

## Introduction to Volume 1

*Will Kaufman and Darryl Holter, Volume Editors*

Welcome to the launch issue of the *Woody Guthrie Annual*, an open-access, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to scholarship on Woody Guthrie and his world. Guthrie's most famous song, "This Land is Your Land," features a second verse that begins: "As I went walking that ribbon of highway / And saw above me that endless skyway ...." The "ribbon of highway" — the image of a two-lane asphalt road meandering off into the horizon, pointing to adventure and a new future— is a point of entry into Guthrie's uniquely peripatetic approach to life, his inquiring mind and wandering ways, the hard-traveling, cross-country, hitch-hiking, train-hopping jaunts that provided material for his writings and songs, the unsettledness of his personal life, and the absence of a stable home or home-life during much of his professional career. Carrying Guthrie from Okemah, Oklahoma to Pampa, Texas, and then on to Los Angeles, Oregon, New York, Coney Island, and, eventually, to Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens, the "ribbon of highway" provides a shifting setting for his experiences, just as it provides a metaphor for the scholarship that has emerged and has yet to emerge, leading to ... who knows where?

One object of all scholarship, arguably, must be demystification, and Guthrie has long been a fit subject for it. A large audience of Americans would have first encountered him through the *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940), recorded within months of Guthrie's relocation to New York from California. They would have seen him including himself, in the first person plural, in the class about which he so often sang, as he declared in his notes to the album:

They are "Oakie" songs, "Dust Bowl" songs, "Migratious" songs, about my folks and my relatives, about a jillion of 'em, that got hit by the drouth, the dust, the wind, the banker and the landlord and the police, all at the same time ... and it was these things all added up that caused us to pack our wife and kids into our little rattletrap jallopies, and light out down the Highway—in every direction, mostly west to California.<sup>1</sup>

Some might have recognized a similar inclusive tactic of Guthrie's in his review of his friend John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which, he declared, was "about us pullin' out of Oklahoma and Arkansas and down south and driftin' around over the state of California, busted,

disgusted, down and out and lookin' for work. Shows you how us got to be that way. Shows the damn bankers, men that broke us and the dust that choked us...."<sup>2</sup>

As many will know, in his self-identification as a proletarian out of the Dust Bowl, Guthrie set out to construct a persona in which he physically embodied the muse of labor:

I have always sort of felt  
That this land belonged to me  
And my work belongs to my land  
Because my work is me  
And it's all I've got to put into my business  
Take my work away from me and I wouldn't amount to much.<sup>3</sup>

Especially in the earliest months of his New York residency, Guthrie tapped into and perpetuated the romanticization of the proletariat in which manual labor was equated with authenticity. As Guthrie wrote to his sister, Mary Jo, in 1940, the Dust Bowl migrants were "Real People, Real Honest To Goodness People, going all over Hell's Half Acre looking for work...."<sup>4</sup> The implication was that people who did not or could not work were of an entirely different, "un-Real" species — an implication to which he returned in the midst of the Second World War, as he wrote to his future wife, Marjorie:

[W]ork is the only cure, work is the only medicine now, and work is the only hope, not only for us, but for every other living person, and the only way you or me or anybody else can climb somewhere out of the swamps of financial worry, useless-feeling, out-of-contact feeling, and every other bad mental state, is to work, work, and work. Work to get what we want, what we owe to others, and work to hold our places, and work to get better places. Because I think in the first place that people aint nothing but their work....<sup>5</sup>

But in truth, Guthrie also felt the need at times to pull back from equating himself with others in the proletarian sphere. In such cases, he would depict himself as a witness among the proletariat in order to become the eyes, ears, and voice of a class who, without a bardic spokesman, could never represent themselves. In such moments of self-deprecation, he would be simply "just a sort of a clerk and climate tester," operating in a "workshop" which might be variously "the sidewalk, your street, and your field, your highway, and your buildings."<sup>6</sup> Or, he would present himself simply as the people's amanuensis: "I hear so many people coming around me and going on about where you get your words and your tunes. Well I get

my words and tunes off of the hungry folks and they get the credit for all I pause to scribble down.”<sup>7</sup> Sometimes he would share the bardic vision with an un-named “you” who naturally perceived the same crises between labor and capital as he did. Thus he would present himself as nothing special, an Everyman bearing witness to the proletarian sacrifice (as in the Centralia mining disaster of 1947); but even here, he could not fully resist transforming his act of witnessing into one of outright participation:

I was there the same as you was there and seen the same things that you did. And you was here the same as I was here and you felt the same things I felt. This is the one trick of human nature that is going to outwit and outfight our owners and their hired bosses, this way, I mean, that we’ve got of being on the spot at places like Centralia, both in body and in spirit, like being on a manure street in India and seeing the eyes of good folks hungry and starving to death. You see, our landlords and our owners don’t make full use of this eye of ours that sees around the world, not like us miners and tongbuckers and shipscalers and riggers do when we risk our lives to get the work done.<sup>8</sup>

It would be too easy to accuse Guthrie of misrepresentation, even mendacity, in his wholesale self-associations with the proletariat. Richard Reuss, among others, has highlighted both the conscious crafting of a myth and the bourgeois reality from which it departs:

Above all, Woody had “been there”; he had spent most of his life among workers, dust-bowlers, hoboes, and the rural peoples of America, and he was most suffused with their worldview and vernacular.... As a result, he was regarded ... as a model to be emulated.... For his part, Guthrie was sufficiently affected by the ... “proletarian” ethos to deliberately play down his early middle-class upbringing and stress his later years of poverty and cross-country ramblings.<sup>9</sup>

