

# “This Land Is Your Land”—Woody Guthrie (1944)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Bill Nowlin (guest post)\*



Woody Guthrie

A musical score for the song "This Land Is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time. It includes the title "This Land Is Your Land" and "Words and Music by Woody Guthrie". The lyrics are: "This land is your land, this land is my land. From California to the New York is-land, from the red-wood forest above me that end-less sky-way, I saw below me to the Gulf Stream waters; that gold-en valley; This land was made for you and me. This land was made for you and me." The score includes chord markings (C, G, D, D7, G) and line numbers (6, 11, 14).

Words and music

Woody Guthrie’s song “This Land Is Your Land” is a phenomenon. It’s known by almost everyone in America, but it was never popularized via radio or television airplay. It was not originally made known because it had been sung by anyone famous. It was a song typically learned face-to-face, in camps or classrooms or places where people sang in small groups--the way all music was transmitted in the days before broadcast media.

It’s a sing-along song that can be sung for joy in a way that many other songs cannot. It’s also a song that celebrates inclusion, which has long made it popular.

In its most widely-known version it’s as patriotic a song as one can imagine. But it is also inherently radical, in the same way that the preamble to the United States Constitution is. Indeed, any number of people over the years have suggested that “This Land Is Your Land” should replace the “Star Spangled Banner” as the national anthem of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Springsteen once called it the “greatest song ever written about America,” adding that it gave voice to “the promise of what our country was supposed to be about.”<sup>2</sup>

Woody Guthrie has been described as “the great balladeer of the American Depression”<sup>3</sup> and the author of about 1,000 songs, as well as a number of other writings. He was first diagnosed with the hereditary disease Huntington’s chorea in September 1952, the disease that ultimately took his life in 1967. From May 1956 onward, he was institutionalized at a New Jersey hospital. He consequently missed out on participation in the burgeoning interest in folk music, but his songs (and his character) were major inspirations to many during the “folk revival” of the 1960s.

“This Land Is Your Land” was originally written in New York in 1940. It is clear enough that he wrote the song because of an instinctive dislike for the then-popular Irving Berlin composition “God Bless America” by recording star Kate Smith. Woody’s original version was titled “God Blessed America” and each stanza ended with the line “*God blessed America for me.*” Those words were later replaced with “*This land was made for you and me.*”

The lyrics most frequently sung are:

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California, to the New York Island  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream Waters  
This land was made for you and me*

*I roamed and rambled, and I followed my footsteps  
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts  
And all around me a voice was singing  
This land was made for you and me!*

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California, to the New York Island  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream Waters  
This land was made for you and me*

*As I went walking that ribbon of highway  
I saw above me that endless skyway  
I saw below me those golden valleys  
This land was made for you and me!*

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California, to the New York Island  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream Waters  
This land was made for you and me*

*As the sun was shining, and I was strolling  
And the wheat fields waving, and the dust clouds rolling  
As the fog was lifting, a voice was saying  
“This land was made for you and me!”*

*This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California, to the New York Island  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream Waters  
This land was made for you and me.*

Copyright of the song has long been maintained by Ludlow Music and The Richmond Organization. A recent lawsuit asserted that the song belongs in the public domain, but there is no question that the lyrics were written by Woody Guthrie.<sup>4</sup>

There were two stanzas not as often sung which offer some of Guthrie's more pointed social commentary:

*There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.  
The sign was painted, said 'Private Property.'*

*But on the backside, it didn't say nothing.  
This land was made for you and me.*

*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple,  
By the relief office I saw my people.  
As they stood hungry,  
I stood there wondering if God blessed America for me.<sup>5</sup>*

Without the two stanzas, “This Land Is Your Land” might be hard to fault from any political perspective. It’s even been used in a commercial by Target.<sup>6</sup> The two verses noted here are clearly more pointed in their politics.

The song was recorded in the spring of 1944 for Moe Asch of Folkways Records. That recording was not released at the time. Jeff Place of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings says that it was first released in 1951.<sup>7</sup>

In 1946 and 1947, Guthrie returned to the studio and recorded a large number of songs for children for Folkways and “This Land Is Your Land” was among them. Its first release on Folkways was in 1951, given catalog number FP27, later as FC 7027.<sup>8</sup> The version released did not contain either of his two more controversial verses.

