

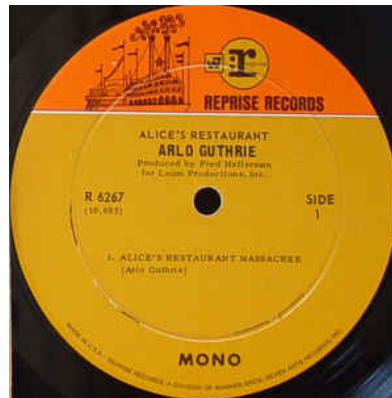
“Alice’s Restaurant Massacree”—Arlo Guthrie (1967)

Added to the National Registry: 2017

Essay by Hank Reineke (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



Arlo Guthrie

Arlo Guthrie & the “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree”

“I’ve decided there’s only one worse thing than banning a song,” Pete Seeger would often muse, “and that’s making it *official*.” I imagine that Seeger (1919-2014), the long serving Dean of American folk music, would have understood the conundrum of commendation better than most. Seeger was a central player in a number of political wrangles and free-speech controversies of his time, his style of agit-prop folk music either venerated or thought incendiary. So when it was announced that Arlo Guthrie’s absurdist, shaggy-dog, anti-war talking blues “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree” (1967) was selected to be archived in the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry--one of only 500 American recordings, as of this writing, to be so honored--one couldn’t help but ponder Seeger’s circumspect wariness.

Citing such examples as Eugène Pottier and Pierre De Geyter's 19th century worker’s anthem “L’Internationale”--or even the “radical” verses of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land”--history taught Seeger to be wary of any song blessed with official designation by a government entity. His belief was simply that a song’s integrity was compromised by its absorption into the mainstream. Seeger argued that once a song was made “official,” verses were too often bowdlerized for public consumption. One or two verses might be preserved, but others were discarded with original context relegated to history books. I believe, in this case, Seeger--who’s mostly vibrant 94 years allowed him to collaborate with Woody *and* Arlo Guthrie-- would approve of the National Registry honor. There’s no evidence of appeasement or dilution when considering the 50-odd year potency of Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree.” For starters, the song doesn’t even *have* a second verse to be excised. Come to think of it, the song, technically, doesn’t even have a *first* verse.

The story behind the creation of the “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree” has as many twists and turns as the 18-minute, 27-second-long song itself. Its genesis can be traced back to the spring of 1965. Upon learning of a friend’s plan to open a restaurant in the mountain hamlet of

Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Arlo Guthrie casually composed the now memorable refrain (“You can get anything you want...”). It was a tossed off, catchy, musical “advertisement,” a three note pick-up followed by an elegantly hummable melody of sixteen bars. It was also, ultimately, never used for its original purpose. Guthrie’s friend, Alice Brock--*the* Alice of the song--would correct nosy journalists who assumed the memorable chorus of Guthrie’s song had a previous life as a radio jingle promoting her business. “I never had a commercial on the radio,” she would muse. “I couldn’t afford that.”

A native son of Coney Island, Brooklyn, and Howard Beach, Queens, Arlo Guthrie knew Stockbridge well despite his New York City roots. His mother, Marjorie Guthrie, was a former Martha Graham dancer who would travel to western Massachusetts in the summer months to teach dance in the Berkshire Mountain community some 40 miles east of Albany, New York. Arlo Guthrie would eventually graduate from his secondary studies at the progressive, arts-orientated Stockbridge School in June of 1965. By his own admission, he was never a great student. Regardless, in September of 1965, Guthrie headed west to begin freshman studies at Rocky Mountain College, Billings, Montana.

The liberal arts school was, in Guthrie’s own words, “the only college that would take me.” His days as a collegian were brief, lasting all of six--or as little as three--weeks depending on the account. His decision to abandon college and return east was hastened when sitting in a parked car on the outskirts of town listening to music. Suddenly Bob Dylan’s new single “Positively Fourth Street” (released September 7, 1965) popped up on the car’s AM radio. It was a sign of sorts that the folk-rock craze was beginning to catch on and anything and everything seemed possible.

