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## Dose of Nostalgia for What Never Was

“Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home” isn’t just the title of the easygoing standard by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer that describes the vagabond life of a happy-go-lucky drifter. It could be the theme song of Johnny Rodgers, a bandleader,

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REVIEW

singer-songwriter, pianist and traditional jazzman, who suggests the tow-headed boy next door striding down a country road as he travels from one style to another.

At the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel, where he and his band began a three-week engagement on Tuesday evening, Mr. Rodgers, who was brought up in Miami, dropped his imaginary hat on many posts. The majority were in the mythical “Southland” celebrated in “The Birth of the Blues,” a song he and his musicians took at a brisk pace and pointedly resisted turning into an anthem.

A nostalgic Southern ambiance was the defining quality of Mr. Rodgers’s music at Tuesday’s opening-night show. He is a steady pop-jazz crooner whose voice acquires more personality and confidence the more forcefully he sings. “It Should’ve Been Me” evoked early Ray Charles, and a breezy “Jailhouse Rock” paid tribute to the King himself.

The rambunctiously funny “Huggin’ and Chalkin’ ” a song associated with Hoagy Carmichael, celebrated the charms of a 303-pound “baby blimp” named Rosabelle Magee, whose suitors carry pieces of chalk to mark their places as they circle around her from opposite directions and risk colliding.

Here Mr. Rodgers and his musicians conjured a hazy realm of folk-blues-pop-country-jazz

*Johnny Rodgers appears through May 29 at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel, 59 West 44th Street, Manhattan, (212) 419-9331, [algonquinhotel.com](http://algonquinhotel.com).*



Johnny Rodger Photo: Bill Westmoreland

innocence where mountain dew sparkles on a haystack as farm boys in overalls cavort with girls in gingham dresses, and the strains from a juke joint down the road drift across a field. If it wasn’t “authentic” in any scholarly sense, it made for an engaging fantasy concocted by a grown-up Andy Hardy.

Mr. Rodgers and his band members even have roustabout nicknames: he is “Poppy Sunshine,” the bassist Brian Glassman “Mud Man,” the drummer Danny Mallon “Mad Dog,” and the guitarist Joe Ravo, who on one number made his instrument sound like a banjo, “Cotton Eye Joe.”

There is another side to Mr. Rodgers, the canny pop craftsman, which came through in his heartfelt ballads. “The Best of You in Me” (written with Richard Barone) echoes the Celine Dion hit “Because You Loved Me,” and “Sweet Georgia Smile,” is an appealing honeysuckle lullaby of eternal devotion.

So who, finally, is this talented chameleon? If you fused elements of Billy Joel, Peter Allen and Johnny Mercer, a silhouette begins to emerge.