

MY SEARCH FOR WOODY GUTHRIE

By Silvia 8T

Who was Woody Guthrie? What do his songs reflect about the times he was living in? Some people describe him as the hero of folk music. They see him as a man who personified completely the style and mind of a musician and human being. They believe his songs represented both Woody Guthrie's spirit, the one of a true protestor, and the faith of all the people who were going through his same experiences. Who was he really? I have read about his childhood, his later life and friends. I have heard his music, listened to numerous interviews and read many sections of his autobiography. And after this intense research I am finally ready to answer these questions.

WOODY GUTHRIE: LIFE

"The note of hope is the only note that can help us or save us from falling to the bottom of the heap of evolution, because, largely, about all a human being is, anyway, is just a hoping machine."
WOODY GUTHRIE



In order to fully understand Woody Guthrie and his lyrics it is essential to know his story, and this is a short summary of it. From a very tender age Woody had to go through the most horrible events: fires, deaths, cyclones, financial issues, the Great Dust Storm, homelessness, and sickness. What has to be taken into consideration is that those events were the same ones that made him who he was, even though this included many stages of sadness and depression. One of the most dreadful incidents that shocked Woody terribly occurred when he was only about seven years old. This was the death of sister, Clara. Meanwhile, at home his mother had already starting to show the symptoms of Huntington's disease. At the time, the fact that she suffered from this incurable disease that affected the spinal nerve, was unknown. Some of the symptoms were depression, violence, and sudden mood swings. In his autobiography Woody in fact writes about his mother:

"She got worse, and lost control of the muscles in her body; and two or three times a day she would have bad spells of epileptics, first getting angry at things in the house, then arguing at every stick of furniture in every room until she would be talking so loud that all the neighbors heard and wondered about it." BOUND FOR GLORY – WOODDY GUTHRIE

Having a mother that acted in such a way, caused Woody to see Clara, one of his older siblings, as a motherly figure. That is why it was incredibly hard for him to get over Clara's death. It was around 1918 when a quick and hungry coal-oil fire brought Clara away from Woody. I am sure this affected Woody's way of thinking very much. He was young when it happened, and these kinds of

events shape a child's personality. As a result, I think he was perfectly aware of what was going on around him, even when he was too young to understand. I believe this brought to the happening of two things. Firstly I believe this was a kind of awakening to the world, bringing him to want to help the situation. In second place, I think that in a way, he became stronger because he had had to deal with these dangers starting from a young age, therefore preparing him for his future years. What I also suspect might have happened, though, is that for some time he must have had a hard core that both protected and isolated him. When he grew up, he began expressing his emotions and addressing his life-changing events with the purpose of helping others like himself, through his songs. That is when I believe he finally broke his shell and found himself again.

Now that you know that what kind of childhood Woody had to go through, it is easier to formulate an opinion about who he was and the importance of his songs. The early stage of his life, though, was not the only one that affected him. April 14, 1935 was when the Great Dust Storm hit Oklahoma and many other countries nearby. It was during the 1930s then, that Woody set off hitchhiking through the West, on his way to California in order to provide his family enough money to go on. This was a period of constant movement for Woody, but it did open the doors of music to him. He had to survive times when he was left with no money, or food, or a place to stay. In his heart, I believe, what kept him going, as well as all the other dustbowl refugees, was his family. I believe it must have been hard for him because with all the misfortunes that had already happened to him, leaving home might have been a painful thing to do. Nevertheless, Woody was a brave man and I think that if there was any chance for his family to be in trouble he would try his best to help. Additionally, this would help him to become a musician, his main dream.

For many of the years following Woody's decision to leave, this man was always changing location and environment. He would often hitchhike, or walk, or ride trains. This last method of transportation was very popular at the time, especially because of all the other people who were traveling in search of prosperity. Trains were a symbol of hope and, through his many experiences, Woody was stimulated to write about them. This occurred both in his songs and in his autobiography. Many chapters of this book, both from his earlier life and from later on, Woody describes his various rides. He talks of the others traveling, just like him: varying from the most ordinary men, to the oddest and most peculiar of all people.



