

Woody Guthrie

By Jeffrey D. Breshears

A folk song is what's wrong and how to fix it, or it could be who's hungry and where their mouth is, or who's out of work and where the job is or who's broke and where the money is or who's carrying a gun and where the peace is – that's folk lore and folks made it up because they seen that the politicians couldn't find nothing to fix or nobody to feed or give a job of work....



I hate a song that makes you think that you're not any good. I hate a song that makes you think that you are just born to lose.... No good to nobody. No good for nothin'. Because you are either too old or too young or too fat or too slim or too ugly or too this or too that.... Songs that run you down or poke fun at you on account of your bad luck or your hard traveling.

I am out to fight those kinds of songs to my very last breath of air and my last drop of blood.

I am out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter how hard it's run you down nor rolled over you, no matter what color, what size you are, how you are built, I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and your work. And the songs that I sing are made up for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you. – Woody Guthrie, 1940, 1945

Unlike later legions of wannabee vagabond folksingers, Woody Guthrie was an original: a creative and eccentric character whose art truly imitated his life. A veritable orphan and nomadic hobo from the time he was thirteen, he set the standard in terms of values and lifestyle for subsequent folksinging troubadours. A man of great contradictions, he was a hard-boiled Marxist/Communist whose favorite historical figure was Jesus Christ, a man who railed against commercialism and the capitalistic music industry yet sold some of his best songs for advertising jingles. A complex man, he was alternately incisive, poetic, sensitive, happy-go-lucky, maudlin, temperamental, erratic, provocative, argumentative, militant, rude, crude and lewd. Stylistically, his unsophisticated rural dialect, bohemian values, and casual manner and attire (work shirt, faded blue jeans and unkempt hair) became the template for hundreds

of young folk, rock and country musicians in the 1960s and afterward. As one of the most prolific songwriters of the 20th century, he wrote dozens of tunes that defined the radical songwriting tradition of the 1930s and '40s, and is best remembered for folk classics such as "This Land Is Your Land," "So Long, It's Been Good To Know Ya," "Pastures of Plenty," "Roll On, Columbia," "The Sinking of the Reuben James" and "Plane Wreck At Los Gatos (Deportee)."

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912 (Bastille Day in France) in the rough-and-tumble town of Okemah, Oklahoma, and named in honor of the Democratic nominee for president that year. His father, **Charley Guthrie**, was a small-time wheeler-dealer businessman, land speculator, ersatz lawyer and local politician who detested socialists and Negroes (he was part of a lynch mob that hung a local black man and his wife in 1910). For a time successful, he built

one of the nicest houses in town, only to have it burn down a month after completion. Then, a combination of bad luck, family dysfunctionality and personality disorders brought near-bankruptcy and bumped the family down a notch or two on the social scale. As his business fortunes soured and his social standing plummeted, Charley increasingly turned to drinking and brawling.

Meanwhile, Woody's mother, **Nora**, apparently plagued by the early symptoms of Huntington's chorea (a terminal disease of the nervous system), grew despondent and volatile. On one occasion she so frustrated her daughter, Clara, that the girl doused herself with coal oil and – purposely or not, no one knew for certain – set herself on fire. She died within a few hours. A couple of years later, the mentally-ill Nora set her husband ablaze one afternoon in a fit of pique. She was shipped off to the Oklahoma State Asylum for the Insane, where she died a few years later. Woody visited his mother a year or so after the incident, but by then she couldn't even recognize her own son.

