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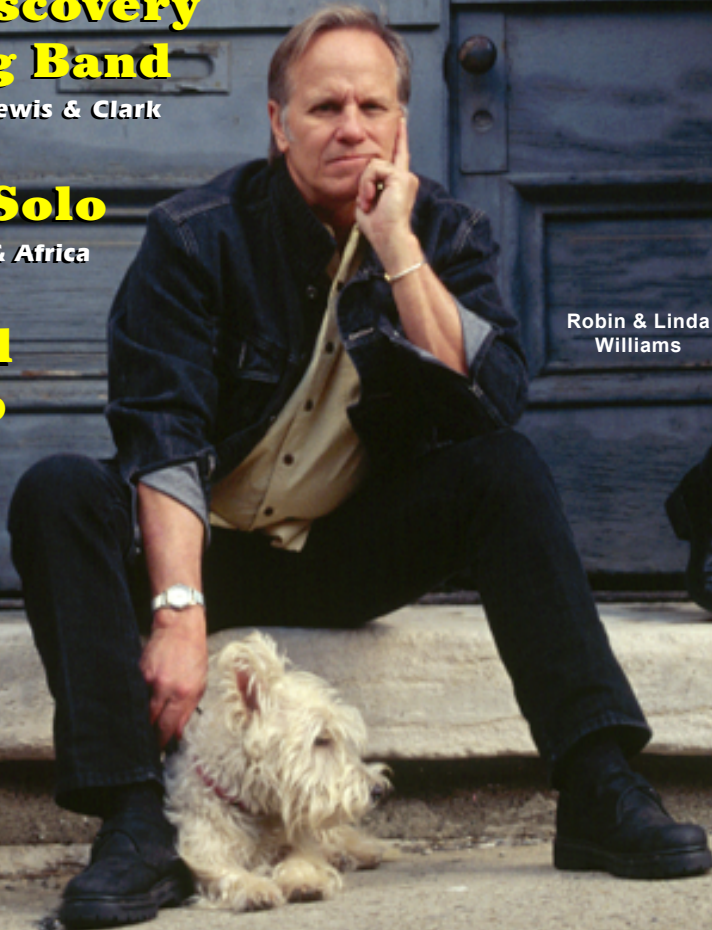
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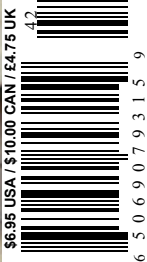




Photo by Cass Fine ©

Rosalie Sorrels:

Passing the Good Stuff On

BY DAVID KUPFER

*“She’s the salt of the earth
Straight from the bosom of the Mormon
church
With a voice like wine
Cruisin’ along in that Ford Econoline ... ”*

— Nanci Griffith, “Ford Econoline”

With her song “Ford Econoline,” Nanci Griffith chronicled the life of a single mother who packed up her kids to tour around the country as a folk singer. About the only thing she got a little wrong was that Rosalie Sorrels was never part of the Mormon church ...

though it was her interest in the early songs of the Mormon pioneers that inspired her to become one of our community’s great folk singers.

Rosalie Sorrels is truly a national treasure, a master storyteller, a respected folklorist, and a legendary traveling diva who possesses a rich, wise voice that flows straight from heart to mouth. Idaho-born and raised, Rosalie is soft-spoken, shy and unassuming with a handsome face and a warm smile. She wears a slight Midwestern twang, delightful laugh and lively sense of humor. But it is Rosalie’s strong sense of self-reliance that has become the trademark of her contribution to the American folk landscape ... and her ability to sing songs about and to those she loves in a wholly unique way that has made her a role model for several generations of female singer-songwriters.

“She’s one of my heroines,” says Pete Seeger. “I remember meeting her when she was a single mother back in 1959. Through the years, she’s risen above her problems and written some of the most wonderful songs, and she became an earth mother to hundreds of single mothers – women in general, really – inspiring them to rise above their problems and face up to their songs. She showed by her own example of what you can do.”

