

"Ruinaton Day": Gillian Welch, Woody Guthrie, and Disaster Balladry¹

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Disasters make great art. In Gillian Welch's brilliant song cycle, "April the 14th (Part 1)" and "Ruinaton Day," the Americana songwriter weaves together three historical disasters with the "tragedy" of a poorly attended punk rock concert. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, and the epic dust storm that took place on what Americans call "Black Sunday" in 1935 all serve as a backdrop to Welch's ballad, which also revolves around the real scene of a failed punk show that she and musical partner David Rawlings had encountered on one of their earlier tours. The historical disasters in question all coincidentally occurred on the fourteenth day of April. Perhaps even more important, the history of Welch's "Ruinaton Day" reveals the important relationship between history and art as well as the enduring relevance of Woody Guthrie's influence on American songwriting.²

Welch's *oeuvre*, like Guthrie's, often nods to history. From the very instruments that she and Rawlings play to the themes in her original songs to the tunes she covers, she displays a keen awareness and reverence for the past. The sonic quality of her recordings, along with her singing and musical style, also echo the past. This historical quality is quite deliberate. Welch and Rawlings play vintage instruments to achieve much of that sound. Welch's axes are all antiques—her main guitar is a 1956 Gibson J-50. She also plays a 1939 Martin D-18 and a 1942 Martin D-45.³ When she picks the banjo, she uses a 1925 Vega Whyte Laydie.⁴ Rawlings's guitar, a 1935 Epiphone Olympic, has become legendary among aficionados to the point that they are almost all in the hands of collectors. He also plays a 1959 D'Angelico Excel.⁵ These instruments give a decidedly antique sound to their music, but their image is equally bound to the past—even the clothes they perform in are vintage. And, perhaps most importantly, their songs both harken back to and refine the art form that critics controversially refer to as "Americana," a genre deeply rooted in American history.

Welch's album, *Time (The Revelator)*, on which the cycle appears, is steeped in music history throughout. All but one of the tracks were recorded in RCA Records' historic Studio B in Nashville; the other at the legendary Ryman Auditorium. According to David Rawlings, most of their recordings are done with vintage microphones, usually a "Sony C-37A microphone—a tube microphone made in the late '50s and early '60s—and an old Neve 1055 preamp module."⁶ As in the case of their instruments, the antique equipment adds to the historic Americana sound of their music. All of their songs and

covers mirror a bygone era. One critic has even described their writing as "at once innovative and obliquely reminiscent of past rural forms."⁷

Welch's attention to and reverence for the past deeply influenced her "Ruinaton Day" cycle. In a 2015 interview she pointed out that she had been listening to Blind Willie Johnson's *Titanic* ballad, "God Moves on the Water," and Woody Guthrie's "Dust Storm Disaster" from his *Dustbowl Ballads* when she started tinkering with song ideas. A few weeks later she realized that April 14th was also the day that Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth. The coincidence of the dates led her ultimately to conceive of the two-song cycle and prompted her to call April 14th "Ruinaton Day." The songs reveal the shared influences that Americana songwriters—from early twentieth-century bluesmen to Woody Guthrie to Welch—often follow, particularly in the way that they draw inspiration from disaster.⁸ One has to wonder if Blind Willie Johnson also inspired the sub-title to the record, since one of his most famous songs was titled "John the Revelator."⁹

Time (The Revelator) was the premier release on Acony Records, an independent label founded by Welch and Rawlings. "April the 14th (Part 1)" is the first of the two songs to appear on the album, weaving the three disasters together with the scene of the failed punk show. Recorded in the key of Ab, Rawlings's mournful introduction sets the stage for the somber interpretation of the events. Welch's vocal enters in the first verse against a Cm chord. That first verse references Blind Willie Johnson's lyrics: "When the iceberg hit/Oh they must have known/God moves on the water/Like Casey Jones." She then turns to the contemporary scene: "So I walked downtown/On my telephone/And took a lazy turn/Through the redeye zone."¹⁰ In just two lines she masterfully combines the historic disaster with even deeper aspects of the folk tradition by introducing the iceberg strike on April 14, 1912, along with a nod to Casey Jones—the legendary train engineer whose own fame lives on in the Americana classic, "The Ballad of Casey Jones," which has been performed by generations of artists, from bluesmen like Mississippi John Hurt to Woody Guthrie's close friend Pete Seeger to the Grateful Dead. Guthrie and his collaborators, Seeger and Alan Lomax, included "Casey Jones" in their seminal songbook *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*.¹¹ The Grateful Dead also released their own original song titled "Casey Jones."¹²