Guthrie would return almost immediately to the east coast. He began to try his hand making music--and perhaps a few dollars--in the folk music basket houses and coffeehouses of Greenwich Village, Philadelphia and Boston. In late autumn of 1965 Guthrie fatefully chose to spend Thanksgiving Day with friends gathered in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to celebrate at Alice and Ray Brock’s Trinity Church, a deconsecrated New England Episcopal House of Worship dating to 1764. On a snow-frosted Thanksgiving morning, Guthrie and friend Richard J. Robbins volunteered to clear the church sanctuary of assorted debris to accommodate the arrival of dinner guests. Upon discovering the nearby Stockbridge dump was “Closed on Thanksgiving,” the pair decided to dispose of the rubbish by throwing it down a hillside embankment. The two law-breaking young men were ultimately tracked down and arrested by Stockbridge’s no nonsense Chief-of-Police William J. Obanhein (a.k.a. “Officer Obie”).

Though the arrest seemed ridiculous and surreal, the young men were guilty of the crime. Pleading no contest and paying a combined fine of \$50, the two were sentenced--under the watchful eyes of the police chief--to “pick up the garbage in the snow.” Though they would later become friends, Officer Obie, the semi-exaggerated authoritarian figure gently lampooned in the song, was greatly troubled by Guthrie’s portrayal of the event. A “John Wayne-type,” Obie admitted he was a no nonsense sort, one not terribly enamored of hippies or predisposed to alternative lifestyles. During the production of Arthur Penn’s “*Alice’s Restaurant*” movie--in which the constable was, in a brilliant masterstroke, cast to portray himself--Obie was anxious to set the record straight on some of the song’s more outrageous scenarios. He told a writer from “Playboy,” “I didn’t put handcuffs on them. I didn’t take the toilet seats off, ‘cause we don’t have any seats.”

The events that transpire in Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant Massacre" were always an artful blend of fact and fiction and convenient time-shifting. In the opening monologue of the "Massacre," Guthrie wryly notes that "Alice's Restaurant is not the name of the restaurant, that's just the name of the song." This is true. The restaurant was actually a modest luncheonette called "The Back Room." Located down an alley off of Stockbridge's Main Street, the inconspicuous eatery was sandwiched between a small grocery store and an insurance agency. Reluctant restaurateur Alice Brock had only semi-optimistically signed a lease for the property in the spring of 1965, mostly due to her realtor mother's urging. She recalled The Back Room was, from the very beginning, a humble and not well managed affair: a narrow lunch counter, three or four dining booths, with dishes prepared in a "tiny ill-equipped kitchen." As a physical presence, The Back Room would survive only a little over a year. It would close in the summer of 1966, its passing lamented only by a small number of local patrons.

There were/are actually three mostly disparate versions of "Alice's Restaurant," perhaps more if one takes into account all the minor variations tested on stage within this triad. The commercial success of the "Massacre" would obscure the other two, though Guthrie would belatedly issue one vintage version ("The Alice's Restaurant Multi-Colored Rainbow Roach") as a digital download in 2013. The earliest incarnation of the song--"Alice's Restaurant around the World" - debuted on stage at Gerdes Folk City in July of 1966. An advertisement in the "Village Voice" would announce--with some sense of pre-destination--"Woody's Son Comes to Gerdes." (Gerdes, of course, was the famous Greenwich Village nightclub instrumental in the rise of Bob Dylan's career five years prior). Guthrie would concede in a 1968 interview, "When I first did ["Alice's Restaurant"] at Gerde's Folk City in New York, it wasn't anything like the last version."

Indeed, it was not. "Alice's Restaurant around the World" was an absurdist travelogue, one that took a circuitous geographic path, weaving tall tales involving alarm clocks, U.S. care packages, and the 17th parallel--the provisional military demarcation line that uneasily separated Ho Chi Minh's North from that of South Vietnam. Somewhat provocatively, Guthrie's shaky monologue confidently hints that his maddeningly memorable chorus of "Alice's Restaurant" might yet be invoked as a whimsical bridge-building weapon of world peace.

