

# THE *Current*

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Tom Jacobs

## A Journey to the Outskirts of Jazz

Ask Rachel Eckroth how she defines her music, and she struggles a bit. Her influences are too wide and varied to suggest a simple answer.

But eventually, she comes up with a reply that could easily serve as the title to a yet-unwritten album. Eckroth is, in her own words, “on the outskirts of jazz.”

“I started off studying jazz,” the pianist, vocalist, composer and recent Grammy nominee said in an interview. “I went to New York to become a jazz musician, and learned from the best. But the work I do spans all kinds of genres. There are several sides of myself.”

The UC Santa Barbara community will get a chance to experience her multidimensional musical personality at 4 p.m. Thursday, when Eckroth headlines a [free concert](#) at the Hub in the University Center. Her trio, which also features bassist Tim Lefebvre and drummer Dan Schnelle, will perform with the UCSB Jazz Ensemble under the direction of Jon Nathan.

A product of Arizona — she was raised in Phoenix and currently lives in Tuscon — Eckroth has long been used to life on the road. When she was young, both her parents were in a country music band, and she recalls joining them on short tours.

“They’d put the kids in the car and take us along,” she said. “I think that’s where my older brother (who became a professional pianist) and I got hooked on music. We got to see what was happening behind the scenes. It was a super fun adventure.”

She began piano lessons at age six, but never truly enjoyed making music until she was 14. That year, “I joined the jazz band in high school and started learning about improvisation and arranging music,” she recalled. “It was a whole new world, and I fell in love with it. Instead of having to stick to what was on the page, I got to create my own thing.”

Eckroth earned degrees in music at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Rutgers University in New Jersey, concentrating primarily on piano. It wasn’t until she was in her late 20s that she seriously began writing — and singing — her own songs, in the mold of such great 1990s female singer-songwriters as Fiona Apple, Sheryl Crow and Sarah McLoughlin.

“There have been people in my life who said, ‘You’re going to confuse everyone if you don’t pick one thing,’” she said. “But I couldn’t do it! I was working on a classical string quartet a while back. I like to see what I can do (within all sorts of genres). I wrote a lot of big-band music, too.”

Over the years, she has worked as a side man with world-class musicians from a variety of genres, including Chris Botti, St. Vincent and Rufus Wainwright. Her most recent album, “The Garden,” received a Grammy Award nomination for best contemporary instrumental album.

“I really appreciate people who are not one-trick ponies,” said Jon Nathan, a continuing lecturer in the UC Santa Barbara Music Department and director of the Jazz Ensemble. “I admire people who are able to transform themselves in different musical situations. I’ve heard Tim Lefebvre play everything from Southern rock to progressive jazz. He covers everything, including really experimental stuff. He also subs with Jon Batiste’s band sometimes. He has no fear.

“Rachel has the same kind of aesthetic. As a composer, she’s doing interesting, challenging stuff. (A married couple), they’re both working musicians who maintain a high level of artistry.”

Eckroth is hardly a stranger to Santa Barbara; she toured here with Botti, and for a time played regularly at the piano bar of the Miramar Hotel. Thursday’s concert will begin with a short set by the Jazz Ensemble, after which she and her trio will join in. She plans to include “a couple of very new instrumental things I have written in the last month.”

Besides bringing world-class artists to the UC Santa Barbara community, Nathan is happy to expose his student musicians to successful working professionals.

“To be able to sit and talk directly to these artists about their lives, and how they got to where they got, is important,” he said. “Hopefully, it will be inspiring. I want them to have a memorable experience and end up even more excited about playing music.”

The Rachel Eckroth Trio will perform with the UCSB Jazz Ensemble from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday, May 19 at the UCEN Hub, 558 UCEN Road on the UC Santa Barbara campus. Admission is free. The performance is sponsored by Gretsch Drums, the UCSB Finance Board, The UCSB Jazz Ensemble and the UCEN Hub.

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