

# My Search for Woody Guthrie

By Daniela 8T

"Woody is just Woody. Thousands of people do not know he has any other name. He is just a voice and a guitar. He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people. Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, 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." This may be one of the most well-known quotes about Woody Guthrie available these days. This was said by John Steinbeck, and it makes a very strong point. It is true, that no matter how famous Woody Guthrie may have gotten, many people think of him as just Woody. This traditional folk-singer whose fame gradually grew didn't start out as much.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, later Woody Guthrie, was born on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1912. He was born in Okemah, Oklahoma, to Charles and Nora Belle Guthrie. He had a sister named Clara Guthrie who unfortunately died at a very young age of an accident involving fire. This started Woody's life with a sad childhood because of his beloved sister's passing away, and only worsened when his mother eventually died as well. He lived in Okemah for the remainder of his childhood, which later became an "oil boom" town because of the amount of petrol that had suddenly been discovered under the earth. This newly found source of riches immediately brought thousand of people to the small town in Oklahoma, but then when the steady flow of oil stopped, people abandoned Okemah, leaving it "*busted, disgusted, and not to be trusted.*" In his autobiography (**Bound for Glory**), Woody Guthrie says, "*Ours was just another one of those little towns, I guess, about a thousand or so people, where*

*everybody knows everybody else; and on your way to the post office, you'd nod and speak to so many friends that your neck would be rubbed raw when you went in to get your mail if there was any. It took you just about an hour to get up through town, say hello, talk over the late news, family gossip, sickness, weather, crops and lousy politics. Everybody had something to say about something, or somebody, and you usually knew almost word for word what it was going to be about before you heard them say it, as we had well-known and highly expert talkers on all subjects in and out of this world."* This extract, coming from **Bound for Glory**, is straight from Woody Guthrie's point of view. No one has rewritten it, or edited it to fit it to their liking. Woody's description of his home town, Okemah, seems very criticizing, but he is really just trying to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. He tells about how Okemah is a small town, with few people, considering the amount that could be found in bigger cities. This town is so small, that every day you would stop and talk with everybody that you saw on the way, talking about everything from gossip, to political topics. This town in a way reminds me of Maycomb County in the book **To Kill a Mockingbird**. This is because in both situations (Okemah and Maycomb) it is a very small town where everybody knows everybody, and everybody always knows what is happening because they know very little of what is happening in the world outside of their little hometowns.

In 1931, young nineteen year old Woody left his hometown, headed towards Texas. He met his first wife Mary Jennings in the town of Pampa, and married her in 1933, later having three children. Woody decided to try the musical business for the first time with Matt Jennings (Mary Jennings' brother) and Cluster Baker. Together they decided to form a musical group, and succeeded, calling themselves The Corn Cob Trio.

After these events, the Great Depression hit, the time period where Woody Guthrie composed many of his songs. He

wrote songs during this time because he was attempting to reconnect people to their own humanity. During the Depression, people didn't act as though they were alive and well. Everyone was dull and didn't show their emotions as much as they had before this terrible time span of melancholy hit. Woody had a family to support, and it was hard for him, as much as it would be for anybody else, but even with the great burden of caring for a wife and three children, he dedicated some of his time to writing songs for others as well. He wrote these songs for their enjoyment, and they were definitely songs that the audience could relate to. Soon after the Great Depression, the Dust Storm devastated hundreds. It is from here that I think Woody wrote most of his true masterpieces. Songs like "Do Re Mi", "Dust Bowl Blues", "Dust Bowl Refugee", "Dust Can't Kill Me", "Dust Pneumonia Blues", "Dust Storm Disaster", are just a few examples of the many songs he has written about the Dust Storm and the Dust Bowl. When this terrible tragedy hit near his family, Woody wanted the best for his family and went on Route 66, searching for a job and money, as did many other refugees, leaving his family behind in Pampa. He eventually arrived in California after a long and hard journey all the way from Pampa in 1937. As the song "Do Re Mi" says, all the Dust Storm refugees had heard such amazing things about beautiful California, where apparently there were thousands of jobs open with generous wages. Obviously, these rumors were not true, and many were disappointed as they worked for completely unfair wages with bad working conditions just because they were so desperate to get food, shelter, and support for their families. Woody had witnessed and experienced terrible hatred from native residents in California, who disapproved of outsiders who were trying to get the jobs that were rightfully the Californians'. This loathing came from all over California, and led to emotional and physical hurt on Woody. However, when Woody arrived in Los Angeles, his luck turned a bit for the better. Singing in The Corn Cob Trio did Woody some good because when Woody Guthrie was in Los Angeles,

California, he got himself a job singing “old-time” traditional folk songs on a very popular KFVD radio. He always either sang alone, or with his singing partner Maxine Crissman, who was also known as “Lefty Lou”. He was very lucky to have found this job, because besides providing him with enough money to survive California, it made his name much better known around America. He got most of his attention from other people from Oklahoma in the migrant camps than other Californians.

