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Simple folk charms the Carlyle set

By FRANK SCHECK

JUDY Collins has become an unlikely mainstay at the swanky Café Carlyle in the last few years, singing to members of the Woodstock generation now sipping their pinot noirs.

But there's something so sweetly pure about her that it doesn't seem incongruous — although when this crowd is singing along to her rendition of John Denver's "Country Roads," they're probably thinking about their homes in Westport.

Now 71, the singer-songwriter has retained her gorgeous soprano voice and flowing hair. Strumming her

CABARET REVIEW

JUDY COLLINS

Café Carlyle, 35 E. 76th St.; 212-744-1600. Through June 12.

acoustic guitar and accompanied by a pianist, she provides a warmth that transcends the room's soft lighting. She

opened Tuesday night with "How Can I Keep From Singing?" It's clearly a rhetorical question, as Collins delivered a generously lengthy, 90-minute set that she seemed reluctant to end. None of her material seems tossed off — she invests all of her song choices with deep meaning, from her loving "My Father" to a paean to her longtime home "Denver" to her moving song about 9/11, "Kingdom Come."

A folk singer through and through, Collins seems most comfortable when telling stories through her songs, as with the classic "Barbara Allen" or her own "The Blizzard."

She takes material that would seem hokey in lesser hands — "Danny Boy" or "Ghost Riders in the Sky" (with its "yippie-yi-yay" refrain) — and makes them fresh with her unaffected approach. And she's clearly not competitive, singing songs by such contemporaries as Joan Baez ("Diamonds and Dust") and Joni Mitchell ("Midway").

Throughout the evening, she delivered amusing, sometimes self-deprecating comments. "I like to look back, but not to stare" was a typical aside. After a quick effort at tuning her guitar, she muttered, "That's close enough for folk music."

Her encore was her signature hit "Send in the Clowns." Even after a year of its being sung at countless Sondheim tributes, Collins made it sound like a revelation.