

## Woody Guthrie's *Songs Against Franco*<sup>1</sup>

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Woody Guthrie has sometimes been mis-credited with the composition of “Jarama Valley,” perhaps the most popular English-language song to have emerged from the Spanish Civil War. It is true that Guthrie recorded a version of the song composed by the Scottish fighter, Alex McDade, who was killed at the Battle of Brunete in July of 1937. McDade’s original version was a four-stanza ode to the British Battalion of the Fifteenth International Brigade, first published in *The Book of the XV International Brigade* in 1938.<sup>2</sup> Guthrie’s version is an adaptation celebrating the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the main American contingent of the International Brigade. Guthrie recorded “Jarama Valley” for his producer, Moses Asch, sometime between 1946 and 1948, but it was not released until 1962 on the Folkways album *Songs of the Spanish Civil War*, vol. 2.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps ironic that the Spanish Civil War song for which Guthrie is best known is one that he did not write. One further Guthrie-penned ode, “Antyfascist Steve,” written in honor of Lincoln brigadier Steve Nelson in 1953, has only latterly attracted notice.<sup>4</sup> Thus, until now, only two songs have been known to have marked Guthrie’s musical commentary on the Spanish Civil War. However, a significant cache of previously unseen songs has now come to light. In the Woody Guthrie Archives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there sits a thin makeshift notebook comprising the lyrics to some ten songs, its cover decorated with a bright red watercolor wash bearing the script, “SONGS AGAINST FRANCO.” Guthrie never published or recorded these songs, but they are important—not simply as reflections of Guthrie’s fierce anti-fascism, which is common enough knowledge, but as evidence of a highly conscious and poignant artistic struggle. For even as he wrote these songs, Guthrie was facing his own—fatal—neurological disintegration through the onset of Huntington’s disease. Mirroring his own physical breakdown was the seeming disintegration of the American Left, with the Korean War raging abroad, the Cold War reshaping the definitions of political freedom at home, and the repressions of McCarthyism decimating progressive activism in every public arena. Guthrie’s *Songs Against Franco* are the legacy of his final assault on what he perceived to be the transplanting of embryonic fascism into the US, a small but coherent body of work yoking Spain’s recent past to Guthrie’s American present.

In 1952, amidst the early disorienting signs of the disease that would claim his life in 1967, and with his second marriage virtually in ruins, Guthrie fled his New York home to join a community of blacklisted artists, actors and writers in the Topanga Canyon community of Los Angeles. There, the

socialist actor Will Geer had established a haven for fellow progressives facing the onslaught of the anti-communist witch-hunt spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Following the publication of the right-wing directory, *Red Channels* (1950), in which he was named as a communist, Geer had refused to co-operate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). As a result, his performing career dried up, and he established the Theatricum Botanicum at Topanga—a venture that continues to produce plays to this day.<sup>5</sup>

Guthrie had known Geer since 1938; they often performed together during agricultural strikes and migrant workers' fundraisers in the Salinas and San Joaquin valleys. It was in fact Geer who introduced Guthrie to John Steinbeck, author of the celebrated Dust Bowl epic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), with which Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* have been so frequently associated.<sup>6</sup> After Geer and his wife Herta Ware had briefly relocated to New York in 1940, Guthrie had followed them, spending his first week in their plush uptown apartment before settling in the shabby Hanover House hotel, where, the following week, he wrote his signature anthem, "This Land Is Your Land."<sup>7</sup> Now, in 1952, Guthrie was back with his old friend Geer, wrestling with the implications of his mortal disease as well as the apparent death knell of the American Left in the face of the Red Scare. It was here that Guthrie envisaged his own defiant act—his own version of fighting the good fight against American fascism. He would record an album of anti-Franco songs for Stinson Records because (as he wrote to Pete Seeger), Stinson's communist president, Bob Harris, would be "freer politically about censoring our recordsong [*sic*] ideas" than his usual producer, Asch, would be.<sup>8</sup> This was actually an unfair slander against Asch, who had already shown his defiance by commissioning Guthrie to write and record *Ballads for Sacco and Vanzetti* in 1946, when the HUAC was already flexing its muscles.<sup>9</sup>

Guthrie's choice of subject matter might seem rather odd for 1952. The Spanish Civil War was long over, the matter settled with the defeat of the Second Republic in 1939. Franco had been ruling, unchallenged, for thirteen years. His relations with the United States were not particularly newsworthy; the Second World War had largely eclipsed any recollection of Franklin Roosevelt's refusal to arm the Republican side, even as Hitler and Mussolini—not to mention Texaco, Franco's "principal oil supplier"—were bankrolling the fascist war machine.<sup>10</sup> Yet, here was Woody Guthrie, in 1952, scrawling in gray ink over a multicolored wash of flowers on a page of his notebook, in the grammatically and syntactically tortured strains of early Huntington's disease:

All of us flowers  
and blooms and blossoms are

all out to stop you cold,  
Franco  
when courtrooms wont stop you we sure  
can and our words are oceans and oceans aplenty  
to not ever let you forget that we've stopped  
while thousands of haters and thuggers and killers just  
like you are before you got born.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is the critical question prompted by Guthrie's *Songs Against Franco*. Why invoke, now, and through folk song, the fascist Generalissimo and the lost cause of the Second Spanish Republic? During the Civil War itself, of course, "songs from the olive orchards and the battlefields of Spain" had been left-wing staples, as Serge Denisoff recalled. Amidst the resentment and outrage over the Roosevelt embargo, singing "Los Quatros Generales" or "Viva La Quince Brigada"—especially in their original Spanish—would make any singing American leftist "the life of the party."<sup>12</sup> Between the years 1937 and 1939, Guthrie had sung at many parties up and down California, either solo or with Geer and other performers. Often these were fundraisers for Spanish refugees, as well as wounded veterans of the Lincoln Battalion.<sup>13</sup>