For the next seven stanzas, Welch focuses on the failed punk show—"a five-band bill/Two dollar show"—with the musicians grinding through a tour in a van with Idaho license plates, looking "sick and stoned and strangely dressed," and not likely to make enough money to afford "even a half a tank of gas" from the show, which was so neglected not even the local journalists showed up to report on it. After the sixth verse, Welch includes a short refrain, "Hey, hey/It was the fourteenth day/Of April," connecting the song back to the historic events. She describes the end of the show in modernist terms that invoke the memory of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in its lingering impotency, as she describes the venue's alcoholic staff cleaning up after the disastrous concert—they "threw the plastic cups/In the plastic

bags/And the cooks cleaned the kitchen/With the staggers and the jags.” Finally, in the last two verses, Welch ties the present to the past and brings Woody Guthrie’s “Dust Storm Disaster” and Lincoln’s assassination into the song: “Ruination day/And the Sky was red/I went back to work/And back to bed/And the iceberg broke/and the Okies fled/and the Great Emancipator/Took a bullet in the back of the head.”¹³

Several tracks later on *Time (The Revelator)*, the historical disasters take center stage from the first verse through the last, in “Ruination Day.” The song begins with a dark droning blues in the key of Am: “And the great boat sank/And the Okies fled/And the Great Emancipator/Took a bullet in the head.” April 14th is thus marked as “Ruination Day” in the second verse: “It was not December/Was not in May/Was the 14th of April/That’s the ruination day.” In the final verse, Welch nods both to Blind Willie Johnson and to Casey Jones: “When the iceberg hit/well they must have known/that God moves on the water, Casey Jones/Casey Jones.../God moves on the water, Casey Jones.”¹⁴

The two songs provide a remarkable example of Americana music. Historical themes, deep reverence for antique songs and seminal artists, and, in the case of “Part 1,” a tie between the past and the present. Add Welch’s down home vocals and Rawlings’s rootsy, yet modern theoretical leads played out on his Epiphone Olympic, and the songs—as different from each other as they are—combine to produce a haunting combination that evokes relics from the American past. In sum, Welch and Rawlings continue a tradition in American songwriting—lamenting disaster—that is as old as the genre itself.

That tradition includes a number of songs about Lincoln. For most Americans on the Union side, Lincoln’s assassination was one of the major disasters of the American Civil War. Just five days after Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox courthouse signaled the end of hostilities, Lincoln, who had already put forward a lenient plan of reunion “with malice toward none,” fell to the assassin’s bullet as he watched a play call *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theater in Washington D. C. On the evening of April 14, 1865, Booth, a famous American actor, used his knowledge of the work to shoot Lincoln at a point in the play that he knew would get a loud laugh and mask the report of his pistol. The president succumbed to his wounds early the next morning.¹⁵

Lincoln’s presidency had been the most challenging in the history of the Republic. The Civil War that broke out before his inauguration in 1861 ultimately led to the death of over 600,000 Americans. But even before the war, Lincoln had inspired Americans with his vision for the nation prompting a plethora of songs. Songwriters wrote about his campaign, his policies, and, of course, his death. Beginning with his candidacy in 1859, which elicited campaign ditties, songwriters have continued to immortalize Lincoln ever since. The Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana at the Library of Congress contains sheet music for over two hundred popular songs written between 1859 and 1909. The collection includes requiems, marches,

memorials, and popular tunes.¹⁶ Some of those tunes, such as "The Assassin's Vision" by J. W. Turner, chronicle particular aspects of the assassination, such as Booth's flight from the scene.¹⁷ Lincoln's importance to African Americans also inspired blues artists throughout the twentieth century, as evidenced by singer and guitarist John Lee Hooker's 1961 single, "Ballad to Abraham Lincoln."

