

BORN INTO A SANTA CRUZ JAZZ FAMILY, SHE'S MIXING IT UP IN N.Y.

Sasha Dobson's musical journey

By Andrew Gilbert

Special to the Mercury News

Sasha Dobson may be the product of Bay Area jazz royalty, but she's not looking to take over the jazz throne.

As the daughter of vocalist Gail Dobson and the late, revered pianist Smith Dobson, the Santa Cruz-raised singer has been busy blazing her own trail. While she hasn't rejected her musical inheritance, her ongoing evolution into a formidable singer-songwriter has proceeded apace.

She first gained attention in New York City as an adventurous improviser at Small's, the West Village jazz spot that served as an incubator for many of the brightest young improvisers who emerged in the

Sasha Dobson

Where: Campbell Recital Hall, Braun Music Center, Stanford University

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

Tickets: \$20

Call: (650) 725-2787.

www.stanfordjazz.org

1990s.

But over the past five years, Dobson has expanded her musical circle to include the gifted songwriters Richard Julian, her boyfriend, and Jesse Harris, whose tunes have been covered by luminous vocalists such as Lizz Wright, Madeleine Peyroux and Norah Jones (including the Grammy-winning hit "Don't Know Why" from Jones' hugely popular 2002 album "Come Away With Me").

Last year, Dobson released "Modern Romance" on Harris' Secret Sun label, an appealing, bossa novating collection of spare but sinuous songs, most of which she wrote in collaboration with some combination of Harris and Julian.

As she's ventured down the singer-



TODD CHELFANT

Singer-songwriter Sasha Dobson will perform Monday night at the Stanford Jazz Festival and also Aug. 11 at the San Jose Jazz Festival.

songwriter path, Dobson has wandered far from her jazz roots, a transformation that Bay Area audiences have seen only in brief glimpses, including her appearances last year at

the Monterey Jazz Festival and last month as part of the SFJazz spring season.

"I feel good about what I'm doing, opening doors and staying away from

classifying my music," says Dobson, 28, who performs at Campbell Recital Hall on Monday as part of the Stanford Jazz Festival. "I've been getting mixed vibes, even from my own family. People have a hard time with change. . . . I know how lucky I was to be born into this strangely wonderful musical family. It comes with a lot of responsibility."

Monday's performance is one of a series in the area, including an Aug. 10 concert at Noe Valley Ministry in San Francisco with John Finkbeiner on guitar and banjo, Devon Hoff on bass and Julian on guitar, and another Aug. 11 at the San Jose Jazz Festival with the same band. For her gig at Stanford, Dobson is working with an expanded ensemble featuring Finkbeiner on guitar and banjo, John Wiitala on bass, Jay Sanders on trumpet and Scott Larson on trombone, a drummerless combo that she calls "sort of Jimmy Giuffre meets Ella on guitar meets Bob Dylan."

Dobson makes a point of mentioning the guitar because the instrument is playing a growing role in her music, as she's worked to develop her skills at accompanying herself. In many ways, her relationship with the guitar represents both her dogged insistence on musical independence and her indelible ties to the jazz tradition.

"The more I play guitar and write my own music, the more I go back to my jazz roots," she says by phone from her apartment in Brooklyn. "I'm writing new music and focusing on accompanying myself. Growing up with my dad, I got a big head about accompanying. It's sort of a lost art. Not many people want to be this self-

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less *bodhisattva* musician. I want to be able to be self-sufficient. I like the idea of writing my own music, and becoming part of the rhythm section."

As she talks about her new projects, she leaves no doubt that, as an artist, she is very much a work in progress. Even as her musical associations take her deeper into her own sound, she circles back to the American Songbook. For instance, she recently recorded the standard "My Man" for a Billie Holiday tribute album co-produced by Harris, a CD that will be distributed by Starbucks.

Until she moved to New York in 1997 at the age of 17, Dobson was a familiar presence on the Bay Area jazz scene. She started performing

as a child with the Dobson family band, joining her parents and her older brother, drummer-vibraphonist Smith Dobson V (who recently released the stellar debut album "Basement Bloodlines" on Evander Music). Like her performance last summer at Monterey, Dobson's Stanford concert is a homecoming of sorts. Her parents often taught at the Stanford Jazz Workshop, and she first attended the program at age 9.

In 2002, the year after her father died in a car crash on the way home from a gig, Stanford Jazz Workshop director Jimmy Nadel brought her onto the faculty, and she's been teaching vocals ever since. "I just try to help people with their music," Dobson says, "to find their own sound."

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