

HIS SONGS ARE OUR SONGS

• Celebrating Woody Guthrie on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

By CHARLIE MAGUIRE

“Born to win. I know I’m born to win.”

— WOODY GUTHRIE

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Born to win? Why, it can be argued that here was one composer who had more than enough tragedy stacked against him early on. There was the loss of a dear sister by fire (Woody would lose a daughter under similar circumstances); sudden and crushing poverty, after his father lost everything in real-estate speculation, and horrific illness; when his mother was committed to a state hospital — a harbinger of Woody’s own future when the same genetic disease claimed him at age 55 in 1967.

And we’re not even talking about the struggles of starting a life in the music business in the middle of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl during the 1930s.

It’s a miracle, really. Guthrie was an explosive talent who gave America so many songs: “This Land Is Your Land,” “So Long, It’s Been Good To Know Yuh,” “Tom Joad,” “Union Maid,” “Pastures of Plenty,” “Roll On Columbia” — you can fill a good-sized paragraph with just the titles alone. There’s more. Prose writings on every subject; a novel published in his lifetime (“Bound For Glory”); another one posthumously (“Seeds of Man”), and an art portfolio so huge that only a fraction has seen the light.

Aside from a U.S. postage stamp and a full-length movie of his first novel, Woody’s fame has been more organic than organized. It started with the people who traveled with him — Pete Seeger and Lee Hays singing his songs separately and together as part of “The Weavers,” getting them around America in a way Woody never could. Then Woody’s persona as well as his music were faithfully carried forward by those who were inspired by him to such a degree they all say it was an ignition point in their careers.



Woody Guthrie Publications

Minnesota-born Bob Dylan, and many others (including this writer) copied him right down to the guitar he played (Gibson) and his favorite meal (chili). Even now, Woody’s lifestyle, as well as his music, seems so fresh, so liberating, that it can make the hippest rockers gladly pull the plugs on their instruments and sing 70-year-old songs with as much conviction as if they had been written today.

“Oh, you can’t scare me, I’m sticking to the Union!”

But even more than that, it is the people — the 99 percent — and not a single professional performer who have contributed most to Guthrie’s enduring appeal. It’s millions of human voices with three chords and guitars singing his songs in schools; in churches; in the buildings of state capitols; outside, inside, and around the world — and when those voices blend on a Woody Guthrie song, they all sound remarkably good.

“Roll on Columbia roll on, roll on Columbia roll on ...”

Along with his no-nonsense, piston-engine melodies, it’s Woody’s words we love. They are the plainly sung simple words written by a man who knew what he wanted to say, and just said it. Woody used words carefully chosen for clarity and dignity, like he knew that his work would be heard and read by generations unknown to him, in languages he could not fathom, and on devices he could not imagine.

“I hate a song that makes you think that you were born to lose. Bound to lose. ... Songs that poke fun at you on account of your bad luck or your hard traveling.”

We know he’s good, just as our Depression-era relatives did when Woody was working and writing. He was singing about what people need, want and deserve.

“Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking my freedom highway
Nobody living can make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.”

A hundred years and counting, we know this to be true — what folklorist Alan Lomax said of Woody Guthrie: “Long ago, Walt Whitman called for writers ... to create a truly indigenous poetry. What he could never have expected was that, when this poet appeared, he would sing his poems to guitar and harmonica accompaniment and that the whole country would sing along with him.”

Charlie Maguire is a songwriter and musician and serves on the Board of the Twin Cities Musicians Union. Along with his friends Tony Glover and Pop Wagner, he is performing concerts of Woody Guthrie’s songs around the region during the Woody Guthrie Centennial Year.

COMMENTARY

Remembering
Woody Guthrie.
Charlie Maguire, OP4

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