“Rosalie Sorrels is what I hoped to sing myself into being: a sprung-from-the earth, real live born-to-wander-and-sing woman with the whole world in her voice. She’s the real thing,” added fellow Weaver Ronnie Gilbert.

And Pete’s sister Peggy, continuing, noted that “Rosalie is a true, genuine human being who hasn’t hidden who she is or what has happened to her. It all comes through her singing and storytelling.”

Bruce “Utah” Phillips, who’s own career has intertwined with Rosalie’s over the years, credits Sorrels for giving him a whole new life as a folk singer after he was blacklisted from Utah in 1969. “Grounded in oral tradition and premeditated spontaneity, she’s probably one of the best storytellers in the county. Her influence is broad and deep, as a ballad singer and a jazz singer, all with no formal training,” he said about his friend. “Her contribution to folk is her generosity of her time and talent.”

Even the late, great Malvina Reynolds – a role model for Sorrels – gave Rosalie high praise: “She is such a rollicking anti-hero, such a gutsy woman, adventurous, curious, and ironically optimistic, a first rate poet-songwriter, a great performer, and a genius storyteller.”

Were there an award for “First Lady of American Folk Music,” Rosalie Sorrels would certainly be a leading contender. Although she never really thought about being a performer until she “fell into it” trying to put food on the table as a single mom, her career is now into its 45th year and has brought her onto the stage at such seminal events as the Newport Festival, Woodstock, and the Isle of Wight Festival. She has lived on the road – sometimes driving more than 90,000 miles in a single year – and released 24 albums. Because of her active contributions to, and involvement with, the social history of our country, the University of California, Santa Cruz, has set up a Rosalie Sorrels Archive in recognition of her contributions to American culture in the second half of the 20th Century.

In person, it’s hard not to be impressed by her hip style, her youthful nature, the depth of character, and her personal strength and resilience. Sorrels’ life experiences of tragedy, triumph and everything-in-between are thoroughly embedded in what she does on stage. It has been a rocky road for Rosalie. She’s suffered an incredible number of

challenges in her life, enduring the pain that comes with teen rape, an abortion, putting a child up for adoption, physical abuse, divorce, poverty, incarcerated relatives, a cerebral aneurysm, a mastectomy, chemotherapy, and the suicide of her son. But her inner strength has consistently won ... a tribute to her strength of character and a deep love of family, friends and life. Those tragedies did not break Sorrels. They were hurdles that she used as inspiration for her lifework. “People create folk songs,” she once said, “because they need them to get along with life and the stuff it throws at you.”

Music is clearly a huge part of her life and always will be. Throughout her entire professional career, she has furthered traditional folk music and has become an exquisite songwriter (though she claims that she has “only written 10 or 15 good songs”).

Looking vibrant and energized, she was reflective when we sat down this winter to discuss her life and work.

WHERE I COME FROM ...

Rosalie launched right into painting a vibrant portrait of a great childhood with a wonderfully colorful family. “My people were an eclectic, eccentric, lovable and literate bunch who came to the West to stay: homesteaders, hunters

“Traveling Lady” Rosalie at her Grimes Creek home “... happy to be alive...” having finished chemo-therapy (inset) and pictured early in her journey (below).



Photo by Andy Anderson ©



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and farmers from here and there. My father's father was born in Culpeper, Virginia, into a respected family whose standards said that a male son should be at least a teacher, a preacher, a doctor or a lawyer. I think he became a Episcopal missionary because he wanted to live among the Indians and explore the West. He crossed the Badlands alone with a birch bark canoe and roamed all around Montana, Idaho and Canada for years before becoming the pastor on several reservations and in small communities. His name was Robert Stanton Stringfellow. His wife, Rosalie Cope Stringfellow, was born in Quebec, Canada. Her family were journalists, and eventually worked to make the *Salt Lake City Tribune* what it is today. She and her sister Elizabeth were photographers who used to earn money making spectacular photographs of the western mountains for stereopticians and postcards, and in her later years she wrote for the *Idaho Daily Statesman* and *The Capitol News* in Boise. They lived in tents and lodges all over Idaho, Montana, Canada and Northern California for the first quarter of the century, and finally bought a piece of land near Idaho City where they built a small cabin they lived in when I was a child. I live there now in a log cabin my father built after the original house was destroyed by a flash flood.