Guthrie himself had already been primed for such musical activism when he arrived in California from Oklahoma, by way of Texas, in 1937. The previous year, according to his brother-in-law and former singing partner, Matt Jennings, the struggle against Franco had been instrumental in putting Guthrie on the path to socialism. Jennings, a Catholic, would show Guthrie the weekly edition of the *Sunday Visitor*, a conservative Catholic magazine whose editorials habitually praised Franco's "fascist rebellion" in defense of the church, and whose anti-communist diatribes by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen were particularly galling to Guthrie.<sup>14</sup> Later, in his autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory* (1943), Guthrie demonstrated his readiness to establish political connections between Franco's war, fought on behalf of the Spanish landowning class, and the greed of American landowners whose aggressive rapacity and mismanagement of the land had brought about the catastrophe of the Dust Bowl. As Guthrie succinctly put it, through the invented dialogue of a distressed tenant farmer in the Texas panhandle, supposedly speaking in 1936: "This Spanish war's a sign [...]. This is th' final battle! Battle of Armagaddeon [sic]! This dust, blowin' so thick ya cain't breathe, cain't see th' sky, that's th' scourge over th' face of th' earth! Men too greedy for land an' for money an' for th' power to make slaves out of his feller men! Man has cursed th' very land itself!"<sup>15</sup>

Fleeing the Dust Bowl and arriving in Los Angeles in the summer of 1937, Guthrie soon found himself drawing political cartoons and writing a column for the San Francisco-based *People's World*, the West Coast organ

of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA). His colleague on the paper, Ed Robbin (who had introduced Guthrie to Geer), recalled: “The civil war was raging in Spain, and it affected us as if it were in our own backyard.”<sup>16</sup> But war of a different kind had been “raging” in California since 1934. Robbin had reported first-hand on what Herbert Klein and Carey McWilliams, writing in *The Nation*, had called “farm fascism”—the “organized terrorism” and “fascism from above” on the part of the fruit-crop growers in collusion with their hired thugs and the police.<sup>17</sup> Robbin recalled “the air of terror and violence in the city of Salinas, [...] the bullet holes in the walls, the broken glass, and some of the children still sick with doses of tear gas,” and he reflected: “A city surrounded by police, city officials, growers, and scab herders with their headquarters in the Jeffrey Hotel, violence in the streets and on the picket lines: weren’t these the very ingredients of Nazi and fascist rule we had been studying in the European scene?”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Kevin Starr has written, equally troubling associations with European fascism could be drawn from the apricot pickers’ strike in the nearby Brentwood District of Contra Costa County: “Heads were busted, and the usual suspects rounded up. In this instance, 150 strikers were herded by deputies into a cattle corral-like enclosure in the center of Brentwood. This spectacle of American citizens being herded into a temporary concentration camp had prophetic import.”<sup>19</sup>

Guthrie’s and Robbin’s editor at *People’s World*, Al Richmond, likewise invoked “the agony of Spain” as well as “the shame of Munich,” where, in 1938, Britain’s prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, had capitulated in appeasement to Hitler. These were “portents of World War II,” Richmond believed: “Domestically the New Deal had palliated the most acute distress, but the problems of mass unemployment and poverty were no nearer solution. The presentiment of impending catastrophe, especially in the tide of world affairs, became even more compelling with the defeat of the Spanish Republic, a scant six months after the pact at Munich.”<sup>20</sup>

When Robbin brought Guthrie into Richmond’s office early in 1939, the editor found that he could add a unique, humorous complement to his more serious writing staff, which included former members of the Industrial Workers of the World as well as veterans of the Lincoln Battalion. The “young hillbilly singer from Oklahoma,” Richmond recalled, “might have been called a hippie in later years, except that his Oklahoma speech was authentic and so was his familiarity with the folkways of the open road as it was traveled by uprooted farmers and migratory workers.”<sup>21</sup> Among these “folkways of the open road” was the figure of the vigilante, as well as the police violence—the “farm fascism”—that Guthrie experienced firsthand in

the company of the striking farmworkers. Thus was born Guthrie's "Woody Sez" column, which, using mock hillbilly dialect, was soon making trenchant connections between the "dustbowl refugees" at home and the "Spanish refugees" fleeing Franco.<sup>22</sup>

Peter La Chapelle has made a study of Guthrie's newspaper and radio work during his three-year California sojourn, some of which overlapped with the Spanish Civil War. He emphasizes the symbolic power of the Republican struggle for the causes to which Guthrie was increasingly committed:

Indeed, influenced by ethnic and political refugees from Hitler's Europe and Franco's Spain, Guthrie in his songs and writings began to associate refugee Dust Bowlers with larger, more politically focused struggles with fascism such as the Spanish Civil War and anti-Nazi resistance. By outlining how others shared migrants' status as refugees and informing readers and listeners about these other conflicts, Guthrie worked to mobilize migrants and other audience listeners as supporters of the antifascist Left. His own connections with Spanish republicanism appear to have been reinforced by having met refugee Spanish radicals and returning veterans of the Lincoln Brigade.<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the general leftist anger over Roosevelt's embargo on arms for the Republican side, and the example of those Americans who were willing to sacrifice their lives on the Spanish battlefields, there is no evidence that Guthrie went so far as to urge US intervention in the war against Franco at this stage of his political awakening. His "Woody Sez" columns are strident in their arguments against US involvement in any European conflict, even though the CPUSA actively supported the Republican cause, with many Lincoln Battalion fighters coming from its ranks.<sup>24</sup> Beyond working to raise funds for Spanish refugees and Lincoln veterans, Guthrie was content to watch the Spanish struggle from the sidelines. He argued somewhat simplistically in "Woody Sez" (with its exaggerated hillbilly orthography): "I wood have a lots of fights if I had a nother feller to fight 'em for me. But since I got to do my own fightin, I try not to have no trouble."<sup>25</sup>