Thanks to the forward-thinking enthusiasms of amateur folklorists and audio preservationists, bootleg recordings exist of several of these early incarnations of "Alice's Restaurant"--including Guthrie's Gerdes set of July 1966. Though the basic melody line of the composition remains mostly unchanged, the surviving recording reveals the song was originally performed at a noticeably slower tempo. The smile-inducing, toe-tapping, and mostly unchanging cyclical "swing" of the ragtime guitar accompaniment present on the official Reprise release--recorded almost a year following--is noticeably absent. Guthrie's playing on many of these work-in-progress versions of "Alice" are more blues-orientated, with nimble-fingered decorative blues riffs, melodic variations and guitar filigrees tastefully inserted.

It's also apparent that in 1966, 18 year old Arlo Guthrie, not surprisingly, had not yet found his own voice. On stage, he chose to speak and sing the slurred, laconic drawl of his father, Woody Guthrie, the famed "Dust Bowl Balladeer" of Oklahoma. A journalist from "Newsweek," having attended one of the artist's earliest residencies at Poor Richards in Chicago, February 1966, would poetically describe Arlo's eerie--and partly cellular--appropriation of Woody's style. When Guthrie sings, it was reported, his "familiar, thirsty, twangy voice hauntingly evokes the

parched earth and the barren highways of the Depression.” The slow drawl and vocal inflections present on Guthrie’s earliest recordings were, of course, not common to the Brooklyn-born folksinger. They were gleaned from the recordings waxed by his father in the 1940s for the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the RCA Victor Company in Camden, NJ, and for Moses Asch in Manhattan. Many other aspects of his guitar playing and singing-style were through uncanny imitations of yet another Brooklyn-born Woody Guthrie disciple, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott.

It’s difficult to determine *exactly* when the disparate versions of “Alice’s Restaurant” began to transform into something more closely resembling the genuine “Massacree.” Once Guthrie abandoned college in the early autumn of 1965, he likewise had forsaken his protection from Selective Service. Though he had written the Draft Board and registered for conscientious objector status in March of 1966, the army classified him as 1-A, or “available for military service.” As such he was expected to report to the army’s induction building at 39 Whitehall Street in lower Manhattan for his physical and mental examinations. It was here where thousands of young men of Guthrie’s age were, in Arlo’s memorable sing-song whimsy, to be “injected, inspected, detected, infected, neglected and selected.”

His maddening experience on Whitehall Street both angered and inspired him; he began to sprinkle his “Alice’s Restaurant” monologues with only mildly exaggerated stories of his physical and mental examinations. In September of 1966, Guthrie was booked to play a pair of mid-week gigs at Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, then the Boston area’s preeminent coffeehouse. This engagement was among the earliest cited performances of the “Alice’s Restaurant Massacree.” A “Boston Globe” critic made note of Guthrie’s rendering of an unnamed 20-minute long talking song “set in western Massachusetts” involving “the desperate crime of littering.” The song was still a work-in-progress. The “Globe” review charged that while the shaggy-dog opus had “dragged a few times,” Guthrie nonetheless “sustained its bite to the very end extremely well.”

Still not satisfied, Guthrie continued to hone the song, adding a little bit here and there, editing out any wry commentary which he deemed redundant or unnecessary. This on-stage polishing of the “Massacree” continued apace during Guthrie’s visit to England in December of 1966 during his modest month-long tour of pubs and folk clubs. English fans, already enamored of Woody Guthrie’s music thanks to Jack Elliott’s visits 1955-1960, were likely disappointed when the prodigal son arrived only to dampen expectations. “I don’t know if I will sing any of Woody’s songs,” he told the British music journal “Melody Maker.” He confirmed only that he would likely perform his own song, “Alice’s Restaurant,” a “twenty minute” long talking blues that “I like very much and people seem to like it too.”

