

# Woody Guthrie

**W**OODY GUTHRIE WAS A STUBBORN, MOODY, IRRESPONSIBLE AND just plain ornery soul; a hard-drinking egomaniac who "borrowed" nearly all of the melodies of his many songs; an irregular source of support to his wives and children; and one of the world's worst house guests.

Woody Guthrie was also one of America's greatest folk poets and the author of literally thousands of songs, including "Pastures of Plenty," "Reuben James," "Grand Coulee Dam," "Do Re Mi," "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You" and "This Land Is Your Land." Woody Guthrie was the original source of an image as familiar to us now as that of Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley: the working-class singer-songwriter, rambling across the continent with his guitar on his back. Woody Guthrie has been an inspiration to three generations of American musicians, from Pete Seeger to Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born July 14th, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. His father, Charles Guthrie, was a prosperous real-estate agent and aspiring politician. But during Woody's boyhood, Charlie Guthrie went broke, and his wife, Nora, who suffered from Huntington's chorea, was committed to a state mental hospital. Woody grew up an eccentric loner, always on the go, fueled by an impetuous creative drive and a boundless curiosity about his world.

In adolescence, he picked up the rudiments of guitar, mandolin, fiddle, har-

monica and jew's-harp. He was a fair painter and an excellent cartoonist. But words were Woody's great strength and consuming passion. For most of his life, words poured out of him in songs, poems, letters, books, articles and newspaper columns. A voracious reader, he combined his natural gifts as a storyteller and lyricist with a wry delivery and impeccable timing.

Woody never cared much about money and would do almost anything, from sign painting to street singing, to avoid the tedium of a regular job. He spent the first twenty-odd years of his life hanging around Okemah or in Pampa, Texas, where the family later moved. He made his first semiprofessional music with the Corncob Trio, playing old-time country songs by the Carter Family and Jimmie Rogers.

During the Great Depression, Woody hit the road. He hitchhiked and rode freights across the West and Midwest, singing the old songs to the migrants and hobos. He slept on the ground, went hungry, was rousted by the cops and railroad bulls. From these experiences came not only the source material for his songs but also a lifelong commitment to radical politics.

In 1933, Woody married Mary Jennings in Pampa. They had three children, but his constant traveling eventually led the couple to divorce. In 1934, Woody published his first booklet of original songs: two years later, he left Pampa for good. Arriving in Los Angeles, he made his first break into radio. Southern California was newly populated with thousands of refugees from the

Dust Bowl farm lands, and Woody's songs and stories spoke to them as nothing else could. By the late Thirties, he was a self-proclaimed Communist (though never a diligent party member) and the composer of songs like "Dust Bowl Refugees" and "I Ain't Got No Home."

Woody Guthrie arrived in New York in 1940 and took the city's thriving left-wing community by storm. It was as though Tom Joad had come to life, straight from the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Woody performed on network radio; contributed a regular column to the *Daily Worker*; published an autobiography, *Bound for Glory*; played for strikes, benefits, subway crowds and anti-Nazi rallies; recorded profusely for Moses Asch's nascent Folkways label; and turned out song after song after song.

In November 1945, after a lengthy courtship interrupted by his stints in the merchant marine and the army, Woody married Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia. They had four children: Cathy (who died in a fire at age four), Nora, Joady and Arlo. But Woody had already begun to suffer the spasms of depression and disorientation of Huntington's chorea. His illness, combined with alcohol abuse and the postwar decline of the American Left, made the rest of his life a cruel anticlimax. The years leading up to his death in Brooklyn State Hospital on October 3rd, 1967, were characterized by painful separations from his family, aimless trips to old haunts, desperate attempts to write and bedside visits from youthful admirers like Bob Dylan.

In 1964, Pete Seeger wrote: "I think that, of Woody's thousands of songs and verses, quite a large number are going to outlive this century, and this is a rare thing for a songwriter. . . . I think maybe several dozen of Woody's songs are going to be sung by my grandchildren and their grandchildren. What better kind of immortality could a man have?"

"Harsh-voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim," was how John Steinbeck described him in 1940. "There is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit." ■



Born July 14th, 1912, Okemah, Oklahoma; died October 3rd, 1967, Queens, New York



*Pete Best, George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Stu Sutcliffe (from left) in 1960*

An / Von	StarClub Hamburg - St. Pauli		Kassen-Beleg Nr.
wurden heute bezahlt für:	Kupelle The Beatles		200-
Empfangs-Bestätigung (Ort, Datum, Unterschrift):	Bezahlung: Konto	Gebucht:	
George Harrison			
2/11/62			



*John Lennon in Hamburg*

An / Von	John Lennon		Kassen-Beleg Nr.
wurden heute bezahlt für:	für Gage 425,- DM		736
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An / Von	Beatles		Kassen-Beleg Nr.
wurden heute bezahlt für:	200 DM gesamt für Überstunden		200-
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15 George Harrison			
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# FOLK MUSIC: 1958-63

