



Review: This Land Is Your Land: The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie

Reviewed Work(s):

Legacy by John Paulson

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make up a coherent story. But neither the exhibit nor the collection of essays that accompanies it pursues this potentially fruitful line of inquiry. Too bad: such an analogy might enrich the way we think about both history and psychoanalysis. The one essay in Roth's collection that addresses psychoanalysis and history, by Peter Gay, seems mired in an old-fashioned defense of "psychohistory."

The exhibit also includes a full-scale re-creation of Freud's famous Vienna office, using Freud's own artifacts and rugs. You can imagine, if you like, lying on the couch or, if you prefer, sitting behind it. Freud family movies, lent by the grandchildren, are fascinating and poignant. On a lighter and final note: don't forget to check out the gift shop when you see the exhibit. I particularly recommend the Freudian slippers for bedtime and the Freudian slippers to keep by the phone to write notes. Until then: Our time is up. See you next week.

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"This Land Is Your Land: The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie." Organized by the Woody Guthrie Archives, 250 W. 57th St., Suite 1218, New York, NY 11107, and Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services, 1100 Jefferson Dr. SW, Suite 3146, Washington, DC 20560.

Traveling exhibition. June 24–Sept. 26, 1999, Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles, Calif.; Feb. 5–April 23, 2000; Museum of the City of New York; May 27–Sept. 24, 2000; National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.; Oct. 19–Dec. 17, 2000, J. Wayne Stark Gallery, College Park, Tex.; March 24–Sept. 30, 2001, Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma; Oct. 20, 2001–April 25, 2002, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City. Some dates not yet confirmed. 3500 sq. ft. (325 sq. m.). Curatorial team: Nora Guthrie, curator; Marquette Folley, project director; Jorge Arevalo, Ronald Cohen, Joe Hickerson, Guy Logsdon, Jeff Place; James Sims, exhibit designer; and John Styron.

Legacy (16 min. videotape). Prod. and dir. by John Paulson (Smithsonian Productions).

Like Charlie Chaplin, whose movies he loved as a child, Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) was always cleverer than he let on. Behind his cornpone humor and deceptively simple songs lay a rich and complex personality surging with playfulness, ideas, and paradoxes. Indeed, Guthrie's easygoing manner belied his staggering industriousness: he penned more than three thousand songs, a newspaper column, a widely read autobiography, and countless unpublished poems, prose pieces, and letters. He also had radio shows, made more than three hundred sound recordings, and created innumerable works on paper—of which more than six hundred drawings, paintings, and cartoons survive. And if his mind and his hands were busy, so too were his feet: as a Dust Bowl refugee, a hobo, a journalist, and a labor activist, Guthrie traveled the

country with an insatiable wanderlust. Eventually visiting every state in the nation, he took inspiration from the road, the people he met, the stories they told, and the songs they shared.

All this dizzying activity has been deftly ordered and historicized in the traveling exhibition "This Land Is Your Land: The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie," organized by the Woody Guthrie Archives and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES) in association with the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Woody's daughter Nora Guthrie, executive director of the Guthrie Archives, served as exhibition curator, collaborating closely with SITES project director Marquette Folley. The result is a celebration—a tribute to a man, his life's work (artistic and political), and his lasting impact. Drawn primarily from the Guthrie Archives and the Smithsonian's Folkways Collection, the exhibition comprises a wide range of media and materials, including manuscripts, diaries, photographs, musical instruments, record albums, works on paper, sound recordings, and a video—many on display for the first time. In addition, Guthrie's song lyrics and autobiographical writings are used extensively in the wall text and labels. "Woody's work is our guide," the introductory panel explains; "His essays, poems, lyrics, and drawings . . . offer glimpses into the artist's life and narrate his life story."

Befitting a celebration of such a renowned peripatetic, visitors wander or ramble through, around, and among the different parts of Guthrie's life. As viewed at the National Museum of American History, the physical layout consists of eight freestanding multisectioned display cases, a small video theater at the end, and framed works on paper covering the surrounding walls of the exhibition space. Two of the display cases incorporate listening stations, each with a few well-chosen selections accompanied by helpful laminated transcriptions. In addition, the prominently displayed visitor response cards at the exit and a wall-mounted display case with a changing sample of past responses help to give the exhibition a populist, interactive feeling. Aesthetically, the design of the exhibition suffers from an excess of competing visual styles, and the chronological order of the display cases is difficult to perceive and follow. Such design problems notwithstanding, the varied, subject-driven presentation makes the exhibition attractive and accessible both to those already familiar with Guthrie and to those, especially young people, who know little or nothing about him.

More indirectly, the exhibition is also a celebration of the Woody Guthrie Archives, which opened in 1996, and of Nora Guthrie's creative efforts to revitalize her father's reputation and legacy. In addition to the current exhibition, she was involved in a week-long salute to Woody Guthrie at Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, and she initiated a recording project in which the British singer-activist Billy Bragg and the American rock band Wilco created music for lyrics that Woody Guthrie wrote but never recorded. The latter collaboration yielded two critically acclaimed albums, *Mermaid Avenue* and *Mermaid Avenue, Vol. 2*. Upcoming projects for the archives include a smaller traveling exhibition for schools and an album of Jewish music that Guthrie wrote, recorded by the Klezmatics. The current exhibition is therefore part of the archives' broader project to assert Guthrie's enduring

importance—a project not simply to preserve and promote his art but also to call attention to the persistence of the problems he tirelessly battled.