The newly re-tooled “Alice’s Restaurant” was also part of Guthrie’s three-song guest slot at WNYC’s “American Musical Festival” at Carnegie Hall on February 18, 1967. The song would receive a small mention in the press, the “New York Times” finding Guthrie’s song an “amusing but pointed spoken monologue on the vagaries of law enforcement, the selective service draft and their relation to the war in Vietnam.” Immediately following the Carnegie Hall event, Guthrie was hired to support Ramblin’ Jack Elliott’s winding down of a three week-long residency at Greenwich Village’s Gaslight Café. Upon the completion of Elliott’s contract, Gaslight manager Sam Hood retained Guthrie as the nightclub’s feature performer. Twice

nightly performances of “Alice’s Restaurant” allowed the young singer-songwriter to hone the subtle nuances of the monologue and his droll delivery to near perfection.

The New York correspondent of “The Broadside” (of Boston) would attend one of Guthrie’s Gaslight shows and wished in typeset, that “someone would get him in a recording studio and have “Alice’s Restaurant” put on wax so everyone could hear it.” By the spring of 1967, most of the song’s essential elements were set firmly in place. In April, the folksinger was invited to perform at Boston’s high-profile “American Festival of Music ’67.” In the estimation of a correspondent from “Billboard,” Guthrie--a virtually unknown entity on a bill that would include such legends as Thelonious Monk, Pete Seeger, Muddy Waters, Mahalia Jackson, Chuck Berry and a score of others--“blew the roof” off the Commonwealth armory with “Alice’s Restaurant.” “The Broadside” all but advocated for the bootlegging of the song, hoping that “someone taped [Guthrie’s armory set] for future illicit listening.”

Such pleas that “Alice’s Restaurant” should be waxed and disseminated for everyone to hear were not going unheard. Harold Leventhal, the concert promoter and business agent for, amongst others, Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Cisco Houston and Judy Collins, had taken over management of Guthrie’s career in May of 1966. Leventhal had become increasingly distressed by the bootleg recordings of “Alice’s Restaurant” that seemed suddenly to be springing up everywhere. In Leventhal’s estimation, the bootlegs really began to proliferate in the weeks following Guthrie’s Gaslight Café residency. “All the kids brought their tape recorders to record the damn thing,” he would grouse.

This was true, in and of itself. Bootlegs of Guthrie’s 1967 Gaslight shows *were* being privately circulated. More problematic was that Guthrie had become a semi-regular late night visitor to New York City’s free-form program “Radio Unnamable” with host Bob Fass. Once the coffeehouses had shuttered for the night, Guthrie would make his way to the WBAI-FM studio at 30 E. 39th Street. There he would guest on the popular late-night program, making music into the wee hours with such tagalong friends as Jack Elliott, David Bromberg and Jerry Jeff Walker. Guthrie would perform the “Alice’s Restaurant Massacre” on listener-supported WBAI on a number of occasions. He would sometimes accompany himself on a solo guitar, but on one occasion had six-string wizard Bromberg joyously seconding. On at least one occasion, Guthrie brought out the song’s obvious ragtime component by raucously pounding out the tune on the station’s rickety, off-key upright piano.

The listeners of the decidedly “underground,” free-speech programming of WBAI, the east coast sister station of Berkeley’s Pacifica KPFK, were completely enchanted by Guthrie’s windy talking-blues. So much so that the station’s switchboard would light up nightly with fevered requests for Fass to playback the tapes he had archived. Fass was more than happy to oblige his audience of insomniacs, third-shifters and taxi cab drivers. He would occasionally ransom such playbacks in trade for donations to the perpetually cash-strapped station. Once the requested donations were secured, the night owls at home with access to reel-to-reel recording decks would roll tape.

It wasn’t long until bootlegs of these informal and freewheeling WBAI sessions were being traded or sold on the down low in and around Greenwich Village. In the June 1967 issue of “Broadside: The Topical Song Magazine,” editors Sis Cunningham and Gordon Friesen--two transplanted Oklahoman radicals and friends of Woody Guthrie since the 1940s --noted that

during WBAI's most recent fund drive, the station was pledged "some \$10,000" solely through their playing of the "Alice's Restaurant Massacre" in "2 segments."

