

How I Became a Woody Guthrie: Woody Guthrie, who is he and why should you care? By Carl Allen and Harry {doc} Babad © 2007



Folks, Woody Guthrie may be gone to us but here in the Northwest, his songs, stories and perhaps even his mannerisms are kept alive by Carl Allen. I hope many of you have attended Tumbleweed Music Festivals in Scenic Richland have taken the time to attend Carl's workshops or have attended the 3RFS concerts featuring The Wanderers. That's Bill Murlin and Carl Allen. More about this in this month's eTalk *twofer* companion article about the Wanderers.

Harry aka doc_Babad

Carl on How I Became a Woody Guthrie

Some 22 years ago, I started doing concerts around the Northwest, some solo, some with my singing partner, Bill Murlin, talking about Woody's time here and singing the songs of that period. There was something about the music of those days that both caught my mind's voice and my imagination. They were mostly foot tapping good too!

In 1998 I learned that the Washington State Humanities Commission was looking for someone to develop a first person characterization of Woody Guthrie doing the Columbia River songs. Initially I resisted that idea because I just wanted to sing the songs and tell the story of the songs without pretending to be Woody.



Eventually, I saw the wisdom of the Humanities Commission approach and developed the program as Woody, using all the written material he left behind during his short time here. As I became more comfortable with the material (both musical and written) I began to really enjoy being Woody for an hour or two and I have done several hundred shows throughout the northwest, mostly in small towns and backwater places. As noted, with a bit of doc's editing of material provided by

the Washington State Humanities Commission, on the
<http://www.humanities.org/inquiringmind/speaker_CarlAllen.php site/> :

Carl Allen is Woody Guthrie An important slice of Washington state history comes alive in a one-hour presentation by Carl Allen with "Woody" leading the way. The presentation became very popular in the 1999-2001 Inquiring Mind catalog and has continued with demands for returns for many another go around. Carl Allen also offers a children's concert, "Woody's Twenty Grow Big Songs," featuring the many children's songs Woody wrote during his lifetime. These are based on a book whose manuscript was lost for more than forty years. The children's concert is sometimes done in conjunction with the Great Depression program or the Columbia River, reaching out to children in the afternoon, adults in the evening.

Carl notes as part of his presentation, that: The Great Depression of the 1930's succeeded in turning upside down the lives of ordinary people in a way not seen before or since. It shaped the nation's psyche and indelibly marked the lives of everyone who lived through it. Stories and songs about the Great Depression abound, and form part of our heritage here in the Northwest. Before penning his Columbia River Songs, this was a fertile ground for Woody Guthrie. Carl's presentation is about those stories and songs. Weaving the facts and anecdotes among the songs.

Carl finishes a session by having audience members share their stories (or their parents' or grandparents' stories).

Woody Guthrie an Introduction

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie (July 14, [1912](#) - [October 3, 1967](#)) was a prolific American songwriter and folk musician. He described himself in one of his songs as "The Great Historical Bum" a first hand observer and survivor of the economic and environmental hardships of the Dust Bowl, which shook the Great Plains states during the Great Depression. Guthrie's body of music consists of hundreds of songs, ballads and improvised works. The breadth of his song topics ranged from political and traditional songs to children's songs. Guthrie performed constantly throughout his life; his guitar frequently sported the slogan "This Machine Kills Fascists". He is perhaps best known for



his song "This Land Is Your Land". Many of his songs are archived in recordings in the Library of Congress and some such as "This Land" are regularly sung in US schools. He occasionally had regular radio shows

Woody Guthrie traveled across the USA many times and spent much of his time on early trips learning traditional folk and blues songs and creating new American folk songs of working people. His travels frequently followed the movement of migrant workers across the Great Plains and in California. He was associated with and regularly performed for, but was never a member of, several Communist groups in the US throughout his life. He had a great many odd jobs including sign painter, radio host, fruit picker, sailor, dishwasher, and soldier in the US army.

In 1941 the Bonneville Power Administration, a five year old federal agency, made a decision that has impacted the psyche of the Pacific Northwest ever since. They hired a 28-year old folksinger by the name of Woodrow Wilson Guthrie to write songs about the new federal projects being carried out in the region. Not being in the habit of hiring folksingers, BPA asked the advice of **Alan Lomax**, folk music curator of the Library of Congress, who might do a good job. Lomax immediately suggested Woody Guthrie, whom he had met and recorded the year before. Woody was born in 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma and had spent most of the Depression years on the road, writing and singing songs about the plight of the Dustbowl migrants. Lomax considered Woody to be the voice of the common man and a natural for the project being contemplated by BPA.



BPA was looking for someone to write songs from the viewpoint of the Public Power advocates. In the Pacific Northwest there had been a propaganda battle between Private Power and Public Power advocates since at least the 1920s, in a struggle to determine who would supply power to the vast area called the Pacific Northwest. The Private Power people did not want the expense of running lines down long stretches of road to hook up a small number of people because it was not profitable, and did not want government involvement. The Public Power people had a more egalitarian view and wanted the government to be a part of assuring power to the people

On the recommendation of Lomax, BPA tracked down Woody at his temporary residence in California and talked with him about writing songs for a film and possibly acting in the film, then headed back for Portland. Woody apparently made more of the conversation than the BPA officials did and loaded his wife and kids into

the car and headed for Portland too. Some controversy exists here in that recent discoveries seem to indicate that the BPA actually offered Woody a one-year employment to do the project. What is clear is that when he showed up at BPA headquarters one morning in May 1941, BPA officials denied that offer. At any rate a compromise was struck due to Woody impressing Paul Raver, the BPA administrator, with his impromptu singing in Raver's office. A thirty-day contract was cut and Woody went to work.

