

Chanteuse Jessica Fichot in Santa Barbara

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By Eugene
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Armed with her accordion and an angelic, jovial voice, Los Angeles–based chanteuse Jessica Fichot will appear at the Live Oak Festival with her quartet band and an eclectic set list that takes inspiration from her broad cultural roots. This is not her first time in Santa Barbara; previous years saw her play at both the French Festival and the I Madonnari Festival. Fichot and company will add an international flair to the already sonically diverse lineup that is set to perform throughout the three-day event.

Fichot's music — French chanson infused with hints of gypsy jazz and international folk — has won the hearts of live audiences across the globe. Critics aren't immune to her enchanting sounds, either, with praise for her discography coming from *L.A. Weekly*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and KCRW. Her two full-length releases — *Le Chemin* in 2007 and *Le Secret* in 2012 — maintained the whimsical, spontaneously delightful tone that characterizes Fichot's brand of chanson while allowing for occasional detours into other genres.

However, she took the musical equivalent of an extended vacation on the 2014 EP *Dear Shanghai*, capturing the popular sounds of early-20th-century Shanghai. Of the seven tracks, the majority are covers of her favorite tunes from that era; the rest, Fichot said, are originals composed “as if they were written in the '40s in Shanghai.” That style of music is called *shidaiqu*, described as a mix of European-style jazz and Chinese singing. Her adoration for *shidaiqu* goes beyond aesthetic enjoyment. “It was not just about me singing Chinese songs,” Fichot explained. Due to Shanghai's international, specifically French, influence in its history, “there were a lot of similarities between the music that influenced my French chanson and this music from Shanghai,” she said. Even Fichot's preferred accordion shows up in both genres. So despite the familiarity her audience has with her talents as a chanteuse, she ultimately concluded, “It felt right to do this album.”

Parsing through Fichot's bio, what's most immediately striking is where her roots lie. The daughter of a French father and Chinese mother, she is nevertheless accustomed to occasional false assumptions about her race. “I do feel weird when people can't recognize that I'm part Asian; they just think I'm white. I don't think I like it,” Fichot laughed. “I guess it's always hard to place your identity when you're mixed, but I think being of mixed heritage is kind of an identity of its own.”

While others sometimes fail to identify her biracial heritage, Fichot herself underwent perceptual changes over the course of her musical journey. Growing up in the Parisian suburbs, “I only wanted to play and write American music,” she said. Only after graduating from Berklee College of Music and moving to Los Angeles did Fichot fully embrace the language and music of her childhood. The addition of *shidaiqu* in her musical identity reflects not only the duality of her heritage, but also the underlying relations between seemingly contrasting cultures.

Chanson, which directly translates to “song,” is used to describe a broad range of music similar to our use of the term “singer/songwriter.” According to Fichot, *chanson* is “a style of music that's very vocal-driven and in French.” But vague working definition aside, *chanson* also has a rich history filled with star power: Charles Aznavour and Édith Piaf, to name a few. Given the massive — and often specific-to-tradition — expectations we usually demand from practitioners of established genres, does French *chanson*'s history give Fichot more to worry about? “Uh, no,” she replied with amusement. “I try not to overthink it It's easy to put pressure on yourself when you write, but I just write what I feel like writing, what I like, things I want to express, and hopefully people like it.”

In fact, Fichot contends, the tradition of *chanson* allows for greater leniency in experimentation and modernization. While the classics are still revered, audiences leave enough head space for modern takes on French *chanson* to blossom. In particular, Belgian dance and hip-hop artist Stromae has received comparisons to compatriot Jacques

Brel, a mid-20th-century master chanteur. The essence of chanson is maintained and expanded upon due to, not in spite of, modern production techniques and uncommon stylistic marriages. Fichot's take on French chanson is imbued with a similar air of creative association. Percussion is not just drums but includes everyday household items, as well. Her tracks are mixed in accordance to contemporary guidelines: less reverb on the vocals, more compression on the instrumentation.

What's next for the international, multicultural singer and bandleader? The next album, in continuation of Fichot's consistent failure to remain comfortably stagnant, will include tracks sung in French, Chinese, and Spanish. Her side project — composing music and sound effect for adventure-based video games — will receive its due attention. In terms of more immediate goals: "I want to finish the game I'm working on now," she said. "It's pretty extensive. And I want to write at least five more songs that I can play with my band, including one that's not in French."

Catch Jessica Fichot and her band's 11:20 a.m. performance on Saturday, June 17, at the Live Oak Festival, which runs June 16-18, at Live Oak Camp (4600 California 154). For more information, see liveoakfest.org.

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