As Guthrie's fellow Oklahoman and future singing partner, Agnes "Sis" Cunningham, recalled, the question of US intervention in Spain had become a moot point after three hopeless years of leftist agitation:

[S]uddenly we realized it was too late to press further for a US lifting of the arms embargo to Loyalist Spain; her final denouement came in February of 1939, when the French sold out the Loyalists and drove evacuees back across the Pyrenees by the thousands after seizing their arms, which they turned over to Franco's forces. Several personal

friends and acquaintances of mine were volunteers in Spain—all but one came back. In a manner of speaking, all of us, even if we never left the United States, had to come back from Spain.<sup>26</sup>

But Franco's victory did not quite signal the end of the American Left's efforts on behalf of the Republican side: for some, it was too early to "come back from Spain" as long as there were still refugees and veterans to support. Guthrie's very first New York appearance, on February 25, 1940, was at a benefit arranged by Geer for the Spanish Refugees Relief Fund at the Mecca Temple on 58th Street and Broadway.<sup>27</sup> The classical baritone Mordecai Bauman, who shared the bill with Guthrie, recalled: "He was a talent we had never heard in New York. In a minute he had the audience in his hand."<sup>28</sup> Guthrie continued to play at Spanish refugee benefits for at least the next seven years, on one later (drunken) occasion infuriating his activist partner, John Henry Faulk, by pretending to steal the proceeds from the event in full view of the gathered crowd:

[Faulk] saw Woody lurch over to the silver collection plate, piled with contributions from the guests, and pour all the money down his shirt. The party stopped cold, everyone staring. Woody was grinning and patting his shirt. "Somebody shoot at me," he said. "You cain't hit me now!"

Faulk rushed over and grabbed him. "Woody, you little son of a bitch, you're making a shambles of this whole thing. That money doesn't belong to these people, it's for a cause. It's for some poor, half-starved Spanish kids sitting in refugee camps in France. So give it back, for chrissake. Now."<sup>29</sup>

In the latter half of 1941, Guthrie's ostentatious pacifism evaporated with the end of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the German invasion of Russia, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When Pete Seeger invited Guthrie to join his group, the Almanac Singers, Guthrie readily agreed, launching into writing a series of gung-ho, pro-war, anti-fascist songs that marked a complete about-face from his earlier non-interventionist stance. From late 1941 to mid-1942—when the press outed them as communists—the Almanacs were the most popular war propagandists on the radio, singing such Guthrie-penned songs as "The Sinking of the Reuben James" and "Round and Round Hitler's Grave." Supporting three children from his first marriage and one from his (soon-to-be) second, Guthrie remained exempt from the draft until late 1943, when "the army was forced to become less choosy about its inductees."<sup>30</sup>

Heading off the army induction notices that were certain to come, Guthrie joined the merchant marine, signing on to the first of three Atlantic voyages

in June of 1943. On two of the three voyages, his ship was crippled and nearly sunk by acoustic mines. His singing partner, Cisco Houston, who sailed with him, recalled how Guthrie's musical anti-fascism suddenly became a personal issue when his life, and that of his shipmates, was threatened: "Even when the ship got hit, the guys were out on the decks singing [Guthrie's] 'You Fascists Bound to Lose,' and singing was the thing that held them together."<sup>31</sup> In particular, it was a personal issue against Franco, since Spanish ships had been complicit with the Nazis in inflicting the damage. Guthrie's shipboard comrade, Jim Longhi, described an ominous threat off the coast of Gibraltar: "For the next two nights we were threatened by brightly lit ships steaming straight toward our blacked-out convoy. They were Spanish ships. Spain was supposed to be a neutral country, yet they were lighting the way for the U-boats, guiding them straight to us."<sup>32</sup> This was an outrage that Guthrie never forgot: his late wartime notebooks bristle with his hatred for Franco and the violation of Spain's declared neutrality. In January of 1945 he exploded onto the page:

I saw the wrecked hulls of twenty six of our ships and their crews of men all knocked to hell in the harbor of Gibraltar.

So I say break all dealings with that fascist, that real Nazi, Franco.

Yes. Break off all foolish friendship with him because you know that if Mexico was to sink ten of our cargo ships you would declare war on them before daylight in the morning.

I saw how the men swim out from the shores of Franco Spain with "sticker bombs" on their backs and stick them onto the sides of our ships. And the men from the other wrecked ships told us, "Oughtta declare war on that Franco right this very minute!"

I do agree with these shipwrecked "sticker bombed" seamen. And I say: "Declare War on Fascist Spain now. This minute."