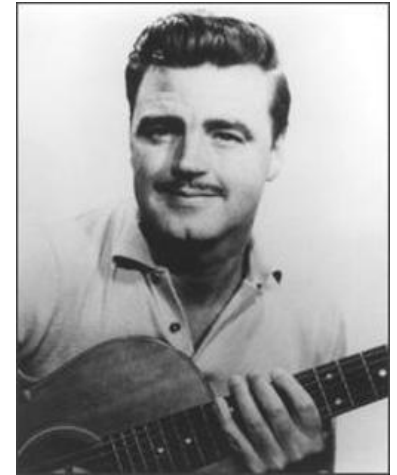
“Hot in the September heat, tired, mean and mad, cussing and sweating, raving and preaching. Part of us waved our hands in the cloud of dust and hollered out to the whole crowd. Others were too weak, too sick, too hungry or too drunk even to stand up.” BOUND FOR GLORY **Woody Guthrie**

Anyway, Woody began to travel. He went all the way to California hoping to enter the music industry. The place where his music really took off, though, was in New York. He arrived there in 1940 and straight away many of his songs about the Great Dust Bowl were recorded, as “Dust Bowl Ballads”. After that he began to meet many important folk song writers, who soon became his friends and music companions. Some examples of these people are:

Pete Seeger

Lead Belly

Cisco Houston



With Pete Seeger, and some others, Woody Guthrie formed a singing group called the Almanac Singers. Together they sang songs about peace and freedom, always fighting for what they believed in. In almost no time at all, Woody then became one of the prominent singers of this group. I find this experience was definitely good for Woody because it introduced him to others who believed the same things he did. It also introduced him to the music world and industry. As a matter of fact, it was mostly through the Almanac Singers performances that people began to be interested in Woody and his songs. As soon as the public started to become familiar with his songs, Woody began to travel often and make plenty new records.



“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 still listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit.” JOHN STEINBECK

Woody soon became a ‘celebrity’. He began writing more and more songs. It was his brave and determined personality then, that brought him to join Merchant Marine and the Army during World War II. He strongly believed in an anti-fascist world, and was insistent on helping to realize this dream of his. This shows how strong-minded he was, and that no matter how frightening the obstacles may have been, he always stood for what he believed in. I admire him for doing so because not everyone is able to do that. He knew of the risks and dangers he could have encountered, but he didn’t allow them to get to him.

It was after the war, when Woody had safely returned to New York, that the symptoms of Huntington's chorea began to show, which he had inherited from his mother. He went through several stages of crazy and unusual behaviors that brought many doctors to believe he was schizophrenic. This happened during the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Woody quickly began to lose main function of many of his muscles, stopping him from playing or writing songs. During the

many years of hospitalization, though, his wife Marjorie and the rest of his friends always remained faithful and visited him every time that it was possible. I believe that Woody, even though extremely sick, proved himself to be very courageous. Unfortunately, on October 3rd, 1967 Woody died.

WOODY GUTHRIE: SONGS

During his life Woody wrote about 3000 songs, exploring topics such as: the Dust Storm, the Unions, World War II, legends, heroes and even children songs. In total, therefore, Woody wrote about an immense number of events, and each and every one of them somehow linked to a specific occurrence in his life.

Woody's parents, Charles and Nora Belle, taught their children many Western, Indian and folk songs. Therefore, Woody was directed inclined towards music since he was a small boy. When Woody reached the age of 14 his mother was being hospitalized for Huntington Chorea, and his father was constantly working. Woody then was forced to ramble around town, looking for ways to earn some money. It was on the streets that he began to play more and more. He soon learned how to play the harmonica and picked up many new songs. As time passed he grew older, and not after long it was time for him to leave Oklahoma and set off for California and New York, where his life as a musician could finally begin.