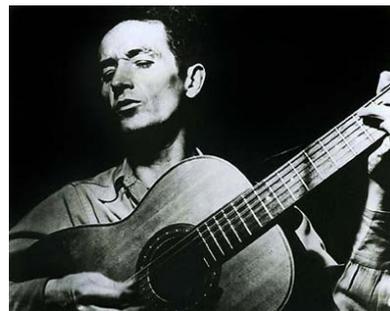
With his mother gone and his father convalescing in a hospital in another town, young Woody found himself a *de facto* orphan at age thirteen. Over the next few years he learned to survive by his wits and sheer determination. He became, by necessity, an "alley rat" who scavenged for food, following the milk truck as it made its rounds each morning and hanging out with the "poor white trash" on the outskirts of town. For a time he lived with his older brother, but they had little in common and more often he cohabitated with the family of a friend. School was tedious and boring, and at seventeen he left town to explore America, hopping freight trains and hitchhiking down to the Gulf coast in the first of many subsequent jaunts he would make in his life. Along the way he met and observed a fascinating assortment of migrant workers, unemployed transients and hoboes – the kind of people he could readily identify with. It was probably on this trip that the seeds of political radicalism were planted, and as the years passed he developed an intense hatred for modern boom-and-bust capitalism and a socio/economic system that failed to provide a safety net for the innocent victims of misfortune and exploitation.

Woody reunited with his father in Pampa, Texas in 1929 and attempted, without much success, to finish high school. But while no star student, he *did* have an active mind, and he became an avid reader at the local library, devouring books on psychology, religion and Eastern philosophy. As a teenager in Okemah he had taken up the harmonica, learning to play it from a local black shoeshine boy in a barber shop, and now he started playing the guitar. His early influences were popular country recording artists like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, and inspired by their success, he formed a group called the Corncob Trio and began playing at local carnivals, barn dances and

socials. A natural-born showman, from the outset he was the center of attention, dancing and singing and mugging for the audience, and over time he developed an engaging vaudevillian stage act combining Chaplinesque mannerisms with Will Rogers-style stage patter. Naturally charismatic and bursting with unbridled energy, he began writing his own songs – or more accurately, writing new lyrics to old tunes his mother had taught him as a boy.

At 21 Woody married a local girl, 16-year-old **Mary Jennings**, and for the next three years he worked sporadically as a sign painter. At one point he got baptized and joined the local Church of Christ, but while his fascination with Jesus and the Bible continued throughout his life he never quite adapted to the disciplines of church life. His eclectic religious and mystical interests ran the gamut from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* to yoga, Eastern meditation and the Rosicrucian Society, but nothing seemed to satisfy. Increasingly restless, he began leaving home for weeks at a time, hitchhiking and riding the rails with no particular destination in mind – a compulsion that drove him to crisscross the country numerous times over the next fifteen years. Then one day in the summer of 1936, he impulsively sprang from the couch and announced that he was heading to California. As he walked out the front door, he turned and told Mary he would send for her and the kids once he saved up some money.

In Los Angeles Woody managed to achieve some local notoriety on Radio Station KFVD performing with a sidekick and co-host, "**Lefty Lou**" (real name: Maxine Crissman). Woody spun yarns, cracked jokes, opined on current events and sang an assortment of traditional cowboy and Appalachian folk songs and old-timey gospel hymns, along with some material of his own. In addition, he usually sang at least one "nigger blues" song on each broadcast – at least, until a young black listener took him to task for his ignorant racial insensitivity. In a letter to Woody the man wrote, "No person... of any intelligence uses that word over the radio today." Having used the 'n' word casually all his life, Woody was startled by the young



man's reaction, but to his credit he read the letter aloud on the air the next day, publicly apologized and vowed never to use the word again. He then

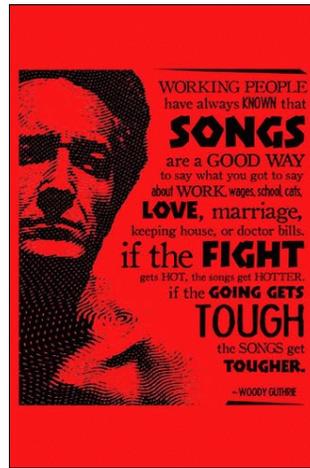
proceeded to rip out all the race songs from his songbook. For the first time it dawned on him that civil rights for blacks was integrally connected to the larger issue of social justice in American society.