By Arthur Levy

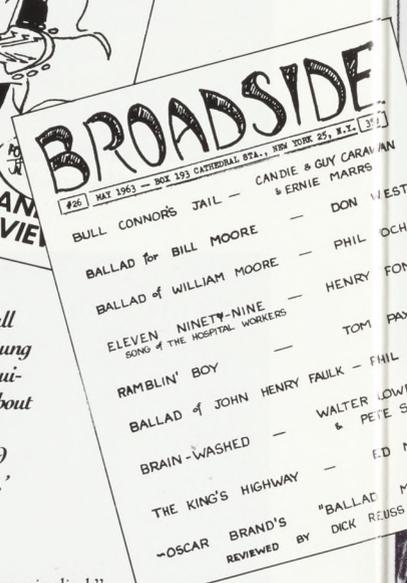
**T**HERE'S A HOOTENANNY COMIN' EVERY week on ABC/Starrin' folk music singers from the mountains to the sea."

In 1963, Jack Linkletter presented the latest entry in the Saturday-night variety-show sweepstakes, ABC-TV's *Hootenanny*. The timing couldn't have been better: Peter, Paul and Mary had just notched up three consecutive Top Ten singles in less than six months: "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." To see how far folk music had come in five years, consider that "Puff" was a thinly veiled pot smoker's jingle and "Blowin' in the Wind" had been adopted as the rallying song for Martin Luther King's August March on Washington and soon became the unofficial theme song of the entire civil-rights movement. Did TV programmers need more justification to throw folk music into the lineup?

Clearly, the advent of the *Hootenanny* series, along with an avalanche of *Hootenanny* one-off albums (one favorite was by jazz vibraphonist Terry Gibbs) and even a short-lived magazine named after the show, signaled some epochal change about to take place. The folk boom soon affected food (ethnic cuisine was in), fashion (who dared go without Al Block sandals or Fred Braun shoes?), dance, arts and crafts, summer camps, even college curricula. If the music itself hadn't made such a leap in popularity, perhaps its chances of surviving unspindled and unmutated would've been better. But once it became an important part of the entertainment business, with its requisite support systems of records, concert tours and media exposure, folk music would never be the same.

To understand folk's appeal at the close of the 1950s, one must appreciate a certain disenchantment with pop music that was felt by a specific segment of America's youth. Such now widely heralded developments as the Brill Building phenomenon, the surf bands, even the flowering of New Orleans, were all seen by the early devotees of folk music as frivolous diversions in the face of the revolution that was on its way. These young people had fallen under the spell of Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac, Bergman and Fellini, Kafka and Camus, Seeger and Salinger, Gandhi and Ginsberg. Alienation, anomie and relevance were on the agenda, ramalama-dingdong was not.

Nor were socially conscious young people the only ones disenchanting with the evolution of pop in the late Fifties. There is a hard-core school of rock and roll purists who insist that the great groundbreaking work of Elvis Presley (and, by extension, all of the first-generation rockers) began with Elvis's first Sun records in 1954 and ended abruptly with his army induction in the spring of 1958. As perceived by these hard-core purists, rock's wild, untamed nature began to slide hard and fast after the King's departure, and its magic fire



*The actions of a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, could be read about in the pages of 'Sing Out!', 'Broadside' and 'Little Sandy Review.'*

was snuffed within a year, on "the day the music died."

It is precisely within that year that we see the emergence of the Kingston Trio, who were soon followed by an entire new generation of young folk personalities. In 1959 folk singers poured out of every nook and cranny of North America and the British Isles. For them, John Jacob Niles and Burl Ives were no less influential than Maybelle Carter and Bill Monroe.

The new folk singers drew from traditional forms and from fresh musical ideas. And there were enough pop-music fans searching for something new to assure folk music the modest popular support it needed. The key was coexistence with rock and roll, an issue with which the folk community would grapple for the next two decades — and then some.

The commercial folk-music boom started with the Kingston Trio's Number One song of 1958: "Tom Dooley," the first folk hit truly to coexist with rock and roll. The isolated hits of such disparate entertainers as Harry Belafonte ("Banana Boat") and Scottish skiffle man Lonnie Donegan ("Rock Island Line") had been regarded as little more than novelties. But with "Tom Dooley," the San Francisco-based trio's honest and simple performance struck a do-it-yourself nerve that intrigued susceptible youth. The Kingston Trio's studious appropriation of songs and arrangements from the workbooks of the Weavers and the New Lost City Ramblers represented pop homage at its most earnest.

The prospect of a career in folk had presented itself to those kids who were proud to thumb their nose at rock and roll, which had become big business by the end of the Fifties. The gates of folk Eden may have opened, but the lines of demarcation were just as swiftly being drawn.

