

Welch's mountain songs return to the Bay Area

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JUST when traditional country music seemed set in its ways, a California girl, guitar slung across her shoulder, headed east and brought Nashville to its knees.

Gillian Welch is something of an enigma in the world of banjo breakdowns, woeful mountain ballads and hard-strumming guitar licks; her songs manage to capture the purity and timelessness of centuries-old Appalachian and Southern music while remaining contemporary and distinct from anything else in the genre.

Welch, 35, joined by long-time accompanist David Rawlings, brings her unique sound Tuesday to San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts. The sold-out show, showcasing songs from her new album "Soul Journey," will be performed in Welch's typical no-frills style: just two guitars, two voices and possibly a five-string banjo riff here and there.

The concert, part of a California mini-tour, is a warm-up for a larger nationwide line-up, in which Welch opens for Norah Jones, with whom she will return to San Francisco in September.

"I love San Francisco. It's one of the great cities," she says in a casual drawl, speaking from her Nashville home.

For a performer whose strikingly genuine style seems as though it could only be a product steeped in multiple generations of Appalachian culture, her emergence into old-time country music stardom is somewhat atypical of her Nashville brethren.

Welch, who learned guitar at age 7 and was raised on Woody Guthrie and Carter Family tunes, grew up in Southern California, graduated from UC Santa Cruz and spent two uneasy years studying guitar at the distinguished Berklee School of Music in Boston.

"It was all sort of silly for me," she says of her formal music education. "I was like a martian."

While there, she met guitarist Rawlings, and the two traveled to Nashville 10 years ago, country music boiling in their veins.

"I immediately forced myself to go play miserable writers nights," she recalls, describing the smoky dank venues where they'd have to wait the whole night to reach the stage.

As the opener for a local funk band, the duo's haunting harmonies and subtle but complex guitar arrangements quickly caught on in a town that takes its music seriously.

Since her first album in 1997, a Grammy nominee, Welch's success has snow-balled, drawing a diverse fan-base of country-bluegrass die-hards alongside others who may well have once dismissed traditional acoustic music as nothing but a relic of their parent's generation.

Welch, who has two songs on the best-selling and influential "O Brother, Where Art Thou"

soundtrack, has become a major force driving traditional folk and country music back into contemporary culture.

That in mind, she vehemently dismisses the classification of "old- time" which her songs are often labeled.

Such refusal to be nailed down is apparent in her fourth album, which will be released next month on Acony Records, her own label. Like each of its predecessors, the record reveals a new dimension of the musician.

"Soul Journey" is a complete departure from the meandering, often cryptic, melodies of "Time (The Revelator)," her last album. On this one, half the songs are uncharacteristically backed-up with organ, base, fiddle and drums, staggered in between simple tracks meant only for guitar and voice.

"If you wanted a sort of mellower, sunnier record, it seems this is the record of ours you'd reach for," says Welch, calling it her most autobiographical to date, the result of a loosely organized four-day jam session with friends.

When Welch and Rawlings perform the songs as duets to a packed house Tuesday, the response will likely be fervent.

"Man, it makes me really glad that people want to come out and hear music played," she spouts enthusiastically. "It's not going to be a big flashy show. ... It's pretty much just for the music and maybe to hear Dave tell a couple of jokes."

Gillian Welch performs at 8:30 p.m. Tuesday at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts Theater, 3301 Lyon Street. The performance is sold out.

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