The situation was too much for Leventhal who, in April of 1967, was pressured to draft a letter to the management of WBAI, threatening legal action should they continue to play their tapes of the "Massacre." If nothing else, this untenable situation forced Leventhal's hand and hastened his decision to get his young client into the studio for his first proper recording session. Once arrangements had been made, postcards were sent out to friends to serve as sounding boards for a planned "live" audience recording of "Alice.": *"You are Cordially Invited to The First Recording Session of ARLO GUTHRIE at Columbia Records Studio, 207 E. 30th St. (bet. 2nd & 3rd Ave.). TUESDAY EVE. JUNE 13th at 8:40 pm sharp! ADMISSION WITH THIS CARD ONLY!*

Guthrie's three performances of the "Alice's Restaurant Massacre" at the Newport Folk Festival in July of 1967--the most important one of these being a much celebrated performance on the main stage before a crowd of some 9,500 fans--is usually cited as the turning point in Guthrie's fledgling career. It was in some respect, but the truth is that when Guthrie walked off the Newport stage on the evening of Sunday, July 16th, his signature song had already been professionally taped and a curious deal inked with Frank Sinatra's easy-listening label Reprise Records.

Guthrie's debut album, "Alice's Restaurant" (Reprise 6267), was released in October of 1967, the very same month that Woody Guthrie passed on, age 54, in his bed at Creedmoor State Hospital, Queens, New York. The success of "Alice's Restaurant" would catapult Arlo Guthrie, age 20, into stardom-- he was, for a time, "America's favorite hippie." The success of his first album was unlikely but not too surprising. Reprise sold more than 700,000 units between October 1967 through September 1969, and the album enjoyed a run of more than 59 consecutive weeks on the charts. The album's success was made even more notable since LP sales were historically helped along by the spin-off of an AM radio-friendly single. Not as surprising was the small flood of merchandise that would follow in the wake of the album's success. New York's Grove Press would publish two unique editions of Marvin Glass's illustrated comic-book paperback of the saga. Random House would issue the "Alice's Restaurant Cookbook" complete with a musical flexi-single. The Overlook Press of Woodstock, NY, would a bit belatedly publish Alice Brock's combined memoir and cookbook "My Life As a Restaurant."

Guthrie too was coaxed into the studio to record a belated country-rock 45 rpm single, "Alice's Rock & Roll Restaurant" (Reprise 0877), suitable for AM airplay. It wasn't a particularly great record, but it did have charm and following its release in November 1969 the 7" platter did slip briefly onto the Top 100 Singles Chart. There were also a number of Arlo Guthrie day glow orange and black light posters, a wall decoration popular in the late 1960s. The most famous of these depicted the folksinger signaling with his middle finger in a most anti-authoritarian fashion. Some of the marketing was silly: in 1968 WBAI reported sightings of "Alice's Restaurant" dish towels, beer mugs, and face cloths. Guthrie's debut album would see a second significant boost in sales when Arthur Penn's critically acclaimed feature film version of "Alice's Restaurant" (United Artists) hit neighborhood movie houses in August of 1969. That very month Guthrie would perform at the historic Woodstock Music and Art Fair Aquarian

Exposition on Max Yasgur's farm in Bethel, New York, his "Coming into Los Angeles" proving he was no one hit wonder.

Hank Reineke has written about folk, blues, and country music for publications such as the "Aquarian Arts Weekly," "Soho Arts Weekly," "Downtown," "East Coast Rocker," "Blues Revue," "On The Tracks," "ISIS," and "The Bridge. His first book, "Ramblin' Jack Elliott: The Never-Ending Highway" (Scarecrow, 2010), was awarded the Certificate of Merit by the ARSC (Association for Recorded Sound Collections) for "Best Research in Folk, Ethnic, and World Music" (2010). "Arlo Guthrie: The Warner/Reprise Years" (Scarecrow, 2012) was awarded the Certificate of Merit by the ARSC for "Best Research in Recorded Popular Music" (2013).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.