

## Woody Guthrie and the Blues

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Most writing on Woody Guthrie focuses on his songwriting, his life, or his politics, but Woody always thought of himself as an all-around musician, singing songs, writing songs, playing country dance music, or whatever else the occasion called for. People don't tend to talk much about his musicianship, but that was what first attracted me to him and what keeps me coming back to his recordings. Woody's musical knowledge and skill constantly inform the rest of his work: for example, when he described Sonny Terry's harmonica playing, the description shows his gift for language and the way he used that gift to make political points, but also his technical knowledge of the instrument.

Sonny Terry blew and whipped, beat, fanned and petted his harmonica, cooed to it like a weed hill turtle dove, cried to it like some worried woman come to ease his worried mind. He ... flipped his lip over and across with his tongue sending all of his wind into one hole, straining the reed with too much pressure and making it sound like it had several side tones and tones that dance between. He put the tobacco sheds of North and South Carolina in it and all of the blistered and hurt and hardened hands cheated and left empty, ... robbed and left hungry, pilfered and left starving, beaten and left dreaming. He rolled out the trains that the colored hand cannot drive, only clean and wash down. He blew into the wood holes and the brassy reeds the tale and the wails of Lost John running away from the dogs of the chain gang guards — and the chain gang is the landlord that is never around anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Woody himself was a pretty mean harmonica player, as he showed on a "Railroad Blues" he recorded for the Library of Congress. It is an old-time, train-inspired instrumental of the kind that was a standard harmonica showpiece all across the American South. He frames his performance with a story about learning this piece from a "colored boy" he heard playing outside a barbershop in his hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma, when he was in his mid-teens:

It was on a warm summer's day, and he was layin' up there barefooted, and I just had my shoes off a couple o' months and'd just about toughened 'em in, you know, where I could run through

cuckleburrs and broke bottles and wade through the liquor bottles up and down the back alleys in town there, after whiskey got to be pretty popular. And I says, "Boy," I said, "that's undoubtedly the lonest piece of music that I ever run onto in my life. Where in the world did you learn it?"

"Oh," he said, "I jes' lay heah an' listen to the railroad whistle, an'," he said, "whatevah it say, I say too."<sup>2</sup>

Woody told that story not only to explain a facet of his harmonica style, but as part of a broader meditation on local race relations and his own relationship to them:

The common, everyday feelin' down in that country, you know, is that for some strange reason, is some people [are] born a little bit better than others, and some are s'posed to work pretty hard and others s'posed to coast through life some way or other. But I don't know, I could never pass either an Indian or a colored boy because, I'll tell you the truth, I learned to like 'em.<sup>3</sup>

Modern listeners are likely to be bothered by the stereotypes in his reminiscence and perhaps even more bothered by the way he phrased that explanation of his feelings: the "colored boy" in bare feet working at the local shoe shine stand was a good deal older than Woody, and Woody quotes him as speaking in a sleepy drawl straight out of a *Stepin Fetchit* movie, then follows up with a profession of appreciation for Indians and colored folk that sounds more than a little patronizing. But the music conveys a parallel and equally important message: if we put our discomfort aside for a moment and listen, we find that Woody knew how to play pretty proficient blues harp.

Americans' relationships to race and racism are often ugly and confused, but never simple. Despite the long history of racial segregation in the South, blues is almost as basic to white southern music as it is to black southern music — just as fiddle tunes are almost as basic to black southern music as to white. And those traditions often overlapped, as Woody showed when he fiddled a twelve-bar blues titled "Long Ways to Travel," with a verse beginning, "Goin' to leave the South, goin' north this fall/ My luck don't change, I won't be back at all."<sup>4</sup> His fiddling is in an old-fashioned style that is closer to African than British Isles traditions, heavy on rhythm and tonal shadings, with little if any cohesive melody. Recording patterns in the early twentieth century, whether of commercial recording companies or of folklorists, tend to suggest a separation between black and white styles — both folklorists and record company scouts favored material they considered "white" when they recorded white players, and blues or other

"black" material when they recorded black players. But black and white players were constantly learning from one another and adapting each other's tunes and styles — the harsh social segregation that kept the racial power structure so unequal was too solid to be threatened by a black man playing an Irish jig or a white man playing blues. White country musicians routinely credited their styles to black sources, often in terms that accentuated the social inequities, like the term "nigger picking," which was standard throughout the South for the thumb-bass and finger-melody guitar style later euphemistically known as "Travis picking" — and it is worth emphasizing that this change in nomenclature cleaned up the racial slur, but also erased the African American originators of the style and credited it to a popular white player.