Organized in eight chronological sections, the exhibition traces Guthrie's life from his Oklahoma childhood, through his political awakening and musical activism in California and New York, and finally to his slow physical and mental disintegration, wrought by the rare Huntington's disease. The exhibition concludes with a video, *Legacy*, focusing on Guthrie's influence and contemporary relevance. Combining seldom seen film footage with commentary by singers such as Billy Bragg, Ani DiFranco, and Bob Dylan, the video intentionally sidesteps interviews with musicians who knew Guthrie personally in order to demonstrate his meaning for a generation that did not experience him firsthand. Although it goes unstated, the effect of the politically infused video is to leave the viewer to ask whether Guthrie's style of balladeer activism is, or could be, as poignant and provocative today as it was in his time.

As the exhibit recounts, the anger shown to Dust Bowl refugees in California sparked Guthrie's political awakening, and his visits to migrant labor camps in 1938 completed it. His deep identification with the poor against the rich and the workers against the owners assumed a radical political language, and from that time on Guthrie set himself on a career of activism through music, art, and writing. He apparently never joined the Communist party (contrary to allegations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation), but he did work openly with Communists and publicly maintained his support for the party even amid the anticommunist hysteria following World War II. His was a radicalism reminiscent of the socialist Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926): deeply American, expressed in plainspoken language, more intuitive than theoretical, and appealing not only to the doctrinaire but also to many who would not have identified themselves as radical. The exhibition, however, does not explicitly analyze Guthrie's radicalism, and visitors not already familiar with Guthrie's life might misconstrue how constant and overt his radical views were. More knowledgeable visitors, on the other hand, may recognize the unique way Guthrie linked agrarian Populism, Debsian socialism, the Wobblies' industrial unionism, Popular Front Communism, and the New York-based folk song activism of the 1940s and 1950s.

What comes through clearly, however, is the dynamic interplay between Guthrie's political convictions and his unending playfulness. This esprit manifested itself in everything from his drawings to his love of language, and the exhibition demonstrates this ably in images and texts. Indeed, the exhibit is at its best showing Guthrie as an unflinchingly inventive personality whose life was defined by his expressiveness; constantly drawing, writing, singing, listening, talking, and recording, he was like a dam bursting with ideas. Music was his principal medium, of course, and, in his prime, songs seemed to flow out of him. On assignment for the Bonneville Power Administration in 1941, for example, he wrote twenty-six songs in thirty days, including "Pastures of Plenty" and several other of his most enduring compositions.

As a songwriter, Guthrie saw himself not as an entertainer, but as a popular balladeer, singing of the important events of his time. Accordingly, the songs he produced were of a very particular cast, usually marrying fresh, topical lyrics with traditional or familiar-sounding melodies. Resolutely at odds with jazz, swing, and other



Woody Guthrie at the legendary Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, 1940. *Courtesy Woody Guthrie Archives.*

styles of commercial music of the time, Guthrie used the past as a resource to provide stability and strength in a socially aware present. For him, music was both poetic and functional—a tool of social and political activism used to chronicle the striving of the downtrodden and to buoy them up. Wherever he went, he played music to give voice to people's struggles, to dignify their fight, to bring them together, fortify them, galvanize them, for he considered songs his weapon in the fight against injustice, greed, hardship, and bigotry. "This machine kills fascists," he painted on his guitars, and he believed it. (Unfortunately, none of those guitars has survived, but the exhibition does display a fiddle Guthrie carried with him, bearing an almost identical conceit burned into the body.)

While Guthrie's vigor and vitality give the exhibition its flavor, one of the exhibition's notable achievements lies in also showing how much Huntington's disease shaped the larger story of Guthrie's life. A long wartime letter breaks into passages of gibberish, foreshadowing his mental deterioration, and exhibition visitors survey the extent of his degeneration in handwriting examples, photographs, and the "Yes" and "No" cards he used to communicate with his wife, Marjorie, after he could no longer

speak. Given Guthrie's energy and élan, in abundant evidence throughout the exhibition, it is chilling to realize that he was hospitalized for the last fifteen years of his life, until his death at fifty-five.

Loving but judicious, this exhibition is a fitting celebration, and the close attention to Guthrie's work and vision shows how he refracted the larger issues and struggles of his time. For all its many strengths, however, the exhibition's multilayered unity also has the effect of masking Guthrie's peculiar paradoxes. For example, a man whose political life revolved around ideas of collectivism led a personal life of "ragged individualism" (as Robert Christgau called it). His songs had a naturalism and familiarity that made them seem like they came from nowhere and from everywhere, yet Guthrie also relished his role as creator, signing his name or initials on almost everything he did. Moreover, by the time his name became virtually synonymous with the Dust Bowl, he was living in New York, which he called home for almost half his life and where, as Billy Bragg has noted, his "folk songs" grew to encompass such unlikely topics as Ingrid Bergman and flying saucers. Those paradoxes in no way undermine the power of Guthrie's achievement. Rather, they enhance it by revealing complexities that defy the tendency to mythologize him. Indeed, from the Oklahoma plains to Washington Square Park, Woody Guthrie's voice resonates far and loud in American history. The exhibition establishes this fact in a lively, instructive fashion. So too do the number of visitors who sing "This Land Is Your Land" as they walk in the exhibition hall.

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"The Star-Spangled Banner: The Flag That Inspired the National Anthem." National Museum of American History, 14th St. and Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20560-0646.

Temporary exhibition, June 1999–early 2002. Daily 10–5:30; admission free. 2,000 sq. ft. Ron Becker, project director.

The Star-Spangled Banner: The Flag That Inspired the National Anthem. By Lonny Taylor. (Washington and New York: Smithsonian Institution and Abrams, 2000. 92 pp. Paper, \$9.95, ISBN 0-8109-2940-6.)

Internet: overview of restoration project, history of flag with selected primary sources, teachers manual for K–8, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ssb>

"THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER PRESERVATION PROJECT . . . made possible by major support from POLO RALPH LAUREN," proclaim the large banners above the entrances to the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, D.C. (The