

The Pied Piper:
Woody Guthrie
(1912-1967)
New York, 1943



BOUND FOR GLORY

This machine kills fascists! What has the author of “Old Man Trump” got to say about life in 2017? Fifty years after Woody Guthrie’s death, **Stephen Deusner** examines the life and legacy of a great American hero – from an abandoned plot in Okemah, Oklahoma, to a new generation of protest singers channelling his indefatigable spirit.

ERIC SCHALL / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

Fascist killer:
Guthrie in 1943



MISSING LINK

“My dad was connected”

From **John Cage** to **Bob Wills**: Nora Guthrie explains how her father knew everybody

“**W**E all played classical music around the house as well as folk, and my father had in his collection the first John Cage album. He knew John, as John was the composer for Merce Cunningham, the choreographer. My mother was Merce’s first dance teacher. There are all these connections that seem crazy, but they’re true. This thing my father wrote about John Cage is real. It’s like the ridiculous story about Bob Willis, the Western Swing bandleader. It turned out my dad had written a lyric about Willis’



piano player, Smokey Woods who was known as the Houston Hipster. It turns out he grew up in Okemah with my dad, and became a boogie-woogie piano player known for smoking marijuana. So my dad knew Willis and his band. I’m not saying my dad was at the centre of those styles of music, but he was connected, and friendly with those musicians. He took a lot from John Cage and Bob Willis. He’s the weird link between them. What I try to do is just leave a piece of bread, leave a trail so that maybe someone else will come along and put all these people together and tell their story.

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THE corner of West Beech and South First streets in Okemah, Oklahoma, sits one of the most important empty lots in all of America. It looks fairly anonymous, a rectangle of brittle grass yellowing under the constant prairie sun, sloping gently upwards to a dense thicket of trees and scrubbrush. It’s no different from other empty lots around the country or even just down the street,

home, a larger, newer dwelling in a better neighbourhood, and they moved here to what they called the old London House after its previous occupants. According to Guthrie, the family hated the place, but he didn’t know enough to despise it just yet. In his 1943 memoir *Bound For Glory*, which is so heavily fictionalised it’s often called an autobiographical novel, he writes: “I liked the high porch along the top storey, for it was the highest porch in all of the whole town... [You could] see the white strings of new cotton bales and a whole lot of men

and women and kids riding into town on wagons piled double-sideboard-full of cotton, driving under the funny shed at the gin, driving back home again on loads of cotton seed.” He reminisces about getting stuck up in an old walnut tree, perhaps the same one that bears his name today; he also recalls a “cyclone” shearing the roof right off. The Guthries moved once again, their fortunes and luck dwindling. Woody grew up, got married, travelled the country, served in the military, wrote thousands of songs, sang in the Almanac Singers with Pete Seeger, and died in 1967.

“Woody was bigger than any genre...”

ANNA CANONI

The London House sat empty for decades after the Guthries abandoned it. In the 1970s a businessman named Earl Walker purchased the lot and intended to turn the house into a museum. Already the local boy was considered an icon of American music – he was by far the most famous native of Okemah, yet the town resisted his canonisation, purportedly due to his Communist leanings. Guthrie was never a registered member of the Communist Party, in fact, he was rarely a registered member of any organisation, suspicious as he was of infringements on his freedom. He did make his name playing



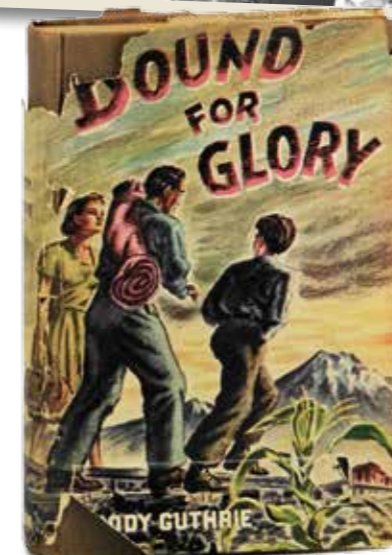
Communist Party rallies in the ’30s, but he seems to have finally settled in as a pro-union Socialist with progressive, albeit occasionally contradictory views on race and class. Many of those beliefs, Guthrie argued, were rooted in his experiences in Okemah, an agricultural town that transformed first into an oil boomtown and later into a ghost town. The region’s fortunes were echoed in the London House, which became a target for vandals and fans who took bricks and wooden planks as souvenirs.