My guitar has got a label on it that says "This Machine Kills Fascists"—and that is the only thing that makes my guitar play.<sup>33</sup>

This is, of course, a striking declaration from a songwriter whom popular culture persists in depicting as an implacable pacifist—the icon who is remembered for proclaiming, "Nope, I aint a gonna kill nobody. Plenty of rich folks wants to fight. Give them the guns."<sup>34</sup> But an annotation of Guthrie's, jotted onto a record cover in that same January of 1945, illuminates his fixation on Franco as the locus for all the fascistic tendencies towards which his own country appeared to be drifting, even as the war against European fascism still raged. Blasting the radio executives at New York's

WNEW station, where he briefly hosted a ballad program, Guthrie wrote: “Of course what sucks my brain dry is this goddamned tight censorship this station has got. They won’t even let me sing a song against Franco. That shows you where they stand. They don’t want no song to say nothing about anything on one side or the other. I guess they are afraid Franco will take them down to the court of law and sue them. Well, let him sue me. I don’t care.”<sup>35</sup>

Guthrie’s immediate postwar writings confirm the sense of malaise infecting much of the American Left in the wake of Harry Truman’s assumption of the presidency. What Robbie Lieberman describes in terms of the American liberal wing would certainly hold true for the communist wing, of which Guthrie was a part: “They were unhappy with the Truman administration’s policy in Europe, which often encouraged the remnants of fascism. While the United States government did little to help displaced Jews find a home, it worked with people and groups once close to the Nazis in Germany, tolerated the Franco government in Spain, and supported the right wing in the Greek Civil War.”<sup>36</sup> Writing explicitly of the Greek Civil War—which had prompted the so-called “Truman Doctrine,” the first articulation of the US mission to fight a global war against communism<sup>37</sup>—Guthrie declared ruefully, in the persona of “a Greek working man, and a fighter, too”:

Fascists  
Fought to get rid of them.  
They didn’t even change their uniforms.  
Still walking my sidewalk.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, it was not only Greece that had Guthrie worried. With the HUAC reaching deeper and deeper into American freedoms of expression and political association, he applied similar terminology to the domestic setting:

If we chase all you fascists  
Out from Washington  
They’d be a world of vacant houses  
For Americans.<sup>39</sup>

It is a measure of Guthrie’s political disillusionment that, by 1949, he was ready to conclude: “The war is so far from won that you can nearly say that we’ve lost outright to the fascists.”<sup>40</sup> Guthrie could even point to evidence to support his assertions, as he did on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August that year: imprisoned Jews in “the British Long Gun Holy Land”; the murdered and disappeared at the hands of “Chiang Kai Check [*sic*]”; and “Franco’s hungry and dead prisoners.”<sup>41</sup>

It is in this context of postwar disillusionment that we should consider the resurgence in popularity of Spanish Civil War songs among the beleaguered American Left—a manifestation of the *Radical Nostalgia* of which Peter Glazer has so eloquently written (2005). In the aftermath of the Republican defeat in 1939, progressive American singers had taken up with renewed verve “Viva La Quince Brigada,” “Si Me Quieres Escribir” and other odes to the (lost) cause. It was as late as 1943 that Glazer’s father, Tom, along with Pete Seeger, “Butch” Hawes and Bess Lomax Hawes, recorded *Songs of the Lincoln Battalion* for the Asch-Stinson label (Asch and Stinson having merged for three short years); the songs included “Viva La Quince Brigada,” “Jarama Valley,” “Spanish Marching Song” and “Quinto Regimiento” among other numbers.<sup>42</sup> Now, in the infancy of the Cold War, folksingers were reviving those same Spanish odes. In 1948, the *People’s Song Book* reprinted versions of “Los Cuatros Generales” as well as Harry Berlow’s “The Rat,” both of which had appeared two years earlier in *People’s Songs*, the major bulletin for the dissemination of progressive topical songs.<sup>43</sup> In September of 1951, when folk singers who had supported the Republican cause were being ingeniously and maliciously designated “premature anti-fascists” by the HUAC, *Sing Out!* magazine reprinted “Jarama Valley” among its monthly offerings.<sup>44</sup> This same issue included a defiant letter from Guthrie, throwing down the gauntlet to the anti-communist Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and Sen. Pat McCarran’s Internal Security Act of 1950: “[W]hichever side MacCarran [*sic*] ain’t on, I am; whichever side Taft-Hartley’s not on, I’m on double watch.”<sup>45</sup>

Guthrie had already seen his close friend and protégé, Pete Seeger, pilloried in the anti-communist “smear sheet,” *Counterattack*—like *Red Channels*, in which he was also named, a major resource for the HUAC. In June of 1950, *Counterattack* accused Seeger’s group, the Weavers, of singing “fighting songs of the Lincoln Brigade (which fought for Stalin in the Spanish Civil War) and other Communist song favorites.”<sup>46</sup> *Counterattack*’s unabashed ignorance as to the political complexities within the Republican ranks still takes the breath away. Its editors had obviously not read Maxwell Anderson’s *Key Largo*, in which Nimmo, a Lincoln Battalion volunteer, explains: “They’re Anarchists, Communists, Leftists, Rightists, Leftist-rightists, Rightist-leftists, Socialists, Leftist-Socialists, Rightist-Socialists, Anti-clericals, Clerical-Communists, Loyalist soldiers, police, crazy people, and once in a while just a plain farmer, all fighting Franco!”<sup>47</sup> No matter: for the right-wing gutter press, singers of Republican songs were plainly and simply “Stalin’s songbirds,” as Seeger was called for the rest of his life.<sup>48</sup>

For the HUAC, particular songs were as suspect as the singers themselves. As Seeger recalled, “In 1949, only ‘Commies’ used words like

'peace' and 'freedom'."49 Among the Weavers' songs singled out by name in the HUAC hearings were "If I Had a Hammer," which honored both the workers' movement and the peace movement, and "Wasn't That a Time," which implicitly condemned the McCarthyite witch-hunters even as it equated the Spanish Republican struggle with the battles of Valley Forge and Gettysburg:

And now again  
the madmen come  
and shall our victory fail?  
There is no victory  
in a land  
where free men go to jail.  
Isn't this a time!  
Isn't this a time!  
A time to try the soul of man!  
Isn't this a terrible time!  
Our faith cries out  
THEY SHALL NOT PASS!  
We cry NO PASARAN!  
We pledge our lives,  
our honor, all  
to free this prisoned land.<sup>50</sup>