"My mother's father was born in Ironton, Ohio, and was a jack-of-all-trades. He worked as a stevedore setting up tents for minstrel shows and Chautauquas, looked for gold in Alaska, fought in the battle of the Maine, and was a labor organizer in Seattle. His name was James Madison Kelly. He married Arabel Beaire who lived near Charleston, West Virginia. She was a nurse in her younger days, and became head nurse at Christ Hospital in Charleston. She was a pretty woman, dignified and a little stern, petite with long chestnut colored hair she piled in three tiers on top of her head ... which she held high at all times. In her photographs there is often an absurd, elaborately folded nurses cap at the top of her abundant hair. She was a Methodist, and brooked no nonsense. He was an avowed atheist – an Irish atheist, and you don't find them lying around just

anywhere. While I can see how she would have fallen in love with him – he was heartstoppingly handsome and given to cursing the horses in Shakespearian language (‘The devil damn the black, thou cream faced loon!’ as he urged them to more quickly draw the plow) – I can’t figure out how they could have met. He had such a wicked sense of humor and such a zest for life. As far as I could tell, she was appalled by everything he said or did. He must have been injured or sick and met her in the hospital. They bought a small 10 acre farm in Twin Falls and built a house there. I stayed there often when my dad and mother were living on the road in a homemade trailer.

“My Dad was a road builder and traveled all over Idaho building two-lane highways. I attended first grade in Twin Falls, but I got all my best teaching from the family. I was read to, or sung to, every night of my life. My Irish grandfather taught me all the soliloquies from Hamlet and when my grandmother said, ‘She’ll never understand them, Jim ...’ he replied: ‘She’ll understand everything soon enough, Sue’ – he didn’t like the name Arabel, so he called her Sue – ‘but first she has to hear the music of the words.’

“My father, Walter Pendelton Stringfellow, and my mother, Nancy Anne Kelley, met at Idaho State University. They both loved books and theater. I have pictures of them together in light operas and cavorting around the campus. They loved music, too ... and each other. It was a lifelong romance with all the dark and light sides ... all the highs and lows, rich and riotous. Their pictures together remind me of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda. They loved and fought full bore, and were splendid



Photo by David Gahr ©

parents who treated me and my brother Jim like we were the most interesting people they ever met, and as though we could do anything we were smart enough or strong enough to do. They gave me access to the world by teaching me to read and withholding nothing. We never had money, but we had a good place to live, wall to wall books, enough to eat, and music of all styles from opera to jazz to country to folk. If we didn’t have it or couldn’t get it, we made it. We were rich.

“Dad drank too much and died too young, but I remember him with great pleasure. My mother – who taught me the value of solitude above all – retired from the bookshop she managed for almost twenty years and lived in the cabin my father built with his hands alone until she was too frail to stay there anymore. I went there and stayed with her for several years, but she finally had to move to a small apartment in town – Boise. She hated it, but put up a gallant front and died with dignity, surrounded by those who loved her. To the end she kept her

keen mind, her edge and her wicked sense of humor (which she inherited from her father). Her favorite aphorism suitable for framing at that time was: ‘I don’t want the cheese ... I just want to get out of the trap.’”

MARRIAGE, CHILDREN AND FINDING THE MUSIC

Rosalie married Jim Sorrels when she was only nineteen years-old. “We stayed married for thirteen years. I had five children: Kevin, Holly, Shelley, Jacqueline and David (who took his own life in 1976, but is present always in the company). The marriage broke up in 1966 and I went home to Idaho to try to figure out how to take care of all those kids. I didn’t know how to do anything but cook and clean and take care of children. I had no marketable skills, and no credentials other than having graduated from high school ... But I knew how to sing, and I had a huge collection of traditional songs and many friends from the community of folklorists and musicians who had introduced me to the people’s wealth of music, lore, stories and mythologies. I wrapped it all up in my invisible backpack and became a folk singer because I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know how to do *that*, really ... I had to learn it while I was doing it. I



(Above) Rosalie at her first appearance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1966. (Left) Rosalie’s parents, Nancy Anne Kelley Stringfellow and Walter Pendelton Stringfellow.