Today there is nothing to officially mark the vacant lot as a historical site. Even that carved tree, a piece of folk art in its own right, isn’t an official installation, but something carved by a local fan. Perhaps that’s fitting, since Woody was an avowed populist, a champion of the common man against the encroachments of corporations and crooked politicians. Okemah finally did commemorate him with an annual folk festival, a small park, and a replica of the London House at the Okfuskee County History Center, but this vacant patch of grass might be a bit more in keeping with Woody, who made himself the subject of tall tales and the occasional outright lie, who penned Dust Bowl ballads based on newspaper headlines, who camped with migrant labourers and rode the rails with itinerants of every stripe, who spent his final decades in a hospital in New York, where Huntington’s chorea took his motor skills, his speech, his mobility, his mind and, in 1967, finally his life. Fifty years on, public memorials and statues are at the heart of an extremely heated discussion of how American remembers its history and how it uses its common spaces. This vacant patch of grass is strangely compelling, even moving in its modesty, in the homemade quality of its commemoration. This empty lot is your empty lot, this empty lot is my empty lot.

WOODY Guthrie remains a popular presence in protest music, a gunny sack full of contradictions and complications. His legacy is twofold: a political figure in music, a musical figure in politics. He might not have been the first guitar strummer to set lyrics about the struggles of the working man to popular song, but Woody remains the most influential and recognisable protest singer, an inspiration and exemplar for nearly every subsequent generation of musical dissenters. Pretty much anybody who has sung about a president or corporate boss has aligned themselves with Woody Guthrie and his populist ideals.

Even 70 years removed from his most active period, he remains politically volatile, even if his politics appear contradictory from the standpoint of the late 2010s. Guthrie was a staunch patriot with a broad definition of American that included not just whites, but minorities and immigrants from every part of the world. He was born into a family with deep prejudicial views (his father reportedly participated in the lynchings of African American men), but Woody eventually rebelled against his upbringing and adopted views that grew more progressive over time. He was a union man who visited migrant camps and mining strikes; a WWII veteran who plastered the military slogan, “This Machine Kills Fascists”, on his guitar, as though music were a weapon. He adopted an exaggerated Okie persona to better sell himself as authentic. He portrayed himself as a loner and a rambler enjoying the quintessential American freedoms of wanderlust and self-determination, yet he loved marches, demonstrations, hootenannies and other communal gatherings of common people. There was glorious strength in numbers.

He loved people, loved hearing their stories, loved hearing about their lives, and that curiosity about his fellow Americans remains highly influential. “To



me one of the problems we’re having right now is this lack of empathy toward other people’s points of view and life situations,” says Patterson Hood of the Drive-By Truckers, whose latest LP, *American Band*, addressed race, class, gun control and other issues head on. “We’ve tried to make that a part of what we do in terms of how we approach our subject matter. Whenever we’ve written about politics, we’ve tried to make it a personal thing, whether it’s one of us or a character or somebody we know. We’ll put them in a situation and let them tell their story.”

Especially in 2017, however, it’s easy to let Woody’s politics obscure the music, to view his legacy as exclusively social rather than artistic. Music was a tool for him, certainly, one that could be used to hold the nation accountable to its founding principles, but it was in many ways an end in itself for a man who was relentlessly, almost obsessively creative. He was a witty cartoonist and surprisingly graceful painter, not to mention a prose writer with an obvious love of words. His newspaper columns and especially *Bound For Glory* collect curious colloquialisms and bend words into a common American dialect.

His truest medium was song, and he wrote in notebooks and journals everyday, often perusing the newspapers for inspiration. Many of those songs were left unfinished; in fact, only about one tenth of the thousands of sets of lyrics he wrote have ever been recorded. He undertook the enterprise of singing and songwriting with great gravity, yet he also wrote some incredibly funny songs. He didn’t merely write about politics, but also about his kids, his neighbours, his car; he wrote about the Grand Coulee Dam and various WPA projects; he wrote love songs and spiritual inquiries. The world around him was his greatest and only source of inspiration, and it was enough.

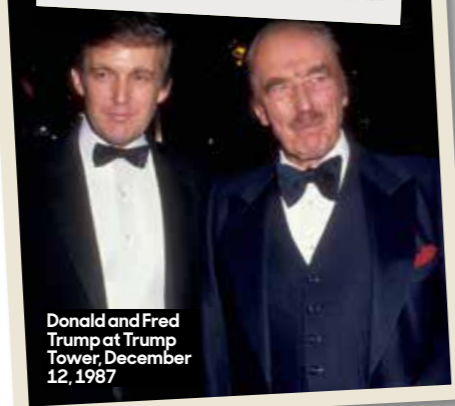
WOODY wrote his most famous tune in 1941, after an arduous cross-country trip. He drove from LA to Pampa, Texas, where his family lived. Then he took a bus to Pittsburgh, hitchhiking the rest of the way to NYC. There, at a hotel called Hanover House on West 43rd Street he reflected on his month-long journey and wrote “This Land Is Your Land”, one of the most popular American songs of the 20th century and, as Ani DiFranco says, “an unofficial national anthem”. It’s a song taught in schools, one of those tunes that seeps into the ether of the nation’s everyday life.