The very first chapter of Woody's autobiography, Bound For Glory, is in fact about the time in his life when he went from town to town, hitchhiking. This gives to show how meaningful that period of his life really was to him, and that it determined his whole future. This chapter is called: Soldiers in the Dust. I believe this tells us a lot about Woody. I interpreted that title in such a way that he compares himself and all the other dust bowl refugees to soldiers fighting to win against the Dust Bowl. Additionally, though, I believe it is a play on words because by using the word 'dust' he may have been referring to not only the Dust Storm, but also the fact that they were lost. Woody, therefore, was very determined and this was then reflected in his songs. It was during this period of time when he wrote the song: This Train Is Bound For Glory (from where he received the inspiration for the title of his autobiography). A verse of this song is also inserted in his book:

This train don't carry no gamblers;

Liars, thieves and big-shot ramblers;

This train is bound for glory,

This train.

This song expresses the importance of trains and hope during that period of depression and instability. From the simple verse stated above the fact that Woody was a strong person, with a big heart and soul is apparent. He believed in the brightness of possibilities and then tried to inspire others to do as well.

When the Great Dust Storm hit Oklahoma, in the 1930s, everybody was in shock. Soon enough most people even began to believe it was the end of the world. This brought Woody to write the song: "So Long It's Been Good To Know Yuh". Woody was part of this world and part of that community, and he knew that he had a power that only other few owned: music. He knew he could influence other people by singing his songs. So he decided to take advantage of that, writing

inspirational lyrics that could bring people all over the world to reflect about the Great Dust Storm. These are some of the lyrics:

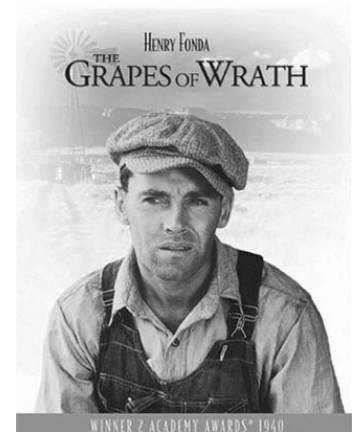
*A dust storm hit, an' it hit like thunder;
It dusted us over, an' it covered us under;
Blocked out the traffic an' blocked out the sun,
Straight for home all the people did run,
Singin':*

*So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh.
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,
And I got to be driftin' along.*

*We talked of the end of the world, and then
We'd sing a song an' then sing it again.
We'd sit for an hour an' not say a word,
And then these words would be heard:*

*So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh.
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,
And I got to be driftin' along.*

From that same experience (the Great Dust Storm) Woody also got the inspiration to write many songs about that event. A few examples are: "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "I Ain't Got No Home". In those songs he expressed the feelings and emotions of those, like himself, who were left without a home or a bed to sleep in. Not only could he refer to his own experiences, but he also was able to reach out to all of the other who felt just like him. He wasn't, though, the only artists who wanted to connect to the people through this topic. John Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath" also came out at the time, and soon after that the movie version of it by John Ford began to appear in the cinemas. An infinite amount of people was encouraged to begin reflecting about Tom Joad's words. It was such a hit that even Woody Guthrie was motivated to write an extremely long ballad about him (Tom Joad). The lyrics describe the adventures of this character, coming to a climax in the ending verses:



*Tom run back where his mother was asleep;
He woke her up out of bed.
An' he kissed goodbye to the mother that he loved,
Said what Preacher Casey said, Tom Joad,
He said what Preacher Casey said.*

*"Ever'body might be just one big soul,
Well it looks that a-way to me.*

*Everywhere that you look, in the day or night,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
That's where I'm a-gonna be.*

*Wherever little children are hungry and cry,
Wherever people ain't free.
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma.
That's where I'm a-gonna be."*

These last verses explain exactly the purpose of Tom Joad, which Woody Guthrie then picked up: freedom, equality, goodness and humanity. Woody wanted everybody to see and understand the meaning of each and every word of his song. He wanted to make them realize what was worth fighting for.

Not even during the time spent working for the Army and the Marine did Woody stop singing, writing songs, and making sketches. Most of the lyrics he wrote were based on Anti-Hitler ideas and about the war. In total, Woody wrote over a hundred famous ballads. A few of these are: "All You Fascists Bound To Lose", "The Sinking of the Reuben James". This last song was based on the sinking of the first US Navy Ship during World War II. Initially the song listed all the names of the men who died and sunk with the ship. These names were then changes to the famous line: What were their names. I believe that through this song Woody wanted to connect the people, both those who participated in the World War II and those who didn't. He wanted to bring them closer to this event and therefore to their own country.

