

Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie was an American singer-songwriter and folk musician. He is held in high regard by professional singers as well as by people who simply appreciated his ability to put to music what they felt. He wrote songs of all types — political, traditional, children’s, ballads, and improvised works. Major songwriters cite him as a major influence on their own musical talents.

His best-known song is *This Land Is Your Land*.

Numerous songs are about his own experiences in the Dust Bowl era during the Great Depression. Guthrie was often called the “Dust Bowl Troubadour.”

Woodrow Wilson “Woody” Guthrie was born July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. His parents were Nora Belle and Charles Edward Guthrie. His parents named him after Woodrow Wilson, then governor of New Jersey but soon-to-be president of the United States.

Guthrie learned to play the harmonica around the age of 14 from a friend. He used his musical skills in trade for a sandwich or coins. He dropped out of school after four years although his teachers remembered him as bright and an *avid* reader. When he was 18, his father sent for him to come to Texas where Charles was living. Guthrie regularly played at dances with his uncle, Jeff Guthrie, who played the fiddle.

When the Dust Bowl era began, Guthrie left Texas — and his wife, Mary, and three children — and joined the Okie *migration* to California in search of work. Many of his songs are concerned with the conditions faced by these working class people.

By 1930, Guthrie had a Los Angeles radio show called “Woody and Lefty Lou” with a partner, Maxine Crissman. They broadcast commercial “hillbilly” and traditional folk music. He sent for his family. He also began to write and perform some of the protest songs that eventually appeared as Dust Bowl Ballads. Around that time, he met and made friends with socialists and communists and wrote a column — “Woody Sez” — for a Communist newspaper.

When World War II erupted, he left the station, KFVD, and returned with his family to Pampa. Soon, he again left his family behind and went to New York City with his friend, actor Will Geer. There, he made





his first recordings. It was also there he wrote *This Land Is Made For You And Me*. He decided he didn't like New York and headed west where he was hired by a number of people to write songs and narrate a film but when his employees began to worry about his communist associations, Woody moved on. He and Mary divorced in 1943.

He helped write and sing “peace” songs with the Almanac Singers, a protest group formed by Pete Seeger, at regular concerts called “hootenannies.” He also wrote an autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, published in 1943, and married a second time. His wife, Marjorie Maza, and he had four children, one of whom, Arlo, followed in his father's footsteps as a singer-songwriter. Woody wrote thousands of poems and protest songs. His health, however, was deteriorating and, in

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1952, he was diagnosed with Huntington's Disease. He and Marjorie eventually divorced.

Guthrie married a third time — Anneke van Kirk — and had a child

who was adopted by friends. That marriage, too, ended in divorce. Marjorie came back into his life and took care of him until his death in 1967.

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