Increasingly, as a result of his own “hard travellin’” experiences, Woody was drawn toward radical left-wing politics. He could easily relate to the misery and suffering of the Dust Bowl refugees, the Okies and the migrant families that poured into California in the 1930s, desperately seeking a better life. These were *his* people, and just as Thoreau worked out his ideas in the woods, Woody was inspired by his adventures on the road. Many of his compositions were thematic message songs, ballads and talking blues that dealt with real-life social and political issues. Woody wasn’t the first American balladeer to write this kind of topical protest songs, but like **Joe Hill** and the IWW “Wobblies” a generation before he came to view music as a weapon in the class struggle. He integrated more socio/political commentary into his radio show, and in 1939 he began writing a regular column, “**Woody Sez**,” for a West Coast Communist newspaper, the *People’s World*. He became a celebrity of sorts within the American Communist Party, which promoted him as “the ultimate proletarian” and “the voice of his people.”

By 1940 Woody’s radio program had run its course, so he left L.A. and moved to New York City. Broke and discouraged and periodically debilitated by excessive drinking, he lived in squalor in the Bowery district and channeled his frustrations into writing perhaps his greatest song, “This Land Is Your Land,” a rebuttal to Irving Berlin’s popular “God Bless America.” (In fact, the original working title of the song was “God Blessed America for You and Me.”) Soon, however, his fortunes improved when he was asked to share the stage with some other local folksingers and entertainers in a “Grapes of Wrath” benefit concert. This was his first public exposure on the East Coast, and as Pete Seeger later recalled, “Woody just ambled out, off-hand and casual... spinning out stories and singing songs he’d made up.” Small and wiry and disheveled, a mediocre guitarist who played straight and simple and sang with a dusty, grainy drone of a voice, he wasn’t attractive and he certainly didn’t sound pleasant, but he *did* command attention. He came across as *authentic*, a true voice of the poor and the downtrodden who had experienced firsthand the things he sang about, and his songs perceptively expressed the anger, frustrations, hopes and fears of America’s working class, the underclass and the victims of depression and social injustice. To those who saw him perform that night, he seemed like the reincarnation of Walt Whitman – except with a guitar – and his impact on the audience and the other performers was electrifying.

One of those in attendance was **Alan Lomax**, the assistant director of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress who saw in Woody the personification of the folk ideal. In a series of taped interviews in March of 1940 Lomax recorded most of the songs Woody had written to date. Victor Records followed with a contract, hoping to capitalize on the

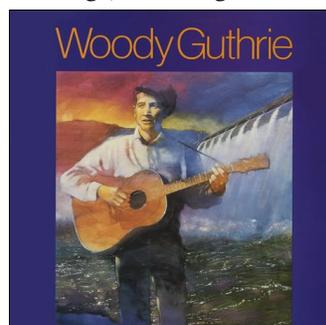
popularity of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* book and movie, and in May Woody recorded his first commercial album entitled, appropriately, *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Although popular among the East Coast leftwing subculture which idealized folk music as “the People’s music,” the album generated little interest otherwise, and Woody Guthrie remained virtually unknown to mainstream America. Other opportunities followed, however, and Woody soon found himself a celebrity, performing regularly on the radio and



enjoying all the perks of stardom, including all the trendy young liberal women he wanted. (One friend likened Woody’s sex drive to a dog in perpetual heat, and Alan Lomax estimated that Woody “must have worked his way through half the secretarial staff in the CBS building.”) Furthermore, he received additional exposure through his “Woody Sez” column in the New

York-based *Daily Worker*, the official propaganda organ of the American Community Party. But all the notoriety aside, it didn’t take him long to wear out his welcome in New York just as he had in L.A. His well-earned reputation for boorish behavior soon alienated many of his friends and colleagues and supporters who came to regard him as a bit too uncouth and unstable to be taken seriously.

