

Sahara Smith

Singer-songwriter Sahara Smith brings unique style to the live-music scene.

By John T. Davis / Photo by Destry Jaimes.

Sahara Smith would like it to be known that she used to be a nerd.

Yes, indeed. The willowy 22-year-old singer-songwriter who seems to be one cool, self-possessed performer used to bury her 9-year-old nose in an Isaac Azimov sci-fi tome and collect Star Wars action figures.



“I went through years of being that good girl stuck in the back of the class,” she says with a shrug.

She’s definitely not at the back of the class anymore. The Wimberley-bred Smith pulled a hat trick at the most recent Austin Music Awards, carting off honors for Best Female Vocals, Best Folk Performer and Best Songwriter. Her debut album, *Myth of the Heart* (curated by no less than T-Bone Burnett hot off his triumphs with Alison Krauss and Robert Plant and the *Crazy Heart* soundtrack), earned respectful nods from mainstream critics and industry publications. Last November, she performed with impressive aplomb on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Her inaugural cross-country tour exposed her to a national audience. (Smith’s songs, said the *Chicago Tribune*, are “lyrically dense and she sings them in a voice that’s breathy but also surprisingly rich.”)

“It’s been a whirlwind looking back on it,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s all just happened so fast, but it happened in order.”

All of it transpired, says Smith, “at a critical point of my personal life. My stepfather had just passed away and I’d just broken up with a boyfriend of two years. It was a tumultuous time. I’d just turned 22, my CD had just come out and things were changing in Austin for me. It was a strange period of time, the emotional journey combined with the physical journey of traveling through the country.”

Austin musician Stephen Barber, who has been producing her latest material, notes, “I can see Sahara’s footprints in so many places. Her nature as a writer and her imagination could take her to many lands in the

way of cinema, theater, dance ... The sky is the limit.”

If expectations for Smith are sky-high, she shows little sign of the pressure when she arrives one blazingly hot morning at an East Austin coffee shop. She is just a pretty girl on a green bicycle, auburn hair flowing down her back, an albatross tattoo glowing on one pale shoulder. Ordering a kombucha, she describes how a tomboy childhood in Wimberley under the gaze of supportive parents helped shape a precociously creative childhood.

“My mom and dad were both creative people: My mom writes and she was an actress. My dad is a jeweler and a sculptor,” she says. “Growing up with them, they really shaped the way I saw the world and really encouraged me to express myself and have some kind of outlook. I think neither of their own parents ever got them as creative people, and they really wanted to make sure I knew I could do whatever I wanted to set my mind to do creatively.”

So how does a youngster rebel against a bohemian mom and dad? Smith laughs, “I didn’t! I always liked my parents. We always got along great.”



Her beautifully euphonious name, by the way, came courtesy of a hiccup. Her parents were discussing what to name their new daughter and her dad suggested “Sarah” when he hiccuped in the midst of the word. “Sahara” was the result.

“My mom thought that was a very great name,” Smith says. “She was an actress and she wanted me to have a showbiz name.”

Smith describes a smalltown childhood of swimming in Blue Hole, going to the drive-in movies at The Corral and sitting in on Friday night bluegrass jams.

“All the kids would go off and play mini-golf and [do] their own thing, and I would be sitting at the campfire playing music with the grown-ups.”

She looks back now with the amused, worldly nostalgia of a big-city career gal.

“I drag my boyfriend out there and say, ‘There’s the stump where I sat with so-and-so. Oh, look, there’s the rock where I stubbed my toe!’ All of the landmarks are vastly significant to me,” Smith says.

To hear her tell it, the biggest cloud on the horizon was the divorce of her parents when she was about 8.

“I was living in Wimberley and was really, really happy and fearless. I remember being this very confident little kid,” she recalls. “Then my parents broke up and I moved to Austin for a year and it totally knocked the wind out of me. It took me years of being cripplingly shy to finally get over it.”

Her mother remarried soon afterward to a man whose rough and tough oilfield-engineer exterior concealed yet another creative soul. Smith credits him as being a ferocious advocate for her musical inclinations. (Myth of the Heart was dedicated to his memory.)

She was precocious and prolific early on. She wrote her first poem at 3 and began playing guitar at 10. In 2004, she placed second in a musical competition on the live radio variety show A Prairie Home Companion.

