

“All aboard for Roosevelt!”

Minneapolis Lyceum Theatre Hosts Woody Guthrie & “Bandwagon”

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

“TWO EVENINGS ONLY!” the ad in the 1944 *Minneapolis Tribune* read. The “Bandwagon,” a vaudeville show of “Boogie Woogie,” Broadway stars, dancers from the Metropolitan Opera, and last but not least “Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston . . . present a collection of ballads and tunes.”

On a nationwide tour in the fall of 1944 supporting the unprecedented fourth-term election of President Franklin Roosevelt, folksinger Woody Guthrie (1912–1967, *Roll on Columbia, So Long It's Been Good to Know You, Dusty Old Dust*), already on his way to becoming “a national possession like Yosemite,” was in Minneapolis again.

It wasn't the first time. Minnesota appears in Woody's writing like no other state except maybe his home state of Oklahoma or California, where he fled the Dust Bowl.

His novel, *Bound for Glory*, opens in Minnesota aboard a freight train, and he mentions Minnesota cities in other songs. Pete Seeger wrote of traveling to Duluth with him, along the way singing to lumberjacks, sailors, and miners. Woody's foremost biographer, Joe Klein, tells of Guthrie and his singing group the Almanacs being tear-gassed while singing in support of a strike at the International Harvester factory on University Avenue. One of the best things about heroes like Woody Guthrie is that it gives your old hometown a ripple on a bigger pond when you discover that they have graced your known streets and avenues with a personal visit.

So not for the first time, but certainly more comfortably, 32-year-old Woody Guthrie walked the streets of Minneapolis after enjoying the oddity (for him at least) of riding in a train rather than on one. “Bandwagon” was on a string of short engagements starting in Boston, then moving on to Hartford, Akron, Indianapolis, Cleveland,

Minneapolis, and points west. The green room and backstage of the Lyceum Theatre would be his home-away-from home for the next couple of days.

Located basically on the site of present-day Orchestra Hall, the Lyceum Theatre was at 85 South 11th Street. Built for \$350,000 in 1905 and originally named the Minneapolis Auditorium Building, it was renovated for an additional \$500,000, then renamed and managed by S. L. “Roxy” Rathafel, who would later open the Roxy Theatre in New York City. The main house had 1,800 seats, and the ups and downs of the entertainment business forced the theatre to move from first-run movies to roadshows on “dark” nights when the Minneapolis Symphony, aka today's Minnesota Orchestra, was not in town. By the time Woody and troupe arrived, the Lyceum had as well, thriving as an upscale theatre, replacing the movies and roadshows, and playing host to personal appearances by the likes of Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn.



Mary Lou Williams by William P. Gottlieb, ca. 1946. Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.



Woody Guthrie by Al Aumuller, Library of Congress, 1943.

“Bandwagon Rolls Into City”

Mary Lou Williams, the “queen of boogie-woogie,” came to Minneapolis today for evening performances tonight and Sunday in “Bandwagon,” musical revue, at the Lyceum theater.

Miss Williams' recordings of “Rollin', Walkin' and Swinging,” “Froggy Bottom,” “Stepping Pretty,” “Blue Skies,” and “Star Dust” have become collectors' items among lovers of boogie-woogie and swing.

A composer and arranger of the first order, Miss Williams has done special numbers with bands of Benny Goodman, Harry

James, Cootie Williams, Bob Crosby and Duke Ellington.

Besides Miss Williams, many stars of stage, screen and radio appear in “Bandwagon.”

Will Geer, for four years the Jeeter Lester of “Tobacco Road,” will be master of ceremonies. Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston, who delivered the goods to our boys in France as members of the merchant marine, present a collection of ballads and tunes our service men are singing.

Others in the cast are Helen Tamaris and Daniel Nagrin, concert dancers of the Metropolitan opera, and Rollin Smith, Negro baritone, star of “Showboat.”