By 1952, the Weavers were thoroughly blacklisted, unable to secure bookings anywhere in the broadcast media or in clubs. As Gene Marine recalled: "In Ohio, a woman was subpoenaed [by the HUAC] because she had held a hootenanny in her house in order to introduce Pete Seeger to other local people. In his own upstate New York, sponsors of a concert were physically threatened."<sup>51</sup> At the exact same time, Guthrie's early patron, the folk song collector Alan Lomax, was suffering as a result of the collusion between the US government and the Franco regime in keeping musical figures in check. Having fled the witch hunts in America, Lomax was in Spain in 1952, attempting to collect folk songs, under the intimidation of the Guardia Civil, who, he said, "would appear like so many black buzzards carrying with them the stink of fear."<sup>52</sup> Lomax's biographer explains: "The police were interested in Lomax because, unbeknownst to him, the FBI had notified the Spanish authorities that he was a potential threat [...] The police in Madrid went through the mail that was being held for [him] and shared what they found with the US Embassy."<sup>53</sup>

It is in the knowledge of this poisonous atmosphere—with the US and Franco's Spain sharing a splendid mutual conviviality—that we finally turn to Guthrie's *Songs Against Franco* as reflections of his engagement with the then-current political culture. In October of 1952, as he scrawled on the pages

of his notebook, it seemed to him that “any good word” was “anty franco [sic].”<sup>54</sup> Guthrie’s composition strategies are varied, and it is sometimes unclear whether his setting is the actual war of 1936-1939, the undeclared war against Franco for which Guthrie had hopelessly called back in 1945, or some later imagined war.

One of the most intriguing narratives in *Songs Against Franco*, “Spanish Rebel,” injects some historical confusion into the song by virtue of its title as well as the protagonist’s self-designation as a rebel—“Half a saint and half a devil”—fighting against Franco in what clearly is the 1936-1939 war. However, during the Civil War, it was Franco and his soldiers who were the rebels, having taken up arms against the elected Republican government. But Guthrie has no time for such distinctions, for here—as in so many of his other songs—rebellion against a prevailing tyranny is the most noble act. Thus, the rebel in “Spanish Rebel” is an American fighter hailing from New York’s Coney Island, where Guthrie was then living with his wife and children. His rebellion is clearly against his own hypocritical government, which has imposed an embargo on Republican aid:

Good Bye to job and salary;  
Good Bye to wife and family;  
Hello to my rabble army  
Stopping Franco while we can.

My United States, dammit!  
Wont give me a single bullet;  
Hitler fires ten billion at me  
Tryin’ ta stop me while he can.

Warshin’ton Dee Cee wont send me  
Not a single shooting bullet;  
Mussoleeny shoots fifty jilliun  
Tryin’ ta stop me while he can.<sup>55</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt had eventually called America’s failure to intervene against Franco “a grave mistake.”<sup>56</sup> But for Guthrie, this grievous error had not only ensured the triumph of fascism in Spain, but it had also paved the way for it to intrude into the corridors of American power. Hence the desperation of the song’s final line:

My world won’t soon forget, dear,  
My hand grenade I tossed here;  
When you dont see me come back, dear,  
Stop these fascists while you can.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, in a song titled “Stop Franco,” the narrator superimposes the Spanish Civil War upon what is both the “damned tangled up” political culture of the American 1950s and Guthrie’s disintegrating personal life:

My life got so damned tangled up  
I signed up for to go  
Up over the hump of the Pyrraneses [*sic*]  
To try to stop Franco; (yes),  
To try to stop Franco.<sup>58</sup>

As is the case in “Spanish Rebel,” the first-person setting of “Stop Franco” is highly significant in that Guthrie chooses a narrative position whose intimacy and immediacy confounds the impression of mere soap-box preaching. The fight against Franco is, again, a highly personal one, as it is in Guthrie’s merchant marine writings. Although “Stop Franco” in particular dwells at length on the brutality of the Franco regime, it also carries resounding overtones of the increasingly thuggish personages on the HUAC, in the anti-communist press and in the country at large. Guthrie had already seen bigoted citizens stirred up into inflicting actual violence upon suspected “commies.” He had fresh memories of the mob attacks that he had personally faced along with Paul Robeson, Seeger, and others during the violently anti-communist Peekskill Riots in New York State in 1949.<sup>59</sup> Now, a scant four years later, McCarthyism in the legislative halls compounded the mob violence on the streets, all hearkening back to Franco’s ascension to power:

Franco he’s a bigshot racketman;  
Coldhearted gambler, too;  
To keep his bullywhip boys in bizness  
There’s nothin’ he wont do;  
There’s nothin’ he wont do.

Franco kills his wisest ones  
That speak out against his few;  
And, to keep my lips from speaking truth  
There’s nothin’ he wont do; no;  
There’s nothin’ he wont do.<sup>60</sup>

Carnavalesque ridicule is clearly one of Guthrie’s major rhetorical strategies in *Songs Against Franco*. “Curses for Franco,” for instance, invokes in all its crudeness the spirit of François Rabelais—perhaps the bawdiest of Renaissance writers—as well as the time-honored folk tradition of “the dirty dozens,” the African American ritual of insult. Guthrie’s fondness for Rabelais is a matter of record; his biographer describes him encountering *Gargantua and Pantagruel* for the first time and going “wild over it, pacing back and forth across the floor, giggling madly and reading aloud.”<sup>61</sup> As for the “dozens,” there is no question that Guthrie was intimately

familiar with the rhetorical form described by Elijah Wald as reflecting “aggression as well as humor and ugliness as well as artistry.”<sup>62</sup> Guthrie’s intent is clear, to “degrade by the grotesque method”—as Mikhail Bakhtin described the process—to drag Franco’s name “down to the absolute lower bodily stratum, to the zone of the genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed”.<sup>63</sup>

Franco he’s a rumdum bum! Franco he’s a turd!  
Franco he’s a shitty slinger th’ worst I ever heard;  
Franco he’s a fart in the wind of dirty & low degree;  
Franco he’s a whammmy whamm whammer!  
The rest I cannot say.