The sinking of the *Titanic* had an equally inspiring impact on songwriters. The *RMS Titanic*, a new edition to the luxury Cunard Line, began its maiden voyage on April 10, 1912, forty-seven years and one day after the surrender at Appomattox. The ship docked briefly in Cherbourg, France and Queensland, Ireland before setting forth to New York City. Under the command of seasoned captain Edward Smith, and with a crew and passengers comprised of over two thousand souls, the *Titanic* steamed west toward North America for the next four days. When it neared Newfoundland, Canada, at around 11:40 p. m. on April 14, 1912, the ship struck an iceberg that crushed its hull, leading to panic and evacuation. Unfortunately, there were only twenty lifeboats on the ship, and each could hold only about 1100 people. Early on the next morning, the massive hull split in two and the ship began to sink. In all, over fifteen hundred passengers and crew perished. A large number of survivors were picked up by the *RMS Carpathia*, another Cunard liner. Captain Smith went down with his ship.¹⁸

Rumors proliferate about the band having stayed aboard to play as the ship sank. A Canadian passenger, Vera Dick, remembered that the band played the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee," and a radio operator named Harold Bride alluded to a song called "Autumn," but there is no definitive evidence to support either claim.¹⁹ The "Nearer My God to Thee" legend survives in the traditional American tune "Titanic Blues," recorded by "Hi" Henry Brown, who closes the final verse with "*Titanic* sinking in the deep blue sea/And the band all playin' 'Nearer My God to Thee'."²⁰

Songs about the *Titanic* disaster also abound. The first, Ernest Gray's "Be British," appeared shortly afterward in 1912 as a tribute to the brave crewmembers who had lost their lives saving passengers. An anonymous songwriter wrote "Titanic," also known as "When That Great Ship Went Down," in 1915. In 1924, Ernest Stoneman recorded a version of it that became a popular hit. Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter, one of Guthrie's best friends, recorded "The Titanic" and referenced the legend that the American boxing champion, Jack Johnson, pulled out of the voyage when he was told that he would be obliged to travel in storage because he was black. Music critic Michael John Simmons notes of Lead Belly's version: "The Johnson urban legend, which started spreading in African-American communities soon after the sinking, contains more than a bit of *schadenfreude* and may account for Leadbelly's rather gleeful delivery."²¹ Woody Guthrie performed this version and quite likely played it along with Lead Belly in the many gigs they shared. (During World War Two, Guthrie had railed against segregation and what he called "Racey Hate" or "Race Hate" and reportedly refused to play for segregated audiences while in the merchant marine.)²² Hillbilly

music legend Vernon Dalhart, who "never met a disaster song he didn't like," recorded at least four *Titanic* songs, including "It Was Sad When That Great Ship Went Down." Other country musicians like the Dixon Brothers recorded *Titanic* songs as well.²³ More recently, in 1997, the disaster inspired a Broadway musical by Maury Yeston and Peter Stone—*Titanic: The Musical*—which boasted twenty-three songs and won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Score. That same year, James Cameron's epic film *Titanic* included perhaps the most famous *Titanic* song of all, Celine Dion's rendition of William Jennings and James Horner's "My Heart Will Go On," which won numerous industry accolades, an Oscar, and several Grammy Awards, including "Song of the Year."²⁴

Welch and Rawlings's third disaster, the so-called "Black Sunday," was the culmination of a series of storms that had given rise to the Dust Bowl. In the mid-nineteenth century, American farmers began growing wheat across the Great Plains. Although their efforts proved quite successful, the thin topsoil of the region simply could not handle the level of crop production; by the 1930s, they had completely exhausted the soil. During that decade, numerous storms blanketed the region, leading residents across the plains to dub the decade "The Dirty Thirties." Some of the "dusters" picked up by the jetstream influenced weather throughout the nation, including the east coast. One major storm spread its dust across the Atlantic all the way to the United Kingdom. On the plains, the dust caused numerous health problems such as eye infections and a serious respiratory condition called Dust Pneumonia.²⁵

Woody Guthrie grew up on the outskirts of the Dust Bowl region in Okemah, Oklahoma, and during his teenage years he moved to live with his father, Charley, in the little oil-boom town of Pampa in the Texas Panhandle—in the southern part the Dust Bowl.²⁶ He had begun writing songs in 1934, the year before Black Sunday, but as his writing matured in the later 1930s, he became fascinated with the Dust Bowl and wrote one of his most important song cycles, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, which includes "Dust Bowl Disaster," one of the songs inspiring Welch's "Ruinaton Day" series.²⁷

