

BY ALEXANDER VARTY

■ Pretend, if you can, that you've been playing piano almost from birth, and that you've developed a keen composer's ear. Let's add that you grew up in a household where folksongs were not just heard but sung, often with friends and family. In addition, you've been captivated by clawhammer banjo for a long time, and you have an affinity with the keening vocals and bittersweet harmonies of Eastern Europe.

What kind of music would you make?

The obvious answer is that there are too many variables to compute, but chances are you would sound something like Moira Smiley and her four-piece band of singers and players, VOCO.

Smiley's influences include those listed above and more. On the program for Moira Smiley & VOCO's upcoming Music on Main concert—at the Heritage Hall on Tuesday (November 20)—are two compositions by pioneering modernist Béla Bartók, one by blues great Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, a pair of shape-note hymns from the Appalachian Mountains, two Serbo-Croatian items, and several original compositions that range from funky body-percussion workouts to diaphanous new-music meditations.

But the wonder isn't that Smiley's work is so diverse; after all, anyone can organize a compilation. Instead, it's that it's so coherent, a quality she ascribes to her early training in the classics.

"I think I have more of an instrumentalist's brain than a singer's brain, in that I don't just think about melody going across space," she relates, on the phone from her Los Angeles home. "I don't just think about melody carrying words; I think about vertical structure a lot, and the interplay and the depth of the music, as well as what the voice is doing. I always function like a piano player."

Smiley might think of herself as a pianist first and a singer second, but she's also a gifted arranger. In assembling her quintet, she's



Moira Smiley (centre, with her band VOCO) aims to break new ground with a group of performers who have completely different strengths and interests.

# Strength in diversity

Moira Smiley has a varied musical background, so it's not surprising that she and VOCO draw on every genre

deliberately sought contrasting rather than complementary voices, and performers whose interests are as diverse as hers.

"I didn't find a bunch of people who all love the same music I do," she explains. "Not at all. And at times I really wondered if I had made a mistake. But ultimately, I want to break new ground; I want to create new territory."

Jessica Catron, VOCO's cellist—who made an earlier Music on Main appearance as part of the Microscores Project, with violinist Johnny Chang—is a good example of the kind of musicianship Smiley finds inspiring.

"She's really into the idea of totally breaking down music into sounds, and rebuilding with different tools than the usual harmonic/diatonic hierarchy," Smiley says. "But she also kind of has this punk-rock sensibility, so she

strengths. "John Ballinger is really a guitarist and composer, but he plays banjo, clarinet, and percussion in our band," she says. "He brings a really disciplined sense of structure because he's been a professional journeyman musician all his life. Jess Basta is our lower female voice, and she was shaped by both Baroque music and soul music, which she started singing at a young age. She has an amazing ear, especially for picking up the quality of the lead singer and being able to fly with that. And then Christine Enns is generally the higher, sharper voice in the ensemble, and she's coming very strictly from a jazz background. While I have the traditional folksinger's 'push', and tend to use a lot of tension and forward motion in my singing, she uses a lot of pulling back, the way a jazz singer does. So we're a really interesting com-

bination, rhythmically. In fact, it's all about sculpting our different streams into one. That's been a primary focus, for me."

Her other primary focus—both playing with VOCO and as a solo artist—is celebrating the primal power of the original instrument: the human voice.

"I think that's a big part of my hope and my mission, for sure," Smiley says. "I think singers have been somewhat relegated to not-musician status. And of course this is just a huge generality, but they're often seen as just somebody who is singing heightened text, and there's nothing more to it than that. But using the voice as an instrument, something that can make you dance—that's where I think I'm headed."

It's only then that this soft-spoken musician reveals that Moira Smiley & VOCO were recently named American national a cappella champions at the 2007 Harmony Sweepstakes competition—an honour that slights her band's instrumental prowess, but clearly indicates that she's on the right track. ♦

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 With the goal of breaking new ground, Moira Smiley has surrounded herself with the contrasting talents of her band VOCO.  
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