

Woody Guthrie

by Guy Logsdon

Woody Guthrie was our national folk laureate. Born in Okemah, Oklahoma on July 14, 1912, Woody was the third of five children in the Charley and Nora Guthrie family. Both parents were talented, handsome individuals; Charley was a successful businessman who dabbled in local politics and enjoyed writing, while Nora maintained a happy home and often entertained the family by singing her folk ballads. Woody's talents were family ones. From Charley he learned optimism and gained a spirit of fighting for his beliefs. From Nora he inherited the unfortunate Huntington's Disease that ultimately destroyed his body as it did his mother's. Unfortunately, family happiness and success were slowly eroded by Nora's undiagnosed bout with her disease, and during Woody's adolescence the security of their family was destroyed by tragedy and illness. As a result, by the age of 15 Woody was travelling the highways each summer as a migratory farm laborer, returning to Okemah in time for school.

In 1929 Woody left Okemah for Pampa, Texas where he rejoined his family. There he learned more music from his uncle, Jeff Guthrie, and friends; he became a western dance band member and began writing songs, often with his father's assistance. But in the mid-thirties the Depression and dust storms, combined with his restless spirit, drove Woody back to the highways; He thumbed his way to California, where he wrote and spoke about his experiences and sang the songs of his youth, and those learned while he travelled. While there, he became acquainted with social activists who encouraged him to write about the plight of people and to travel to New York City where in 1939 he met Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and others who ultimately became the foundation of the urban folk revival. Through encouragement from Lomax and admiration for Woody's genuine folk expression, the Interior Department hired him to write songs about their Columbia River projects in the Northwest. From there he returned to New York City which became his home when he was not travelling the highways of the nation.

Inspiration for Woody's songs and writings came from the beauty and spirit of the nations' terrain and citizenry. His songs of reflection and love of country and friends have and will continue to inspire generations in our quest for a more humane and just world. Through his songs Woody became the spirit of the folk music revival and the prime inspiration for many musicians, among whom is Bob Dylan. Unfortunately, Woody's life of creativity was short for when he was approximately 42 he was hospitalized. He died October 3, 1967, but as long as there is a voice to sing his songs Woody will live. Indeed, he loved his Oklahoma hills, and this land *is* his land.

Guy Logsdon has been a collector and student of American folklore and music. He is presently Professor of American Culture and Folklife at the University of Tulsa, having received his Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma.

Suggested reading:

Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory*. (E.P. Dutton & Co., N.Y., 1943). Also available in paperback.

Guthrie, Woody. *Born To Win*. (Ed. by Robert Shelton, MacMillan Co., N.Y. 1965.)

Guthrie, Woody. *Seeds of Man*. (E.P. Dutton & Co. N.Y. 1976.)

Klein, Joe. *Woody Guthrie Alive*. (Alfred Knopf, NY 1980)

Suggested listening:

This Land is Your Land: Woody Guthrie, Folkways Stereo FTS 31001

A Tribute to Woody Guthrie, Warner Brothers 1198 (a two record set)

Woody Guthrie, A Legendary Performer, RCA Victor CPL1-2099e

Woody Guthrie, Library of Congress Recordings, Electra Records, EKL271/272