

MY SEARCH FOR WOODY GUTHRIE

by Shannon 8T



Woody Guthrie had an artistic ability like that of no one else; his music changed how people saw the world, and he is and always will be a music icon. He was very passionate about his music and was a very complicated individual. He appeared differently than he actually acted in real life, because in real life he was a very dark person. He cheated on multiple wives, and was just careless when thinking about

others. One would say that he had reason to be this way after previous events in his life that had a huge impact on him. Woody lived a full, eventful life, always on the move ready to express his thoughts with the people through his songs. I think that the songs which he wrote were basically a way of saying that he has something important to say to the world, and, in my opinion, he wasn't like the other singers of the time but instead he had a message to get across.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on the 14th of July 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma (the location where he was also raised). He was considered to be the upper middle class of the time. His father (Charles Edward Guthrie) was basically the provider for their family. He worked as an industrious business man who was fairly active with politics and a town favorite. In contrast, his mother (Nora Belle Guthrie) stayed home to take care of her children and anything else needed at home. Woody's childhood was pretty stable for the most part but it definitely had its struggles.

Throughout his life he was affected deeply by various tragic fires. They happened very often in his life, but at the small age of seven his family went through their first occurrence with fire. This first fire caused the death of his older sister Clara Guthrie, after being burned in almost every part of her body, and the loss of their only house. In his autobiography "Bound for Glory" Woody Guthrie talks about many aspects of his life that had a huge impact on how he was as a person. In this particular occurrence, he describes things in a way that we can tell that it was a devastating loss but also that it made him stronger as an individual. Many of the other fires that he confronted later in life remain a mystery when talking about the cause, although it is suspected that they may have been caused by Woody's mother who suffered from Huntington's disease though she didn't know it. People didn't really know what this disease was, one minute Nora Guthrie would seem healthy and then another minute she would immediately turn insane. This had a huge impact on Woody's family because his mother only got worse as time went on and couldn't take care of her kids anymore and keep up with her marriage. Once it reached the point where his mother was checked into a hospital, Woody started to have some doubts about his future. His mother died in 1930 after a couple years of being in the mental hospital of Oklahoma. After this happened Charlie Guthrie decided to move to Pampa, Florida for a job opportunity as a farmer; Woody started to feel a little bit of

independence towards the remaining members of his family. At the young age of fourteen, Woody started living alone and occasionally with other families while working and begging for food or a permanent residence to live. On the road times were very hard for Woody, but he was a fighter and he never gave up hope that someday his life would turn around again. While traveling on his own, Woody did not forget about his education; he would from time to time go to different high schools. Although he did not excel as a student, he developed a love for playing music after being taught by his uncle. After his fourth year in high school Woody dropped out before even graduating because he had lost interest. He ended up going to Pampa after that for a little bit of time as he visited his father and started his musical career at local places around where he lived.

At the age of nineteen, Woody started to repair his fragile life and get his act together. He also at this age managed to fall in love with Mary Jennings who turned out to be his first wife. Together they had three kids. As this couple started their life together it was a very confusing time in history because dramatic events were occurring that had a huge impact on the world as they knew it. For example: The Great Dust Storm that occurred in the year of 1935. People thought it was the end of the world because it had brought such disaster with it. It was a very hard time to live through, especially for the people from the most troubled areas where the storm hit, and it was becoming overwhelming for some. Woody was one of those people. He was very curious to see how different people were coping with these tragedies, and he wanted some space from his family for awhile.

Woody never really had a stable amount of money in his early years, so he had wanted to join, along with thousands of other "Okies", people looking for different jobs in California to have the experience but also maybe earn some more money than he was already making. So he ended up leaving Mary and the kids behind. While traveling to California, Woody witnessed numerous aspects of life that gave him many inspirations for some of his songs such as: So Long It's Been Good to Know You, Dust Bowl Blues and Dust Storm Disaster. As he started to settle in California, he began to notice some opportunities for his distant career. In the late 1930's he developed instant fame in Los Angeles when he began singing on the radio with his partner Maxine "Lefty Lou" Crissman as a broadcast performer of "hillbilly"

and traditional music. While dealing with this fame he was also making a good deal of money along the way, so he decided to send some here and there for his family he had left back in Texas.

