

Odetta: 'oh, baby, she don't miss'

by J.L. Round

Odetta, big-voiced belle of...Of what - the blues? Yes. Of folk music? That too. Of spirituals? Yes again. But don't stop there. That's not half of what Odetta is. First-rate singer, comic, comedian - the list goes on. She is a complete entertainment package compacted into one energetic body.

Odetta's tall, stately presence commands attention on sight. She flows onto a stage bare except for a stool and a microphone and immediately she fills up the whole space. Her soft, soothing contralto voice puts you at ease instantly. She lets you know she has command and that you may sit back, relax, and let her take you along with her. And take you she does, on an excursion into the sights and sounds of hundreds of years.

Odetta sings, mimics, clowns, and just plain fools around while getting down to the essence of life in her amusing, provocative, and often very serious performing, but never serious without sight of an underlying humour in life. She gives the impression that she really knows what it's all about.

From a long line of singers Odetta is influenced by, and influences in return, many people. But Odetta doesn't imitate. Her singing is her own. Sure, you'll hear Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, and a lot of great singers in her voice. You can hear a whole heritage of black suffering and joy and pride in her too. But, no matter how or what she sings, it always comes out Odetta. And, for a woman who still has to have the house lights out after 24 years because she doesn't like "to see the faces," to quote a line from one of



Odetta sings like crazy

her songs, "Oh, baby, she don't miss."

Odetta is as subtle a singer as she is powerful. Her voice is an extremely rich and agile instrument. And with it she packs in a wide range of emotions which enables her to switch from sentimental ballads to slave songs to lullabies and then double back with a heavy, growling blues number. All this she manages while accompanying herself with a quick,

strident rhythm or a caressing, tender strumming on guitar. She becomes Earth Mother, slave, gentle lover, kind friend as she switches back and forth within an incredibly diverse repertoire of songs. And each one bears Odetta's brand, becoming slightly unique no matter how many times you've heard it before.

But if one were to find fault with the performance, it would lie with the songs themselves. With a voice

as powerful as hers, Odetta seems rarely to use it to its full abilities. The songs chosen ranged in a mid-land of expression. You might say that it was all too civilized. Nevertheless, Odetta projects an amazing amount of vitality from a stage which she makes seem a mere arm's length away. She draws you close with her deep, resonant voice, conversing with you, explaining, describing, striving for the phrase that will best express her thoughts.

Odetta is amusing with her tales, her gentle rebuffs of the follies of others, her comic songs. She is a singer who acts out her songs. She is an actor who sings her parts. She is an earthy singer with a voice that at times defied gravity and, whether wailing high or moaning low, she sure hits the mark. So, don't try to define Odetta; it can't be done. Ask not what Odetta is, but just sit back and let her do it for you.

COPUS conference

The annual conference for part-time undergraduate students (COPUS) is to be held in Halifax this year, hosted by Dalhousie University. Delegates are expected to arrive from all points across Canada. Preparations are now underway to organize an effective program and ideas for programming are sought from those who would like to have some input into the planning.

This year the conference will be held on a long weekend, beginning May 21 and probably extending until Sunday afternoon on May 23. Registration fees have not yet been finalized but it is expected that Dalhousie's embryonic organization (no part-time organization as yet) will shortly be cranking out all the relevant information.

Some suggestions for seminar topics include: ratification of the present COPUS Constitution; discussion of regional caucuses for part-timers; discussing ways of making part-time student's associations more effective vis-a-vis the university community, the administration, effectiveness of meetings, part-time student news media (newsletters to papers and building exchanges of information between associations).

Despite the fact that Dalhousie's association is just getting off the ground it is not expected that a great deal of trouble will be encountered in carrying off the conference successfully, as advice and assistance has been promised by U of T's part-time association APUS; the Dalhousie Student Union; and Resume, the part-time student press at Laurentian University.

The group at Dalhousie is very keen, so we'll all be expecting great things from Halifax this spring. Invitations are extended to any groups attending to present position papers or seminars of relevant topics. Contact Academic Affairs Secretary Phil Hicks at the Dalhousie Student Union, 424-2419 for more information.

TWO SMALL OPERAS AT DAL

Dalhousie Music Department Faculty and students will be presenting two small operas "Riders to the Sea" and "A Dinner Engagement", in the Sir James Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie Arts Centre on Thursday and Friday, March 4 and 5, at 8:30 p.m. Admission is free.



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