

Family ties aside, Sloan is her own Wainwright

September 7, 2007

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It's a big family. You've got Loudon Wainwright III, once declared a "new Bob Dylan," who's been singing and recording personal folk songs for coming on four decades now. His ex-wife is Kate McGarrigle, of Canada's beloved McGarrigle Sisters. Their children are singer-songwriter Martha and the grandiose pop star Rufus Wainwright. One of the Roches and her daughter lurk in this family tree, too. Everyone has their own career, and sometimes they even sing together.

But, as Yoda once said, there is another.

Sloan Wainwright -- Loudon's sister, Rufus and Martha's aunt -- is the undiscovered treasure of this musical dynasty. Writing and singing since her youth (she's not quite 50), she's been recording only for the last decade. But already her six CDs have set her apart from her brother's witty, documentarian and occasionally caustic songs.

"My songwriting is very different from Loudon's," says Sloan during a phone conversation from her home in Katonah, N.Y. "We're such different people, and we come from a very different place as far as expressing ourselves."

Loudon's songs frequently dwell on undisguised family issues. His divorces are well-chronicled in his catalog, as are various escapades and bouts with the kids ("Rufus Is a Tit Man," "Father/ Daughter Dialogue," "Five Years Old"). Rufus and Martha have returned the favor on their own albums, and even Sloan has mentioned the relatives in her own music.

But in "The Baby and the Bathwater," from her most recent album, "Life Grows Back," she sings the woe of all such biographical songwriters: "*Why must we have an audience / To applaud our every confession?*"

"That song itself is a family song," she says. "It's kind of an auntie giving some auntie-ish advice about being grateful for the good stuff that comes in life, and that line, that's really kind of asking the question about the predicament many of my friends and family are in, this situation where we do work ourselves out in front of an audience. And maybe it's not always such a great idea."

Sloan's recording career came late because she was sidetracked for 23 years as co-owner of the Bakers Cafe in Katonah. Throughout that experience, though, she continued singing and performing, developing her stage chops and her unique, contralto voice before learning to apply it in the studio.

"The way I see it, there's the art of writing songs, the art of working with your instrument, then there's the art of creating a record, which is entirely separate, and then there's the art of performance," Sloan says. "To me, they're all kind of separate. ... One thing with my songs and my voice that I've learned to do over the years is to kind of use my voice -- not my writing voice but the sonic part of my instrument -- to rearrange what people are thinking in a performance. ... It's not so much about what I'm saying as how I'm saying it, the way words go together and the way I make them sound."

Chicagoans can experience such rearrangement when Sloan Wainwright makes a rare appearance here -- on radio, at least. She and her trusted guitarist, Stephen Murphy, will perform live on "Folkstage" at 6 p.m. Saturday on WFMT-FM (98.7). (Only members of the WFMT Fine Arts Circle can attend the broadcast as the studio audience.) She'll be playing songs from "Life Grows Back."

She also will appear with Dorothy Scott and Maura O'Connell at a benefit show, "A Women's Night Out: The Art of Music," at 8 p.m. Sept. 15, at the Door County Auditorium in Fish Creek, Wis.

Loudon also has a Chicago date ahead: Sept. 22 with Lucy Roche (his daughter by Suzzy Roche) at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

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