

CULTURE

Musician Eska Mtungwazi overcame self-doubt and stereotyping to launch her solo career, and the result is an astonishing range of styles that won her debut album a Mercury music prize nomination. By Jane Cornwell.

singer, deploying that glorious falsetto on other people's projects. Grace Jones, Bobby McFerrin, Nitin Sawhney, Zero 7 – despite having graced more than 200 records, Eska always eschewed the central spotlight. Side-women tend to stick to their comfort zones, even those with better voices than the star.

But the reasons behind Eska's late professional blooming are more complicated than sticking to what you know. There was her reluctance to be categorised, in an industry where categorisation is the norm. She is not exclusively a soul singer, a jazz diva or a folk artist. She is all those things and more. Then there was her age, and her colour and size. For a long time she bought clothes several sizes too small, promising herself she'd get out there once she could fit into them.

"In all honesty I struggled because I just didn't think I looked like an artist," she says, sitting on a couch at RAK Music, a recording studio and music management company in North London, surrounded by walls plastered in platinum records. "This industry is so visually driven. Growing up I would never imagine myself as a solo performer. I knew I had musical aptitude but I just thought, 'No one's looking for me.'"

The middle of three children born to Zimbabwean immigrants, a teacher and a nurse, who'd come to Britain planning to better their degrees and return to nab the top jobs back home – "but they stayed and stayed, the classic story, and have retired here" – Eska was immersed in eclecticism from the get-go. Each Sunday in Lewisham, south-east London, after the family got home from church, her father would flick through his vast vinyl collection: Quincy Jones, Madonna, American jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal, Scottish rockers Wet Wet Wet.

"He'd turn the sound down on TV and give us the record sleeves and liner notes to read," she says. "We'd be grumpy at missing out on whatever we were watching but we'd always come around. There was a soundtrack for Duke Ellington's Sacred Concerts at Westminster Abbey with singers such as Tony Bennett. At 10 years old I'd be sitting there thinking, 'Wow, Westminster Abbey. Whoever this Ellington guy is, he must be good.'"

Being taught to listen to music changed her life. "Music is a discrete exercise. As a pastime, listening doesn't happen in the same way in the 21st century, where music comes in short bursts and with videos. I've been training young people to just sit and listen, nothing else." She flashes a smile. "It's so hard for them. You see their eyes going everywhere until finally they're in the zone."

Her early loves included soundtracks for *Star Wars*, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. The first record she bought was *Song of Joy* by Captain and Tennille. Later came Kate Bush, Captain Beefheart and vocal groups such as The Free Design. She was already reading music and playing the recorder when her father brought home a piano. He showed her middle C and she was off, writing love songs about break-ups she'd never had and fancying herself as a female version of Bruno Martelli, the introverted musical genius from *Fame*.

"That was my role at school," she says of Prendergast girls' school in Lewisham. "People would say, 'Can you write a song for me?' Then I'd get to play them at assembly."

She took lessons in violin and cello, and won an extracurricular scholarship to study opera at a conservatorium up the road. Then came madrigals, and leading a church choir that sang hymns she'd written. "Always such a joy," she says. "I loved it." She played in an orchestra, jammed in a band, performed supporting roles in her school's twice-yearly musical theatre shows.

"But I was never the star. I'd always be told, 'You're fantastic but you don't look the part.' Feeling like you're not the right size or shade gets to you."

The only black girl in her year – "There were five Africans out of 600 pupils in the entire school" – Eska struggled with her identity. Out and about in South London, she was generally assumed to be British-Caribbean, a second-generation descendent of the West Indians who'd come over on the HMT *Empire Windrush* in 1948 and settled in the area. The fact that she couldn't understand patois confused everybody.

"People always forgot the big migration that came later from West Africa," she says. "But southern Africans, forget it – I didn't meet another Zimbabwean until I was 21. Zimbabwe for me had five people in it, at home. I grew up surrounded by white working-class culture and Jamaican working-class culture which, if you're black and live in London, you have to take on."

"So all this plus the eclecticism of my dad's record collection and the eclectic musical education I had at school made me feel it was okay to be other. Music made me feel I could call on anything."

She still had to fight her way out of a corner. People assumed she was a soul singer because of the way she looked. But if Eska felt an affinity towards any musical genre it was folk music, with its inclusive and outward-looking live scene, and the music of the church – most

memorably a Pentecostal church where, in a single experience at the age of 15, she was privy to 350 people arpeggiating their voices as they spoke in tongues.

"Everyone there – black, white, Asian, mixed – was on the same page musically and spiritually. I thought, 'I need what they've got.' That encounter had a huge impact on me in terms of my approach to writing and performing music and that need to connect," she says. "For me it's always about finding something that resonates higher than our personal issues. It's about trying to get to that place where we have a better understanding of ourselves in the world."

