



Dirty Liner

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VIVA VOCO &

by Audrey Coleman

In the amphitheater at Cal Tech, Pasadena, four female voices pour forth, blending like interwoven strands of silk, each its own lustrous color, yet together incredibly beautiful. For the first three lines of the opening song, they shimmer in harmony. Then the strands separate to allow one vulnerable, penetrating voice to own the last line of the verse.

*I live in California
From the green mountains I came.
I travelled 'cross this stolen land
With nothin' but my name.*

The lone voice belongs to Moira Smiley, 32, guiding force of VOCO. Originally from in the green hills of Vermont, she came to California in 2002 after a stint in the Midwest, forming this remarkable ensemble two years later. Her long red tresses fall on pale shoulders, accessorizing with the lime cotton sundress she is wearing. In contrast, the rest of the quartet — vocalists (and brunettes) Jess Basta and Christine Enns and pert blonde vocalist/cellist Jessica Catron, all wear darker colors.

On this particular Saturday night, the songs have their roots in remote Appalachian communities, Balkan mountain villages, and church halls where believers practice the shape-note singing tradition. Our ears visit a sailor clinging to life on a ship struggling to round Cape Horn, a field worker calling for water, backed up by rhythmic slapping. We

Officially, the concert ends with the shape-note hymn “Wondrous Love,” whose tune, Smiley tells the audience, was lifted from a popular pirate song and reworded to inspire. Now VOCO’s official anthem, it builds to an emotional peak with:

*Throughout eternity
I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
Throughout eternity...
I'll sing on, I'll sing on.*

The brilliant dissonance in the final chord is spine-tingling.

Amid the ecstatic applause, someone shouts “Stand in the River!” And with Smiley’s voice at the helm and her spare banjo accompaniment, the four women sail into a serene emotional space to sing what sounds like a traditional hymn.

*Come and stand in the river
Current gentle and slow
Send your troubles down water
Down on that water flow*



an 1815 farmhouse on 150 acres of hayfields, forest, and market gardens that her city-born parents had purchased to embrace farming and a rural lifestyle. Her parents have Welsh, Scottish, and Irish roots and a deep love of music. “Early on, I remember my family having gatherings,” she recalled, “and people singing from a big book of folk songs. That would happen in the kitchen. It had the big Glenwood wood cook stove, so it was warmest...”

Her parents’ record collection included traditional Appalachian singer Jean Ritchie, whose pure interpretations Smiley would emulate some years later. But there were also vinyls of the 60s folk revival — Peter, Paul, and Mary and the Kingston Trio. “My Dad played banjo and was a tenor. He was quite proud of his music knowledge. He had sung barbershop as a young man and insisted I learn how to sing by ear and harmonize. My Mom has a lovely, warm alto voice and a natural, quiet, vulnerable musicality in her voice. We’d sing on family trips — barbershop, Victorian parlor songs, old jazz, and American folksongs. Then shape-note singing took over.”

MOIRA SMILEY

encounter the yearning melodies of the late Kate Wolf and, most notably, the vivid soundscapes of Smiley’s imagination.

Despite the intensity of the songs, a sense of playfulness and spontaneity pervades the performance. At any moment, Smiley may pick up her banjo or accordion. Catron may sit down and grab her cello. Or, without introduction, all four may begin playing in unison the instruments they have trained carefully since VOCO was formed — their bodies.

When they erupt into total-body percussion, the audience sits transfixed. In unison, the women are clapping and slapping their thighs, arms, sides, and ankles. Turning, bending, reaching, and all the while emitting spontaneous yelps and cries. They are a vision of sheer rhythmic joy.

Except that it isn’t a traditional hymn. Smiley composed it. In fact, “Stand in the River” is performed by choral groups around the world.

“I have a wish to have the songs be timeless. I don’t know why,” Smiley confided two days later in her house perched on the sun-drenched hills of the quiet, artsy community of Silver Lake, overlooking Hollywood. For the song “I Live in California,” which easily evokes 49ers or Dustbowl migrants, she deliberately “kept everything without references to technology today.”

The timeless quality of her songs may have something to do with Smiley’s upbringing in the Champlain Valley area of Vermont, where the nearest town was New Haven, population 500. The family of six lived in

The tradition of a *cappella* singing that had flourished in New England over 200 years earlier fascinated the community of music aficionados where Smiley grew up. It was a grassroots musical movement. Two centuries ago, singing teachers would travel from village to village, teaching congregations of untrained voices to sing from hymn books, the most famous of which was called *The Sacred Harp*, by following shapes on a page that corresponded to notes on the scale. (Hence the title of VOCO’s most recent release, *Circle, Square, Diamond, and Flag*.) “Let it be clear that the living tradition of shape notes is a Southern [religious] tradition now,” said Smiley. “The revitalization of it is a northern [secular] thing that’s happened since the 50s. I am a child of that.”

A shy girl with a loud, penetrating voice, Smiley was nudged into performing solos in dozens of old village churches in New England. She described herself as a “wild child,” exploring nature, building lean-to’s. “There were always songs involved in those times — mostly made up. I also rode my horse and sang a lot. The horse didn’t seem to mind!”

The community in Vermont also introduced her to the East European songs that are now a staple of VOCO’s repertoire. “It was kind of a lefty community interested in communal forms of music, and the Balkans are rich in that. And then I had a teacher who went to Croatia on a Fulbright, and she brought back a lot of songs and taught us how to sing them. I just loved her.”

