



Photo by Shawn Michael Jones

# Cécile McLorin Salvant

Thu, Jan 26, 2023 at 8 pm  
Royce Hall

**CENTER  
FOR THE ART OF  
PERFORMANCE  
UCLA**

# Welcome

## TO THE 2022-23 SEASON

UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance (CAP UCLA) is dedicated to the advancement of the contemporary performing arts in all disciplines — dance, music, spoken word and theater, as well as emerging digital, collaborative and cross cultural platforms — by leading artists from around the globe.

Our mission aligns with UCLA's mission of education, research and civic engagement by providing cultural and experiential programs that provoke inquiry and facilitate connection and creativity.

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Photo by Shawn Michael Jones

CAP UCLA Presents

# Cécile McLorin Salvant

Thu, Jan 26, 2023 at 8 pm  
Royce Hall

Program duration: 75 minutes  
No intermission

Cécile McLorin Salvant – Vocals  
Sullivan Fortner – Piano  
Marvin Sewell – Guitars  
Alexa Tarantino – Flutes  
Keita Ogawa – Percussion

Funds provided by the Ginny Mancini Endowment for Vocal Performance.



UCLA



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## Cécile McLorin Salvant

Cécile McLorin Salvant, a 2020 MacArthur Fellow and three-time Grammy Award winner, is a singer and composer bringing historical perspective, a renewed sense of drama, and an enlightened musical understanding to both jazz standards and her own original compositions. Classically trained, steeped in jazz, blues, and folk, and drawing from musical theater and vaudeville, Salvant embraces a wide-ranging repertoire that broadens the possibilities for live performance.

Salvant's performances range from spare duets for voice and piano to instrumental trios to orchestral ensembles. Her unreleased work *Ogresse* is an ambitious long-form song cycle based on oral fairy tales from the nineteenth century that explores the nature of freedom and desire in a racialized, patriarchal world. Salvant studied at the Université Pierre Mendès-France. She has performed at national and international venues and festivals such as the Newport Jazz Festival, the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Village Vanguard, and the Kennedy Center. Salvant is also a visual artist.

### About *Ghost Song*

The ghosts playing the lead roles in Cécile McLorin Salvant's rhapsodic *Ghost Song* are not the Hollywood kind. They're closer temperamentally to the fleeting, elusive presences Emily Dickenson famously celebrated in verse:

*One need not be a chamber to be haunted.*

*One need not be a house.*

*The brain has corridors surpassing material place.*

*Ghost Song*, Salvant's Nonesuch debut, explores the (many) ways people can be haunted — by lingering memories, roads not taken, ghosts real and imagined. Its intense, disquietingly evocative songs follow living souls as they confront torments of absence — some characters lament loved ones gone too soon, others are troubled by the remnants of vanished romance, others are paralyzed by the sense of time galloping past.

It is a breathtaking, fully realized conceptual work from an artist whose trajectory has moved at warp speed. Born in Miami, Florida in 1989, Salvant studied piano beginning at age five, sang in a children's choir at eight, and then began classical voice lessons. She pursued dual tracks as an undergraduate in France (her mother is French, her father Haitian) — studying French law at one university while attending the Darius Milhaud Conservatory studying baroque music and jazz. Though at the time she didn't intend to sing professionally, she entered the Thelonious Monk competition in 2010 and won it.

That led to a string of five acclaimed releases, each one more daring than the previous. Yet nothing Salvant has done can quite prepare listeners for the visceral intensity, concise yet prismatic writing, and genre-obliterating

atmospheres of *Ghost Song*. The work draws on the tools this vocalist, composer, multiple Grammy winner, and MacArthur Fellow has utilized in the past, but in new and harrowing ways. It is, in the least glib sense possible, the rare departure that is also an arrival.

*Ghost Song* situates Salvant's image-rich originals alongside radical reimaginings of songs by Kate Bush, Gregory Porter, Sting, Harold Arlen, and Kurt Weill. Each of the pieces describes a different type of engagement with unquiet spirits, and each dwells within a detailed, highly specific musical atmosphere. The stylistic range is astonishing: Brooding minor-key torch songs sit next to argumentative Sondheim-style music theater dialogues sit next to ancient folk melodies sit next to invitingly spacious (and harmonically complex) jazz meditations.

Salvant conceived *Ghost Song* during the early period of the pandemic and recorded it in the necessarily patchwork way creative projects happened under lockdown. Doing the work was, she recalls, at once frustrating and therapeutic. But it didn't prepare her for the challenge she faced when tracking was finished: Figuring out the best way to raise the curtain on a song cycle devoted to ghosting, the emotional needs of ghost presences, and the very nature of communication with spirits.

One logical choice was a song called "I Lost My Mind" — an incantation in Salvant's detached robotic voice, with tense vocoder-style interior harmonies enhanced by Aaron Diehl's careful voicings on pipe organ.