Despite the alcoholism and a remarkable collection of character disorders, Woody still experienced periodic spells of responsibility, and later that year he moved his wife and children to New York City. For about a month they lived like a normal family, but characteristically Woody soon tired of domestic life, piled everyone in the car, and headed off once again for the West Coast. Finding little work in Southern California, he eventually accepted a one-month contract with the Bonneville Power Administration in Oregon to write songs for a proposed documentary film on the Columbia River Project. It turned out to be the most productive month of his life as he cranked out 26 songs, including some of his most memorable



ones such as “Roll On Columbia,” “Talking Columbia,” “The Grand Coulee Dam,” “Pastures of Plenty,” and “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (The Great Historical Bum).” It was a Herculean effort, and at month’s end he

collected a check for \$266.66, which worked out to about \$10 per song.

With few options as a solo performer, Woody returned to New York in June, 1941 and joined **Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell** and **Lee Hayes** in the **Almanac Singers**. As one of the first urban folksinging groups, the Almanacs had built a sizable following among leftwingers and unionists. They lived communally in Greenwich Village, toured extensively and sang in union halls and, occasionally, on the radio. The previous November the group had recorded *Songs for John Doe*, an album of pacifistic and isolationistic songs that excoriated FDR for instituting the draft and preparing for war. But now with Nazi armies pouring into the Soviet Union, the Almanacs dutifully followed the Party line, changed their tune, and began clamoring for interventionism.

Initially, Woody fit right in. Painting the slogan *"This Machine Kills Fascists"* on his guitar, he was the most naturally charismatic and animated performer in the group. As an artistic collective, the Almanac Singers typically wrote their songs and worked out their musical arrangements collaboratively, inspiring



The Almanac Singers, featuring Woody Guthrie (far left) and Pete Seeger (center).

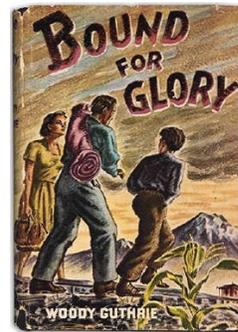
and energizing one another. But now with Woody in the group, the others tended to defer to him. Apparently captivated by his persona, they revered him as the personification of the ideal proletarian: non-commercial, anti-establishment, free-spirited, fiercely independent, and refreshingly uninhibited by bourgeois social conventions. Woody relished his new-found celebrity status, and at least in his mind he was the star even as he took little interest in the day-to-day affairs of the group.

In the summer of '41 the Almanacs toured coast-to-coast and eventually concluded their concert schedule at a giant Labor Day celebration in San Francisco. In October, after the American destroyer *Reuben James* was torpedoed by a German U-boat, Woody wrote his epic ballad, "The Sinking of the Reuben James, eulogizing those who died. (Although he took exclusive credit for the song, it actually was co-written

with Seeger and Lampell, who worked out the chorus.) In April 1942 the group released an album of patriotic and militaristic songs entitled *Dear Mr. President*, and they sang on several overseas broadcasts for the Office of War Information until their Communist and isolationist past came to light.

At that point the group's popularity collapsed, exacerbated by personality conflicts, artistic differences and other internal problems. With his crude mannerisms, erratic behavior and uninhibited narcissism, Woody was the source of much of the friction. By nature he was an individualist and a solo performer, and the group format tended to cramp his style. Seldom sober and often undependable, over time he lost the respect of his comrades. On one occasion Gordon Friesen, one of the Almanac House communitarians, had all he could take of Woody's opinionated pontifications and snapped: "Woody, what are you talking about? You never harvested a grape in your life! You're an intellectual, a poet. All this singin' about jackhammers – if you ever got within five feet of a jackhammer it'd knock you on your ass. You scrawny little bastard, you're just [fooling] the public. You never did a day's work in your life!" Later, Lee Hays admitted that "Woody was hard to take. He wasn't housebroken. If he drank too much, he was obnoxious and rude, at best an unruly child." Millard Lampell was even less charitable. To him, Woody was a self-centered "bastard" and a drunk who repeatedly neglected his family and abused his wife.

