



# AMERICA'S FOLK HERO

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By Mitchell Brown

Photographs courtesy of Woody Guthrie Publications

A black Gibson guitar rests gracefully on the knee of a humble entertainer. His name is Woody Guthrie. With a distinct look, a head of curly hair, and sporting a flannel shirt, the “Dust Bowl Troubadour” strums the instrument lovingly with a pick in his hand. A tag on the soundboard reads, “This machine kills fascists.” From this machine made of wood and string, Guthrie expounds with his music, songs that express stories from the working class’s perspective during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era. Through folk music, he fights against fascism and advocates for equal rights and freedom of speech. In doing so, his songwriting will make him an inspiration for generations of musicians such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Johnny Cash. But long before the birth of the music, Woody Guthrie’s journey began in Oklahoma.

Born in Okemah, Oklahoma, on July 14, 1912, the singer was named after the soon-to-be president; his full name was Woodrow Wilson Guthrie. However, at the time of Guthrie’s birth, Wilson was still the governor of New Jersey and the Democratic candidate for the presidency. Guthrie was the third son of Charles and Nora Belle Guthrie, preceded by Clara Edna and Roy, and followed by George. Clara Edna would tragically die from a fire around 13 or 14 years of age in 1919. This would be a precursor to the tragedies that would line Woody Guthrie’s early life, including his mother’s institutionalization and eventual death due to a genetic illness.

“Although they didn’t know it at the time, Nora Belle had inherited Huntington’s disease from her father. She became symptomatic when Woody was just a young boy, but they thought her drastic behavior was due to the hard times and hard luck that the family was having,” said Anna Canoni, vice president of Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., and Guthrie’s granddaughter. “After some accidents, and her increasingly erratic behavior, she was brought to the Central State Hospital for the Insane in Norman, Oklahoma. It was a very difficult time for Woody and his family. A few decades later, Woody inherited the same illness from her.” To make matters worse, his father moved to Pampa, Texas, to find work to pay off debts and left Woody and his siblings to fend for themselves. When he was 18, Guthrie moved to Pampa in 1929 to be with his father; however, it wouldn’t do him much good considering that Pampa would be one of the areas that the Dust Bowl hit most severely. But, through all of these rough occurrences in his early life, he did have one thing that caused him happiness and to shine: an aptitude for music.

## Where it Began

Guthrie’s innate musical talent can be attributed to his upbringing. His parents raised him to communicate through song from a young age. His father taught him western, Indian, and Scottish folk music. His mother would play the

piano and sing Scottish-Irish ballads, which would go on to have a profound effect on his songwriting. “She played long, lonesome songs telling stories of the lives of people,” said Canoni. “As Woody grew older and started writing ballads of his own, you can see the direct threads from his mother’s influence in storytelling through song.”

While in Pampa, Guthrie, age 19, got married to Mary Jennings in 1933, having three kids together: Gwen, Sue, and Bill. Mary was the sister of his friend, Matt Jennings, who was an eventual member alongside Cluster Baker in Guthrie’s first band, The Corn Cob Trio. After his first band, he would eventually join the Pampa Junior Chamber of Commerce band. These would be informative times for the young singer as he learned the joy of performing for a captivated audience. However, work was scarce following the Dust Bowl, and he had a family to support. So, as many “Okies” or “Dust Bowl refugees” did at that time, Woody Guthrie went west to California in search of work.

## On the Move Down Route 66

Guthrie traveled down the Mother Road toward California, hitchhiking, walking, and even hopping freight trains, taking odd jobs along the way. He would perform in saloons and paint signs, often in exchange for lodging and food. This was a period in time when migrant workers could not afford to be picky. “He didn’t perform much on stages. More so on picket lines, at hootenannies, and at rallies,” said Canoni. “He performed for those who he felt he could help with his songs, whether on the merchant marine ships or in front of a group of union workers. He wrote so much about people’s struggles and lives that hearing validation in a song was a very profound experience for an audience. He sang so that others could be heard.”

By 1936, Woody made it to California — his family would join him one year later — though he was met with hostility from the locals for being part of the exodus of people who relocated from the Midwest. Eventually, he landed a job at KFVD radio and began singing original and “old-time” music. He gained public recognition for his collaborations with Maxine Crissman, or “Lefty Lou from Ole Mazoo,” a nickname she received for being left-handed and hailing from Kalamazoo, Michigan. During his time at KFVD, Guthrie honed his creative voice for being a compassionate storyteller with music that resonated with the people who left their homes in search of a better life, while injecting social commentary and critiques of American culture. He advocated for truth and justice and even praised famous bank robber Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd, who was considered an outlaw hero. He went on to write a song about “Pretty Boy” and has been quoted as having said, “I love a good man outside the law, just as much as I hate a bad man inside the law.”

He eventually decided to leave the show when the music he was producing began to fall under scrutiny. “Woody experienced the growing censorship that came with popularity when he was on the radio,” said Canoni. “Perhaps it was perceived as being uncomfortable with success, but I think that it was really him trying to retain his integrity to the work and to the people. He loved performing in front of people, but not at the sacrifice of his ideals and his voice.” He would go on to move to New York City in 1940. There, he would go to do the work that he’s best known for. Most notably, “This Land is Your Land” which he wrote in 1940

Opening spread: Photograph by Lester Balog.



but recorded in 1944 with Cisco Houston, a fellow folk singer and songwriter who, along with Guthrie, recorded with Moses Asch’s Folkways Records. Originally titled “God Blessed America for Me,” the song was written in response to “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin. Guthrie heard the song frequently while he was traveling, and it was a constant source of frustration for him considering that he felt it ignored the unbalanced distribution of wealth that he had witnessed his entire life.