Franco he’s a bullywhip man! Franco he’s a goon!  
Franco he’s a foney baloney! Franco is a loon!  
Franco he’s a frankenstein of dirty and low degree!  
Franco he’s a jinnga jinng jinger!  
The rest I cannot say!

Franco he’s a snattle rake! Franco he’s a louse!  
Franco he’s a penny me snatcher! Franco he’s a farce!  
Franco he’s a blood spiller thug of dirty & low degree!  
Franco he’s a wheengy dingy dinger!  
The rest I cannot say!<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, in “Talking Love Lost Blues,” Guthrie turns to mocking the sexual impotence of a close associate of Franco who had appealed to the Generalissimo for aid. In an annotation below the lyrics, Guthrie claims to have read of this embarrassment in a “factual newspaper story.” Help had apparently been secured from Franco’s good friends, the Americans:

Franco, Franco, run quick and see;  
Run quick an’ see what’s happenin’ ta me;  
My staff wont stand up hard any more,  
And I cant satisfy any of my whores.  
Got me worried. What can I do about it?

I’ll just send a telegram right away  
To that great sex doctor in the U.S.A.;  
He can ship his office machenery [*sic*] over here today;  
I’ll borrow enuff money off of Uncle Sam ta pay.  
Couple a hundred thousand ta get ‘im on his way.

When this talk with Uncle Sam was through,  
That money flew and the doctor, too;  
Five shiploads of ‘chenery with full train’d crew

Tryin' ta git Franco's buddy back his longlost youth.  
Caint guarantee anything.  
Just makin' a stab at it.<sup>65</sup>

Songs such as these latter two reveal Guthrie's exasperation—and perhaps his own political impotence—in the face of both the Spanish dictatorship and America's hypocrisy in supporting it, the only weapon he can muster being carnivalesque degradation. But it is characteristic of Guthrie, never fully devoid of optimism, to seek a glimmer of light amidst the darkest of landscapes. Of all the *Songs Against Franco*, it is the talking blues “Enda Franco's Line” that best reflects his hopes for the defeat of fascism at the hands of determined, organized progressives. Guthrie's use of the talking blues—a black musical discourse originally aimed at presumptions of white supremacy—is highly significant for two reasons. First, it resurrects the voice of one of his most celebrated Dust Bowl ballads, “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” in which the narrator strikes a resilient, defiantly laconic note in the face of both natural and economic calamity.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, the sub-genre of the talking blues is itself “ideologically charged” in its “satiric potential,” as Guthrie scholar Martin Butler notes.<sup>67</sup> “Enda Franco's Line” has thirteen stanzas, each beginning with a given year, which lead us through the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War to the waves of worker unrest that had been spreading since 1947 throughout the Basque Country and Catalonia, challenging Franco's autocracy and culminating in the Barcelona general strike of 1951.<sup>68</sup> Again, as in his other anti-Franco songs, Guthrie implicates the United States as the guardian of Spanish fascism, even as Franco's own citizens stir in gathering rebellion:

Longa 'bout Nineteen Forty Nine,  
Franco lived on Wall Street's chicken and wine;  
Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty O'—  
Every worker in Barc[e]lona on a strike did go.

Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty One,  
His cops and his whips and his camps did hum;  
Ladies march'd through the streets with empty oil jugs,  
Got stopp'd and whipp'd and jailed by thugs.

Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty Two,  
We're sending Frankie money every day or two;  
Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty Three,  
I'm hoping anda praying Franco will cease t' be.

Guthrie's final stanza envisages what history itself declined to provide: the overthrow of the Franco regime within the next three years:

Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty & Four,

I hope his ganga killers wont be anymore;  
Longa 'bout Nineteen Fifty Five,  
The Spanish working folks'll bring my good old Spain alive!<sup>69</sup>

It was, of course, a hopeless cause. Franco would rule until 1975, outliving Woody Guthrie by eight years. Upon finishing his *Songs Against Franco*, Guthrie turned to other hopeless causes—at least, causes that would have seemed very hopeless in 1952: the presidential campaign of the Progressive Party candidate, Vincent Hallinan, the comprehensive repudiation of the Korean War, total nuclear disarmament—and he wrote songs about all of them.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, he saw former singing comrades like Burl Ives naming names—including Seeger's—for the HUAC. He watched helplessly as Seeger was hauled before the Committee in 1955, convicted of contempt of Congress for his defiance, and given a ten-year jail sentence—the sentence was later overturned on a mere technicality. Guthrie himself was spared a subpoena solely because of his illness; but he saw the entire folksinging community branded en masse as likely communist sympathizers.<sup>71</sup> In 1956, he was committed to the Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey, and he remained hospitalized until his death eleven years later.<sup>72</sup>

But the noble aura of the Spanish Civil War and its songs had managed to survive the blacklist of the folk music community, the beginning of the end of which had been signaled by the triumphant return of the Weavers to Carnegie Hall in 1955, the very year of Seeger's HUAC appearance. The concert recording—*The Weavers at Carnegie Hall* (1957)—includes the rousing anti-Franco anthem “Venga Jaleo.”<sup>73</sup> As late as 1962, Guthrie's young associate, the Canadian-born balladeer Oscar Brand, could declare: “On campus after campus I have heard the lamentation that there have been no ‘great causes’ since the Spanish Civil War”<sup>74</sup>—a lament that lends credence to the sentiments of Tom Lehrer's fondly satirical number, “The Folk Song Army”:

Remember the war against Franco?  
That's the kind where each of us belongs.  
Though he may have won all the battles,  
We had all the good songs.<sup>75</sup>

At about the time Lehrer recorded this song, Guthrie received a letter from a young English fan:

Dear Woody,  
I am writing to you to tell you that I have sung your songs in Franco's Spain. I have your picture inside my guitar case.  
Yours sincerely with huge admiration, Ralph May.

