

Few figures in jazz history have experienced the kind of success that vocalist Samara Joy has, especially at such a young age. Still only 25, she leads a career that can safely be called sensational.

To date she's received five Grammy Awards, including one for Best New Artist that has given the committed jazz singer the profile of a pop celebrity and made her a steady presence on network TV. With millions of likes on TikTok, Joy has helped new, young generations of music fans discover timeless American music. Her performance credits read like a list of the most legendary venues and events in all of jazz and R&B, among them the Newport, Monterey and Montreal Jazz Festivals, the Apollo, the Village Vanguard and Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Throughout Joy's rise, her press has been glowing, to say the least. Of *Linger Awhile*, her breakout Verve Records debut, *DownBeat* commented, "With this beautiful recording, a silky-voiced star is born." The *New York Times* called her a "silky-voiced rising star," while NPR named her a "classic jazz singer from a new generation." One sold-out concert at a time, she's earned a reputation as a masterful interpreter of jazz standards and a rightful heiress of the sound, technique and charisma that defined her jazz heroines — including Sarah Vaughan, Betty Carter, Abbey Lincoln and Carmen McRae. Remarkably, she didn't truly immerse herself in the jazz tradition until college.

A native of the Bronx's Castle Hill neighborhood, Joy became entranced by classic R&B as a child and cut her teeth as a singer in her church's gospel choir. Her family history is deeply musical — her grandparents, Elder Goldwire and Ruth McLendon, helmed the Philadelphia gospel group the Savettes, and her father, the musician and songwriter Antonio McLendon, has toured with Andraé Crouch in addition to recording his own astounding original work. She began exploring jazz singing in her teens, as a senior at Fordham High School for the Arts in the Bronx, and the triumphs came quickly: In Jazz at Lincoln Center's Essentially Ellington program, jazz's most prestigious high-school competition and festival, she won Best Vocalist.

After graduating from high school as her class' valedictorian, Joy studied jazz at SUNY Purchase, where she fell in with gifted, dedicated instrumentalists she'd collaborate with in the years to come. While still a college student she won the 2019 Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition, which introduced her to the larger jazz scene as a rising star to watch, and kick-started her professional career. The all-star judging panel included Christian McBride, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Jane Monheit and producer Matt Pierson, who would become Joy's manager.

Joy released her self-titled debut on the Whirlwind label in 2021 — the same year she graduated from college — and impressed the jazz cognoscenti with her richly evocative approach to standards and the intimate kinship she demonstrated with her musicians, especially the guitarist Pasquale Grasso.

She followed the debut up a year later with the phenomenal *Linger Awhile*, which underscored Joy's knack for choosing repertoire (including Ronnell Bright's "Sweet Pumpkin") and showcased her ability to write lyrics to improvised jazz solos (such as Fats Navarro's "Nostalgia.") alongside her interpretations of well-known classics. It was an exhilarating period, to be sure: At the Grammy Awards in 2023, she won the Best New Artist Award over the most buzzed-about stars in rock, pop, hip-hop and R&B. Immediately her public profile reached the stratosphere. Samara Joy was omnipresent—profiled in dozens of A-list outlets and appearing and singing on *Fallon*, *Colbert*, *Today* and other shows.

To follow up such blockbuster success, Joy looked inward, toward the comforts of home and family. The fall of 2023 saw the release of her EP *A Joyful Holiday*, which features one track, "O Holy Night," where Joy sings alongside members of her illustrious musical McLendon family. A wildly successful holiday-season tour followed, also featuring Joy with her family and special guests. That same season, Joy crossed over to the fashion world, starring in a campaign for the New York brand Theory. Part of the campaign included a video in which Joy premiered her song "Now and Then," a union of her affecting words and music by the late, great bebop sage Barry Harris—a mentor to generations of jazz luminaries, the singer included.

Just a year after her historic Best New Artist win, she added another statue to her collection: Her single "Tight," which she produced herself and recorded with her working band, earned Joy the 2024 Grammy for Best Jazz Performance. The following month, Joy released the single "Why I'm Here," an inspirational, conquering song she co-wrote with PJ Morton. Overflowing with strings and uplift, the song appears as the end-credits music in *Shirley*, the celebrated Shirley Chisholm biopic starring Oscar-winner Regina King. Both of these singles could be heard as signs of fascinating new music to come.

Joy's new Verve release, *Portrait*, represents the next phase in her continuing artistic evolution — thoroughly in control of her songs and sound, and unbound by expectations. The album documents the seemingly telepathic rapport she's developed with her touring band. Throughout these eight tracks, she leads the ensemble with authority while also functioning as a source of support and interplay. "I'm often the fifth horn," she says. "I just love the sound of this band. Hopefully, when people hear it they'll realize that I'm a *musician* too."

Joy co-produced *Portrait* with fellow multiple-Grammy-winner Brian Lynch, a trumpeter and musical director who has been Eddie Palmieri's most vital late-career collaborator and was a member of the final lineup of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. It was tracked in streamlined sessions — just two or three takes of each tune — at one of jazz's most hallowed sites, Van Gelder Studio. The band recorded all together in that fantastic room, feeding off each other's energy as they would at a fiery live show. "It was the perfect place to capture this sound in its entirety," Joy says.

In designing the album's program, she took highlights from her concert songbook and gave them to individual band members to arrange, based on each player's gifts and personality. *Portrait* is also Joy's most profound expression yet of her prowess as a songwriter — particularly as a lyricist of absolute poetic precision. Among the album's most stunning works are “Reincarnation of a Lovebird (Pursuit of a Dream),” her blend of Mingus' Charlie Parker homage with her own meditation on, as she describes it, “a love so strong it's surreal.” “Peace of Mind/Dreams Come True” melds original music with the cosmic optimism of a beautiful piece by Sun Ra.

Still, as might be expected given Joy's track record with classic tunes, some of *Portrait*'s most impressive moments are the standards: “You Stepped Out of a Dream,” “No More Blues” (an exuberant palate cleanser on which Joy sings Jon Hendricks' lyrics), “Autumn Nocturne,” “Day by Day.”

Ultimately, *Portrait* is the perfect recording for Samara Joy to release at this critical juncture in her spellbinding career. It nods to the gifts that made her a phenomenon — her singular voice, with its organic blend of jazz heritage and R&B emotion; her heavenly way with American standards — while allowing her to stake out bold new territory as a writer and bandleader. “I'm still very much a student, even though I've graduated,” Samara says. “So this is only the beginning... there is much, much more to come.”