The original 1944 recording included the “private property” verse but not the “relief office” one. It is this version that was honored by the National Recording Registry in 2002, the inaugural year of the Registry. As Nick Spitzer has written, “Guthrie’s [1944] recorded version was more or less lost until Smithsonian archivist Jeff Place heard the acetate master during a 1997 transfer of the recording to a digital format.”<sup>9</sup>

As noted, “This Land Is Your Land” has become widely known and loved, familiar not only to those who live in the United States but around the world. Woody Guthrie’s daughter, Nora Guthrie, says that thousands of people have reached out over the years, saying, “*This* should be the national anthem’--because it’s filled with beauty and love of country.” Her response has been that the song “belongs to *the people*--not the government.”<sup>10</sup>

A New York law firm decided to test that proposition. Lead attorney Mark C. Rifkin of Wolf Haldenstein Adler Freeman & Herz LLP brought a lawsuit against The Richmond Organization (TRO) and Ludlow Music seeking to have it declared that the song was in the public domain. The same firm had succeeded against the same defendants in having the song “We Shall Overcome” ruled to be in the public domain because “the Plaintiffs have shown, as a matter of law, that the Defendants have no valid copyright in the words and melody of the first verse of ‘We Shall Overcome’ because it lacks originality.”<sup>11</sup> The same law firm had previously successfully overseen the reversion of the song “Happy Birthday To You” into the public domain.

Whatever the legalities, “This Land Is Your Land” remains a widely-known and widely-loved song that has endured, and arguably only grown in stature over more than 75 years since it was first written.

Nora Guthrie responded to an inquiry, saying, “Here’s what I cherish, and what the song means to all of us. One of the most visionary moments, when the song was genuinely, and cosmically,

‘fulfilled,’ was at President Barack Obama’s inaugural concert. America was singing at that moment.”

That moment had embraced, she wrote:

- Pete Seeger, a blacklisted musician for 25 years, center stage, leading the country.
- Singing to the first African American elected President of the USA.
- Accompanied by Bruce Springsteen--the biggest rock star in the USA.
- Backed by an African American gospel choir of young people.
- With an Indigenous percussionist.
- With the biggest sing-along audience of millions of Americans--who ALL knew the words to the song! What other song could have possibly fit the bill? None.

Nora added, “As I watched it, crying, I looked up and said to my dad, ‘So THIS is why you wrote it!’ It was as if the moment was made for the song, and vice versa. I don’t know if that kind of moment in music history will ever happen again.”<sup>12</sup>

*Bill Nowlin was co-founder of Rounder Records in 1970, with Ken Irwin and Marian Leighton Levy. In the 20-plus years since the 1990s, he has written or edited 100 books, mostly about baseball but including a few about music or politics, including “Woody Guthrie: American Radio Patriot” (Rounder Books, 2013). He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In June 2020, semipro soccer team Tulsa Athletic consciously replaced the pre-game singing of the National Anthem with “This Land Is Your Land.” See Joe Bagliere and Brien Ries, CNN.com, June 25, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/25/us/tulsa-athletic-star-spangled-banner-woody-guthrie-spt-trnd/index.html>

Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) was a native of Oklahoma. Since 2013, the Woody Guthrie Center has been housed in Tulsa.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Springsteen in a 1985 concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yuc4BI5NWU>

<sup>3</sup> Henrietta Yurchenco, *A Mighty Hard Road—The Woody Guthrie Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 11.

<sup>4</sup> A recent court case from 2019 is Saint-Amour et al v The Richmond Organization Inc et al. U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, No. 16-04464. See an article about the case: Jonathan Stempel, “U. S. judge refuses to dismiss ‘This Land Is Your Land’ lawsuit,” Reuters, March 28, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-music-this-land-is-your-land-idUSKCN1R920P>

<sup>5</sup> Springsteen can be seen singing the “relief office” verse in the video from the 1985 concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

<sup>6</sup> Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man—The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 403.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Spitzer, “The Story Of Woody Guthrie’s ‘This Land Is Your Land,’” NPR.org, February 15, 2012.

<https://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land>

<sup>8</sup> Email to author from Jeff Place, Smithsonian Institution, on August 18, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Spitzer.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Blair, “How ‘This Land Is Your Land’ Roamed And Rambled Into American Life,” *All Things Considered*, NPR.org, March 14, 2019. In 2020, Nora added a concern about the song truly becoming the National Anthem. “Woody didn’t write it to be used as a march-to-war song. Or can you imagine how a corrupt administration, or an anti-democratic group could abuse it?” Nora Guthrie, email to author, September 1, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See U.S. District Court Denise Cote’s ruling in the Southern District of New York on September 8, 2017.

<https://www.whafh.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/We-Shell-Overcome-SJ-Decision-9.8.17-1.pdf>. Thanks to Mark Rifkin for responding in August 2020 to an inquiry regarding the status of litigation over the copyright. When it came to “This Land Is Your Land,” the defendants took a somewhat novel approach. When District Judge Deborah Batts declined to dismiss the suit that Rifkin et. al. brought on behalf of the group Saatori, the defendants (TRO and Ludlow) gave Saatori a free lifetime license to use the song, which in the opinion of the Court rendered the plaintiff’s claims as moot. The case was dismissed. One suspects that any other serious effort to challenge copyright ownership of “This Land Is Your Land” would be met with the same response, effectively resulting in it becoming impossible to truly challenge the validity of the copyright because any challenge mounted could similarly be met with a grant of a free license.

<sup>12</sup> Nora Guthrie, email to author, September 1, 2020.