By now, Guthrie was laying in the Brooklyn State Hospital, practically mute and virtually paralyzed. So his ex-wife wrote on his behalf:

Dear Ralph,

Thank you for writing. Keep singing, signed Marjorie Guthrie.<sup>76</sup>

Ralph May later adopted the performing name Ralph McTell, and went on to become a giant of British folk music, penning the classic song, “Streets of London.”<sup>77</sup> He must have been quite fortunate to have evaded Franco’s police if he had been singing Guthrie’s songs in Spain; for as late as 1971, Pete Seeger was having no such luck. Arriving in Barcelona for a pre-arranged concert at the university, Seeger found that his show had been canceled by the police, who had been “fearing a left-wing riot,” as Seeger’s biographer writes: “‘I am sorry that the concert could not have been held,’ the dean told Seeger an hour later. ‘It is out of my hands. The governor of Barcelona says that he personally ordered the police to stop it, and he did so on orders from Madrid.’ Seeger left, vowing to sing in Barcelona another time.”<sup>78</sup> True to his word, he returned in 1978, singing for a new generation the *Songs of the Lincoln Battalion* that he and his comrades had recorded in 1943. As he explained on a 2003 recording of “Jarama Valley” made with Guthrie’s son, Arlo, Seeger had asked his audience how they could possibly have known the English words well enough to have sung along with him: “I said, ‘How come you sing these songs in the same versions that I sing?’ And they said, ‘Oh, we learned them off your record. We made tapes of them and brought them across the border and played them for each other. Of course, if we’d played them very loud we might have gotten arrested.’ So, that little record kept alive—in Spain—some of these songs.”<sup>79</sup> In 1993, now seventy-four years old, Seeger returned to Barcelona once more, where he sang “Viva La Quince Brigada” to a packed concert hall.<sup>80</sup> There can be no doubt that—as ever—he had the angel of his long-dead mentor, Woody Guthrie, sitting on his shoulder, perhaps singing in counterpoint one of his own *Songs Against Franco*.

*In addition to all untitled notebook entries and annotations by Woody Guthrie—hereafter referred to as Notebooks—which are held in the Woody Guthrie Archives, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and copyrighted by Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., I gratefully acknowledge permission by Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc. to quote from the following lyric writings: “Curses for Franco,” “Enda Franco’s Line,” “Spanish Rebel,” “Stop Franco” and “Talking Love Lost Blues.”*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared in the open-access journal, *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 1 (June 2017): 91-111. The author is grateful for permission to republish the article here. For the original publication see:

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<https://www.atlantisjournal.org/index.php?journal=atlantis&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=349>.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Ryan, ed., *The Book of the XV International Brigade* (Madrid: Commissariat of War, 1938. Reprint, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Frank Graham, 1975), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Jarama Valley," on Various Artists, *Songs of the Spanish Civil War, Vols. 1 and 2* (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 2014 [1962]), Track 13.

<sup>4</sup> See Paul C. Mishler, "Woody Guthrie's Lost Song to Lincoln Vet Steve Nelson," *Science and Society* 68, no. 3 (2004): 350-355.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, "Will Geer and Woody Guthrie: A Folk Music Friendship," in *The Life, Music, and Thought of Woody Guthrie: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. John S. Partington (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate 2001): 131-142 (p. 139).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Santelli, *This Land Is Your Land: Woody Guthrie and the Journey of an American Folk Song* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2012), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Nora Guthrie and the Woody Guthrie Archives, *My Name Is New York: Ramblin' Around Woody Guthrie's Town* (Brooklyn, NY: powerHouse Books, 2012), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Woody Guthrie quoted in Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 358.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Woody Guthrie: Writing America's Songs* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 169.

<sup>11</sup> Woody Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 69. Woody Guthrie Archives, Tulsa, Oklahoma (hereafter WGA).

<sup>12</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), 55.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Woody Guthrie*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Cray, 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1943), 247.

<sup>16</sup> Ed Robbin, *Woody Guthrie and Me: An Intimate Reminiscence* (Berkeley: Lancaster-Miller, 1979), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Klein and Carey McWilliams, "Cold Terror in California," *The Nation* (July 24, 1934), 97.

<sup>18</sup> Robbin, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 164.

<sup>20</sup> Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (New York: Delta, 1972), 274-275.

<sup>21</sup> Richmond, 280.

<sup>22</sup> Woody Guthrie quoted in Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007), 65.

<sup>23</sup> La Chapelle, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1994), 9-14.

<sup>25</sup> Woody Guthrie, *Woody Sez: Sayings, Stories & Drawings by America's Greatest Ballad-Maker*, comp. and ed. Marjorie Guthrie (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1975), 64.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and Gordon Friesen, *Red Dust and Broadides: A Joint Autobiography*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1999), 177.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Nowlin, *Woody Guthrie: American Radical Patriot* (Cambridge: Rounder, 2013), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Mordecai Bauman quoted in Cray, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Delta, 1999), 338-339.