Rosalie joins Nina Gerber and Nanci Griffith onstage at the 2000 Philadelphia Folk Festival. (Inset) Rosalie and "U Utah" Phillips in 1996 when they recorded *The Long Memory*, an album of labor songs.

Photo by Robert Conwin ©



Photo by Ray Humold ©

lived like a gypsy moving from place to place.

"During the course of my marriage – after the first two babies and a move to Salt Lake City – I had begun to take advantage of the University of Utah. I took some acting classes in the adult education department and decided to learn the guitar. Dean Harold Bentley, the director of the extension division, truly believed that if everyone could play the guitar and sing together, the sorrows of the world would melt away like dew on a warm summer morning and war and pestilence would vanish. He came to the classes, put the students on in concert, had us all out to his ranch and generally treated us like family. Pretty soon he had me teaching the classes I'd just taken. He got me some theory lessons from a real music teacher, gave me a classical guitar to play instead of that old Stella with the two-inch-off-the-neck action, and finally brought Wayland Hand (a native of Logan, Utah) from UCLA's magnificent folklore department to teach "An Introduction to American Folk Music" one summer in the late '50s. I sat in on the class and got hooked on the concept of oral transmission: the passing down of spoken and sung stories from generation to generation by word of mouth, person to person. History comes alive when you add that human and personal dimension and the information available through old songs and stories. It colors every piece of information with the stuff of life.

"Right after the birth of my middle daughter, Dean Bentley and Dr. Hand arranged for me to go to UCLA for a very important folk music seminar. If I learned enough, I was to start a folk music society at the University.

"The faculty of the three-week gathering included Bess Lomax Hawes, Herbert Halpert, Richard Waterman, John Greenway, Charles Seeger, Ed Cray and Wayland Hand with guests Guy Carawan, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, and more. I attended these classes day and night. Guy was my mentor and guide. I also went with him to the Ashgrove, a great performance space and caught Bud and Travis, Cynthia

Gooding and some others I can't remember. Only a couple of years later, I was performing there with Oranim Zabar and later with The New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen. I first heard Jean Ritchie there – and Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley, not to mention all the amazing pickers and singers in the L.A. area.

"When I got home to Salt Lake City, I began to bring some of the people I'd met: Jean Ritchie, Jesse "the Lone-Cat" Fuller, Eddie James "Son" House, Guy Carawan and Ramblin' Jack Elliott. I never thought I'd get to go anywhere, so I wanted to hear these people in person. The University brought in Pete Seeger and Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven! I started a radio program so my friends could hear even more.

"I began to find all the great pickers and singers around Salt Lake City and have gatherings at my house every Friday night where we would trade songs and hot licks. We'd share food and wine and try to absorb the political conflagration that was moving toward us during that era of change."

MUSIC TAKES OVER

Rosalie started performing in the ski resorts, in prisons, in mental hospitals, at the University of Utah and other schools in the area. "I'd sing for anybody who'd want to hear me. I was one of the few people collecting traditional songs in the West. I was

a shy singer, and not really acquainted with my own voice, but I was invited to the Newport Folk Festival in 1966 (I think because of Jean Ritchie and Mike Seeger) to sing those songs. I had accepted the idea that you should keep yourself out of the performance when you sang folksongs: 'the song ... not the singer,' but at the festival I heard an endless number of marvelous performers: Jean Ritchie, Joe Heaney, Howlin' Wolf, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Dorothy Love Coates, Phil Ochs, and Buffy St. Marie (who was a revelation). It became clear to me that you take it all in, turn it over and over until you find your own voice, and take your place in the chain. The music does not need to be protected. It will continue forever.

