

Woody Guthrie, Folk Singer and Composer, Dies

Rambler and Balladeer of the American Scene Was 55

His 1,000 Songs Told of Dust Bowls and Endless Skyways

Woody Guthrie, the American folk singer and composer, died yesterday at Creedmoor State Hospital, Queens, following a 13-year illness. He was 55 years old.

Mr. Guthrie, who wrote more than 1,000 songs that echoed the glory and travail of American life, had been bedridden for the last nine years with Huntington's chorea, a rare hereditary disease that attacks the nervous system.

Harold Leventhal, the singer's agent and friend, said that in his last years Mr. Guthrie had been virtually immobile, unable to speak, read or use his hands.

For Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, his songs, his guitar and his humanism were his life. He was a wispy, raspy-voiced musical spokesman for the downtrodden who used his scarred guitar to sing out against injustice and sham.

He also sang of the beauty of his homeland—a beauty seen from the open doorway of a red-balling freight train or from the degradation of the migrant camps and Hoovervilles of the Depression years.

A small, weather-worn man with bushy hair, he was as simple and homespun as his songs. His grammar was often atrocious. But his vision of America was bursting with image upon image of verdant soil, towering mountains and the essential goodness and character of its people.

Of Highways and Skyways

At a concert a few years ago in Connecticut, Odetta, the folk singer, told her audience that if she were in charge of things, one of Mr. Guthrie's songs, "This Land is Your Land," would be the "national anthem."

The song, one of the balladeer's best known, shows Guthrie at his best:

*I roamed and rambled, and I followed my footsteps,
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
All around me a voice was sounding,
This land was made for you and me.*

*When the sun come shining, then I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving, and the dust clouds rolling,
A voice was chanting as the fog was lifting,
This land was made for you and me.*

*This land is your land, this land is my land,
From California to the New York Island,
From the redwood forest to the Gulfstream waters,
This land was made for you and me."*

But Mr. Guthrie also stirred controversy with topical songs that were born in his radicalism and his impatience—songs deploring the Dust Bowl and the lot of its refugees, songs crying out against the misuse of migrant workers and extolling the virtues of labor unions. He also wrote talking blues, ballads and children's songs.

No Patience With Pessimists

"I hate a song that make you think that you're not an good," he once said. "I hate song that makes you think that you are born to lose. Bound to lose. No good to nobody. No good for nothing. Because you are either too old or too young or too fat or too slim or too ugly or too this or too that. Songs that run you down. Songs that poke fun at you on account of your bad luck on your hard traveling.

"I am out to fight those kind of songs to my very last breath



Robin Carson, 1943

Woody Guthrie

of air and my last drop of blood."

Woody Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912, in the Dust Bowl town of Okemah, Okla. His father, Charles Guthrie, was a professional guitarist and prizefighter who made his living at several trades.

The five Guthrie children—Roy, Clara, Woody, George and Mary Jo—were reared on the old songs and ballads sung to them by their mother, and on the Indian square dances and Negro blues shouted by their father.

As a boy, young Guthrie sold newspapers, sang and danced in the streets for pennies, and fought it out in gang brawls. His formal schooling ended in the 10th grade.

A Series of Hardships

Life went sour for the Guthrie family in Okemah. Charles Guthrie's land-trading business went bankrupt, two of the family's houses were destroyed by fire, another by a cyclone. Young Guthrie's sister Clara was killed in an oil stove explosion. His mother developed Huntington's chorea and later died in a state asylum.

At the age of 15, he hit the road for Houston, working odd jobs and playing the harmonica in barber shops and pool halls. He returned to Okemah, then joined his father in the Texas Panhandle town of Pampa, where an uncle taught him to play the guitar.

As the dust storms and the Depression pressed in on the Southwest, the balladeer left home again, heading for the West Coast by freight train, singing in saloons to eat. In California, he appeared regularly on radio and, his social conscience aroused by what he had seen on the road, sang in union halls, gave support to striking farm laborers and wrote articles for the radical People's World.

From this exposure to America's social and economic ills came such songs as "So Long," "It's Been Good to Know You," "Hard Traveling," "Blowin' Down This Old Dusty Road," "Union Maid," "Pastures Plenty," "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Tom Joad."

A verse of "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," for example, graphically described the dust storms:

*Well the dust storm came, it came like thunder
It dusted us over, it covered under
It blocked out the traffic, it blocked out the sun,
And straight for home all the people did run.*

His funds running low on the West Coast, Mr. Guthrie traveled to New York City, where he sang his songs in waterfront taverns and in his

jungles; to the lost men on the Bowery, to the upper classes in Town Hall and to the workmen in Madison Square Garden.

Joined Merchant Marine

Restless once again, he moved out once more for the South and the West. While in the Pacific Northwest, he composed 26 ballads for the Oregon Department of the Interior about Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams, becoming a singing advocate of public power.

Later, he joined Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and others in the Almanac Singers, a group that sang to unionists and to audiences of farm and factory workers across the country.

In 1943, he and his close friend, the late folk singer Cisco Houston, joined the merchant marine. Mr. Guthrie took part in three invasions and was twice on ships that were torpedoed. From the war years came songs like "Reuben James," "Round and Round Hitler's Grave" and "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done."

In 1943 he wrote "Bound For Glory," an odyssey of his life, a book that Orville Prescott, in The New York Times, said had "more triple-distilled essence of pure individual personality in it than any in years."

Following the war, he briefly renewed his association with the Almanac Singers and wrote a second book, "American Folksong," a collection of 30 songs and sketches. He was also associated for a time with Mr. Seeger and Mr. Hays in People's Song, which was described as a "new union of progressive songwriters."

An Influential Life Style

Mr. Guthrie recorded many of his songs on the Stinson, Folkways and Victor labels, giving whole new generations who never had a chance to see him an opportunity to hear him. A result was that he had a profound influence on American folk singing, from the countless youngsters who sing out at Washington Square Park to such well-known performers as Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, Logan English, Jack Elliott and Phil Ochs.

Realizing his voice did not sound "like dew dripping off the petals of the morning violet," Mr. Guthrie once said that "I had rather sound like the ashcans of the early morning, like the cab drivers cursing at one another, like the longshoremen yelling, like the cowhands whooping, and like the lone wolf barking."

The balladeer married twice, first in the early nineteen-thirties the former Mary Esta Jennings, and then in 1945 the former Marjorie Mazia Greenblatt. Both marriages ended in divorce.

Surviving are two daughters of his first marriage. Mrs. Gwendolyn Lackey of Los Angeles and Mrs. Sue Garvin of Whittier, Calif.; two sons and a daughter of his second marriage, Arlo, a folk singer; Joady and Nora Lee, all of New York; a sister, Mrs. Hulett Edgmon of Seminole, Okla., and a brother, George, of Long Beach, Calif.

A private funeral service will be held today. A family spokesman said Mr. Guthrie's body would be cremated and his ashes scattered in the waters off Coney Island, where he once lived. A memorial tribute is planned by his family and friends within the next two months.