

Woody Guthrie: Rebel With a Cause

Woody Guthrie's music sounds simple. He wrote most of his songs with just a few chords and sang them in a rough-edged, nasal voice. But there is nothing simple about the impact of his work. His music gave voice to human suffering and social causes, and it launched the modern folk movement. Today, Guthrie's work continues to echo in folk, country, rock, and the blues.

"Woody Guthrie's artistry may be the single most important contribution that America has given to the world's evolving culture," writes music journalist Douglas Heselgrave.

Born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was named after the man who soon would become the twenty-eighth U.S. President. Guthrie's family prospered in his early years, but then a string of tragedies struck: a house fire, an older sister's death, his mother's mental illness, and his father's business failings. By age fifteen, Guthrie was essentially on his own. In 1929, as the Depression hit, he relocated to Pampa, Texas, where he learned the guitar, fiddle, banjo, and mandolin, and worked on starting a music career. His desire to break into country music drew him to California, where he began appearing on local radio.

Guthrie also performed in the migrant camps that dotted the state, and he identified strongly with their residents, who had fled the impoverished Great Plains region in search of farm work. Eventually, he composed a collection of "Dust Bowl Ballads" that described their plight. In the process, his interests turned from merely entertaining audiences to conveying something important with his music.

"I never did make up many songs about the cow trails or the moon skipping through the sky," Guthrie wrote, "but at first it was funny songs of what's all wrong, and how it turned out good or bad. Then I got a little braver and made up songs telling what I thought was wrong and how to make it right."



Guthrie preferred a rambling lifestyle, moving around the country and collecting stories of everyday life and hardship to put to music.

"There is nothing sweet about the songs he sings," novelist John Steinbeck wrote of Guthrie. "But there is something more important for those who still listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit."

In the 1940s, Guthrie was a central figure in a New York music community that brought a social conscience to folk songs and gave birth to the folk revival of the 1950s and beyond. But, as Guthrie's fame grew, his health faltered. After years of decline, he died on October 3, 1967, in Queens, New York, succumbing to Huntington's disease, the same genetic brain disorder that claimed his mother.

"He left behind an army of imitators and a catalog of songs that people will be dusting off and singing for as long as they make guitars," singer-songwriter Steve Earle writes, summarizing Guthrie's legacy.

Sources: *Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Paste Magazine*, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* by Joe Klein

LISTEN:

- “Don’t You Push Me Down”
- “This Land Is Your Land”
- “Do Re Mi”
- “This Train Is Bound for Glory”
- “Riding in My Car”
- “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh (Dusty Old Dust)”

READ:

- Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie (Plume, 1983): Originally published in 1943, this memoir is part-fact and part-fiction, narrated in Guthrie's down-home style.
- Woody Guthrie: A Life* by Joe Klein (Alfred A. Knopf, 1980): The author recounts the tragedies and hardships that shaped Guthrie's life and turned him into a voice for everyday working people.
- Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* by Ed Cray (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004): The author was given access to Guthrie's unpublished writing to help him tell the story of a man filled with contradictions.