On the one side were the purists who were uncompromisingly devoted to Appalachian ballads of English and Celtic origin. Since they held day jobs, they didn't fear any commercial exploitation of the music. At their most expansive, they might let a song from Hank Williams or the Delmore Brothers into the

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# HOOTENANNY

**THE NATIONAL FOLK SINGING MAGAZINE** □ DECEMBER 50¢ IND.



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- PHIL OCHS  
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PETE SEEGER  
ED McCURDY  
LAD MONGERS"  
K REISS

**GOSPEL  
BLUES-BLUEGRASS  
RAGTIME JUG  
CRAZE**  
*Concious Report*

**CANDID TALKS WITH PETER, PAUL & MARY AND ODETTA; BOB DYLAN SPEAKS;  
PETE SEEGER'S FAREWELL; HUMOR BY LOU GOTTLIEB; ERIK DARLING ON GUITAR**



*The finale of the 1963 Newport Folk Festival*

repertoire; otherwise, they clung steadfastly to a traditional form of song that hadn't been much tampered with for, say, 200 years. Folk purists regarded the advent of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash as nothing more than a ripple that would soon go away.

On the other side was a network of outcasts to whom the notion of straight employment was preposterous. This colorful subculture of pickin' and singin' "fellow travelers," as the House Un-American Activities Committee pegged them, comprised disenfranchised college students like Cambridge's Eric Von Schmidt, Brooklyn cowboys like Ramblin' Jack Elliott, art-school hell raisers like Bob Neuwirth, well-bred and gifted singers like Joan Baez, classical buffs like Paul Rothchild, expatriates, beat poets, novelists, journalists, photographers, political organizers — and more than a few rank opportunists.

Their role models came from many sources, but all converged into a single incandescent image: the lone singer onstage, a one-man (or one-woman, more often than not) band, with an acoustic guitar slung proudly — preferably a Gibson J-50 or Martin D-28. They were separated from the folk purists by their musical sources, for they drew upon not only traditional balladry but also the rich reserves of immediate forebears like Woody Guthrie and the Almanac Singers, the New Lost City Ramblers, Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger and the Weavers.

Into this eclectic mix was poured Bill Monroe's bluegrass and the hillbilly of Dock Boggs and the Carter Family, children's sing-alongs learned at the feet of Guthrie, Seeger and Elizabeth Cotten, the house-rockin' hymns of the Reverend Thomas Dorsey and Clara Ward, the white-hot gospel of the Stanley Brothers and the Sacred Harp Singers, Roger Sprung's old-timey banjo, the Landreneau Cajun Band's Creole swing and more — Tin Pan Alley, Dixieland, ragtime and Caribbean, Spanish, Yiddish, Israeli, French and African songs.

Best of all, there were the city and country bluesmen, whose influence was part



*Lightnin' Hopkins*

and parcel of folk music long before it was acknowledged on the rock and roll side. The deaths of Big Bill Broonzy (1958) and Blind Willie McTell (1959) were felt most strongly in folk circles and led to a time of feverish re-discovery. The legacy of recording from the Twenties and Thirties left by country and Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Peetie Wheatstraw, Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell were a treasure-trove for the tough young performers in 1960.

At the same time, the careers of living bluesmen were experiencing a revival greater than anything since John Hammond's Spirituals to Swing concerts in 1939. The Newport Folk Festival exulted in the newly discovered sounds of Lightnin' Hopkins, Son

House, Skip James, Mississippi John Hurt, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Bukka White, Jesse Fuller, Furry Lewis, Big Joe Williams, Memphis Minnie, Sippie Wallace, Mance Lipscomb, Sleepy John Estes, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee and the greatest teacher of them all, the Reverend Gary Davis, from whom a generation of singers learned "Samson and Delilah" and "Candyman."

It was only a short jump from the rough-hewn Delta blues to the gritty electrified Chicago, Memphis and Detroit styles of Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Spann, Willie Dixon and B.B. King. Most folk musicians eagerly adapted the songs to acoustic and National steel guitar. But in 1960, electrification was out of the question in even the most liberal folk camps. The closest acceptable hybrid forms were the washboard and jug bands (skiffle bands, in England) that popped up at beach-party hoots and at late-night jam sessions in college dorms and dressing rooms. Still, the image of the vagabond bluesman provided a viable role model for yet another breed of alienated youth.

The bluesmen found their audience on white college campuses and the bur-

geoning coffeehouse scene. Without exception, they were shunned by the urban black community, whose embrace of R&B had already reshaped the commercial Top Forty. Nonetheless, the bluesmen were always an integral part of the folk scene – in fact, they were integrated into the fabric of the folk movement in a way that presaged the coming of a more resounding kind of integration.