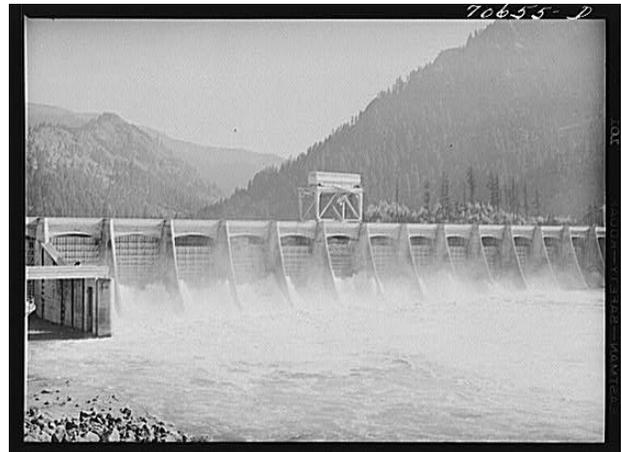
The thought of Woody working together with the government in any fashion is a bit of a stretch. Woody had spent his life as a critic of the government because of what he saw on the road during the Depression, and had developed into something of a left-winger and a Socialist. But BPA offered him something no one else ever had; carte blanche to write songs about what he saw before him. BPA gave him the whole palette of the Pacific Northwest and told him to go paint songs. He rose to the challenge admirably. He wrote 26 songs in 30 days, some real classics and a few not so.

The folks at the BPA did not entirely trust Woody and instead of assigning him a car to travel up and down the river they assigned him a car and a driver, Elmer Beuhler, who was to get him to and from each day. Elmer is alive and well today at age 96, living in Portland. It was he who saved a copy of the movie, *The Columbia*, for which Woody wrote the songs. Politics in the late 1940s caused BPA to order the destruction of all copies of the film. In a stroke of serendipity it was Elmer who was ordered to destroy the films, and knowing he was sitting on history, Elmer saved a copy and hid it in his basement under a woodpile for many years, until he deemed it safe to pull it out.

The Spillway at Bonneville Dam =>

Woody said about this time in 1941, "I saw the Pacific Northwest from just about every tree and cliff and rock and fencepost from which it could be seen. I

made up little songs about the dams and the river, listenin' to words and songs and poems faster to come in my ears that they could ever be writ down." He would go back to Portland in the evening and record the songs he had written that day in a cramped recording studio in the basement of the BPA building.



These recordings form the basis of the Columbia River Collection issued in 1987 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the BPA. These songs were lost for years and it was Bill Murlin, a BPA employee, who in 1984 suggested using the Guthrie songs to

help celebrate BPA's 50th anniversary. After a long search with plenty of nationwide publicity, all 26 songs were rediscovered, including those recorded in 1941 in that small recording studio at BPA.

At the end of his 30-day contract Woody left Portland, hitchhiking east to New York City while his wife, Mary, and the three children went south to California. He had left Texas with his family with the coming of the Dust Bowl era, following the Okies to California. The poverty he saw on these early trips affected him greatly, and many of his songs are concerned with the conditions faced by the working class, and is reflected in many of his songs.



Just a Dust Bowl Refuge



It Dusted us Over — It Dusted Us Under

The relationship of Woody and Mary was always strained and Woody's constant traveling and moving of the family eventually wore down Mary's resolve; they were eventually separated for the last time in Portland. Woody used his musical talents to earn money as a street musician and by doing small gigs. He was ultimately married three times and fathered eight children, including the widely applauded musician Arlo Guthrie and is the grandfather of musician Sarah Lee Guthrie.

Woody was, according to Wikipedia, along with Pete Seeger a founding member of **The Almanac Singers** and came back to the Northwest in the late summer or early fall of 1941.



He also returned here in 1948, visiting Spokane and Portland, just in time to witness the Vanport Flood and write a song about it. These are the only documented times he returned to the Northwest.

Later in his life, he developed symptoms of the degenerative neurological affliction, Huntington's disease. Like his mother, he eventually died from complications of this fatal congenital disease. In spite of his illness, during his later years, he served as a figurehead in the folk movement providing inspiration to a generation of new folk musicians, including mentor relationships with Bob Dylan and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

Discography and More

In 1944, Guthrie met Moses "Moe" Asch of Folkways Records, for whom he first recorded "This Land Is Your Land", "Worried Man Blues", along with hundreds of other songs over the next few years. These would later be released in several pressings by Folkways and Stinson Records. Much of this material is still available as cassettes and more recently CDs from Smithsonian Folkways <<http://www.folkways.si.edu/index.html>> including the 4 CD set of *Woody Guthrie The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1-4* of. For a discography of Woody's Music check out the dozens of items listed by Rolling Stone at <<http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/woodyguthrie/discography/>>

The latest Guthrie recording was issued in September 2007. It's a long-lost wire recording of Guthrie and his second wife, **Marjorie**, live in concert at the Young Men's Hebrew Association in Newark, New Jersey in 1948. The title is *The Live Wire Woody Guthrie*, and is available from the Woody Guthrie Foundation at www.woodyguthrie.org. It is a fascinating recording, the only known recording of Woody live in concert, and it is a must for any Guthrie fan.