Guthrie's works—his songs, novels, non-fiction, and even his visual art—all document his own reverence for the past, usually as a means of informing the present. He often employed historical events as a backdrop to what he called his "balladsongs;" and he loved to use disasters and tragedies as the basis for his lyrics. In over three thousand songs that he penned during his active period between 1934 and 1954, he frequently, and sometimes famously, chronicled sensational tragedies such as the stampede at the union hall in Calumet, Michigan, in 1913 that counted seventy-three men, women, and children as casualties,²⁸ or the World War Two sinking of the US destroyer Reuben James on October 31, 1941, which killed 136 of the 180-man crew.²⁹ Guthrie was also preoccupied with the three historical events chronicled in Welch's "Ruinaton Day" cycle—Abraham Lincoln's life and assassination, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and, naturally, Black Sunday, which he had experienced firsthand.

Guthrie was fascinated by Abraham Lincoln, whom he addressed directly in songs such as "The Ballad of Harriet Tubman," in which he presents Tubman urging, "Give the black man guns and give him powder,/To Abe Lincoln this I said:/You've just crippled that snake of slavery,/We've got to fight to kill him dead."³⁰ Guthrie's reference to the "crippled snake of slavery" reveals a great deal about his songwriting methodology as well as his regard of heroes such as Tubman and Lincoln. It also points to one of the more remarkable transformations in Guthrie's life—a transformation from casual racist to a civil rights crusader.³¹

Guthrie's conception of race mirrors that of many white Americans in the Popular Front in the twentieth century. Racism and white supremacy had become so ingrained in American culture that even those who eschewed such views often viewed others through prejudiced lenses. As a young man, Guthrie frequently used racial stereotypes in his artistic depictions of Africans and African Americans. On his KFVD radio show in the 1930s, he used the "N-word" on the air, prompting an African American fan to write him a letter explaining how hurtful the word was. Guthrie apologized profusely on the show and vowed never to repeat such "racist frothings."³² As he saw more of the world, embraced leftist causes, and befriended African American musicians like Lead Belly, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Josh White, his ideas about racial equality underwent a profound transformation. By the 1940s he was refusing to play to segregated audiences. After witnessing the racially motivated Peekskill Riots in 1949, he wrote the first of two "racey hate" song cycles³³ and followed with a second cycle about Beluthahatchee, Florida, in the early 1950s.³⁴

In the 1950s, Guthrie moved his family into a Brooklyn housing development known as Beach Haven, built and owned by a developer and landlord named Fred Trump. Guthrie was appalled by what he viewed as Trump's attempts to keep the complex segregated. He wrote several songs about "Old Man Trump," two of which were recorded during Trump's son Donald's successful campaign for the presidency in 2016.³⁵ At the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, an essay about "race hate" is on display. In the essay, Guthrie identifies Trump as his enemy specifically because his segregationist policies are providing a terrible example to Guthrie's young children. Guthrie's views of Trump mirrored those of other tenants of Trump housing developments. In 1973, complaints from African American renters led the Justice Department to file suit against Fred and Donald Trump for violating the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The Trumps retained the infamous lawyer Roy Cohn, who then countersued the government for \$100,000,000. Two years later the Trumps and the government settled the case.³⁶

When Guthrie wrote the "Ballad of Harriet Tubman," his Huntington's disease was moving into the more acute phase, which would eventually see him hospitalized for the remainder of his life. One of the many symptoms of Huntington's is compulsive behavior. Guthrie exhibited many and the compulsive obsessions associated with the disease, including hypersexuality and excessive use of alcohol and tobacco. It is clear that he also became

obsessed with racism. In 1953, Guthrie spent some time living on his friend Stetson Kennedy's property on the Beluthahatchee Swamp on the outskirts of Jacksonville, Florida. Guthrie said he went to Kennedy's property, a place that Woody referred to as "Pore Boy Acres," to protect his friend from KKK threats during and after his 1952 campaign for governor of Florida. Kennedy had created "Pore Boy Acres" as a sort of a time-share retreat for fellow travelers in the music scene and the Popular Front—if you helped Kennedy build up the property, you could stay in the cabins for free, as a way to secure a more stable home. So Guthrie viewed the trip as a way not only of defending his friend, but also of developing a home for himself and his young lover and soon-to-be third wife, Anneke van Kirk.³⁷