Then as more and more people started to become aware of his musical presence they all wanted to broadcast him on their own personal radio shows. He ended up appearing on the radio station KFVD owned by Frank Burke. This is where he began writing and performing different kinds of protest songs and the many songs he had written while experiencing his travels. After a couple years of being in the spotlight, Woody debated whether he should go back to live with his family

in Texas but then he began getting fascinated in many different things that people he knew were involved in. For example, Woody was introduced to the Communist circles of Southern California; he was not actually a part of them, but from time to time he wrote a couple of columns for the communist newspaper. Along the process of getting out of his communist stage Woody met a man



called Will Geer. This man saw that Woody's career was coming to an end in California, so he took this as an opportunity to invite Woody to New York with all of the connections Will Geer had there. Woody kindly accepted the offer considering it was a whole new place that he could express his music to and have the experience. New York's folk music community embraced Woody when they heard all of the diversity he had to offer. This was also along the time when Woody heard the song God Bless America by Irving Berlin; he was so sick of hearing it the way it was sung, so he took it into his own hands and

changed the whole song into something that was completely his own. He recorded the song he wrote in 1944 called "This Land Is Your Land", which is one of his most famous songs ever that is still sung today. Everybody had heard this song at the time and they were interested to meet the man behind this music. This is how Woody first met Pete Seeger, who at the time was already a famous folk singer. Woody and Pete Seeger began to associate in their careers. Pete

mentioned to Woody his newly formed folk protest song group called The Almanac Singers. Woody was determined to join this group, because it consisted of everything he stood for, and eventually he did. The singers usually hosted little get togethers and dances where they would play their music. The group sang the kind of music that was associated with peace, but then after Hitler invaded



the Soviet Union in 1941 they changed their music style to anti-fascist songs. While still focusing on his career he decided to join the marines to serve for some time. On the ship he ended up meeting a dancer named Marjorie Mazia who was a dance instructor at a school. Woody would always sing to the people on the ship and for Marjorie; these two eventually fell in love and got married. Once they started their lives together, they decided they wanted to move to Coney Island. They ended up having four children along the years: Nora, Joady, Cathy and Arlo. The family he had with Marjorie

consisted of a lot more care and compassion than the other family he had back in Texas. Woody truly wanted this family to work out and he



showed that he loved them. The majority of the songs in his later years were inspired by his children that gave him many of his ideas. Woody was always very scared in life to get close to anyone or anything, because of previous experiences where he had lost something important to him. He thought that he seemed like every time his life started to become satisfying something would happen and ruin the current situation, which most of the time was the case for him. While he was enjoying his life with his family a terrible tragedy struck Woody yet again. His daughter Cathy died in a fire. She was left alone in a room wearing a synthetic fabric dress and a spark came from the lamp and hit her dress, completely burning the dress

and her skin. This incident left Woody depressed and confused, considering the fact that the same occurrence happened to him yet again after many years. As the years went on and as he was getting older he started to slow his career down. Some of the last songs he ever really wrote and published were the ones dedicated to the passing of his one daughter (e.g. To Grow on for Mother and Child). These songs were mostly meant for children, but I think everybody appreciated them due to the fact that he was just such an inspiring artist. As Woody was getting older his health was only getting worse and his behavior was changing drastically. It wasn't until 1952 when he found out that he was really diagnosed with Huntington's disease, which was basically a genetic disease passed down from his mother. Marjorie (his wife) was one of the first one to notice this change in behavior and she was concerned for the sake of her children living around them. She told him basically that he needed help and to return to California without her -- she didn't want their children around him. Woody did as told, and then while in California he fell in love with Anneke Van Kirk. This couple not long after meeting got married and had a child named Lorina Lynn. After some time of being together the

couple went to New York where they then proceeded with a divorce leaving Woody alone. This seemed like the end for Woody, checking into the Greystone Park Hospital where he would eventually die from his disease. Fortunately, Woody still had a lot of people that cared for him despite everything that happened. His second wife Marjorie came back with his children everyday to take care of him and to keep him company. Then sometimes he would also get visits from people that he had influenced during his career (e.g. Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger). Woody had people visiting him constantly in the hospital up until the day he died on October 3rd, when an original folk singer hero was lost.

P.S.

I wanted to add the following quotes which I found interesting.

“Woody, don’t you cry. Promise me that you won’t ever cry. It don’t help, it just makes everybody feel bad, Woody……”

“I ain’t a-cryin”

“Don’t do it-don’t do it. I’m not bad off, Woody; I’m gonna be up playing some more in a day or two, just burnt a little; shucks lots of folks get hurt a little, and they don’t like for everybody to go around crying about it. I’ll feel good, Woody, if you just promise that you won’t cry.”

This particular piece of dialogue was taken from the autobiography written by Woody Guthrie himself called “Bound for Glory”. This autobiography reveals numerous aspects from his past and personal thoughts about life.

Woody’s sister didn’t want him to cry because she wanted to keep the faith in life. When everybody was crying it made it seem like she was going to die for sure and she didn’t want to think negatively. Woody kept his promise and always kept his emotions inside.

Woody’s mother reached a breaking point and went crazy. Broke furniture and was constantly upset at the world.