## A Man with a Voice

Throughout the 1940s, Woody Guthrie revolutionized folk music via his collaborations with Alan Lomax — recorded for the Library of Congress — his first commercial album with RCA Victor titled *Dust Bowl Ballads* (released in July 1940), and his recording of a rendition of “House of the Rising Sun,” which The Animals would famously perform in 1964. The album’s success, along with Guthrie’s success as a

radio host for Model Tobacco’s weekly *Pipe Smoking Time*, allowed him to move his family into an apartment in uptown Manhattan—a notable change for Guthrie, considering he lived destitute for most of his life.

It didn’t last long due to Guthrie’s artistic integrity and a desire not to have his music censored. He moved his family back to California in 1941, and then to Oregon. Woody and Mary eventually divorced when his work became too intrusive in their lives; the constant traveling and activism created an unrepairable rift between them. This resulted in him moving back to New York in June 1941, where he became involved in the formation of The Almanac Singers, alongside Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, and Lee Hays, as an activist musical group that sought to fight against fascism and act as a form of political protest while advocating for communist ideals. Which, once the “Red Scare” occurred, put them under some scrutiny. Regardless, at the time, Guthrie’s work and collaborations with The Almanac Singers would pave the way for the development of folk music in the music industry.

Photograph by Al Aumuller.



Woody Guthrie strumming his iconic guitar.

Following his divorce, Guthrie went on to have a relationship and eventual marriage in 1945 with a dancer from the Martha Graham Dance Company named Marjorie Greenblatt. They would have four children: Cathy, Arlo, Joady, and Nora. The familial bond and encouragement from his relationship with Marjorie would go on to help Guthrie with many creative endeavors, including his first novel in 1943: a semi-autobiographical telling of his experiences during the Dust Bowl era titled *Bound for Glory*.

When the U.S. became involved in World War II, Guthrie would go on to serve in both the Army and the Merchant Marine in 1943. During that time, he wrote hundreds of songs to rally the troops, which included historical and anti-Hitler ballads. As a result, he was hired by the army to write songs that were published in brochures, tunes that warned sailors of the dangers of venereal diseases.

After serving his country, Guthrie found himself in Coney Island in 1946, where he lived with his family and began writing children's songs. He was given further praise as an innovative songwriter since the songs covered subjects that children could relate to while using language that they could understand, with pieces covering topics like friendship, fun, responsibility, and family.

## Winding Down

At the tail end of the '40s, when he was in his late thirties, Woody Guthrie faced critical health problems. His behavior changed; he became aggressive and erratic, and it caused problems at work and home. It's known now that it was the symptoms of Huntington's disease, the very same condition

that took his mother's life, although it wouldn't be properly diagnosed until much later. With the symptoms taking a toll on him, Guthrie left his family and returned to California, along with his protégé and fellow folk singer-songwriter Ramblin' Jack Elliott, where he met Anneke Van Kirk, his third and final wife with whom he would have a daughter named Lorina. Around this time, people were becoming blacklisted because of the "Red Scare," and Guthrie and his activist friends became targeted for their stances. He would formally become blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1948.

To make matters worse, when Guthrie and Anneke returned to New York, his condition became exacerbated, and he was hospitalized several times. After being picked up for vagrancy in 1954, he was admitted to the Greystone Psychiatric Hospital where he was officially diagnosed with Huntington's. Friends and family treated and visited him during his hospitalization, including Marjorie Guthrie. There also came a resurgence in the popularity of folk music during this time, and an entire generation of musicians emerged from it. "I think it's his ability to speak truth and honesty in a plain-spoken language that makes him trustworthy as a storyteller," said Canoni. "The fact that history tends to repeat itself makes his work timeless. It was his bearing witness to humanity."

Many musicians owed their adoration of the genre to Guthrie, and many came to visit and play for him in the hospital, including The Greenbriar Boys, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. The latter wrote a song on his debut album, *Bob Dylan*, in 1962, called "Song to Woody," where he proclaims his admiration for the artist.

Woody Guthrie died of complications of Huntington's disease on October 3, 1967, at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens. He was cremated, and his ashes were scattered on the shore of Coney Island. His first two daughters also sadly passed away from the disease.

Since his death, he has received posthumous inductions into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame in 1970, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, and the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 2006. Although he's been gone for over 55 years, his contributions to the music industry through his songwriting and his effect on counterculture are still felt to this day. His son Arlo would follow in his father's footsteps in 1967 and become a respected singer-songwriter himself. He announced his retirement in 2020. Woody's daughter Nora Guthrie and music historian Bob Santelli have published a book of his writings, letters, poems, and art titled *Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art • Words and Wisdom*. Anna Canoni had several quotes by Woody that are representative of him as an individual, but the one that feels the most reflective of his legacy is in his handwritten poem "Changer":

"I'm a changer,  
a constant changer,  
I have to be or die,  
because  
anything that isn't changing is dead,  
and I am alive."

Woody Guthrie loved a good story and — in the end, the man, the singer-songwriter, the son of Oklahoma — lived a pretty good one himself. He was truly a musical legend and a true folk hero who certainly makes the Midwest proud.