

Woody Guthrie: Rebel With a Cause

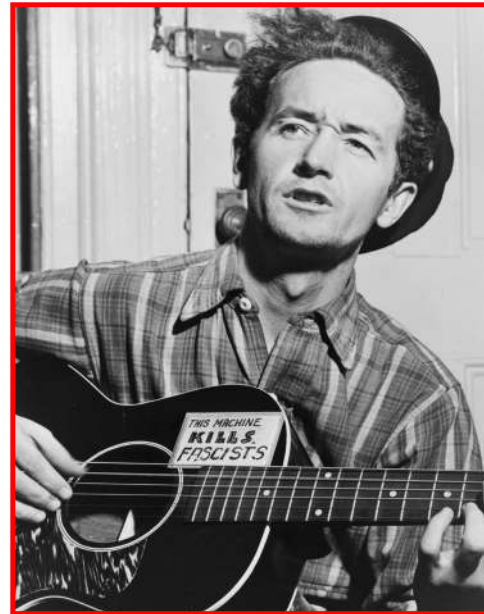
Woody Guthrie's music is simple. He wrote most of his songs with just a few chords, and he sang them in a plain style. His topics, though, are often complicated: war, poverty, hunger, racism. Their influence turned folk music from down home entertainment into an important way to express real-life issues and problems.

"He wrote about disasters, the simple joys of childhood, the working man's struggle, the black man's misery, the fight against Adolf Hitler, and the beauty he saw around him," writes author Karen Mueller Coombs. "Mainly, he wrote songs of hope, because Woody Guthrie believed that given the right song, downtrodden and discouraged people everywhere could rise up singing."

Born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, Guthrie suffered a string of childhood tragedies: a house fire, an older sister's death, his mother's mental illness, and his father's business failings. By age fifteen, he was on his own. In 1929, as the Depression hit, Guthrie moved to Pampa, Texas, where he learned to play several stringed instruments and started a music career. Eager to break into country music, he moved to California, where he appeared on local radio.

He also performed in migrant camps that dotted the state, and he connected with their residents, who had fled the poverty-stricken Great Plains region in search of farm work. Eventually, Guthrie wrote a collection of ballads that described their plight. His interests turned from merely entertaining audiences to saying something important with his music.

At first, Guthrie addressed social issues by trying out "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 traveled around the country, collecting stories of everyday life and hardship to put to music. In the 1940s, he began to be recognized for the changes he was bringing to music. But just as he was earning credit for inspiring a folk revival in the 1950s, his health took a serious turn. After years of decline, he died on October 3, 1967, in Queens, New York, succumbing to the same genetic brain disorder that claimed his mother.

In 1977, Guthrie was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and he joined the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 as an "early influence."

Sources: *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*; *The New Yorker*; *Woody Guthrie: America's Folksinger* by Karen Mueller Coombs

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:

There Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: The Life of Woody Guthrie by Anne Neimark (Atheneum, 2002): For ages 10 and up, this biography gives special attention to the folksinger's early years.

Woody Guthrie: America's Folksinger by Karen Mueller Coombs (Carolrhoda Books, 2002): For ages 10 and up, this basic account of Guthrie's life puts more focus on his career than it does on his troubled life.

This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie by Elizabeth Partridge (Viking Books for Young Readers, 2010): For ages 12 and up, this biography describes Guthrie's tragedies, travels, and creative spirit.