me think about what I want to do going forward."

Wright is conscious of the history of African-American migrants bringing Southern traditions to Chicago. Such sounds illuminate *Grace*, whether through the vocal techniques she absorbed from singing gospel in her father's church or her dreamlike interpretation of "Stars Fell On Alabama." The album was informed by her response to the 2016 presidential election and how, despite political divisions, she remained close to her neighbors in North Carolina, where she previously was based. On "All The Way Here," which she composed with Maia Sharp, Wright quietly but strongly affirms her place in contemporary America.

"I have my own sense of belonging—no political tide will rewrite that for me. So, I wanted to sing from that place," Wright said. "It's a great time to have your banners and flags going for whatever you stand for. You can also make statements, even of revolt with great affection, even a loving defiance. It's what *Grace* is about."

Deep connections provided another foundation for *Grace*. Wright's longtime friendship with producer Joe Henry has revolved around numerous conversations about music and history, many of which influenced the album. She attributed her 20 years of working alongside pianist and choir leader Kenny Banks Sr. for the way her voice engaged with his organ lines. And she has collaborated with guitarist Chris Bruce since recording 2005's *Dreaming Wide Awake* (Verve). Along with admiring Wright's vocal timbre and rhythmic command, Bruce praised the way she transformed Allen Toussaint's "Southern Nights."

"The original [version] motors along quite a bit, and Lizz was feeling more of that cut-time groove and started humming that beat to the drummer," Bruce said. "We all had to adjust to that, but it was cool. It opened all this space for the guitars in an unusual way. She gave more room to a lot of colors and made it more hypnotic."

Since relocating to Chicago, Wright has listened to some of her older recordings—an experience that triggered thoughts of how accomplishments should fuel new directions.

"You want to be humble and you want to be unmet in a way, so you stay thirsty," Wright said. "That's what I've been creating with this [arts education] experience—that I finally heard myself as a listener who didn't own that voice. I was grateful for where I've gone and what I've experienced, but then it's, 'OK, I've got to go back to work.'" **DB**