In his songs, Woody Guthrie truly knows how to connect to his audience. He uses themes that everybody can relate to, such as injustice and other things such as main events that affect many (like the Great Depression and the Dust Storm), and very simply and poetically expresses the feelings that he felt while writing that song. He puts himself in the position of those who were actually living when things like the Dust Storm happened, and he *lives* it.

By 1940, Woody was in New York, already much more famous than what he had started out like. He didn't like fame, so he moved around a lot (this was what brought him to New York in the first place). Still in 1940, Alan Lomax recorded Woody's songs for the Library of Congress in Washington DC. In New York, Woody also met many of his companions, who are also mentioned in Bob Dylan's “Song to Woody”, a tribute to Woody Guthrie. These men included Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, Burl Ives, Will Geer, Brownie McGhee, Bess Hawes, Josh White, Millard Lampell, and Sis Cunningham. Along with these men Woody formed a musical group called The Almanac Singers, and with them, Woody became interested in politics and started singing protest songs, communist songs, and anti-Fascist songs. The Almanacs became pretty popular, and Woody Guthrie even got his own radio show called **Woody Sez**. Obviously, with his increasing popularity among people buying his music, Woody's income increased, and he was soon able to bring his family, whom he had left behind in

Tampa, to New York. After a while, although he was very successful, Woody became frustrated and sick of all of the recording and singing he was doing for New York's radio station. He decided it was time for another change, and moved (with his family this time) to Portland, Oregon. In Oregon, they gave Woody a contract to sing for Columbia River Songs, and when his contract expired, Woody went back to Pampa, Texas with his family. However, once back in Pampa, Woody wished to travel back to New York, and did so, hitchhiking along the way. This went on during the 1940s, his travelling, performing, and involvement with anti-Fascist protests. Mary Jennings felt that she couldn't keep loving a man who was so inconsistent, and their marriage was soon ended.

Woody, now divorced and living in New York, met Marjorie Mazia. They had similar view in politics, and it seemed as though Marjorie had been made for Woody. He was reckless and wild, while she was precise and organized. They each brought balance into the other's life, and were soon married in 1945, later having four children. One of Woody Guthrie's children, Cathy, died in a terribly tragic accident. Cathy had been Woody's type of inspiration, who he had written all of his children's songs for. She died when one of her dresses caught fire while she was still wearing it, her mother having gone out to buy some fruit. A spark from a dysfunctional lamp caught, and lit up her dress, burning her almost instantly, and later, the fatal burns killed her. This terrible loss hurt both of Cathy's parents horribly, but the worst part is that for Woody Guthrie, it had almost become a trauma. His sister had also died of lethal burns.

Woody Guthrie joined both the Marines and the Army during World War II. In **Bound for Glory**, Woody tells of one of these times with his fellow military soldiers, where they are all talking together. Then the argument becomes more hostile, and Woody Guthrie get into a conversation when the Negro man that Woody was talking with notices some white

boys pouring something on an old Negro man's feet. It's gasoline, and the boys quickly light it, as they run. *"The flame rose up and burned in a little spot about the size of a silver dollar. In a few seconds the old man clawed at the strings of his bundle where he was resting his head. He kicked his feet in the dust and knocked little balls of fire onto two or three other men playing some poker along the back wall. They fought the fire off their clothes and laughed and bawled the kids and the old man both out."* Woody sees all of this happening, and the poker players insulting the man for ruining their card game. Woody gets mad, even more so when the boys offer him a drink of "liquor" from the gasoline bottle. Woody pours all the gasoline out, and yells at the boys. Then the Negro boy that had been talking to Woody asks them how long it's been since they started cooking people's feet. Then the Negro boy and the two white boys are ready to get into a full-blown fight, and Woody attempts to stop them. Then, the old Negro man asks if they can open the door to let some air in, and as they do, the burst of fresh air cools everybody down, and relaxes them a bit.

Woody later continued to write music, and kept on loving it, until somewhere in the late 1940s, when his behavior started becoming more violent, and erratic, and he would often be very moody. He then later found out that he had inherited from his mother a neurological disease called Huntington's Chorea, the one thing he'd always dreaded the most in his life, because it had killed his mother. Very affected by this discovery, Woody left his family and went to California, where he met young Anneke Van Kirk, whom he later married. After a while, his disease worsening each day, Woody returned to New York, but this time with Anneke. He was hospitalized many times, and misdiagnosed, treated for many other diseases which he did not have. Anneke then abandoned him, and he then went to a hospital in New Jersey in 1954, where he was finally diagnosed correctly with Huntington's. He worsened, and worsened, although Marjorie, his loyal ex-wife, went to visit him very often, and

brought his children whenever she found it appropriate. Woody soon began to lose his ability to make motions, or formulate words, but he was often visited. Bob Dylan even visited him, singing "A Song to Woody", which was a tribute because of how much he admired him. Woody Guthrie later died on October 3, 1967, in Creedmoor State Hospital, Queens, New York.