"During my formative years, Salt Lake City was a good town for jazz. Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Lester Young and Dizzy Gillespie came in on the air, but the big bands came in buses ... in person! Basie, Ellington, Kenton, Herman, Chet Baker, Shorty Rodgers and his Giants, Hampton Hawes, Art Tatum, Erroll Gardner and some of those huge traveling jams ... one night festivals of jazz that had it all, and made this country girl's head swim.

"Meanwhile, I got myself a tape recorder and started accosting perfectly nice old folks who were minding their own business asking them for their old songs and stories, and they gave them to me. I collected a couple of hundred old Mormon songs about crossing the plains and settling the area and learned more than I thought there was to know. I read way more history than I would have otherwise. I was curious and wanted the answer to the age old question: 'What's happening?' I read

everything I could get my hands on, listened to every kind of story, and learned more than one song everyday.”

Rosalie went on to add, though, that Malvina Reynolds was probably her biggest single influence. “I think Malvina was probably the most instrumental. When I met her, I was having a really hard time. She would put me to work helping someone who was having an even harder time, and I would notice that my hard time was probably negligible. She squired me along quite a bit and affected my future. Not that she meant to teach people a lesson ... she just knew a lot and communicated that.

“I first met Malvina when I had a radio show in Salt Lake City on the university station. It was a folk music show, and Folkways sent me everything they put out. They sent me her album, *Another Candle*, and I thought she was so great. I just loved the sound of her voice. She didn’t start performing until she was almost 50, and people used to say she couldn’t sing. But I loved the sound of her voice. It reminded me of Ethel Merman. She had kind of a grassy sound, she was very direct, and she had a great sense of humor. I just loved her songs, too. They said real stuff.

“There was a folk festival in Berkeley, and I went to meet some of the people. I was certain she would be one of the headliners and I asked around and was told she was not a real folk singer because she did not sing any traditional music, she wrote everything she sang. I kind of stood there with my mouth open. ‘She’s down in the cafeteria doing sing-a-long, she does that really well,’ I was told. Not long after that I was in a couple of folk festivals with her and I was so taken by her spirit and her sounds that I decided I had to meet her. My marriage was breaking up, and I actually came to the Bay Area in 1967 to live. I started asking people where does she hang out? They looked at me like I was crazy and said, well, she doesn’t hang out, you have to go to her house. I thought, I can’t do that!! I was basically pretty shy ... but finally I went and said ‘I’d like to get acquainted with you and be your friend.’ She let me right in and took me under her wing.”

MAKING RECORDS ... AND COMMUNITY

Rosalie made her first record very early on ... a collection of the traditional songs from Idaho and Utah, recorded in 1958 and released in 1959 by Folkways. It wasn’t without controversy, though.

“Moe Asch had asked me to do songs that were typical of Idaho and Utah, but he didn’t like one of the choices I made. He never told me, of course, I got the news through the grapevine. It was a children’s song, a favorite in both states. I’ve collected it over and over in the West. The truth is that I don’t like it much myself. It’s a racist ditty, disrespectful to the Chinese, but, nevertheless, it’s typical. I took it out and replaced it with a great song about Utah’s ‘Dixie,’ the almost tropical southern part of the state. I’ve always been