<sup>30</sup> Klein, 274.

<sup>31</sup> Cisco Houston, untitled recollection, in *Reprints from the People's Songs Bulletin, 1946-1949*, ed. Irwin Silber (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 21.

- <sup>32</sup> Jim Longhi, *Woody, Cisco, and Me: With Woody Guthrie in the Merchant Marine* (New York: iBooks, 1997), 83-84.
- <sup>33</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 1 [26], 95. WGA.
- <sup>34</sup> Guthrie, *Woody Sez*, 71.
- <sup>35</sup> Woody Guthrie, Annotation to *American Folksay: Ballads and Dances*, January 16, 1945. WGA, Media: Record Albums, Box 3, A no. 2008-100.
- <sup>36</sup> Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995), 105.
- <sup>37</sup> Denise M. Bostdorff, *Proclaiming the Truman Doctrine: The Cold War Call to Arms* (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 2008).
- <sup>38</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Talking News Blues," in *New Found Land*, typed manuscript by Guthrie (1947), n.p. Alan Lomax Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. AFC 2004/04, Woody Guthrie Manuscripts, Box 33.02, Folder 20.
- <sup>39</sup> Woody Guthrie, "I'll Write My Name Down in Blood Red Blood" (1948, n.p.). WGA, Songs 1, Box 2, Folder 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Guthrie quoted in Cray, 305.
- <sup>41</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 1 [57], 17. WGA.
- <sup>42</sup> Tom Glazer, Baldwin "Butch" Hawes, Bess Lomax Hawes, and Pete Seeger, *Songs of the Lincoln Battalion* (Asch-Stinson, 1943).
- <sup>43</sup> Waldemar Hille, ed. *The People's Song Book* (New York: Oak Publications, 2006 [1948]).
- <sup>44</sup> Alex McDade, "Jarama Valley" [1938], *Sing Out!* 2, no. 3 (1951), 11.
- <sup>45</sup> Woody Guthrie, "A Letter from Woody Guthrie," *Sing Out!* 2, no. 3 (1951), 14.
- <sup>46</sup> *Counterattack* quoted in Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson, *Songs for Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs, and the American Left, 1926-1953* (Hambergen: Bear Family, 1996), 45.
- <sup>47</sup> Maxwell Anderson, *Key Largo* (Washington, DC: Anderson House, 1939), 9.
- <sup>48</sup> Lawrence J. Epstein, *Political folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 123.
- <sup>49</sup> Pete Seeger quoted in David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard, 2008), 188.
- <sup>50</sup> Lee Hays and Walter Lowenfels, "Wasn't That a Time" [1948], in *Reprints from the People's Songs Bulletin*, ed. Irwin Silber (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 75.
- <sup>51</sup> Gene Marine, "Guerrilla Minstrel" [1972], in *The Pete Seeger Reader*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen and James Capaldi (New York: Oxford UP, 2014): 3-42 (p. 24).
- <sup>52</sup> Alan Lomax quoted in John Swezd, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 272.
- <sup>53</sup> Swezd, 272-273.
- <sup>54</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 65. WGA.
- <sup>55</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 66. WGA.
- <sup>56</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt quoted in Hochschild, 369.
- <sup>57</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 66. WGA.
- <sup>58</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 68. WGA.
- <sup>59</sup> Howard Fast, *Peekskill USA: Inside the Infamous 1949 Riots* (New York: Open Road Media, 2011).
- <sup>60</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 68. WGA.
- <sup>61</sup> Klein, 259.
- <sup>62</sup> Elijah Wald, *Talkin' Bout Your Mama: The Dozens Snaps, and the Deep Roots of Rap* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 171.
- <sup>63</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984 [1964]), 28.
- <sup>64</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 70. WGA.
- <sup>65</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 72. WGA.
- <sup>66</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Talking Dust Bowl Blues," *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Rounder, 1988 [1940]), Track 3.

- <sup>67</sup> Martin Butler, *Voices of the Down and Out: The Dust Bowl Migration and the Great Depression in the Songs of Woody Guthrie* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 88.
- <sup>68</sup> Joe Foweraker, *Making Democracy in Spain: Grass-Roots Struggle in the South, 1955-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 114.
- <sup>69</sup> Guthrie, Notebooks 2 [9], 74. WGA.
- <sup>70</sup> Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2017).
- <sup>71</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2002).
- <sup>72</sup> Phillip Buehler, *Woody Guthrie's Wardy Forty: Greystone Park State Hospital Revisited* (Mt. Kisco: Woody Guthrie Publications, 2013).
- <sup>73</sup> The Weavers, "Venga Jaleo," on *The Weavers at Carnegie Hall* (Vanguard, 1957), Side 1, Track 8.
- <sup>74</sup> Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song* (New York: Minerva Press, 1962), 58.
- <sup>75</sup> Tom Lehrer, "The Folk Song Army," *That Was the Year That Was* (Warner Bros./Reprise, 1965), Side 1, Track 4.
- <sup>76</sup> Ralph McTell, *As Far as I Can Tell: A Post-War Childhood in South London* (London: Loyola, 2008), 540.
- <sup>77</sup> Ralph McTell, "Streets of London," *Streets of London* (Transatlantic Records, 1975), Track 1.
- <sup>78</sup> Dunaway, 372.
- <sup>79</sup> Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie, "Jarama Valley," on Various Artists, *Spain in My Heart: Songs of the Spanish Civil War* (Appleseed Records, 2003), Track 1.
- <sup>80</sup> Pete Seeger, "Viva La Quince Brigada," Live performance at Paulau Sant Jordi, Barcelona (April 23, 1993). Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqe7LpBUzqU>.