

By MELISSA DRIBBEN, *staff reporter*

Their passion lights up rooms

There's someone to fill every obscure niche in society. People who will sort your recyclables. Rent you a jukebox. Dye your hair blue to match your sneakers.

So, given the big picture, maybe what Rollin Wilber and Sally Lou Nation do isn't all that weird.

They sell antique lighting. Let me re-phrase that. They live, breathe, sleep, bathe, play the piano, and sing beneath a tangled canopy of thousands of unplugged fixtures, which they repair, restore, polish, rewire and then sell.

"It's one of those unexplainable life paths," says Rollin.

He is a classical pianist and composer. She is an actress and singer and landscape designer.

He is 44. She is 64. They fell in love 20 years ago, working on a stage production. But after a short time together, they were driven apart by social pressure. Older men take young lovers all the time and are envied, if not admired. Older women who attract younger men are wicked, if not perverted.

"You really are vilified," says Sally Lou.

Ten years ago, they made their way back to one another. "We're both free-spirited," says Rollin. "And utterly content."

Some non-conformists calculate their eccentricity. Sally Lou and Rollin didn't do it on purpose. They just followed their hearts, and wires, and ended up here.

A name with a past

She's a tiny woman in a denim dress with a white lace collar, her hair pulled back in a barrette. Maybe it's the fringed lampshades, maybe its her thin, prim voice. But there's something out of time about her as she sits in a worn leather armchair stroking a Siamese cat.

So you have to ask. That name. She nods. Her ex-husband's grandfather's second wife was Carrie Nation, the crusading prohibitionist.

Rollin seems to have a slight patina, too. He's long and reedy, with a receding hairline, his bony fingers resting on the knees of his jeans.

At first, they hoped to support themselves by restoring an old house to its original, authentic exquisiteness, and then selling. They went broke, but in the process met an antiques dealer who saw how

lovingly they'd repaired the lights. She suggested they try it full time.

"We didn't know the field existed," says Rollin. "But we jumped in, off the cliff both feet, whole hog."

They've turned their 1910 home on Dexter Street in Manayunk into a museum of electrical excess. There isn't a bare inch of ceiling space. All three floors are dripping with crystal chandeliers. Art Deco lamps from defunct New Jersey ice cream parlors, milk-glass billiard hall lights, and a swashbuckling, gargoyle-laden thing that looks as if it came from a medieval dungeon.

Business burning bright

They used to do all the restoration work themselves. Now, they have more business than they can handle, even though they've never put up a sign and don't advertise much. So they rely on a network of artisans and parts dealers reaching across the country and into Europe.

A tour of the house begins with a green-shaded gas fixture they found in Germantown a couple of years ago, still connected to the gas lines and burning.

On this wall is a neo-Gothic sconce with hand-wrought iron spikes that a dealer

unearthed in the Poconos. In the dining room hangs the ruby-painted crystal ballroom pieces that Rollin found in Prague. In the parlor is a rare, high Victorian, 12-armed monstrosity with griffins, butterflies, lions and Mayan faces carved into thick-limbed brass.

“I call this the room of confusion,” says Rollin as he enters the last cubicle on the third floor.

“Let me give you some light,” he says. He turns on a dim bulb to reveal 1,000 fixtures dangling like cobwebs.

“This is where half of our customers blow out. They say, I can’t deal with this.”

Sally Lou and Rollin often feel a little overwhelmed themselves. “But it’s so interesting,” says Rollin. “And artistic.”

“Yes,” says Sally Lou. “Definitely artistic.”

Then they look at each other and you see they’ve found their niche. And discovered that there are thousands of ways to light up a life.