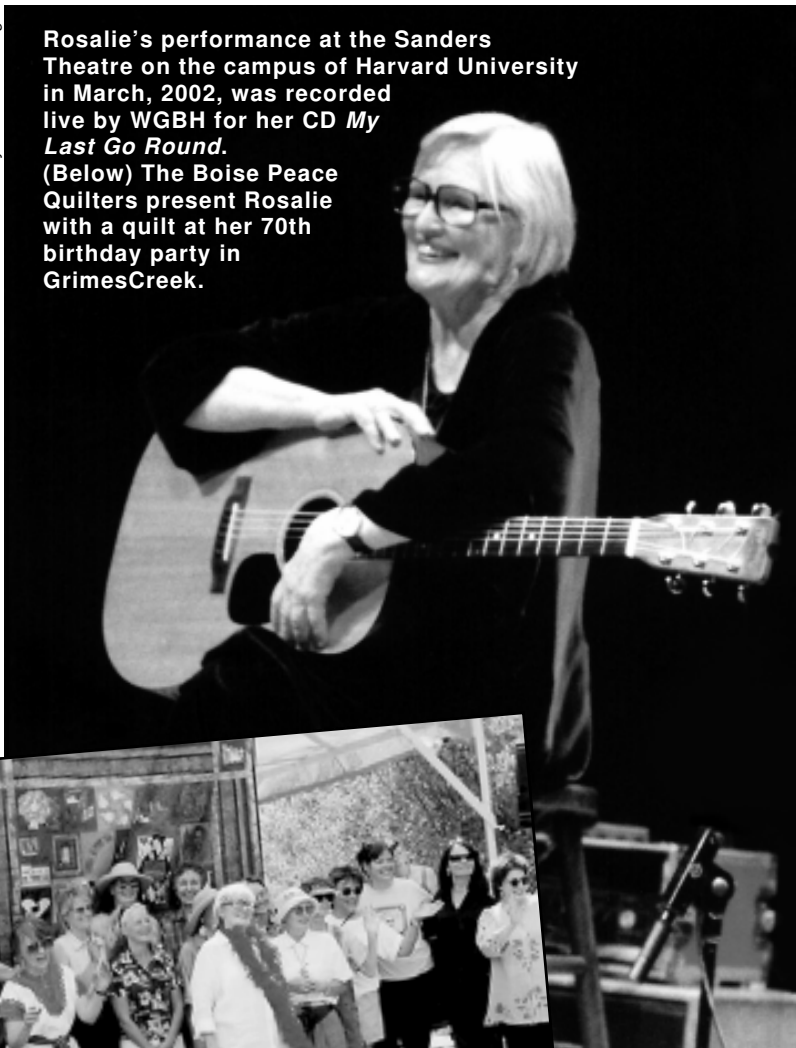
sorry I let him bully me into doing that. It’s useful to know both sides. You need to know who you’re dealing with before you can change the ways you deplore.”

It was almost a decade, after her appearance at the Newport Folk Festival, that she returned to the studio to make a record for Folk-Legacy. And then five more years before she began making the series of recordings that helped her rise to prominence in the folk community of the 1970s for Sire, then Green Linnet and Red House. In the midst of all this, though, Rosalie returned to a project celebrating the lore of her home state.

“When I came home in the late 1980s, the Idaho Statesman ran a headline: ‘Notorious Stranger Returns.’ After more than 15 years of exile on the road, I got a job making a collection of Idaho folk music into a book celebrating the state’s centennial. It was called *Way Out in Idaho*. I spent nearly three years visiting every little town, every reservation and every celebration ...

Photo by Paula Rosenberg ©

Rosalie’s performance at the Sanders Theatre on the campus of Harvard University in March, 2002, was recorded live by WGBH for her CD *My Last Go Round*. (Below) The Boise Peace Quilters present Rosalie with a quilt at her 70th birthday party in GrimesCreek.



all the while collecting songs and stories from every-damn-body.

"I loved putting together that book, but it was contentious all the way. I think they wanted a sort of chamber of commerce advertisement of the western world, but the crew of people working on it, including myself and the publisher Jim Hepworth, wanted the real skinny. One of the songs was 'Old Judge Duffy' from Harry Tams of Moscow, Idaho. It's commonly sung all around the state and the story is that it actually happened in Florence, Idaho. There was a murder. A woman was killed. Everyone knew the blacksmith did it, but there was only one blacksmith."

... So Duffy rose up in the court like a lord,
And with these words, he settled the strife:

'I move we discharge him, we need him in town,'

And he spoke out the words that have gained him renown:

'We have two Chinese laundry men ... everyone knows ...

Why not save the poor blacksmith and hang one of those?'

