

MUSIC

Moira Smiley and VOCO tops for original sound

By RICK MASSIMO
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Moira Smiley and VOCO make some of the most captivating music you'll hear from some of the sparest ingredients, and that's exactly how Smiley likes it.

Cello, banjo, ukulele and accordion make appearances in VOCO's music, but one of the main selling points is the voices of Smiley and her bandmates (currently Emily Eagen and April Guthrie, though it's a revolving cast for "musical and practical reasons," Smiley explains). The harmonies' effect on traditional songs and Smiley's trad-based originals is haunting and chilling one minute, lively and fun the next. "Voices in harmony

feel pretty complete," Smiley says, "even if it's a simple [song]."

Smiley previously was in a fully a cappella group called

Hit it

Vida, but when she moved to Los Angeles "cello and banjo was a sound I really wanted to hear at the time," and more folk instruments have seeped into the sound since then.

And the group's other trademark is the body percussion — foot-stomps, handclaps and chest-thumps — that drive the music.

"We are drum set-less," Smiley says, "and you don't



BLACKSTONE RIVER THEATRE

Moira Smiley (center) and VOCO will perform in Cumberland on Saturday.

have to rent the whole trailer!"

But seriously, folks ... "I like things that are

spare, and that can capture the energy and attention of the audience with very few elements. ... [And] the body percussion keeps it visually interesting, even when it's a simple texture. Sometimes folk music has not been very visual — the troubadour type of folk music, where you pretty much sit and someone's got a guitar.

"But I've always sought surprise in my music, and that comes most simply with rhythm and melody. If you keep surprising yourself as a writer and arranger, then you're going to be interesting

to watch on stage, for me."

There's an element of body percussion in nearly every musical tradition, but Smiley says it's on the wane in most places. "Probably the most vibrant form of body percussion in mainstream culture is step, and that's being kept alive mostly in African-American [culture]," Smiley says. "But everybody does some kind of body percussion in different cultures. It hasn't been very alive in this country since hambone!"

Smiley, who has also performed with acts such as

Paul Hillier's Theater of Voices, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and New World Symphony, has written a few new songs specifically for the winter concerts, but the group's repertoire is generally mixed between traditional music arranged by Smiley and her originals — all of which can range from old-timey traditional to boldly avant-garde on their discs, "Small Worlds" and "Circle, Square, Diamond & Flag." And after the winter shows are over, Smiley says it's time for a three-month hiatus from touring.

"I feel a lot of music coming up from inside. I'm going to write a couple more albums and maybe a longer work, like a song cycle." Then it's back to the road, with trips to Italy, Australia and Croatia already slated for 2012.

Moira Smiley and VOCO perform the program "A Winter Gust of Song" at the Blackstone River Theatre, 549 Broad St., Cumberland, Saturday night at 8. Call (401) 725-9272 or go to riverfolk.org.

I was gonna suggest making it a sleeping-bag weekend at the BRT, with the terrific Celtic group **Cherish the Ladies** doing a Christmas-themed show on Sunday, but theater honcho Russell Gusetti says it's **sold out** — so don't even.