

By their very nature, the best moments in jazz are usually fleeting, and often go unrecorded. Sometimes, however, a performance leaves a trace in the air, like the hiss of static after the big bang. Last July, those with the right antennae could pick up the echo from Gregory Porter's British debut, in Soho. The buzz was about his finale, an a cappella version of *Mona Lisa*, when the only noise from the audience was the big man's unaccompanied baritone filled the room. Porter laughs when I remind him of this, then reveals that the moment was more pragmatic than planned: "We'd had a great night, it was the second encore and the band was a little slow getting back to the stage. So I thought, why not go ahead without them?"

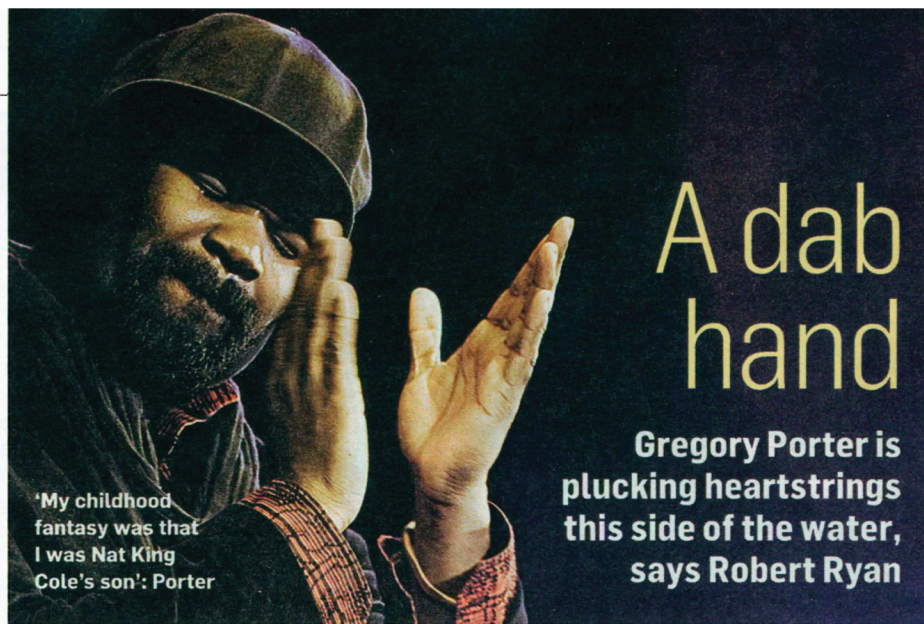
The choice of Nat King Cole's lachrymose *Mona Lisa* might be surprising for a rising jazz star such as Porter, but Cole's phrasing and timbre are all over the title track of Porter's Grammy-nominated album, *Water*. Is it true that he once thought he was Cole's long-lost son? "Kind of. I grew up in Bakersfield, California, with an absent father.

I used to sing a lot as a child, especially in church, where my mother was a minister. One day, I made a tape recording of myself, which I played to her. She said, you know, you sound a lot like Nat. Later, when I listened to his lyrics, there was all this fatherly advice there — Nature Boy, Pretend and so on. So, instead of an imaginary friend, it was my fantasy that I was Nat's son."

Yet music wasn't Porter's first calling. His powerful physique won him a football scholarship at San Diego State. "But early on, I injured my shoulder. So I began to

pursue an interest in musical theatre." He soon put his childhood infatuation to good use with a successful semiautobiographical stage show, *Nat King Cole & Me*.

In recent years, gigs with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Jazz Orchestra, and residencies at St Nick's Pub, in Harlem, and the Smoke jazz club, on the Upper West Side, built Porter, who turns 40 this year, a solid enough fan base to make recording an album viable. "The Grammy nomination got me noticed in America. But it was Jamic Cullum who started the ball rolling here."



'My childhood fantasy was that I was Nat King Cole's son': Porter

## A dab hand

Gregory Porter is plucking heartstrings this side of the water, says Robert Ryan

Cullum was beside himself. "Finally! Another jazz singer with chops to sit alongside the mighty Kurt Elling. A superb band and a voice both elastic and soulful." The "soulful" is important, because, jazz aside, Porter's music crackles with bursts of Donny Hathaway, Bill Withers and Lou Rawls. "Sure. And what do we have in common? We're all children of ministers and have gospel in our background."

There is a new album in the can, and — almost as soon as the last echoes of his *Mona Lisa* had died away — he was booked to reappear in Soho at the ReVoice! Festival and was snapped up for Jazz Voice, which opens the London Jazz Festival. Despite Porter's "next big jazz thing" status, his immediate ambitions are relatively modest. "I love the guys I play with in Europe, but I just want to be able to afford to bring the band that plays on the records over. I think British audiences would like that." I suspect he won't have to wait long to find out. ☐

*Gregory Porter is at the ReVoice! Festival at Pizza Express, Dean Street, W1, Oct 7 and 8. Jazz Voice is at the Barbican, EC2, Nov 11*