Woody scrawled the verses in an old notebook, one of many filled with songs he recorded and others he never set to tape. At the bottom of that particular page he scribbled a simple phrase that amounts to a complex mission statement, one that sums up his own musical enterprise and inspires others since: “All you can write is what you see.” Songs, in other words, were to him a means of reporting the news, of summing up the times, of gauging the temperature of the nation, of chronicling your own life. It’s a truism, but also a challenge to himself and to others.

In other words Woody doesn’t demand followers. Rather, his music encourages his listeners to be their best and truest selves, to do good and honourable work in whatever form suits them. In that regard some of the albums truest to Woody’s spirit sound very little like him. Alynda Segarra literally followed in Woody’s footsteps: a teenage runaway turned vagabond musician, she hitchhiked and hopped trains across America in the 2000s, then started busking to earn money to move along to the next town, opening herself up to the nation’s landscape and its people along the way. “Woody didn’t know he was instilling a sense of patriotism in this Puerto Rican girl from New York, this sense that America belongs to me, too.” Segarra admits she found her truest



OLD MAN TRUMP RYAN HARVEY



Donald and Fred Trump at Trump Tower, December 12, 1987

expression in the latest Hurray For The Riff Raff album, *The Navigator*, on which she adopts a fictional persona to tell a story that mixes autobiography and science-fiction. “With that album it feels like I’ve finally figured out how to be me. It’s based off of a character, with a whole story to the album. It felt like I had to try on a lot of different personas. I had to go out and experience the country. I had get far away from where I came from in order to say: ‘OK, it’s time to be me now.’ I learned that lesson from Woody. It got in me and I can’t get it out now.”

If you know about Guthrie in the 21st century, it’s likely due to the efforts of Nora Guthrie, who serves as president of Woody Guthrie Publications. She admits she’s an unusual choice

to tend her father’s legacy. She’s not a musician and certainly not a folk singer. Woody’s youngest child, she never learned to play guitar, never wrote songs or sang them for people. Instead, she studied dance. “I’m the last of all the children and the only female in the group,” she says. “I’m the only one who doesn’t play guitar. When all this started happening, I would look up and say, ‘Dad, why me? What do I know about folk music?’”

But she feels she was chosen to do expand his legacy, and she has undertaken the enterprise creatively, working diligently to show every side of her complicated father. She has spent the last 30 years spearheading projects in different media: a new symphonic interpretation of “This Land Is Your Land” by composer David Amram, a collection of Woody’s songs about Jewish culture arranged by the Klezmatics, a book of his artwork, even a walking tour of New York City. She has also given his unrecorded sets of lyrics to other artists so they might add melodies, arrange and record them, and give the world new Woody songs. Perhaps the most famous entries in this new canon have been the *Mermaid Avenue* trilogy of records made by Wilco and Billy Bragg – for a certain generation, Jeff Tweedy’s version of “California Stars” may be the most popular Woody Guthrie song, right up there with “This Land Is Your Land”.

Her inexhaustible efforts have dramatically changed how we view Woody Guthrie in the 21st century, while providing a model for how such multi-faceted artists might be presented to new generations with no firsthand knowledge of them. In 2013 his archives were moved to the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, which has a permanent display of his letters, lyrics, paintings, drawings, wood carvings, and musical instruments. “It’s difficult keeping up with him. He put out so much in a very short time. There’s no end in sight that I can see. It won’t be me who will do it all.”

Perhaps it will be Anna Canoni, billed somewhat modestly as senior operations manager for Woody Guthrie Publications. “So much of my family has been up onstage, so it’s nice to work behind the curtain,” she says. “Woody’s voice has such integrity to it that it deserves to be available and accessible. It’s a family responsibility, but it’s even bigger than that. I can’t fail society by not keeping him alive.”

In 1950 Woody Guthrie moved his family into a new apartment building in Brooklyn called Beach Haven. They lived there only two years, but the short chapter has taken on new relevance in recent years. Beach Haven was, by decree of the US government and by practice of its owner, a whites-only block, one that profited from what the Federal Housing Authority suspiciously labelled “inharmonious uses of housing”. Woody was disgusted to discover this practice, eventually breaking the lease and moving out of Beach Haven. He of course wrote about the experience, in prose and in song, naming the owner in unrecorded lyrics titled “Old Man Trump” and “Trump Made A Tramp Out Of Me”.

Uncovered and published in early 2016 by Will Kaufman, a Guthrie scholar at the University Of Central Lancashire, those lyrics became suddenly relevant nearly 70 years after they were written, when Fred Trump’s son was elected President. As Woody writes in “Old Man Trump”, “I suppose that *Old Man Trump* knows just how much racial hate he stirred up in that bloodpot of human hearts.”