If you have to call Eska anything, call her an experimental artist, a seeker. Eight years ago, after twiggling that each time she vowed to go solo she would sabotage her efforts, she quit being a voice for hire and went on a 40-day reflective retreat. It wasn't that she doubted her abilities; she knew how good she was. She just didn't feel worthy.

"On the road I was always one of the boys," she says. "So I had to understand and enjoy the power I have in my femininity, to embrace my sense of womanhood and take time to enjoy how I look, to love what I wear. To write songs that captured the joy of living."

Then she asked herself where home was, and had a cultural epiphany. Born in Bulawayo, and with extended family across rural and metropolitan Zimbabwe, Eska has only visited her birthplace a handful of times, the latest being eight years ago. "I thought, 'Okay, I'm a Londoner.' African blood but with an English heartbeat." She pulls a face. "I was like, 'Can I say that?'"

She could, and she did. In 2012 she staged an operetta titled *English Skies* at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, using the 80-voice choir she directed at Goldsmiths college and Joseph Campbell's mythic song cycle *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to connect the surtitled lyrics of 16 of her own songs. "It became my own heroine's journey under an English sky," she says, "encountering gatekeepers, slaying demons, going through thresholds."

The album was nearly ready to be born when, in the summer of 2014, Eska gave birth to a daughter, Wonder, after a brief and difficult pregnancy, and that after believing herself infertile. For three months she sat by her prematurely born daughter's bedside, willing her to live. As quests go, it was her toughest and most severe. "I was doing 12-hour shifts," she says, "singing and reading to her and being a milk machine."

In the background, Wonder toddles in and out of sight, a sparkly eyed 15-month-old. "She's a miracle." Another smile. "She's my sonnet."

Eska's music, you feel, has reached even greater heights as a result. The day she got the call telling her she'd been nominated for the Mercury Prize, she changed Wonder's nappy to celebrate. There have been other, smaller victories: last October she performed during a Paris Fashion Week show for American designer Rick Owens, appearing in a clear Perspex box raised above the runway, on which models were carried by dancers.

"I had a mini meltdown at the fitting house," says Eska. "All those old insecurities about me not being the right size and look reared up. But I got over that really quickly. Rick is such a warm, gentle soul and his clothes are all about feminine strength. You could go to war in Rick's clothes."

Owens, it turns out, was in the audience at the New Morning, cheering on this woman with her acrobatic voice and astounding multi-instrumentalism, her joyous songs with their layers of meaning.

Two encores and she's offstage to meet the fans who are crowding around the merchandise table. She's posing for photos, signing copies of her record, thanking people for coming.

And for a beat or two, just standing there, triumphant. ●

A Monday night in the 10th arrondissement, and the queue outside the New Morning club stretches right along the street. The singer and musician we're lining up to see is pictured on posters, looking stately and Afro-futuristic in the cover shot from her eponymous debut album, *ESKA*. Doors open, we rush for seats and wait.

It's Eska's first solo gig in Paris. Later, when we meet in London, where the Zimbabwean-born artist has lived since the age of two, she'll confess that she didn't think anyone was going to turn up. She'd gone through her phone and rung every contact she had in the French capital, pleading with them to come. But on the strength of her remarkable debut, which was nominated for Britain's 2015 Mercury music prize and dubbed "a mind-bending gem" by *The Observer* newspaper, people came. A lot of people.

"It's a wonderful and scary feeling to be a complete unknown again," the 45-year-old told me later, on the eve of her first Australian performances at WOMADelaide. "But you know, wherever I go, there's something about live music that connects."

Having crept incognito into the dressing-room, a small round figure carrying a tote bag, her face half hidden by a hoodie, Eska bursts onto the stage wearing a red maxi dress and a gold headdress, imperious and larger than life. Backed by a quartet on guitars, laptop and harmonica, she embarks on an introductory jam that flits between genres before segueing into "Heroes & Villains", a roots-reggae track that fires up the room.

Her voice swoops and soars through songs with unconventional tempos and lyrics drawn from classic mythology and Bible stories, telling of quests and gatekeepers, slayed demons and perfumed goddesses. She plays a mini-orchestra's worth of instruments: violin, glockenspiel, acoustic guitar. There is a grand piano for a cover of Devo's reworked "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and a Venezuelan bass cuatro ukulele for "She's in the Flowers", her psych-folk take on Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.

Mid-set, braids flying around her head, she bashes a tambourine while her band funks out then steps aside to let the extraordinary Philip Achille – a Royal College of Music graduate – deliver a scorching harmonica solo. "Yeah," she yells, punching the air with the rest of us, before getting back to her big-hearted songs that pulse with elements of jazz, soul, folk, rock, gospel and electronica. Songs that sound like no one but Eska Mtungwazi.

It's easy to see why Eska is often billed as the greatest singer you've never heard of. An erstwhile music and maths teacher with a degree from the London School of Economics, for decades she's been a backing



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