



WOODY GUTHRIE: AMERICAN FOLK HERO



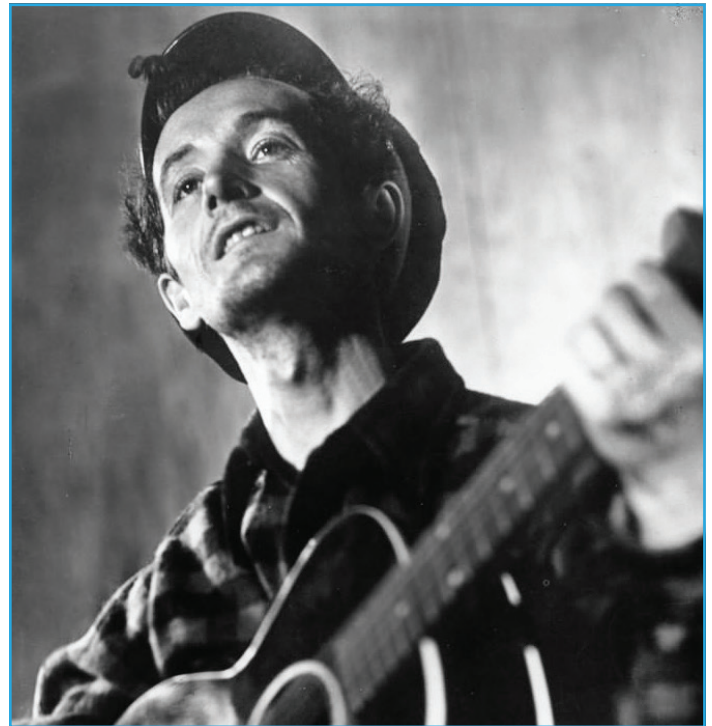
Woody Guthrie's music is simple. He wrote most of his songs with just a few chords, and he sang them in a plain style. His songs, though, are often about difficult subjects like war, hunger, and racism. Guthrie's influence changed folk music from simple entertainment to an important way to express real-life problems.

Born in 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma, Guthrie suffered a string of childhood tragedies: a house fire, an older sister's death, his mother's illness, and his father's failed business. 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 instruments and started a music career. He wanted to play country music and moved to California, where he appeared on local radio.

Guthrie also performed in migrant camps across the state. He cared about people who had left their homes in search of farm work, so he wrote a collection of songs that described their troubles and became more interested in saying something important with his music.

At first, Guthrie addressed 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 folk music. But just as he was earning credit for his music his health took a serious turn. After years of illness, he died in 1967 in Queens, New York, from the same brain disorder that his mother had.

In 1977, he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and his name was added to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 as an “early influence.”

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LISTEN

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



WOODY GUTHRIE: AMERICAN FOLK HERO (CONTINUED)



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In which city and state did Guthrie learn to play multiple instruments and also begin his musical career?

2. Circle the word “tragedies” in the second paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning.

3. Why do you think the essay’s title includes the word “hero?” How was Guthrie a hero? Highlight evidence in the text that supports your answer.