The folks that hired Rosalie to do the book wanted that song removed. "They took it out. They said it didn't make Idaho look good. You can't make Idaho look good to the Chinese! [laughs] They were treated horribly: not allowed to own property, paid poorly, lived in abominable conditions, died by the hundreds, persecuted and disrespected, and never even called by their names. In the hundreds of newspapers from that era that I read, all Chinese men were called "John Chinaman." The women were sold into prostitution and were often referred to as "poker brides," having been gambled away like summer wages (as it says in another song I hear around the bars).

I took my name off the book. But then the publisher made them put the song back the way I had it, so my name went back on and I'm proud of the project. The people I collected the stories and songs from are proud of it, too. My favorite review was a message from Rosephine Coby, a Shoshone/Bannock teacher from the Fort Hall Reservation near Pocatello. She said: 'In all the years I have lived here – which is all my life – I have never known who my neighbors were. Now I know them all from your wonderful book, and I'm proud to live here.'"

That pride, eventually, led to Rosalie founding her own label in 2003, also named, suitably enough, Way Out In Idaho.

"I gained control over most of the recordings I have made, and started a small company. I'm producing my CDs myself, and selling them on my website (<www.wayoutinidaho.com>) and when I perform. I hope to eventually take on other artists and sell them in independent stores. Red House is going to

DISCOGRAPHY

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CONTACTS

BOOKING: Way Out in Idaho, P.O. Box 1204, Boise, ID 83701; Ph: 208-869-1261; E-mail: <rosaliesorrels@hotmail.com>

ON THE WEB: <www.rosaliesorrels.com>; <www.wayoutinidaho.com>


distribute the label, and that's really great for me, they are honest and do a good job of distribution. I'm tickled when people want my work.

"I make the CDs at home in Idaho – 250 at a time. I've released a compilation CD made up of cuts from albums I made between 1967 to 1994 ... and I've just produced (with a lot of help) *My Last Go Round*, a recording of a gathering at the Sanders Theater in Cambridge. The title was inspired by Ken Kesey's book about the last roundup in Pendleton, Oregon (1911). I can't believe how well it turned out. It is dedicated to my old dear friend Dave Van Ronk, who was supposed to be there but passed away a few weeks beforehand. So that's what I am doing ... and putting my company together.

"I live in the mountains among a diverse community: mountain people, retired people – people older than me and I'm seventy – survivalists and iconoclasts. I like them, and

we seem to get along. We help each other sometimes, and we have different ideas on what you need to survive. I do benefits for the local fire department, and they saved my house twice. I do concerts for small arts councils, schools and libraries. When I say where I live, outsiders often say, 'Oh, there's nothing but a bunch of white people there,' or 'potatoes' ... but this place has five huge reservations, a large population of Basques, and many Hispanics. It's as diverse as it can be. Best, tho', it's still fairly empty of people.

"My parents' spirits inhabit every inch of the cabin where I now live with my dog, Lenny Bruce Peltier. I am visited by my children. The wall to wall books keep me company. The garden keeps me attached to the earth. All the wild creatures keep me on my toes, and music gives me joy and keeps my mind alive. My children are bringing their children - I have five grandchildren and two great grandchildren. My friends bring me back my youth and the riot that has been my life. Politics keeps me awake and stokes the fire. You need to stay awake. Get rid of the dreck and pass the good stuff on.

"My greatest hope is that we can save this planet and our place on it. Everyone seems to be worried about what they have and what they mean to get. Our sense of community has almost disappeared. The population is too big and unwieldy. There's no time for small pleasures: nobody makes bread anymore, they use bread machines. There are still communities and people with a sense of place, but they are not connected to each other. I've always felt comfortable wherever I would go because I feel so secure in the place where I live. Maybe I'll just stay home and stop being the 'Traveling Lady' ... or maybe I will come around until I find my way." 

David Kupfer is a Northern California-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in the pages of The Progressive, Whole Earth, Earth Island Journal, and Talking Leaves.

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