

## Alicia Olatuja Lights Up the Loft

### Stunning success for the folks at ArtPower

By [Robert Bush](#)



Brian Ross

Alicia Olatuja at the Loft at UC San Diego on May 12, 2016.

When Brooklyn-based singer Alicia Olatuja took the stage for her sold-out show at UC San Diego's the Loft on May 12, the crowd erupted into applause before she sang a single note. Clearly, they knew what to expect.

As her red-hot band consisting of pianist Josh Nelson, bassist Ben Williams, guitarist Peter Sprague and drummer Christian Euman stretched out on a one-chord vamp, Ms. Olatuja began her inexorable quest to conquer the room with lithe musicality and irresistible stage presence. Sprague delighted with a spidery-fingered chromatic choreography, and Euman basically killed it with a thoroughly explosive out-chorus.

Olatuja can soar into the heavens with devastating clarity and still hit you with a deep resonant warmth, as she demonstrated on "Will You Love Me Still?" which capitalized on her flawless intonation and a melodically effusive Nelson solo.

Next up was a heartfelt version of Michael Jackson's "Human Nature," driven by Euman's lawn sprinkler hi-hat/bass drum combo, where Ms. Olatuja held a note on one breath long enough to make a pearl diver jealous -- just before launching into a wicked episode of scatting.

Sprague took the listeners on a wild and beautiful chord-melody introduction to set up "Truth in Blue," where

Ms. Olatuja locked in tight with a Williams ostinato, standing a full two feet behind the microphone as she unwrapped a tour-de-force that reminded me of Leontyne Price joining Minnie Riperton at Chaka Khan's house. Nelson decorated this one beautifully, and if I hadn't known that he was sight-reading the entire set, I would never have guessed.

Clapping on the beat, Ms. Olatuja led the band into the sensuous Portuguese riffing on "Serrado," which featured a wood-toned Williams solo that rippled with muscularity. Ms. Olatuja moves in a way that might make Protestants reconsider the ban on dancing (or double-down on it), and her stage manner is genuine enough to make you believe she's saying it all for the first time. Most important, the wordless vocal solo she closed out with was simply breathtaking in every way.

Nelson's cloudy rubato opened Olatuja's arrangement of "Over the Rainbow" in wistful fashion, as she summed up the sweet sound of lost innocence with stunning virtuosity, and her sublime control of tastefully delivered melisma never wavered on the gospel-leaning "In the Dark."

Speaking of gospel, Ms. Olatuja closed her evening with an astonishing reimagining of "Amazing Grace," which had the audience singing along and gleefully clapping on the back beats while Sprague masterfully layered a quote from Eddie Harris' "Freedom Jazz Dance" for extra value.

A long, loud standing ovation ensued. This was a total win for the folks at ArtPower, and the Loft.



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