Stetson Kennedy had reason to fear the Invisible Empire. In 1946, he had infiltrated the Klan and other racist groups such as the Columbians with the cooperation of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Acknowledging the widespread impact of these groups beyond the South and fearing that they often existed in cooperation, Kennedy approached the producers of the Mutual Broadcasting System's popular children's radio show, *The Adventures of Superman*, with the idea of a series of episodes that exposed the Klan's existence and its secrets, and made fun of its ridiculous rituals. That series, "The Clan of the Fiery Cross," aired in 1946.³⁸ Next year he testified against and helped to convict Columbian members Emory Burke and Henry Loomis. Kennedy later chronicled his exploits in a 1954 book, *The Klan Unmasked*.³⁹ Kennedy certainly gilded the lily in discussing his exploits and often co-opted stories from other investigations and informants in his fanciful book; but he did nonetheless infiltrate racist organizations, he did testify against Burke and Loomis, and although the secrets and rituals revealed in the *Superman* series were not unique to the Klan, he drew their ire and animosity. Consequently, his Belutchatchee retreat was apparently threatened sometime in 1952 or 1953, causing him to flee to France and, later, England.⁴⁰

During this stint in the Beluthahatchee swamp, Guthrie explored the idea of a Harriet Tubman song. As he frequently did, he wrote essays, scraps of poetry, notes, and even drew pictures as part of his writing process. He wrote a letter to the long-dead Tubman, pasting it onto the inside front cover of one of the many marbled composition books in which he would scribble down his ideas. He writes to Tubman (in the grammatically and typographically skewed expressions of Huntington's disease): "You deserve five or six dozen purple hearts and I'm strikin' out right now to see that you get them. You deserve a whole big wallfull of the pertyest damnd medals we make in our factory and I'm startin out this very minute to get them for you too." After thanking her for her part in the destruction of slavery, he enlightens her as to what he's been doing at Beluthahatchee—namely,

holding down my little inch or two of humanly space here at Stetson Kennedy's place that he named Pore Boys Acres when his old papa died not so very long ago and left Stet this fifty acre patch of wild waters and

wild trees and wild roots and wild leaves which a wilder gang of hoodlum hooded KKK neighborfolks tried to chop, to hack, to rip, to blast, to wreck, to smash all to smithereens when Stetson married that 1/2 blood 1/2 breed negro wife of his that had arthritis so bad . . . I hope that I can do some little kind of a job or two of work everyday to hold onto all of your good things that you laffaed and joshed and teased and sung about with John Brown and A Kerrham Lincoln . . . [every one] I know feel just the very same way that I feel about going right on and working and fighting till we kill that old snake of slavery that you and your breed and your seed and your creed and your kind crippled as bad as you've crippled it.⁴¹

Lincoln also entered into other aspects of Guthrie's artistic life. In 1947, during a return to the Pacific Northwest that had inspired the twenty-six songs composed for the Bonneville Power Administration six years earlier, Guthrie decided—as he often did—to pitch a record project idea to Moses Asch and Marion Distler of the Disc Company of America. After describing his experiences driving through the West and the people that he met, he mentioned his desire to chronicle the history of the region and its people. As ever, this approach stemmed from Guthrie's view of folk music as a form of anthropological engagement. After waiting two months, he wrote to Asch again, informing him that he had been writing new songs. He listed and described a tranche, noting: "MY OTHER TWO MIGHT BE SPORTYER SCENES ABOUT RIVER BOATS AND WRASTLING MATCHES, OR A BALLAD BASED ON HIS [Lincoln's] TALL TALES AND STORIES."⁴²