All this was being transmitted in the spirit of “the folk process,” a cross-fertilization of ideas that, as 1960 rolled around, reflected the expanding world view of a minority of the new players. The narrow position of the purist elite was being challenged on musical grounds, and the controversy was vigorously debated wherever folk music got a toehold. Over the next three years, in Greenwich Village, Philadelphia, Coconut Grove, Berkeley, Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto,



*The New Lost City Ramblers*

Los Angeles, Kansas City, Cambridge and London, the conscience of the younger practitioners continuously tested the patience of the elders; it is to their eternal credit that, in one of Western music’s rare moments of cooperative nurturing, the old embraced the young.

That set folk music apart from any movement that came before, ensured its growth and set its path for the future. Given this blessing, the movement’s priorities quickly revealed themselves, propelled by the promises of the New Frontier, as the Kennedy administration’s agenda was nicknamed. In the pages of *Sing Out!*, *Broadside* and Paul Nelson’s *Little Sandy Review*, on radio programs hosted by Oscar Brand in New York and Studs Terkel in Chicago, in the cluttered storefront headquarters of Israel Young’s Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, a curious scenario was playing itself out for all to see and hear.

The action centered around a small but vocal group of young bloods, armed with guitars, typewriters and – by 1962 – a respectable number of recording and publishing contracts. They also had well-connected and influential managers and producers and the means to turn their thoughts into deeds. Chief among their many concerns was the stalled civil-rights movement. “Which Side Are You On?” was as applicable to their fellow singers and songwriters as it was to the world at large. Sparked by fierce determination and quixotic devotion to the human spirit, the words and music of the folk singers identified the issues and then rallied public commitment where it was needed.

However quaint (or threaten-

ing) the notion of idealism and morality must have seemed to pop-music observers, it was the sole *raison d’être* for singer-songwriters, whose numbers flourished. The recordings of Bob Dylan, Peter LaFarge, Malvina Reynolds, Guy Carawan, Bob Gibson and (soon after) Eric Andersen, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and Buffy Sainte-Marie provided a Top Forty of their own. Inevitably their concerns roamed beyond the confines of the conscience-bound folk movement. After all, songwriters are romantics too, and beside the all-consuming problems of



*Cisco Houston*

the bomb, desegregation, strip mining, the welfare state, political corruption, free speech, apartheid, death and taxes, there’s always room for a love song.

The first golden era (all five years’ worth) of the modern, commercial folk-song movement was heading for its denouement. New singer-songwriter albums were few and far between in 1962, and each one was considered a mini-manifesto in its own right. In the following year, the number of new recordings skyrocketed, with Elektra, Vanguard, Folkways, Prestige, RCA, Mercury and especially Columbia actively courting young performers. While many deny it, a subtle competition had taken shape, and a hierarchy was establishing itself.

The power of folk music was displayed for all to see when Peter, Paul and Mary sang “Blowin’ in the Wind” at the March on Washington. For young people whose social and political convictions may not yet have solidified, it was a time for heart and mind to come together. The powerlessness of youth in the Forties and Fifties gave way to a positive feeling of strength and identity in the Sixties. And folk music provided the marching beat for this transformation.

*Hootenanny*, which refused to allow Pete Seeger and the Weavers to appear, became the white elephant of folk music when Bob Dylan, the Kingston Trio, Carolyn Hester, Joan Baez and others agreed to boycott it. The show didn’t miss a beat though, filling its ranks with the Chad Mitchell Trio, Hoyt Axton, the Tarriers, Mike Settle and the New Christy Minstrels. The viewing public, generally unaware of the boycott and its attendant controversies, supported the show for one season before it was canceled. Folk music had rid itself of an albattross and, in the process, safeguarded its roots.

The final two events that signaled the end of this magical era of folk music were the assassination of John F. Kennedy and, soon after, the coming of the Beatles, when the country lifted its veil of mourning and radio’s frozen playlists were thawed. It was time for the music to move on. Woody would have been the first to warn his children about staying in one place too

long, but the warning wasn’t really necessary. No one wanted to go back to 1962, and nobody ever did.



*Reverend Robert Wilkins, Gaither Carlton, Skip James, Arnold Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, Yank Rachel, Hammy Nixon, Doc Watson (standing, from left) and Sleepy John Estes*

Read more about it: This era and the years before and after it are capsulized by Lenny Kaye (a.k.a. Doc Folk) in his liner notes to his indispensable four-volume folk series on Elektra Records: *Bleecker and MacDougal: The Folk Scene of the 1960s*; *Crossroads: White Blues in the 1960s*; *O Love Is Teasin’*; *Anglo-American Mountain Balladry*; and *Elektrock: The Sixties*. After twenty years, *The Face of Folk Music*, by David Gahr and Robert Shelton, has retained its value as a primary source material for this era.