*Have you heard of a ship called the good Reuben James
Manned by hard fighting men both of honor and fame?
She flew the Stars and Stripes of the land of the free
But tonight she's in her grave at the bottom of the sea.*

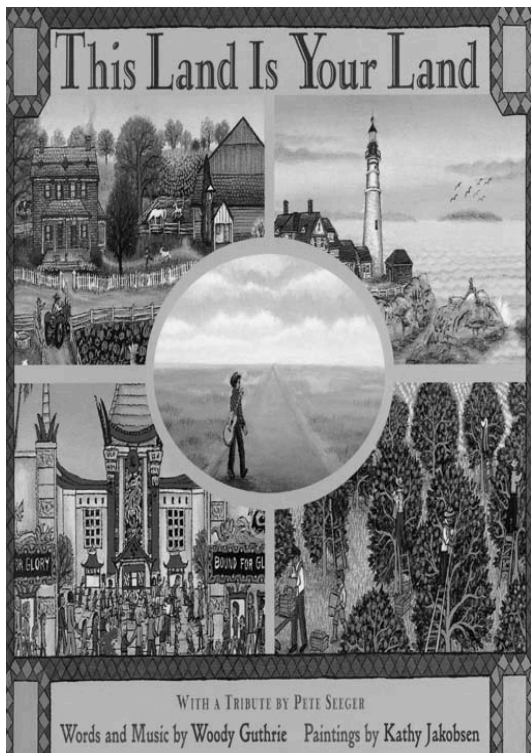
*Tell me what were their names, tell me what were their names,
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?
What were their names, tell me, what were their names?
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James*

*Well, a hundred men went down in that dark watery grave
When that good ship went down only forty-four were saved.
'Twas the last day of October we saved the forty-four
From the cold ocean waters and the cold icy shore.*

*It was there in the dark of that uncertain night
That we watched for the U-boats and waited for a fight.
Then a whine and a rock and a great explosion roared
And they laid the Reuben James on that cold ocean floor.*

*Now tonight there are lights in our country so bright
In the farms and in the cities they're telling of the fight.
And now our mighty battleships will steam the bounding main
And remember the name of that good Reuben James.*

Finally, to conclude this section on Woody's songs I have chosen a song known to everybody around the globe: This Land Is Your Land. Woody Guthrie wrote this song in 1940. He was sitting at a diner when suddenly, on the radio, Kate Smith's song "God Bless America" begins to play. Basing himself on the tune of her song, Woody then wrote one of America's most famous folk songs. His original version was called "God Bless America For Me". Later on he changed it to the famous version we all love. The first verse is, in fact, the one that has been introduced to many school text books:



*This land is your land this land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.*

I believe that Woody Guthrie accumulated all of his thoughts and ideas into one main song: This Land Is Your Land. In it many different concepts are present, many of which are taken by personal encounters. There are two verses that I enjoy particularly. The first is:

*As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.*

Woody writes about the kind of world he was living in: the kind where people were being prevented from moving forward, when in reality their perfect world is just a few steps ahead. I believe Woody wanted to point

out that it was necessary for people to make a stand and go searching for what they truly believed in. And through this song I think Woody made his point perfectly clear.

CONCLUSION

I have researched a lot about Woody Guthrie, his life and his songs. So, who is Woody Guthrie? And what do his songs reflect about the times he was living in? I now know that he was a man who aspired to find prosperity. He was certain that even in the darkest of times, and even when the world seemed as if it was going to come to an end, there was always a light. This light represented hope, happiness, dreams and growth. He knew and understood all of this, and his ambition was to allow many others to realize this as well. Between Woody's life and his songs, furthermore, there was a consistency. This means that they reflected not only the times he was living in but also what kind of man Woody was. By reading his lyrics it's possible to interpret his life and personality. Woody, therefore, was able to transmit a possibility through his songs; a possibility for a better world.