With few bookings, the Almanac Singers struggled on for a few months before finally calling it quits. In the meantime Woody completed work on an autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, in which,



characteristically, he played fast and loose with the facts. In reality, the book was as much a novel as an autobiography. About this same time he took up with **Marjorie Mazia**, a performer with the prestigious Martha Graham dance company who, like Woody, was also married. Their frequent liaisons over the next few months produced a baby

girl, and after divorcing their respective spouses the two eventually married in December 1945 following his discharge from the Army.

To avoid the draft Woody joined the merchant marine in May of 1943 along with fellow-folksinger **Cisco Houston**. After serving for five months he resigned, contending that he had done his duty for the war effort. Suffice it to say, his local draft board was neither impressed nor satisfied, so he re-enlisted a second time, and then again once more. Twice his ship was torpedoed by German U-boats, and following his third stint, confident that he had finally beaten the system, he left to resume his music career,

only to be drafted into the Army on May 7, 1945 – coincidentally, the very day that Germany surrendered. Despite his repeated requests to serve in the entertainment special forces, the Army put him through basic training (which he nearly failed) and then assigned him to a communications teletypist post. Frustrated and resentful, he went AWOL in September and fled to New York City, only to have Marjorie promptly dispatch him back to his base. Surprisingly, he was given only one week of detention, and in December he was finally discharged.

After the war Woody joined the **People's Songs** collective of radical songwriters organized by Pete Seeger, and in 1948 he composed several songs for Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party in the presidential campaign. Although only in his mid-thirties, by this time his creative years were behind him, and in the post-war music culture his style was hopelessly passe. While there were still occasional flashes of inspiration – such as his poignant tribute to the plight of migrant farm workers entitled “Deportee” (or alternately, “Plane Wreck At Los Gatos”) – for the most part alcoholism had dried up his creative juices, and he had lost his charisma and audience rapport. After having crafted a unique if mercurial career, he had become what every entertainer fears most: a bore.

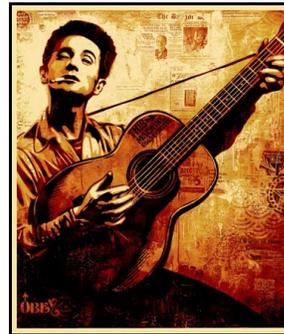
In the immediate post-war era Woody kept a low profile, often deflecting questions about his politics with off-hand comments such as, “I ain’t a Communist necessarily, but I been in the red all my life.” An apologist for Stalin to the end, he refused to criticize the American Communist Party even when faced with irrefutable evidence that it had functioned from the outset as little more than a front for Soviet propaganda. In a letter to an aunt, Woody sought to explain his blind allegiance: “The Communists always have been the hardest fighters for the trade unions... and the equal rights of every person of every color.” Furthermore, he opined, “Communists have the only answer to the whole mess.” Therefore, he wrote, “you can call me a Communist from here on. I’ve been working with them since 1936.”

True to form, when the Korean War broke out in 1950 Woody sided with North Korea and China. But although he had been identified as a Communist as early as 1941 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), he was ignored during the Red Scare of the late forties/early fifties, probably because he was no longer a popular entertainer and the Committee had bigger fish to catch and fry.

Woody suffered the first detectable symptoms of Huntington’s chorea while in the Army, and over the next several years he was plagued by intense depression, an inability to concentrate and a loss of muscle control. In addition, he had been an alcoholic most of his adult life, the affects of which were wreaking havoc on his psyche and his personal relationships. His behavior, never stable, became increasingly erratic. He neglected and abused his

second wife and family just as he had his first, and the situation deteriorated considerably after his and Marjorie’s oldest child was burned to death in a bizarre house fire. Then in 1949 he hit a new low when he was convicted of sending obscene letters through the mail and sentenced to six months in jail. However, as things eventually turned out, he was released after only a month. Like the rich and powerful that he so despised, Woody also had influential friends in high places.

