

The 'real' Woody Guthrie

WOODY GUTHRIE: A Life, by Joe Klein (Knopf, 476 pages, illustrated, \$15.95).

Reviewed by Charlie Maguire

The facts about Woody Guthrie are more complicated than any myth, and Joe Klein got it right. "True as the average," Woody once said of himself, and he comes out of these pages looking very real.

The book doesn't fall into the popular legend that has foiled and influenced so many. Woody! The rambling singer who rode a freight train out of the Dust Bowl and onto the American stage with a guitar-full of songs. Woody! Who turned out stories, poems and songs by the bushel; tunes like "Car Car," "Hard Traveling," "This Land Is Your Land," and autobiographical novels like "Bound for Glory." Woody! Who was happy being homeless as long as he had a bottle and a new song.

Instead, Klein has written a detailed, almost conversational biography of a man whose best work never reflected the tormented life he led. A man who for years has been alternately damned and protected by those who knew him, and imitated and distorted by people who didn't. Klein uses care, fairness and common sense in a people-oriented research to link Woody's years together.

There was no easy jump from Oklahoma to New York, from the migrant camps to the Library of Congress. There was prophetic family tragedy, southern California and Mexican radio shows, a lot of miles, and a broken marriage with three children (Woody married and divorced three times).

There were long hard years of borrowing from traditional songs, and copying more successful entertainers like Will Rogers and the Carter Family, many day jobs, and behavior ranging from ornery to selfish to embarrassing. An acquaintance observed that Woody sometimes was as comfortable to be around as a "loaded gun."

In truth, Woody was a macho, hard-shelled little man whose mood swings could be tender or terrifying, especially for his family and friends. It may be that this kind of grit was what saw him through all his working years, and later helped him stubbornly keep on living despite a hereditary nervous disease that was lit-



Woody Guthrie, the subject of a new biography.

erally worse than death. But still in all, some of the stuff that he pulled must have been pretty hard to take.

A professional letter writer, as much as he was a brilliant ballad-maker and novelist, Woody speaks for himself on all manner of subjects. Thanks to Marjorie Guthrie (Woody's second wife), the author was allowed unrestricted access to Woody's private papers, and she cooperated on the smallest and most intimate details of their life together.

There are snatches from all his published works, and the songs are here, too. The "oral history" of Woody's life, the anecdotes that have served so colorfully as part of his "folk" biography up until now, are down in print. Cisco Houston's "Wind Machine" story is one of the best (he was a close friend of Woody's and he gets only light treatment here). The political and social history of America in the first half of this century is woven easily into Woody's comings and goings.

But it's in the last part of the book that Klein does so well. Woody's physical decline was subtle and irre-

versible. The disease that drove his mother insane — a violent mind-altering illness, with no hope of a cure — came for Woody. The author writes of these last years graphically, but with such strength that Woody's struggle with Huntington's Chorea may be where the myth-making should be; not in the freight yards, but in the hospital bed.

There are two photo sections containing mostly familiar poses to long-time students of Woody, though a few are receiving wide circulation for the first time. On a technical note, the binding on the review copy started to come apart on the first reading, and Richard Hess's folksy dust jacket (brighter than any album cover Woody ever knew) may be all that will hold this copy together.

Basically this book is about a man and an art form; the folksinger and the folksong. This book lays the myth to rest, and brings renewed appreciation to what the guy did in spite of it all.

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