Most of the critical attention to Guthrie's artistic output has focused on his lyrics; however, he was also an accomplished visual artist. As a young man he often supplemented his income working as a sign painter, a skill he employed again during his short stint in the army in the months immediately following V-E Day. Lazy doodles, cartoons, drawings, sculptures, and watercolors adorn many of the pages of his notebooks, letters, lyric sheets, and essays. He also worked in oils; however, most of his oil paintings have been lost or remain undiscovered. Only two oils on canvas survive. One depicts a pueblo style "house of earth" painted in Santa Fe. The other is a portrait of Lincoln, completed in 1937, that now hangs in the main gallery of the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As a finished oil painting, it is by far the most detailed of Guthrie's realistic portraits, which themselves comprise only a small portion of his visual output (the majority are cartoons or semi-abstract renditions). We do not know anything about the extent of Guthrie's work in oils; however, the professional layer of detail suggests that he was quite accomplished in that area. To be inspired to spend the amount of time it would take to produce such a work in oil on canvas suggests that the painter held the subject in high esteem. The pueblo "house of earth" is a well-documented obsession of the artist; he wrote frequently about how houses constructed of this universally available material could end homelessness in America, and he took the time to write multiple drafts of a

full-length novel of the same name. (*House of Earth* was finally published in 2013 in an edition edited by Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp. Guthrie's painting adorns the cover).⁴³ Whether or not Guthrie had a similar fascination with Lincoln that influenced his decision to paint the portrait in oil cannot be determined; however, when combined with his writings about the Great Emancipator, Guthrie's interest in the subject is clear.

Another portrait of Lincoln also inspired Guthrie. After seeing a portrait hanging in a bank, Guthrie wrote a little scrap titled "Old Honest Abe on a Bank Wall." In it, he remarks on both Lincoln's timelessness and the price of his historical legacy: "It must be awful tough to be what folks call a great man. They won't even let you die . . . Claiming you for their very own Old Honest Abe."⁴⁴

Guthrie's fascination with religion and philosophy also brought him back to Lincoln, albeit through a circuitous route. Throughout his life Guthrie explored all sorts of religious and philosophical forms of expression. Baptized as a Protestant, he converted to Catholicism in order to marry his first wife, Mary Jennings. As a young man he explored faith healing, Rosicrucian thought, and various forms of mysticism. He was also a fan of the poet Khalil Gibran, who was immersed in Sufi mysticism and the belief that all religions are somehow related. Guthrie followed the same path, exploring religious and philosophical ideas but never truly identifying with any one religion. According to his daughter Nora, her birth certificate reads "all or none" in the section identifying religious affiliation.⁴⁵ Guthrie's second wife Marjorie was Jewish and his consequent affiliation with Judaism informs a major part of his writing. He spent a good bit of time with her parents, especially her mother, Aliza Greenblatt, a major Yiddish-language poet. (Guthrie even tried to learn Yiddish and composed a host of songs with Yiddish words, about Jewish traditions and Hanukkah).⁴⁶

Guthrie's leftist politics often saw him embrace the Wobbly conception of "one big union." To Guthrie, Lincoln's commitment to preserving the Union coincided with all of these ideas. While killing time in the army during his training at Scott Field, Illinois, in 1945, he read Emerson and the Transcendentalists. In a letter to Marjorie he wrote:

Emerson's transcendentalism is pretty well preached . . . That we are all parts of a One Big Something. Emerson loves to call it one man... The pages are good reading and make me want to own the book. It is like Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedism, Buddhism, Shinto, the workers who believe it and live it are the worlds [sic] finest people... It takes a good soaking of Leninism and Marxism and Abe Lincolnism to bring the best orchards out of all these systems of planting.⁴⁷

Guthrie's reference here to Emerson's idea of "one man" coincided perfectly with his own notion of being "part of one big something." His identification of "Abe Lincolnism" with "Leninism and Marxism" also illustrates this point.

Lincoln also makes an appearance in Guthrie's official FBI file. Guthrie, like many left-leaning artists, drew the FBI's attention during the McCarthy era. Director J. Edgar Hoover's own pencil-written notes can be seen throughout Guthrie's file. Although coincidental, Lincoln's name appears in a memo to Hoover from the special agent in charge in Los Angeles, who wrote that "[Guthrie] entertained ... by singing songs" at a meeting of the "Lenin, Lincoln, Douglas [sic] Memorial at Broad Street Mansion on February 12, 1943."⁴⁸ Although many of Guthrie's friends were either blacklisted or hauled before the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee—such as his buddy Pete Seeger, whose testimony led to a conviction for contempt of Congress—the FBI investigation of Guthrie fizzled in light of the debilitating effects of his Huntington's disease.