Woody regularly pointed out that a lot of his music came from African American culture, including some songs that his modern fans tend not think of in those terms. For example, in his Library of Congress recordings he introduced one song as "wrote by a colored slave that run off from his master and went back up north. He was a southern slave and he run up north, and it was pretty cold up there, so he worked around up there a little bit, and stayed in jails and everything, and was treated like a dog, so he wrote this song—or got it started."<sup>5</sup>

The song that follows is "I'm Going Down the Road Feeling Bad," which many people credit to Woody himself, along with "This Train is Bound for Glory" — a song white southerners of Woody's generation associated so thoroughly with black culture that when white groups recorded it in the 1920s and 1930s, the record labels reminded listeners of its ethnic roots by writing the title in black dialect: "Dis Train."<sup>6</sup> As for "Going Down the Road," it is in a form most historians of American folk music now refer to as pre-blues, proto-blues, or occasionally as sixteen-bar blues: three repeated lines, followed by a tag line:

I'm going down the road feeling bad,  
I'm going down the road feeling bad,  
I'm going down the road feeling bad, lord, lord,  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

This was a common African American song form, which seems to have evolved into the shorter twelve-bar blues (typically consisting of two repeated lines followed by a rhyming tag) around the turn of the twentieth century. As with banjo hoedowns, by the time recording became common this older African American form was more popular with white listeners than black, and thus is often thought of as "hillbilly" or "old time" music rather than blues. But in the early twentieth century most white southerners

still thought of such songs as a kind of blues, and specifically associated them with African American culture.

Woody regularly stressed this connection, making the point at particular length in a 1941 letter to Max Gordon, who owned the Village Vanguard nightclub in New York. Gordon had booked Lead Belly and Josh White for a month-long engagement, the first time a New York club had presented anything resembling traditional rural blues, and Woody wrote a lengthy critique of the duo's debut, expressing his enthusiasm and suggesting some changes. One was that the club's MC should "give [their show] a little more historical value, and prove the origin of this style of music by the Negroes and the spread and influence amongst white hill country people, and even lumberjacks, gold chasers, cowboys, oil boomers, etc." Woody specifically suggested that the MC should highlight the roots of popular hillbilly styles in black culture, writing:

Victor Records' two biggest sellers, namely Jimmy Rodgers and the Carter Family, have constantly used the two and three line repeat, with a last line the same. The westerners are singing almost a pure Negro style ... and lots of them haven't stopped to think yet that the whole thing traces back to the slaves, the sharecroppers, the big town workers, the chain gangs, and spiritual songs of the Negro people.<sup>7</sup>

I came to Woody's music as a singer and guitarist rather than as a historian, and was guilty as charged — I never used to think about African American traditions when I sang songs like "Going Down the Road," or one of my favorite duets by Woody and Cisco Houston:

There's more pretty girls than one,  
More pretty girls than one,  
Every town I ramble around,  
There's more pretty girls than one.<sup>8</sup>

Woody played mandolin on that one, and it shows another facet of his varied musicianship — he plays a smooth tremolo style, duplicating the sort of drawn-out phrases he played on fiddle, but on mandolin those phrases have a light delicacy that complements or comments on the lonesome vocal lines rather than mimicking them. It makes me wonder whether there was a tradition of black southwesterners playing in this style, none of whom happened to be captured on record. There would be nothing surprising about that: the few black mandolin players who recorded in this period, such as the soloist for the Dallas String Band, tended to be virtuosos, and Woody was not a virtuoso. But he was a very tasteful player who was thoroughly

comfortable in blues and related idioms, and it seems likely that he had heard black mandolinists as well as black guitarists and harmonica players.

Woody was also familiar with the black music that swept the South and Southwest on recordings during the "race records" boom of the 1920s. In his letter to Gordon, he specifically suggested that the MC should connect Josh and Lead Belly's music to Blind Lemon Jefferson. When I first read that, I kind of glossed over it — Josh and Lead Belly both claimed to have led Lemon Jefferson, so I figured Woody was just expanding on their reminiscences and didn't consider that he might have his own connections to Jefferson's music. But Woody grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, Jefferson's home territory, just when Jefferson's records were most popular in that region and, as it happens, white southwesterners seem to have been particularly drawn to African American blues records. The Western Swing bands routinely covered songs by people like Memphis Minnie and Kokomo Arnold, and in 1939 a jukebox operator in Beaumont, Texas, wrote a letter to *Billboard* saying that "race records" were so strong in his market that they could be kept on the same box for years: "They don't get old and lose play like other records."<sup>9</sup>

So I should have paid attention when Woody wrote about Jefferson, especially since I was familiar with both Jefferson's famous "See that My Grave is Kept Clean," and Woody's "Lonesome Day," in which he inserts Jefferson's final verse:

Have you ever heard a church bell tone?  
Have you ever heard a church bell tone?  
Have you ever heard a church bell tone?  
Then you know that the poor boy's dead and gone.