“The lyrics are great and the timeliness of them is just so weird,” says Deana McCloud, executive director of the Woody Guthrie Center, where the original handwritten lyrics are on display. “There’s also a typed document that Woody wrote about Beach Haven, where he talks about the difference races and cultures that are being separated. But he puts out a solution: Let’s you and me get together and talk and sing together and walk together until we sink this goddam race hate together? He wanted to find common ground and solve problems like this together.”

Shortly after the lyrics were published, Nora Guthrie worked with a Baltimore singer-songwriter-activist named Ryan Harvey to set them to music, melding fragments of several unfinished songs into one brand-new Woody Guthrie tune and recruiting Ani DiFranco and Tom Morello (with whom Harvey co-owns Firebrand Records). Says Harvey, “We decided that instead of doing something really folksy, we wanted to do something a little different, something a bit more folk-punk. Let’s update it. It doesn’t have to sound like Woody Guthrie. Ani kept telling me, ‘Go harder. Sing harder. Get angry with it.’”

The trio managed to update the material to the present day, with a punk energy and a snarling urgency. “I didn’t know Ryan before,” says DiFranco, “but we were both like, we have to record this song right now. It shows you how the news recycles itself. I’ve been writing songs for 30 years, and it’s a really sickening feeling to pull out a song from so long ago that sounds like it was written yesterday. I thought, ‘Wow, history does nothing but repeat itself.’”

The lyrics have a time-capsule effect, as though Woody was documenting his present to predict



Rick Danko and Robbie Robertson with Dylan at the New York Seeger benefit, Carnegie Hall on January 20, 1968

the future. Says Harvey, “If you take that story and you look at Woody Guthrie as representing left-wing populism and if you look at Fred Trump as representing right-wing private interests, the song becomes a snapshot of the entire history of the country. You listen to Woody Guthrie and some of those songs could have been written right now.” While “Old Man Trump” has remained relevant well into 2017, Harvey has no illusions that his or Guthrie’s music will soundtrack the movements reshaping America in the 2010s. “I’m a white male folk singer. We’re not going to be the people writing the big songs affecting these larger movements. There are new forms of music and other voices that are carrying a lot further and are a lot more relevant at this moment. Bob Dylan isn’t going to be writing the theme song for something like Black Lives Matter, but a hip-hop artist or a soul artist or even a rock artist might.”

That seems to be the consensus at the moment: folk is no longer the music of the folks, but a more rarified form that doesn’t reach as many people as it once did. Harvey and DiFranco suggest hip-hop might be a more relevant force, with Kendrick Lamar in particular carrying on Woody’s legacy on a much more popular, populist level. Segarra points to a video of demonstrators in Ferguson, Missouri, protesting another shooting of an unarmed African American by police and chanting the

“The confluence of two generations...”

Nora Guthrie on the new boxset documenting a pair of tribute concerts in 1968 and 1970

I WAS at the Hollywood Bowl concert, but I didn’t think about who was in the house band. A 19-year-old Ry Cooder was in the band, along with Chris Etheridge and some of the Flying Burrito Brothers! There were some of the most beautiful moments that will never happen again, like Odetta doing “Ramblin’ Around” backed by the Burritos, or Ry Cooder playing with Pete Seeger. At both of these shows you had this confluence of two generations, and it’s really important to hear that music. “The house band for the New York concert was The Band. They weren’t even introduced as The Band, as it was before they made their first record.

They had come down from Woodstock with Dylan. It was his first concert, 18 months after his motorcycle accident, and he just came out of the woods with a bunch of guys he’d been jamming with. We were able to track down the guy who filmed the Hollywood Bowl concert, who was one of the cameramen at Woodstock. There was going to be a film of that show. It was never put together, but it was shot. You watch the clips now and you go, ‘Oh my God, what a rockin’ show. All of these interconnected stories... I won’t even live long enough to share all of them but, to the best of my ability, I want to put these stories down.”

chorus of Lamar’s “Alright”. “I just love that video so much. It’s so beautiful it makes me cry. Kendrick is one of the greatest artists of our generation. I think about that new song ‘DNA’. When I hear it, it reinforces this idea that Puerto Ricans and African Americans and indigenous people all come from a beautiful place, that we’re all Americans just like anyone else. Something else that I get from Woody’s music is being recharged and re-energised by just a love of the people – people who are working hard, who are suffering, who are just trying to make a better life for their families. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell myself. Even if the fight continues forever, it’s always worth it to try to change the world. Even if you don’t succeed, it was fucking worth it.”



Woody Guthrie - The Tribute Concerts is available from Bear Family Records



Woody with Marjorie Guthrie and their son Arlo, January 1966

RON GALELLA/WIREIMAGE; JOHN COHEN/GETTY IMAGES

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