Guthrie also gave a nod to Lincoln in one of his most well known songs, "Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done." Although he does not name Lincoln, he identifies the end of slavery as being on par with building the pyramids, the fall of Rome, the American Revolution, winning World War Two, and a host of other great historical events. Of course, the end of slavery was only one by-product of the Civil War. The other was the preservation of the Union—a concept equally dear to Guthrie's heart.⁴⁹

Guthrie's interest in the *Titanic* is most evident in his performing career. Not just the *Titanic*, but other nautical themes pepper Guthrie's song collection. The *Reuben James*, the first US ship sunk during World War Two, became the subject of one of Guthrie's most memorable songs. He wrote about the *Reuben James* after reading the list of its casualties in the newspaper. During the war, Guthrie served both in the merchant marine and the army. There is little doubt that he performed "Titanic" with Lead Belly, as they often worked and sang together. He also recorded a version of "When That Great Ship Went Down" for Moses Asch on what is now the Smithsonian Folkways label. This version includes musical and vocal collaborations by Sonny Terry and Cisco Houston. Music writer Ken Bigger pointed out in an article for *Sing Out!* that the Smithsonian version appears to be a "fusion" with another traditional song, "What Did the Deep Sea Say." Guthrie also wrote two late, still unpublished lyrics entitled (through the prism of Huntington's disease) "Talkin Tytanick" and Tytanick.⁵⁰

Unlike Lincoln's assassination and the *Titanic* disaster, Guthrie witnessed Black Sunday at first hand, as he and his then-wife Mary were living on the southern edge of what became known as the Dust Bowl, in Pampa, Texas. The storm—which hit on Palm Sunday, April 14th, 1935—was the worst of all the dusters of the 1930s and is considered the event started the epic migration of the "Okies" and "Arkies" out of the plains. Ed Cray notes that the Guthries protected themselves from the storm by stuffing newspapers around the doors and windows of their little house. The dust was so thick, as Cray describes it, that "the naked electric light hanging on a cord from the ceiling glowed no brighter than a lighted cigarette."⁵¹ Guthrie set out for California shortly after the storm. In California he befriended a leftist named Ed Robbin, who took him out to the refugee camps where migrant

Okies and Arkies were living. The conditions he witnessed there led Guthrie himself to embrace leftist causes. Having just started trying to write popular songs like "Buckboard Wagon," Guthrie found inspiration in the camps and penned the songs that would ultimately become his celebrated *Dust Bowl Ballads*. The first line of his song, "Dust Storm Disaster"—the song that would first inspire Gillian Welch to write her "Ruination Day" cycle—powerfully records the date and tenor of the disaster: "On the 14th day of April in 1935/There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky." Guthrie describes the sheer horror and fear in the fifth verse: "Our relatives were huddled into their oil boom shacks,/And the children they was cryin' as it whistled through the cracks./And the family it was crowded into their little room./They thought the world had ended, and they thought it was their doom."⁵²

Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*—all written in the "old timey" style of the songs his mother Nora Belle used to sing to him in childhood, with their lyrics rooted in American disaster history—would go on to become one of the seminal recordings of mid-twentieth century Americana. His work, along with that of blues and roots musicians of the same era, created the foundation of the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. The reverence for past songs, styles, and history during that revival helped both to preserve and to forward the genre, as witnessed in the popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, of the diverse musicians and writers of the Outlaw country movement led by Townes Van Zandt, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, David Allen Coe, Guy Clark, and others. Those artists had a profound influence on the rise of the Americana movement in the 1990s, exemplified by performers such as Ryan Adams, Jay Farrar, Ani DiFranco, Wilco, and others. Wilco in particular helped to bring Woody Guthrie's music to a new generation through its collaboration with English songwriter Billy Bragg on the two-volume release, *Mermaid Avenue*, in which they fashioned previously unrecorded Guthrie lyrics into complete songs. Gillian Welch and David Rawlings were an integral part of that movement in the 1990s; accordingly, it is not surprising that Guthrie's "Dust Storm Disaster" would end up on Welch's turntable at such an opportune time.