Woody just changed a few words, shifting the first line's opening phrase to "Did you ever hear..." and ending, "That's a sign that another good man done gone."<sup>10</sup>

As usual, Woody gave his blues criticism a political slant, first highlighting his kinship with the black singers, then giving a view of that kinship from Lead Belly's side:

Josh and Huddie come from my kind of people, and they're carrying on a great tradition in the line of Blind Lemon Jefferson, one of the really great blues singers and guitar players.... Huddie says, ["My people has got the blues about everything, about clothes, about money, about places to stay and places that ain't worth the rent you got to pay ... nowadays everybody's got the blues; but the white folks blues quits where the Negro blues starts in.["]

And Woody added, "I've never heard the Negro situation said any clearer or easier than that, and there are lots of progressive books and papers going around."<sup>11</sup>

One could argue that although that speech is a long way from Woody's description of the "barefoot colored boy" playing harmonica, there's still some stereotyping going on. Northern, urban leftists tended to present Lead Belly as a symbol of the downtrodden southern Negro, and Woody specifically contrasted Josh's hipper style with Lead Belly's, writing: "Josh is singing the big city blues, and Huddie Leadbelly is representing the rural, country boy singing in the hot spots of the mushroom boom towns that bloom and fade."<sup>12</sup>

That leaves out the fact that Leadbelly sang lots of pop songs and wanted John Lomax to book him in the Cotton Club alongside Cab Calloway. If you look at the few pictures of Woody and Lead Belly singing together, only Woody seems to be presenting himself as a "country boy." Lead Belly, by contrast, is in a fashionable suit with a polka-dot bow tie (Fig. 1). That contrast is even more dramatic in a publicity picture of the cast of a CBS radio show Alan Lomax produced with Nicholas Ray, which shows Ray, Josh, the Golden Gate Quartet, and Burl Ives sitting around in neat suits and ties, while Woody lies lazily on the floor in a plaid shirt and rumpled canvas jacket, with a Stetson pushed back on his head and a cigarette drooping from his mouth (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Photograph by Stephen Deutsch.



Fig 2. Photographer unknown.

Woody consistently presented himself as a Will Rogers kind of character, and in this context his informal or theatrically countrified dress and manners served as a badge of honesty and solidarity with simple, hard-working folk. When he described Lead Belly as “country,” he meant it as a compliment and a mark of comradeship — he was claiming him as a fellow worker from back where they both came from. However, it is worth noting that Lead Belly’s black associates in New York spoke of him very differently. Brownie McGhee told me about Lead Belly scolding him for carrying his guitar slung over his shoulder like Woody did, rather than using a proper case like a professional musician, and the Haitian dancer Josephine Premice described Lead Belly as “a dandy,” recalling his beautiful suits and gold-handled walking cane.

On the other hand, Pete Seeger recalls an argument between Lead Belly and Josh White at the Vanguard, with Josh berating Lead Belly for “tomming” for the audience, and Lead Belly replying, “Oh, come on, Josh — make a fool of yourself once in a while and take the white folks’ money.”<sup>13</sup>

History is messy. Woody recorded only one duet with Lead Belly, with Sonny Terry backing them, and it was a version of “Po’ Mourner” or “You Shall Be Free,” an old blackface minstrel satire of Negro spirituals, which intersperses a chorus of “You shall be free, when the good Lord sets you free,” with typical “coon song” comedy verses about chicken-stealing preachers.<sup>14</sup> It is easy to see why Josh might have objected to this kind of stereotyped clowning, but I am not assuming this is the sort of thing that bothered him in Lead Belly’s performances; “You Shall Be Free” was popular in oral tradition throughout the South, sung and enjoyed by both black and white audiences. It was also common in the repertoire of white

northern college glee clubs, some of whose members were still singing in blackface into the 1950s — in the mid-twentieth century, as in the twenty-first, racial insensitivity was neither particularly old-fashioned or particularly southern.