Salvant liked the full-disclosure honesty of it. "Starting off that way is basically saying 'Hey, I know this is different.' Because once you say, 'I've lost my mind,' it sort of allows you to do whatever. After that, there can be no expectations for what it's going to be."

The song immortalizes a tipping point lockdown moment. Salvant recalls being in her Brooklyn apartment, walking and pacing, at times simply trying to understand her emotional state. "It was one of those nights when I just wanted to scream but could not figure out why. Am I anxious? Or excited? Am I just feeling cooped up? I didn't even know what the scream was for anymore... Eventually I felt it was OK to just go with the completely crazy thing and not worry if people think you have lost your mind for doing it."

As tempting as "I Lost My Mind" was to consider as an opener, Salvant intended for *Ghost Song* to start with just her voice — a lone presence, shrouded within the natural reverb of a church, gently leading listeners into the album's spirit realm. She drew up a list of songs to try, including "Wuthering Heights" from Kate Bush's debut *The Kick Inside*, and set up a session at St. Malachy's church in New York. It was an afternoon in January, and a snowstorm was approaching. She remembers keeping her coat on the whole time. "I might have been wearing gloves," she adds.

"There's something so, so comforting and uplifting singing in that vast space and feeling that support from the space. It just feels like this is where we're

meant to sing ... You hear the stones bounce your sound back to you. It's these ancient things we connect with."

She began "Wuthering Heights" as a fantasia in the heavily embellished style of Irish sean nós a cappella singing; as the song unfolded in the vast space, she gradually incorporated the shapes of Bush's celestial melody. Salvant somewhat reversed that process for the folk standard "Unquiet Grave," returning to sean nos improvisation as she went along. The result: The two tracks became natural bookends.

"To me there is no track one," Salvant says, laughing. "I wanted the album to be a circle. [But] we do need a track one in life ... I just wanted those two songs to bind it together. So it is the first track but it's also the last track and it's also the middle track. Which sort of goes to how I listen to music — oftentimes on repeat. I'm walking around my neighborhood, I'm on a plane traveling somewhere; when I start, I'm putting stuff on repeat — and that means it's eventually a circle. For me this album is a repeat album."

There are other design elements governing the *Ghost Song* sequence. The album opens and closes with solo voice and then moves, stepwise, into pieces that gradually increase in terms of density and tension, requiring more elaborate instrumentation. "I Lost My Mind," which is track six, serves as the "hinge" of sorts; the songs that follow it on the album's second half mirror the band configurations on the first. Among the featured talents are pianist Diehl and Sullivan Fortner, both longtime Salvant collaborators; Fortner also helped produce the album and wrote many of the arrangements.

Even the themes follow that structure, Salvant says. "The songs are in relationship to each other. In some ways they match each other, they're like twins. Or like fraternal twins, or one is the evil twin of the other." In a broad way, she says, the start of the album looks at how "I, as the living, am visited by the ghost." In the second half, the roles are sometimes reversed. "And then I, in turn, go visit the ghost... I am haunting the ghost and annoying the ghost, which is saying, 'Get out of here and go live.'"

The album is a departure for Salvant in nearly every way. It's nothing like the jazz-and-standards repertoire of her last three albums — *The Window*, *Dreams and Daggers* and *For One to Love*, each of them recognized with Grammy Awards for Best Jazz Vocal Album. Two are double albums; the forty-six-minute *Ghost Song* fits on a single vinyl record. Salvant says that was intentional.

"I was in the mood for something short, because I wanted to make something that mirrored how I listen. My attention span has gone to hell, like everyone's I'm sure, because of these phones ... And I think about that a lot. [During lockdown], like many people, I reflected on what I do, and I realized that when I'm singing there will be a little bit of my energy going to "Is this boring? Everyone's bored, right?" Noticing that made me realize about the speed at which things have evolved, how maybe we have lost that privilege to be bored — now people take their phones into the shower.

The phone is waterproof, right, you can literally be scrolling and never be bored and always be anxious. And at the same time, we have more people meditating, slowing down. I think that this is a good sign, this desire to be a bit more settled. Sitting down and listening to music becomes almost a meditative activity. Sometimes you drift off, and sometimes you're bored. But what a gift, to be bored... So now when I see people wriggling in their seat I think, 'What a gift, that they have that moment.' If you're bored, you're welcome. I'm giving you a gift."

Salvant traces the origins of *Ghost Song* to her previous project, the longform *Ogresse*, a fable in the form of a cantata that required her to sing all the characters. She wrote the story, lyrics, and music, and collaborated with Darcy James Argue on arrangements for a thirteen-piece orchestra. The work is being developed into an animated feature-length film.

"That was completely my initiative to make. Beforehand, I had always followed the lead of whatever label I was with, asking for a new recording. This was a commission project, but, actually, I shopped for commissioners once it was already written... that was the start of me being more active and less passive in the process of making music. [And that] carries over to *Ghost Song*. I think it came directly from the confidence that making *Ogresse* gave me."