Welch's modernist approach in "April the 14th (Part 1)" also mirrors Guthrie's own modernist approach to his art. The fact that these two important American writers share that stance reflects not only Guthrie's own artistic process but also his influence on contemporary writers like Welch who continue to thrive in the post-modern world. Guthrie witnessed and participated in the expressions of that modern world. His approach to art was infused by the connections between modernity and history, and his creations reflected those connections.⁵³ Cyclical writing, historical themes, and reverence for things past all illustrate the contemporary approach to Americana music. Woody Guthrie stood as one of the cornerstones of that tradition and his influence and relevance lives on in the works of so many artists. Welch's cycle, and her continuing importance to the Americana

movement, both relies on and confirms the present relevance of Woody Guthrie.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented as the Homer L. Hitt Presidential Distinguished Lecture at the University of New Orleans. I would like to thank Kate Blalack and Deana McCloud of the Woody Guthrie Center for their assistance with the research for this article.

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⁴ See <https://equipboard.com/pros/gillian-welch/#banjos>.

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¹⁴ Welch, "Ruinaton Day," *Time (The Revelator)*.

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²³ Simmons, "Songs Playing Tribute."

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- ²⁵ Mark F. Fernandez, "Black Sunday and the American Dust Bowl," *We're History: America Then for Americans Now*, April 22, 2018: <http://werehistory.org/author/mfernandez/>.
- ²⁶ Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 69-70.
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- ³⁰ Woody Guthrie, "Ballad of Harriet Tubman," Woody Guthrie Archives, Tulsa, Oklahoma (hereafter WGA), Songs 3, N1, P2.
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- ³² Cray, 108-109; Kaufman, *American Radical*, 149-150.
- ³³ Kaufman, *American Radical*, 163-165.
- ³⁴ For the unpublished Belutchatchee songs see Woody Guthrie, Notebooks, Series-2, #1, WGA. See also Jorge Arévalo Mateus, "Beluthahatchee Blues: An Interview with Stetson Kennedy," in *Radicalism in the South since Reconstruction*, ed. Chris Green et al (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Will Kaufman, *Mapping Woody Guthrie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), Chapter 7: "Beluthahatchee."
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- ³⁸ For a good account of "The Clan of the Fiery Cross," see: <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/radio/radio.php?topic=radio-reviews/070146-fierycross>.
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- ⁴⁰ The Stetson Kennedy infiltration of the Klan has been embroiled in controversy. For a good bibliography chronicling the issue see <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/stetson-kennedy-controversy>.
- ⁴¹ Woody Guthrie to Harriet Tubman, "April Again," 1953. WGA, Notebooks, Series-2, #1.
- ⁴² Woody Guthrie to "Disc" [Disc Company of America] from the Mermaid Ave. address, June, 24, 1947. WGA, Woody Guthrie Correspondence, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8.
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- ⁴⁴ Woody Guthrie, "Old Honest Abe on a Bank Wall," August-October 1948. WGA, Manuscripts Series-1, Box 7, Folder 15.
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- ⁴⁶ The New York band, The Klezmatics, subsequently released two albums based on Guthrie's Jewish-themed songs: *Woody Guthrie's Happy Joyous Hanukkah* and *Wonder Wheel*, the latter winning a Grammy Award in 2007. See <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/artists/klezmatic>.
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- ⁴⁸ Memorandum from SAC to J. Edgar Hoover Los Angeles. WGA, Woody Guthrie's FBI file, Personal Papers Additional related Material F. B. I. File 1941-1971, Box 2 Folder 48.

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<https://singout.org/2017/06/05/titanic-playlist-part-one/2/>; Woody Guthrie, "What Did the Deep Sea Say": https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/What_Did_The_Deep_Sea_Say.htm; Guthrie, "Talkin Tytanick," and "Tytanick." WGA, Woody Guthrie Lyric Collection, Series 1, Box 09.

⁵¹ Cray, 69.

⁵² Woody Guthrie, "Dust Storm Disaster" ("The Great Dust Storm"):
https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Dust_Storm_Disaster.htm.

⁵³ For an excellent investigation of Guthrie's modernism see Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).