

WOODY GUTHRIE: REBEL WITH A CAUSE

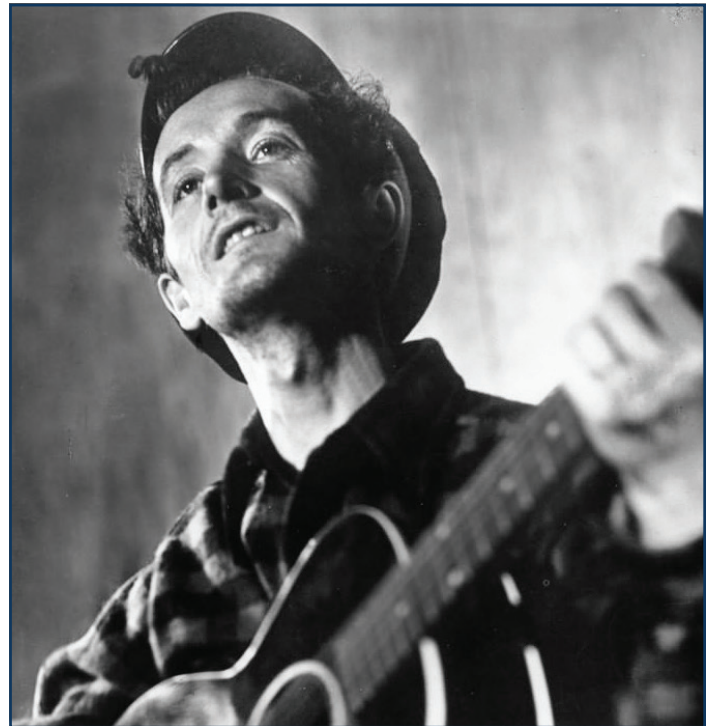
Woody Guthrie's music sounds simple. He wrote most of his songs with just a few chords and sang them in a rough-edged nasal pitch. But there is nothing simple about the impact of his work. Not only did his music give voice to human suffering and social causes, but it also helped launch the modern folk movement. Today, Guthrie's work continues to echo in folk, country, rock, and blues music.

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

Born July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, he was named Woodrow Wilson Guthrie after the man who soon would be 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 Great 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 strongly identified 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."

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LISTEN

"Deportee," "Do Re Mi," "I Ain't Got No Home," "Rock Island Line," "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: REBEL WITH A CAUSE (CONTINUED)

In the 1940s, Guthrie was a central figure in a New York music community that brought a social conscience to folksongs and gave birth to the folk revival movement of the 1950s and beyond. But, as Guthrie's fame grew, his health faltered. After years of decline, he died 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 catalogue of songs that people will be dusting off and singing for as long as they make guitars,” singer-songwriter Steve Earle wrote, summarizing Guthrie's legacy.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the sixth paragraph, what does the word “rambling” mean in this context? Circle any clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning, and then, define the term below in your own words.

2. “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.” Do you agree or disagree with this definition of the “American spirit”? Explain your answer.

3. What impact did Guthrie have as a songwriter, and why does that impact endure today?