Twilight Red, a dreamy ode to isolation and the last track on Myth of the Heart, was written when Smith was just 13.

She doesn’t regard it as a particularly big deal that she penned such an emotionally intricate and durable creation when most kids her age were still reading comic books.

“When I wrote that, it was before I had ever had a boyfriend. But when I was in junior high, when we moved from Wimberley to Houston for a year,” she explains. “In Wimberley, I knew I was weird, but I was with a whole group of weird kids around me and that was fine. In Houston, I was by myself, and I was just weird again. I was just the little nerdy girl. I didn’t have any friends and I was really miserable and lonely, and so I wrote this song about how [the listener] is not the only person who feels this way.

“It turned into a love song because it’s an easy metaphor for that sort of feeling. As I’ve grown older, it’s changed in what it means. So I still really connect to it although it’s an old song.”

Now, with a few heartbreaks, an album and a national tour, and some years of grown- up living under her belt, Smith’s musical horizons are expanding exponentially.



Myth of the Heart had an easy-rocking, Americana-flavored groove that belied its meticulous production (Smith describes the process as “chop-chop-chop ... 120 or 130 segments for each track, all glued together with Pro Tools”). Make no mistake, it’s as catchy as all get-out. Just try getting, say, The Real Thing, with its evocative line, “I want to drive all night and wake up another person ...” out of your head. But it’s not the kind of music she wants to make the rest of her life.

Smith’s new material, which she has been recording with Stephen Barber and a bevy of musicians, including members of the avant- garde chamber orchestra Mother Falcon, reflects her entry onto a bigger stage.

“I’d never been to New York City,” prior to touring, she says. “But now I’ve been four or five times. We were staying in Union Square high up in an apartment, and it was winter and the whole of Union Square was covered in snow and ice and I wrote this song called Gone. I call it my Manhattan cowboy song, and it’s just full of that imagery ... This is the type of music I want to make forever.”

For a moment, Smith’s reserve cracks to reveal a ferocious, youthful impatience: “I’ve been chomping at the bit! I feel like my manager would have liked to have waited a little longer to do a second album, but I was like, ‘Let’s go, let’s do it! I’ve got the songs.’”

“I think she’s off the charts,” says Rosalyn Rosen, who co-manages Smith along with Kevin Wommack (who also helms her record label, Playing In Traffic). “Her songwriting is ascending, everything evolving and ascending beautifully. I think she’s grown in every way imaginable.”

Wommack, who first saw Smith perform seven years ago, says, “As a songwriter, she was an old soul to begin with. Lyrically, she’s been killing it since she was 15. She’s always had the gift of writing insightful, poignant and deep songs. From a performing standpoint, since she was so young and started so early, it’s been all about gaining the confidence that only comes from playing shows.”

Wommack adds that the new material Smith has recorded should see the light of day sometime in the latter part of October.

From one perspective, Smith can be regarded as one blossom in a bouquet of young, formidably talented, local, female singer-songwriters who include Kat Edmonson, Suzanna Choffel, Betty Soo, Celeste Griffin, Ruby Jane and Sarah Jarosz (Jarosz, like Smith, grew up in Wimberley. Smith has a game she plays with herself regarding how quickly in a conversation the connection comes up).

From another, she is an heir to a distaff Austin songwriting tradition that includes Grammy-winning veterans such as Patty Griffin, Eliza Gilkyson and Shawn Colvin.

Either way, she regards her future with an equanimity that is wise beyond her years.

“It’s funny; I’ve never aspired to be anything resembling a big deal,” Smith says. “When I think about myself in five years, I’ve never thought, ‘Oh, I want this great success.’”

“I aim for what will make me happy. And then if I get more than that, that’s amazing. And what will make me happy is something that’s always achievable. I’m never disappointed if I’m doing what I love and making an honest living.”

She slurps the last of her drink, her straw making that rattling noise straws do when there’s nothing left at the bottom of the cup.

“When people are little, they fantasize about fame and fortune and being on TV,” she says.

“I always fantasized about being interviewed by [NPR Fresh Air host] Terry Gross. I still do!”

She laughs merrily at the thought. Still a nerd at heart.