At the same time, Smiley was a piano prodigy with a rigorous practice schedule and a passion for Shostakovich, Stravinsky, and Bartók.

By the time she was a college freshman at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, scholarships had propelled her into a degree program in piano. But soon the wealth of musical and folkloric resources in Bloomington re-ignited her love of singing. “I decided that piano was too lonely,” she said.

She formed a vocal quartet, Vida, which focused on the Balkan repertoire she loved. In her academic studies, she decided to pursue an Early Music degree. “I was really interested in medieval music, because you could improvise and nobody told you the rules,” she said. “It was more about how deeply could you look into the manuscripts and the iconography around it and figure out how to do this music, where it communicated to people now but also was somewhat true to what went before. I loved that. It was so creative to me.”

While touring with Vida, Smiley met the members of another ensemble that enthralled her. “Kitka does really beautiful, deeply studied, authentic music of Eastern Europe,” said Smiley. “So when Vida disbanded in 2001, I joined Kitka.”

This decision took her to Kitka’s home base in Oakland, California. After performing with Kitka for about two years, Smiley felt ready



Moira Smiley & VOCO - Smiley, Jess Basta, Christine Enns, and Jessica Catron

to lead her own ensemble in a more diverse repertoire. She headed to Los Angeles.

How did VOCO take shape? Cellist/vocalist Jessica Catron signed on after meeting Smiley through a mutual friend. Christine Enns, Jess Basta, and two other members who have since departed answered an ad Smiley posted on Craig’s List.

She tried to remember the ad: *Do you want to sing in a group? Do you want to sing harmonies? Do you want to improvise? Do you want to travel and perform?* And then I gave them a lot of b’s — *From Billie Holiday to Bjork, to Bobby McFerrin to the Bulgarian Women’s Choir, Bach, Bartók...*?

“It didn’t get that many responses, considering how big Los Angeles is,” recalled Smiley. “I auditioned about 15 people.”

It felt natural to make the shape-note singing she learned as a child a staple of the VOCO repertoire. The process of adaptation is ongoing and collaborative. Sometimes Smiley rewrites lyrics to tone down the “fire and brimstone” and other religious content. The group builds harmonies for what was once sung in unison and adds instrumentation to what was an *a cappella* vocal tradition.


“When we started singing ‘Wondrous Love’ in VOCO, it took a good long year to work it — just keep practicing it, recording our different ideas. The very first idea that I had was to have the banjo play the tune. We had percussion for a while. At the time we were working with the cajon, the wooden box drum. Another process for a shape-note song:

We sing it together and Jessica will say, ‘Ah, I’ve been thinking about this cello line as kind of a loop.’ So these things come and get built into the performances sometimes over six to eight months. And then, of course, you perform it and it changes still more.”

For body percussion, she took inspiration from percussionist/rhythm dancer Keith Terry and his wife, Edie Ladin, a close friend. “Body percussion is really old,” said Smiley. “In the African-American tradition it is very popular... [It relates to] the history of work songs, too. A lot of times, when people were without instruments, living in camps, a natural way of keeping a rhythm was just by using your body. I feel very electric and grounded and playful when I’m doing it. It’s cool to see how each person has their own sound.”

Maintaining spontaneity in performance is a key concern. “I actually re-do the set list every night — or we do. I feel like we are traveling between several worlds and each concert [audience] has a different wish. [We ask ourselves] what’s going to make a connection tonight.”

VOCO’s upcoming CD release will focus on the East European repertoire — traditional songs, Bartók pieces, and her own compositions in that vein; it remains untitled as yet. Smiley also has been busy within the United States and abroad and with a work funded by the Durfee Foundation and American Composers Forum, arranging Béla Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*.

New horizons for VOCO? Smiley would like to see the group “improvise more and more and more. You know, to have that ease. It’s like a very tender garden. You have to just keep cultivating it. At the same time, you have to get up in front of an audience and just deliver something that is very communicative and together. Improvisation is such a huge ideal for us, and body percussion is part of that. In fact, we’ve even improvised on our names.” Smiley demonstrates, slapping her thighs, clapping and hitting her chest with open hands while calling, “Moooooiraaaaaah Smiiiiiiiieeeeeee!” When you go to the next Moira Smiley and VOCO concert in your area, be ready for anything. 

MOIRA SMILEY & VOCO

Circle Square Diamond Flag

MoraMusic (2008)

The eight tracks of *Circle Square Diamond and Flag* showcase Moira Smiley & VOCO at a live performance at the 2008 Bloomington Early Music Festival in Bloomington, Indiana. The CD provides almost a sampler of vocal styles the group covers and captures the intense, yet contained, energy of the performers. Songs range from fairly straightforward Sacred Harp melodies to more freely arranged modern compositions. In Smiley’s “Return My Soul,” the Sacred Harp influence is evident in the chorus, but the song is quite modern in its flexible arrangement, with voices snaking around one another in variations while banjo-picking

accompaniment supports the melody with a steady heartbeat-like structure. “Wondrous Love,” a traditional shape-note tune, is sung with energetic abandon, like the pirate tune that spawned it (“It started out as a pirate song, and comes to you today as a messed-up Sacred Harp song,” according to the spoken introduction), accompanied by a stomping foot, fingerpicked banjo, and cello that is by turns smooth and choppy, mirroring the vocals. Body percussion is the accompaniment of choice on Lead Belly’s “Bring a Little Water, Silvy,” with stomping feet and hand-clapping grounding the chorus. A fine introduction to this exciting new group.

— Susan Hartman (Baltimore, MD)

www.moirasmiley.com