

Odetta an audience delight

by Kevin Washington
Assistant Editor

I always tend to enjoy folk singers in concert, because whatever they do is usually spiritually uplifting, fun and down right entertaining.

Odetta was no exception.

In fact, she takes the fun part to the extreme, and you can never have too much fun.

Odetta performed Sept. 21 in UNC-CH's Memorial Hall for a crowd of 1,300, but she also helped the audience entertain itself as well.

The music of the folk--earthy and ethereal, often mellow, often striking--lends itself well to group gatherings because it is the kind of music men, women and children can share without losing the quality of it. Its quality lies partly in the sharing.

Odetta gave the show its theme and simply moved the audience along with her. As she said early in the performance, "I want y'all to jump into the sea with me because we don't have no time to float."

It seems, for Odetta, that we are all moving somewhere. She sang several children's songs--songs she called, "the songs we hated in school," to pull the audience in. She said in an interview that one of the reasons folk music was still around was because basic human needs have not changed, and children, by far the most human of us all, represents those needs--love sharing, tenderness--on a continuum in history.

But they, like us older adults, are always moving to something, too.

The Georgia Sea Islands song, Kumbiya (something I remember from elementary school), led the concert. Her range, full and magnificent, gave back its haunting spirit which seemed to be missing when Eddie, Skip and the other 23 ten-year-olds in my class tried to sing it years ago. Then she shared the song with the audience, and brought back those memories I had as a ten-year-old of sitting in the middle of 22 other kids, and for the first time recognizing the

fun of listening to 20 children with high voices trying to sound like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, yet achieving a simple, powerful unity which we had never had on the playground or in reading 1.

But the world of children's songs, as she said, is not confined to a universe of sweet, innocent works. Speaking of "Rock a Bye Baby," Odetta said, "You might think of a song as a lullaby, and you're singing it to this little miracle in your arms, but you know its an underground 'I'm o' get you' song."

She nestled an air baby in her cradled arms as she crooned the lullaby, giving it a new meaning to those of us not bright enough to have seen before that it's an, I'm going to get you song.

And she added, "That is a personal dedication to the present administration."

Odetta, who talked as much as she sang, to the audience's delight--said she believed that today was an exciting time, because "we are adding things to history books never put in them before." With that introduction, she dedicated a smooth ballad to the black cowboys, the wandering breed of cowboys who never made the history books.

It is' that road that we wander which gives us life and Odetta said: "Humor is a huge part of our survival kit. We're trudging down the road, get to a fork in it...society has its foot on our throat...You can die on the road...or make a joke or song of it."

"Carry It Home to Rosy," an Alabama sharecropper's song dealt with the humor we need on that road. The Sharecropper, she said, laughs and tells tall tales--he talks about the expensive hound dog he'll never afford. As she said, some of the words didn't make sense, but the understanding was in the delivery--her face emotionally blinding with its smooth pleasurable look one moment and

with sorrow, pain and loneliness the next. Her legs swinging in and out at times, sometimes her foot tapping the floor lightly.

To bring the theme of wandering home, she performed a suite of songs and told the audience, "Just close your eyes and let it take you wherever you want to go." From folk song to white spiritual to haunting ballad, she sped the audience through a range of songs, which she had said earlier could never have been created anywhere else in the world except America.

To finish, Odetta gave the audience 'one of the songs we hate in school' "Home on the Range." In a lazy bebop, almost spiritual translation, she made "Home on the Range" seem nothing like "Home on the Range." Without her guitar, she explained the song, "Now the words we're talking about are

ecology...where the deer and the antelope play...and clean air...where the skies are not cloudy all day...and consciousness raising.

"It's almost like you learned it in school, but I've taken some liberty with it."

By far, the concert topped other folk singer concerts in the Triangle recently (and even those were excellent). Odetta brings that bond between people to the stage effectively and maintains the quality of the show by making it her show.

It's a shame that students at the three area universities, many of whom have never heard folk singers were not allowed to have a second chance with this masterful artist, for she was only here one night, and anyone worth their salt would return the next with one or two or three friends...

Maybe more.



Odetta speaks to her audience
Photo by: Denise Moultrie



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