In fairness to Guthrie, he openly acknowledged his middle-class origins in his earliest recordings and writings; his was the story of a small-town land speculator’s family fallen into hard times before the Depression.<sup>10</sup> But having absorbed the myth of Guthrie the legendary American hobo, riding the rails or the boxcars with a guitar slung across his back, few Americans would be aware, as biographer Joe Klein discovered, that “Woody only used the trains as a last resort: they were too dangerous and uncomfortable.”<sup>11</sup> Few would be aware — as Bess Lomax Hawes, Guthrie’s fellow Almanac Singer, told biographer Ed Cray — that Guthrie harbored a secret “hyper-

literacy' carefully hidden in an ill-kempt, often unwashed body."<sup>12</sup> In spite of the litany of "hard work" that Guthrie eulogizes in such songs as "Talking Hard Work" ("I chopped and I weeded forty-eight rows of short cotton, thirteen acres of bad corn, and cut the sticker weeds out of eleven backyards, all on account a 'cause I wanted to show her that I was a man and I liked to work..."),<sup>13</sup> Guy Logsdon and Jeff Place wryly state that Guthrie was "[n]ot known to be a hard worker at manual labor himself"; rather, he listened "to migrants and other laborers and transformed their stories, problems, aspirations, tragedies, loves and work experiences into first-person narratives."<sup>14</sup> Above all, Guthrie was an artist.

Still, Guthrie's middle-class origins and background may not, in the end, so far remove him from the reality of the Dust Bowl proletariat with whom he identified himself, and with whom he remains identified. As Peter La Chapelle notes, while Guthrie "may not fit the classic definition of a Dust Bowl migrant" because his family had not "lost a farm to drought or soil erosion," he was nonetheless "fairly representative of the migrant stream" in that he hailed from a "middle- to lower-middle-income" background, had "fallen into the ranks of the working poor," and had sought a better life in California.<sup>15</sup>

All of this is to say that Guthrie's travels along the "ribbon of highway" were more complex and layered than the folk myth built around him might automatically suggest. He was no one-trick pony: the great majority of his songs were not about the Dust Bowl; nor were unions and workers' rights his only concerns. It is hoped that, through such scholarship as is here offered, Guthrie will emerge in all the fullness and complexity in which he deserves to be considered. Wherever this scholarship will ultimately take us, the contributors offer a number of illuminating stops along the way. The first three essays engage with some of the broader aspects of Guthrie's output and performance. Elijah Wald looks at Guthrie's interaction with black musicians and the blues, while Thomas Conner focuses on the performativity of his radio days in Los Angeles. Ray Allen explores a relatively unknown dimension of Guthrie's work, his Jewish-themed materials, particularly as they have been interpreted by the New York-based Klezmer band, The Klezmatics. There follows a series of essays focusing on particular songs of Guthrie's. Emily Baxter and Jodie Childers write on his "Union Maid," offering both a feminist analysis (Baxter) and a video interview, plus a commentary, with Pete Seeger on the song's origins (Childers). Mark Allan Jackson places Guthrie's "Jolly Banker" in the context of his — and our own — financial crises, while Vani Kannan examines the impact of "Deportees," a song that literally changed history, thanks to the inspiration it gave to Tim Z. Hernandez and Lance Canales, who are interviewed on their detective work and discovery of the names of those lost Mexican workers who, formerly, had been "known by no name

except 'Deportee'." Rounding off the essay section, folk musician and professor Kristin Lems offers some thoughts on Guthrie's relation to the trickster or "merry prankster" tradition of Till Eulenspiegel and others. This issue closes with two reviews: David Ulin opens up the world of Guthrie's recently discovered, posthumously published novel, *House of Earth*, edited by Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp, and Will Kaufman gives a listen to his editorial colleague Darryl Holter's new CD and DVD production, *Radio Songs: Woody Guthrie in Los Angeles, 1937-1939*.

Launching a scholarly journal is often a labor of love and a very tenuous enterprise. Countless promising titles have sunk into oblivion after the first or second issue. The future of the *Woody Guthrie Annual* will depend on the steady contribution of able scholars as well as the continued interest of readers — so please, spread the word as far and wide as you can. Meanwhile, we welcome you with open arms, open minds, and open access to the first issue. Enjoy the conversation!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie quoted in Ed Robbin, *Woody Guthrie and Me* (Berkeley, CA: Lancaster-Miller Publishers, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, "Work Is Me," in Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Guthrie to Marjorie Mazia, n.d. (but between September and December 1942). Woody Guthrie Archives: Woody Guthrie Correspondence, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 44.

<sup>6</sup> Woody Guthrie, *Born to Win*, ed. Robert Shelton (New York: Collier, 1967), pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> Woody Guthrie to Alan Lomax, September 19, 1940. Woody Guthrie Archives: Woody Guthrie Correspondence, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 39.

<sup>8</sup> Guthrie, note to "The Dying Miner," Woody Guthrie Papers: Moses and Frances Asch Collection, Ralph Rinzler Archives, Smithsonian Institution. Song Texts, Box 1, Folder 3.

<sup>9</sup> Richard A. Reuss, with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow Press, 2000), p. 161.

<sup>10</sup> See "Beaumont Rag," Woody Guthrie, *Library of Congress Recordings* (Rounder Records, 1988), Disc 1, Track 5; also Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (London: Penguin, 2004 [1943]).

<sup>11</sup> Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Delta, 1999 [1980]), p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 231.

<sup>13</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Talking Hard Work," *This Land Is Your Land: The Asch Recordings*, Vol. 1 (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1999), Track 20.

<sup>14</sup> Guy Logsdon and Jeff Place, "Notes on the Songs," liner notes to Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land: The Asch Recordings*, Vol. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 49.