By 1955 his health had deteriorated to the point that he was confined to a hospital room, where he remained for the most part the final twelve years of his life. For the first few years he usually got out for Sunday visits, staying with family or friends, and although lucid and aware most of this time, he gradually lost the ability to communicate orally. By the late 1950s he had become a revered icon to young bohemian troubadours, many of whom flocked around him on these weekend visits. Then, after young Bob Dylan revealed that he had visited Woody on several occasions in his hospital room, such a pilgrimage became a veritable right-of-passage for aspiring folksingers. Ironically, Woody’s greatest notoriety came in the 1960s, long after his active career was over, as a new generation of folksingers and folk groups mined the reservoir of compositions he left behind, breathing new life into many of his songs. As he lay bedridden, decrepit and wasting away, he was also accumulating, as he put it, “big chunks of free enterprise” – some \$50,000 a year – off songwriting and recording royalties. But his health continued to decline, and he finally expired in October 1967.



Woody Guthrie was an American original, and a whole generation of young folk/protest singers in the ‘60s and ‘70s, dubbed “Woody’s Children” by the media, absorbed his worldview just as they strove to emulate his mannerisms and lifestyle. Ultimately, his legacy was passed on not only via the

direct lineage of Pete Seeger and his own son, **Arlo Guthrie**, but indirectly in a creative fusion of folk-based lyricism and innovative musical artistry through the works of talented songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Bruce Cockburn, Kate Wolf, Mary Chapin Carpenter and many others.

Woody Guthrie’s life was a living contradiction. As the prototypical left-wing singer/songwriter, he personified the values of the alienated radical utopian troubadour. At times a keen social critic, he was also a narcissistic, irresponsible and immoral social rebel unbound by what he regarded as bourgeois values. As is typical of many left-wing activists, he aimed to

change the world without first changing himself, failing to realize that the root of all the injustice, hypocrisy and dysfunctionality that he perceived in American society was also present within his own soul. As an admirer of Jesus Christ, he should have heeded the Lord's warning to those who judge others unjustly and hypocritically:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." [Matt. 7:1-5]

- Roll On Columbia
 - Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done
 - Hobo's Lullaby
 - Deportee
 - Jesus Christ
 - 1913 Massacre
 - Union Maid
 - This Land Is Your Land
- Tributes to Woody Guthrie
- "Song to Woody" – Bob Dylan
 - "Bound for Glory" – Phil Ochs

The Essential Woody Guthrie A Selected Discography

Dust Bowl Ballads (Rounder CD 1040)

- The Great Dust Storm
- Talkin' Dust Bowl Blues
- Pretty Boy Floyd
- Tom Joad
- Dust Bowl Refugee
- Do Re Mi
- Dust Bowl Blues
- Dusty Old Dust (So Long, It's Been Good To Know Yuh)

Columbia River Collection (Rounder CD 1036)

- Roll On Columbia
- Talking Columbia
- It Takes a Married Man To Sing a Worried Song
- Hard Travelin'
- The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done
- Jackhammer Blues
- Grand Coulee Dam
- Washington Talkin' Blues
- Pastures of Plenty

Struggle. (Smithsonian Folkways CD SF 40025)

- Struggle Blues
- The Dying Miner
- Union Burying Ground
- Pretty Boy Floyd
- Ludlow Massacre
- 1913 Massacre

A Tribute To Woody Guthrie (Various Artists. Warner Brothers 9-26036-2)

- Oklahoma Hills
- I Ain't Got No Home
- Do Re Mi
- Dear Mrs. Roosevelt
- Pastures of Plenty
- The Grand Coulee Dam