

the postgraduate jazz course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

'I auditioned for Guildhall and to my great surprise was accepted. It was one of the best things I ever did because it was there that I got the skills that enabled me to compose and arrange my own music. During that time I also discovered many of the other jazz greats including Horace Silver, Bill Evans, Miles Davis and singers like Shirley Horn, Abbey Lincoln, Dianne Reeves and Cassandra Wilson. After the course I was lucky enough to be asked to tour the UK with the Orphy Robinson Band as part of a live group working with the Phoenix Dance Company. I was also involved with a project fronted by the saxophonist David Jean Baptiste and had the opportunity to work with some excellent musicians and singers including Gary Crosby, Jason Yarde and Julie Dexter.'

Did the singer agree that a debut album of primarily self-composed material was both artistically and commercially a brave move?

'Although I love standards I wanted to share my own interpretation of jazz. I hope that I've created something that can appeal to younger people and those not usually drawn to jazz without compromising the essence of jazz – its beautiful harmonies, creative freedom and the limitless opportunities for expression. The songs on the album are all really personal to me – they describe the experiences and emotions that I went through during the period I took to write them. It's strange having your thoughts, feelings and dreams exposed to all. Even singing itself has the power to make a person feel incredibly vulnerable – there's nothing to hide behind, no instrument to form a barrier between you and the audience. Singing your own songs seems to double this sense of vulnerability. It gives people the power to reject you and your very essence. But at the same time, when someone who has listened to my music tells me how much it's moved them or made them smile, there's nothing to describe the joy that I feel at having touched them or to have contributed to even one moment of their happiness. For me, that's what this is all about.' ■