Although mentioned last in the reviews here, and not as well known then as now, Guthrie, an author, songwriter, and performer, traveled in pretty good company. Not only did he have his close friend and merchant marine shipmate Cisco Houston to harmonize with, but also on the “Bandwagon” stage was Will Geer, master of ceremonies, whose friendship brought Woody to New York four years earlier. (It was in a small New York City hotel room just off Times Square where he wrote his best known song, “This Land Is Your Land.”) Geer, who had just finished a long run on Broadway playing the character Jester Lester in the play “Tobacco Road,” is best known today by a generation who remembers him playing Grandpa in the TV series “The Waltons.”

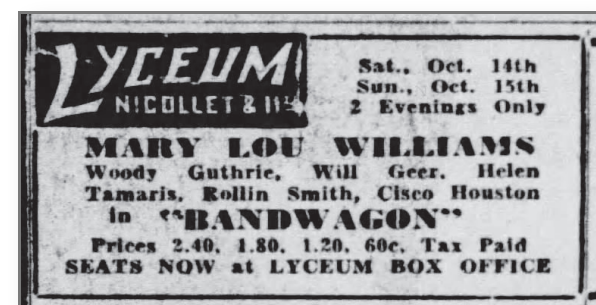
The show was vaudeville-style with a little something for everyone — singing, dancing, comedy, a jazz trio — with Woody and Cisco leavening the entertainment with Woody’s WWII songs like “Ruben James,” topical ballads like “Do, Re, Me,” and “Union Maid,” plus finale numbers like “Girl with the Roosevelt Button.” Then it was back to the green room, and later a stop at a newsstand, then a café counter for chili, followed perhaps by some bar busking possibilities over on Hennepin Avenue.

The advance promotion for the shows fell to Jackie (Gibson) Alper, whom this writer knew when she and her husband had a folk radio show decades later in a small town in upstate New York. Although she did not travel with the troupe, she knew enough about Woody to tell me that his favorite drink to order on the tour was Myers Rum.

A month after Roosevelt’s successful election (Roosevelt had only six more months to live, dying in Georgia less than a month before VE Day, on April 12, 1945), Woody Guthrie was back in New York and on radio station WNEW for fifteen minutes every Sunday afternoon starting at 4:45 p.m., singing “This Land Is Your Land” as his opening theme song. He too would be in failing health; a genetic disorder that affects the body and the mind diagnosed as Huntington’s Disease would cut his career short. In fact, when he was at the Lyceum in Minneapolis, Woody had less than ten years of rambling left. He entered the hospital for good at age 40 having chronicled in song a major part of American history in the early-to-mid 20th Century.

And what of the Lyceum where Woody trod the boards with his good friends? The wrecking ball took that in 1973 to make way for a new home for the Minnesota Orchestra, which still on many occasions is spectacularly interrupted by one-nighter performances like Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Will Geer, who have lived, written, and performed what we can proudly claim as the American story.

Woody’s “This Land Is Your Land” is 80 years old this year. If you’ve a mind to, sing, hum, or whistle a little of the chorus of the song — it’s an election year after all, and as Woody said, “Take it easy, but take it!”



PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: If you want to retrace Woody’s steps to and from work in October of 1944, there are plenty of parking spaces along 11th Street. Start at Orchestra Hall, then work your way down to the old Peter’s Grill location (across the street from the Hen House) for chili, pie, and coffee. Then maybe walk down Hennepin Avenue, paying attention to what few old bars from the World War II era are left, then enter the Hennepin County Library and check out a copy of Woody’s *Bound for Glory* or maybe one of his albums. You’ll get the idea.

Charlie Maguire is a traveling songwriter, musician, and union organizer who makes frequent stops in Hennepin County.

NOTES

- 1 “National Possession,” Clifton Fadiman, *New Yorker*, 1943.
- 2 *Woody Guthrie: A Life* by Joe Klein, Knopf, 1980 pp. 283–286.
- 3 Lyceum Theatre: cinematreasures.org.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Almanac, Twin Cities Public Television, for the tip.



IMAGE CREDITS

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The Minneapolis Star, October 11, 1944;
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11th and Nicollet photo, 1950s, courtesy
Hennepin County Library.

