

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

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Woody Guthrie

**This Land Is Your Land**

Words and Music by  
Woody Guthrie

The image shows a musical score for the song "This Land Is Your Land" in G major, 4/4 time. The score is written on a yellow background. It includes the following lyrics and chords:

1. This land is your land, this land is my land. From Cal - i -  
As I was walk - ing that ribbon of high - way I saw a -

6. D D7 G C  
for - nia to the New York is - land, From the red - wood for - est  
bove me that end - less sky - way, I saw be - low me

11. G  
to the Gulf Stream wa - ters;  
that gold - en vil - ley;

14. D D7 G  
This land was made for you and me.  
This land was made for you and me.

Words and music

It has been sung in union halls, around campfires, in classrooms, from concert stages. It has been labeled America’s “alternative national anthem.” The song is Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land.” And though many people know its melody and lyrics (at least the first few verses), few know its complicated and, at times, controversial history, not to mention the difficult life of the man who wrote it.

Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) was born in Okemah, Oklahoma. His father was a cowboy, land prospector and local politician. Despite some early prosperity (the family owned several parcels of land), while still quite young a tragic series of events undermined Guthrie’s upbringing. First, his family home burned to the ground, followed not long after by the death, also by fire, of his seven year-old sister, Clara. Burdened by grief and undiagnosed Huntington’s Disease, Guthrie’s mother dissolved into grief and increasingly erratic behavior. When her son was 14, Nora Guthrie, was institutionalized. (She died in 1930.)

Forced to work to pay off mounting debts, Woody’s father, Charles, relocated to Texas leaving his children behind in Okemah to eek by on their own. Guthrie turned to delivering newspapers and dancing for pennies to help support himself. At 16, Guthrie left home, setting out on the open road. Over the next few years he traveled the American south working odd jobs like farm laborer, spittoon cleaner and sign painter. He briefly returned to Texas in 1929 before departing again to live the life of a hobo. For the next seven years, Guthrie rode the rails, one of the dozens of young, itinerant men of the times who turned to the hobo lifestyle during the Great Depression.

Both of Guthrie’s parents had been musical. His mother, before her illness overtook her, sang and his father played the banjo. From his uncle, Jeff Guthrie and on his travels, Guthrie learned various instruments, including the guitar and Jew’s harp. Guthrie soon learned he possessed natural musical abilities including the ability to play “by ear.”

Spurned on by the despair of the Depression, the Dust Bowl and the rise of fascism in Europe, Guthrie soon turned songwriter. He broke with many of the popular styles of the day—the happy ditties churned out by Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths—and, instead, embraced the rough and folksy “hillbilly music” he had absorbed in his boyhood.

In 1937, Guthrie returned to California, one of thousands of “Okies” that had fled from the plains to find work in California. Though times were hard, and jobs few, Guthrie was able to secure himself a position at California radio station KFVD where he earned a dollar a day for singing on

the air. There, Woody introduced two of the thousands of songs he would write, including “Do Re Mi” (a slang term for “money”) and “Talking Dust Bowl Blues.” Both spoke directly to the hundreds of migrants who listened in daily.

Wanderlust however struck him once again. Guthrie traveled frequently, bringing his original songs—increasingly radical and advocate in nature--to union halls and other social and political forums around the country. He lived for a time in Washington state and later moved to New York City.

Guthrie was recorded for the first time in 1940 when the Library of Congress’s traveling musicologist Alan Lomax taped Guthrie talking and performing some of his songs. Shortly after, Guthrie recorded his first commercial album. “Dust Bowl Ballads” was released by Folkways Records in 1940. It contained such selections as “Do Re Mi,” “Tom Joad, Part 1,” “Tom Joad, Part 2,” “Dust Can’t Kill Me,” and “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore.”

Guthrie’s most famous composition, “This Land Is Your Land,” was written in 1940. Supposedly, it was written in reaction to the “Pollyanna” political and national sentiments expressed by Irving Berlin in his song “God Bless America” first introduced by Kate Smith in 1938. Guthrie considered Berlin’s patriotic hymn to be “complacent” and “unrealistic.”

Musically, the melody of the song seems to be drawn from an earlier tune performed by the Carter Family, “When The World’s On Fire.” (Guthrie would have been familiar with the group and their repertoire based upon his long-standing interest in folk and country music.) The Carter’s song meanwhile drew its melody from an even earlier gospel hymn, “Oh, My Loving Brother.”

If the melody of the song was not entirely new, the sentiments that it expressed certainly were. Originally titled “God Blessed America for Me,” “This Land...” has a far more pointed meaning and subtext than the happy sing-along that it is today might actually suggest. This is especially true in the song’s original fifth and sixth verses, often omitted in later renditions of the song and often omitted by Guthrie himself during performances:

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

*In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple;  
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,  
Is this land made for you and me?*

The inclusion of these two oft-deleted stanzas reveal a far greater and more accurate portrait of Woody Guthrie than tends to appear with most reprisals of his best-known work. It changes the tone of the song from just a feel good anthem into a rally against socialistic economics.

Woody Guthrie first recorded “This Land Is Your Land” in April of 1944. Serving as a merchant Marine at that time, Guthrie recorded the song, for Folkways, while briefly home on shore leave. After his discharge in 1945, Guthrie returned to New York where he was quickly accepted into the local folk music scene which then included Pete Seeger, the Weavers and others. It was while living in New York, on Mermaid Avenue in Coney Island with his second wife and four children (one of which was son Arlo), that Guthrie would be his most prolific as a songwriter. It was during these years that he composed “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)” as well as other folk classics.

Unfortunately, this period of productivity and increasing popularity was not to last. As with his mother, Guthrie suffered from Huntington's disease and its symptoms began to manifest themselves more fully in Woody's fourth decade. His illness, combined with a long-standing addiction to alcohol, resulted in declining health and ever-increasing erratic behavior. Guthrie entered the first of a series of hospitals in 1956 and would be in and out of institutions until his death in 1967.

Though mass recognition of his artistry would not emerge until after his death, Guthrie's influence on American music is profound. He is the godfather of the modern Folk genre. Bob Dylan idolized him (and often visited Guthrie in various institutions near the end of his life). And a thousand singing-writing troubadours pay tribute to Guthrie every time they pick up their guitars.

Though less today than they have been in decades before, songs for the sake of social change have never been completely eradicated. Springsteen, Dylan of course, Judy Collins, Natalie Merchant, Steve Earle and others still mix messages in with their music, drawing attention and criticism to national and international injustices. Arguably, contemporary rap artists are the Guthries of today as they spit harsh truths in amongst their fast rhymes.

Granted, it may be a considerable a leap from hard-core West Coast or East Coast rap to "This Land Is Your Land" but only in degrees. The intention has remained the same even if most latter-day rap songs will never become as universally known as Woody Guthrie's most famous and beloved song.

*Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).*