

CD Review

Various Artists, *Woody Guthrie: The Tribute Concerts (Carnegie Hall 1968, Hollywood Bowl 1970)*. With accompanying texts: *Woody Guthrie: The Tribute Concerts (Book 1) and The TRO Woody Guthrie Concert Book (Book 2)*. Bear Family Records, 2017.



I'm a "red diaper baby" born before World War II. One feature of that background was having grown up to a folk music soundtrack in which Woody Guthrie songs were of course featured. I never saw Woody in person, but, being part of the leftwing Brooklyn

subculture, his presence was a take for granted element of my childhood world. In high school and college, our crowd gathered at the hootenannies and Greenwich village songfests, and the ambience and songs were, we thought, "ours" — setting us apart from the mainstream teenage pop culture. Pete Seeger was our Elvis — and he helped make Woody one of our most cherished icons.

As I write this, it's exactly 50 years ago, that my young wife and I went to a concert at Carnegie Hall to pay tribute to Woody just a few months after his death. The event was important to us because Bob Dylan was expected to be live on stage for the first time since his motorcycle accident some eighteen months earlier. Moreover, that Dylan would appear to pay tribute to Woody might, we thought, signify a connection to "our" political/cultural domain that we sadly believed he had renounced. Dylan did perform at Carnegie Hall, but the cultural significance of the concert went beyond Dylan's presence. For it signified that the cultural project that Woody and Pete had undertaken nearly thirty years earlier was no longer a marginal eddy in the popular cultural mainstream. Dylan, for example, that night was translating Woody into the language of rock and roll — and there, on stage, singing the songs and telling Woody's story, were artists and actors with unquestioned acceptance by popular culture audiences. The long exile of the once blacklisted cultural left was definitively over that night, as survivors of the Almanac Singers joined together with a group of musicians that soon became The Band.

Two years later, we'd moved to Santa Barbara, California. Soon after, we learned that another Guthrie Tribute concert would happen at the Hollywood Bowl. Of course, we had to go — and traveled the ninety miles. It was our first time at the Bowl; we were stunned by the fact that its 18,000 seats were packed — and packed largely by a mass of young, hippie-styled folks. Dylan wasn't on the bill, but Country Joe McDonald and band were — and they helped provide the musical bridge between the generations and the genres. Peter Fonda (recently the star of the hippie epic, *Easy Rider*) took Robert Ryan's place as one of those narrators alongside Woody's Los Angeles political and performing sidekick, Will Geer, not yet a popular culture icon as Grandpa Walton. The huge youthful crowd, singing along, the sight of the old Almanacs and young rockers joining together for "This Land" at the finale, reinforced my sense that, against all expectations, Woody and America had converged.

These tribute concerts were excellent musical and social experiences — as well as being culturally significant. That significance was reinforced when they appeared as LP records soon after the live events. Those recordings, issued as an unusual joint project by two major labels in 1972, further reinforced Woody's mainstream acceptance. And the recordings contained not only the songs but much of the narration as read by Robert Ryan, Peter Fonda, and Will Geer — thereby introducing Woody's writings to a wide audience.

Now, on the fiftieth anniversary of Woody's death, Bear Family Records has issued the Woody Guthrie tribute concerts in the form of a monumental package of material. Three CDs include the complete concerts along with a series of interviews with some of those who performed and others who were there. One who was not invited to perform (but ought to have been) was Phil Ochs, and he airs his grievances in a long-ago interview included here.

The restored concerts are the heart of this project, of course, but the discs are embedded in a large, magnificent book, filled with backstage photos and with a series of essays providing details on the concerts themselves, on Woody's life and work, and on the enormous body of that work that has come to public awareness since Nora Guthrie began enabling the mining of the Guthrie archives by artists and scholars. And along with the backstage photos, we are treated to many examples of Woody's graphic art, facsimiles of his typed and handwritten lyrics, and exhaustive discographic listings of his songs. And that's not all! A second book in the box is a reproduction of the *Woody Guthrie Concert Book* published in 1972 by TRO-Ludlow. This book contains the complete text of the concert narrative as created by Millard Lampell (and largely made up of Woody's words) and the words and music of all the songs, accompanied by photos and other graphics evoked by the material.

There are quite a few “deluxe” packages of Woody materials now available, often including previously unreleased recordings. Woody himself may well have mocked these — he very much resisted becoming a commodity, of course. The Bear Family package, weighing five pounds, is certainly the heaviest. It makes a wonderful gift if one wants to introduce Woody to someone who doesn’t know him. It’s something that libraries and schools should value. Collectors of Woodyana have to have it. And, of course, if you were there then you likely won’t be able to resist seeing the box as a kind of time machine.

DICK FLACKS

Editor’s Note: *Woody Guthrie: The Tribute Concerts* (Book 1) contains the following essays:

Sean Wilentz, “So Long to Woody Guthrie”

Jorge Arévalo Mateus and Michael Kleff, “Troubadour, Poet, Topical Songwriter”

Nora Guthrie and Michael Kleff, “The Artists — Where Were They Then”

Wenzel, “When the Poet Is a Singer”

Will Kaufman, “What We’ve Learned”