

SXSW Review: Rosalie Sorrels at the Victoria Room at the Driskill Hotel

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So there was Rosalie Sorrels, friend and confederate to folk music giants like Odetta and Ramblin' Jack Elliot, holding forth in luxe surroundings amidst the bas-relief ceiling, swagged lace curtains, figured carpet, hardwood accents and private bar of the opulent Victorian Room at the venerable Driskill Hotel...all in all, the perfect setting for songs about hobos, beatniks, cowboys and poets.

Well, never mind, ain't life funny that way. Sorrels, a raconteur and entertainer of the first order, held forth with to-the-manor-born aplomb. Dressed in black down to her cowgirl boots, resembling no one so much as a hipper Judi Densch, she said without any fear of contradiction, "I'm the only person you know that's written two songs with (legendary beat poet) Lawrence Ferlinghetti."

Even before she was introduced by her Red House Records representative, the irrepressible Sorrels was off to the races, spinning one engaging tale after another and occasionally managing to inject a song like "The Goodnight-Loving Trail," a wickedly clever hipster take on "My Favorite Things," and a meltingly lovely song called (I think) "Starlight On the Rails" into the mix.

"I'm 75, but that's a lot, particularly if you were careless with the first part," she acknowledged. After a cerebral aneurysm almost killed her in 1988, she confessed to having the occasional "senior moment" (a friend in California calls them "rolling blackouts"). But her charm, wit and ability to draw an audience into her own universe are undiminished.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Victorian Room, the pierced, tattooed and blogging young masses passed by, perhaps one in 20 throwing a questioning glance at the graceful silver-haired woman with the guitar. They had no idea what they were missing. As Sorrels said about another party, and she might have been speaking of herself, "Little old ladies are sometimes surprising."