The nature of *Ghost Song* — its thematic unity, its carefully rendered scenes — has prompted Salvant to rethink the way she performs as well. In the past, she's called tunes in the moment, based on the mood of the audience or the energy on stage. This project almost demands a different approach.

"Now I am curious to think about the process of touring an album. I have to confess, sticking with the same set every night makes me a little nervous... It feels like going from wearing different clothes every day to wearing a uniform. So there's something freeing about it, because you don't have to decide... I wonder what it'd be like if I did do the same set every night for a cycle. Will I go crazy? Will I get stuck? I'm very curious about that. Because I also feel like repetition is incredible. It's fundamental to this music, it's fundamental to the African diaspora. It leads to incredible discoveries."

As Salvant talks about *Ghost Song*, several times she describes the individual spirits (can they maybe even be called "characters"?) with affection, as though the process of writing these songs brought her close to them, enhanced her appreciation for the spirit world. She came to intuit which ones needed her solemn tone, which were angsty, and which were simply restless.

Her vocal performances — which cover the full dynamic range from whisper to scream — catch and then delicately magnify those distinctions, giving the apparitions dimension, showing something other than the demon side.

But when asked if she believes in ghosts, Salvant becomes conflicted. "I'm pretty much a skeptic. I was about to say I don't believe in ghosts, because I'm a materialist — I need to see it. But then again, I'm completely in love with stories, I delve into stories so easily. So, I guess then I love ghosts."



SAT, FEB 4 & SUN, FEB 5  
SAT, FEB 11 & SUN, FEB 12

## 600 Highwaymen

Royce Hall

Obie Award-winning experimental theater duo 600 Highwaymen present *A Thousand Ways (Part Three): An Assembly*, a timely and intimate return to togetherness. This interactive theatrical experience invites an audience of 16 participants to create a private performance from a shared script. Blurring the lines between spectator and participant, *An Assembly* explores how the most intimate gathering can become a profoundly radical encounter.

“Simple but sublime . . . the show alerts us to the awesome strangeness, and the utter ordinariness, too, of being alive in the here and now.” — *The New York Times*

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Each year, Design for Sharing (DFS) brings thousands of K-12 public school students from across Los Angeles to CAP UCLA venues for free performances and interactive workshops with professional artists.



DFS programs are open to any public school in greater Los Angeles, and are always free to attend.

A black circular logo with the text "CAP UCLA" in white, bold, sans-serif font. The logo is positioned in the middle right of the page, overlapping the background image.

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# UCLA Nimoy Theater

CAP UCLA is building a new home for live performance in Westwood!

Located near the UCLA campus on Westwood Boulevard, The Nimoy is a reimagining of the historic Crest Theatre as a flexible, state-of-the-art performance space.

This dynamic and intimately scaled venue will immerse audiences in a profoundly engaging experience of live performance — while providing contemporary performing artists from Los Angeles and around the world expanded opportunities to develop and present new work.



**Opening fall 2023**

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We **STAND AGAINST** all forms of discrimination.

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As part of UCLA's School of Art & Architecture (SOAA), we — UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance (CAP UCLA) and Theater Management Services (TMS) — are committed to connecting and creating space for the arts and for all communities.

We acknowledge our organizations' histories as being predominantly white institutions. We are facing uncomfortable truths about systemic racism as we work to make the deep changes necessary to transform the organizational dynamics in our work culture and business practices and dismantle existing oppressive structures. We know there will be shortcomings, which we will face head on. We commit to continually addressing and adapting to changes as they arise. It is only in an improved, supportive work environment that everyone can be fully present, and respected as their true authentic selves.

*This statement was drafted by a committee of staff members from both the Center for the Art of Performance and Theater Management Services, from a variety of backgrounds, viewpoints, and perspectives.*

Together we stand with UCLA's School of Art and Architecture's EDI statement.



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The Executive Producer Council is CAP UCLA's philanthropic leadership group, which develops and contributes resources vital to CAP UCLA's programming and mission. The Council champions the creative development and presentation of live programs and public dialogue with contemporary performing artists by providing direct support for CAP UCLA's annual programming. The Council is engaged in dialogue about the artistic and curatorial practices that inform annual programs, long-term initiatives and collaborative planning efforts which stand at the heart of CAP UCLA's mission and public purpose.

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## GENERAL QUESTIONS

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As we continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, CAP UCLA would like to acknowledge the critical support we received from a **Shuttered Venue Operators Grant**. This historic initiative — part of the American Rescue Fund Act passed by Congress in March 2021 — represents a significant commitment to the arts and a recognition of the value of the arts and culture sector to the nation's economy and recovery. We would especially like to thank members of Congress who supported the inclusion of university-based performing arts centers and helped make this vital funding possible.

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