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► Eclectic and experimental

Moira Smiley

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Living the life harmonious

Moira Smiley brings her eclectic work to Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society

BY PAUL FREEMAN
For The Daily News

The world is always in need of harmony. And Moira Smiley, with her group VOVO, offers it in imaginative, stirring, transcendent ways.

"A lot of what happens when you sing and you perform is that you overcome fears and you inspire others to overcome those," Smiley told The Daily News. "Part of the reason why people go to hear live music is that palpable experience of inspiration."

You can experience VOVO at Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society on Sunday. Usually the venue presents jazz, but founder Pete Douglas attended a concert Smiley curated in Santa Barbara and asked her to create a similarly moving, eclectic feeling in Half Moon Bay.

The vocal group is comprised of Smiley (who plays accordion and banjo), April Guthrie (cello), Jess Basta and Christine Tavares.

The quartet's music reflects the Los Angeles-based Smiley's passion for Eastern European and early American folk music, as well as classical. They perform originals, as well as traditional material: a cappella numbers, as well as those with instruments. In 2007, VOVO was named the nation's best a cappella group.

At the Half Moon Bay concert, VOVO shares the bill with Oakland's Testim, which features Kaila Flexer (violin) and Gary Hegedus (oud, Turkish saz, Greek lauto). Joining Testim for this event will be percussionist Evan Fraser. The two groups will interact during one another's sets.

Smiley and Flexer taught together in Santa Fe this past summer, Smiley said. "Kaila's a very beautiful violin player. She and her partner Gary are very fluid musicians. I knew that they had the sort of authority with improvisation that I needed to create a seamless evening."

Previously, Smiley led the a cappella folk quartet VIDA. In creating VOVO, she wanted to add instruments to the mix, as well as the excitement of body percussion. The group's members slap out infectious, intricate rhythms.

"I had done a lot of physical theater in Europe and I yearned to have the singing that I did be very physical. I wanted the singers to be very expressive on stage and authentic with their movements, not limited. I wanted great dexterity from the singers, an ability to do almost anything with their voices, but not neglecting the role of the body in that. Singers can lose their sense of their four limbs and their core to freely express the music."

Smiley coaxes the audience to participate, to add another layer of percussive foundation or an extra vocal pattern.

The audience cuts across demographic lines. "I feel a desire to communicate with a lot of different people. Yet what I enjoy musically can sometimes be a little bit intellectual or esoteric. So balancing those two forces in myself, is kind of what VOVO is about."

Seeking a balance, Smiley rewrites the set list every night. "I want to use all the colors at our command. The band is a very fine-tuned instrument. We respond very much to the people in the room. Our presentation is very accessible."

"VOVO's first two years were about finding the focus. The three following years, we've refined it, coalescing as a group, teaching each other."

Much of the teaching falls to Smiley, as she chooses the group's unusual repertoire. Rehearsals include a great deal of vocal improvisation. Smiley hopes to increasingly integrate the same sort of adventurous spontaneity into performances. "It



Photo by Melanie Wahla

Moira Smiley is to perform at Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society in Half Moon Bay on Sunday.

MUSIC PREVIEW

WHAT: Moira Smiley & VOVO plus Testim
WHERE: Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society, 311 Mirada Road, Half Moon Bay
WHEN: 4:30 p.m., Sunday
TICKETS: \$35; 650-726-4143;
www.bachddsoc.org

we'll get there."

She regards the voice as an instrument. "I always thought of myself as a musician, rather than as a singer. I always thought of the voice as being as flexible and as powerful when there weren't words, as when there were."

During her developmental years, Smiley was surrounded by folk, classical and jazz. "Vermont, where I grew up, had some very active idealism about art and art being important to community. They were fearless about the role of art to change lives."

"It's always difficult to bring change, whether in art or anything else. People are resistant to new ideas. So there's a bit of a warrior aspect, a bit of an instant rebellion, by getting out in the van, on the road, and doing your thing. It's not a comfortable life."

Smiley is always looking to explore new musical avenues. "I have my measure of frustrations. You're always trying to adjust, saying, 'But I could do better. I could do finer work. I could reach more young people.' So there are always aspirations that keep drawing you forward."

She relishes challenging the audience, as well as herself. "Everywhere we go, I'd like us to inspire people to sing and to inspire singers, who are already on the way to their craft, to think even broader about what they can do. Performance-wise, I want VOVO and whatever VOVO becomes, to always be involved with improvisation, taking risks and communicating with people."

"I never want to lose my audience because I've gotten too intellectual. At the same time, I want to be fiercely experimental. I've always sought music that surprises me."

Explore surprising, compelling VOVO sounds at www.myspace.com/vocoinfo or www.moirasmiley.com.

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