Woody, Lead Belly, and Josh met in New York because all three had become involved with the northern, urban, leftist (in particular Communist) engagement with traditional rural folk cultures. Josh had been the first to come north, in 1931, at the behest of a commercial company that wanted him to record blues and gospel for the African American market, and one of the records he made for that market was of an old spiritual called "There's a Man Going Around Taking Names":

There's a man goin' around takin' names,  
There's a man goin' around takin' names,  
He took my father's name, and he left my heart in pain,  
There's a man goin' around takin' names.

Like many black gospel songs, this uses one of those lyrical forms Woody associated with blues, three repeated lines and one different line, and uses a familiar folk metaphor: the "man" is death, going around collecting souls. After Josh began hanging out with people like Woody, Alan Lomax, and Pete Seeger in the 1940s, he added a gently political twist to this lyric by singing a final verse in which, "He took Abe Lincoln's name, but there were no slaves left in chains."<sup>15</sup>

Woody used the same song — or one very much like it — as the basis for his own meditation on slavery and death, but changed it far more thoroughly, turning it into one of the most powerful poetic condemnations of lynching. He called it "Slipknot," and the verses include one saying "my brother was a slave, he tried to escape/ 'N' they drug him to his grave with a slipknot," and another asking:

Did you ever lose your father on that slipknot?  
Did you ever lose your father on that slipknot?  
Yes, they hung him from a pole and the shot him full of holes,  
They left him there to rot on that slipknot.<sup>16</sup>

This lyric may well have been inspired by "Strange Fruit," the anti-lynching song made famous by Billie Holiday and later by Josh, but to my way of thinking it is more powerful, because it is written in an idiom familiar to both lynchers and lynched rather than in the style of an urban art song.

Woody's relationship to the blues tradition is central to his work, and should be considered in any discussion of his broader relationship to racial issues. In recent years, a couple of books have indicated the complexities of



the latter relationship: Woody was from a part of the United States where white people tended to be casually racist, and when he first got to California he was still telling racist jokes and singing songs like "Run, Nigger, Run" on his radio show. Both books note that Woody went through a sort of racial epiphany after receiving a letter from a young African American radio listener, and further expanded his views after moving to New York and meeting Lead Belly, Josh, and Sonny Terry.<sup>17</sup> But they do not deal with the different complexities of southern and northern racism. At a time when many northern whites were unaware of blues or of any distinctively African American music, a lot of racist white southerners had demonstrated their love for black music and even adopted black musical styles. The black comedian Dick Gregory put his finger on one of the fundamental peculiarities of American race relations when he wrote, "Down South they don't care how close you get as long as you don't get too big, and up North they don't care how big you get as long as you don't get too close."<sup>18</sup>

In both North and South, Euro-American musicians have adopted or adapted African American styles, including conservative white southern musicians whose frequent intercourse with African Americans was protected by institutional and traditional segregation, and progressive northern white musicians who loved black music and supported civil rights but spent very little time around black people. In broad political terms, those white northerners count as supporters of civil rights and those white southerners count as retrograde bastions of racial inequality. But in individual, personal terms, Gregory's maxim complicates the situation. Woody was from the same South that Gregory was talking about, and like other white southerners who learned to reject their racist upbringing, he displayed a level of comfort and closeness with his African American peers that was rarely matched by his white northern comrades. His deep understanding of blues went along with a personal affinity that his black peers recognized. That included sharing old songs like "You Shall Be Free," without necessarily worrying about the racial politics involved, as well as writing and singing songs condemning lynching and celebrating racial equality.

And Woody did more than just sing. There's a wonderful story in Jim Longhi's book, *Woody, Cisco, and Me*, about him desegregating a troop ship during a submarine attack,<sup>19</sup> but I want to end with a less familiar incident that Sonny Terry recalled:

We went to Baltimore in the forties with Woody Guthrie to do a concert down there for a union. After the concert they had a big dinner for us. They had all the big tables set up, all the food and everything, and we walked in with Woody. And they say, "No. We

can't serve *them* in here." Baltimore was a Jim Crow motherfucker then, boy.

Woody say, "You mean, goddammit, you can't serve these boys in here after they played for you all this evening? And now we can't eat together?"

They say, "No. We can't serve them here."

Woody told us to meet him out front in a few minutes, so we left. Then he tore that place *up*, turned every table over. Food all over the floor. Then he said, "You goddamn sons of bitches can pay for all this yourselves. If we can't eat *nobody's* gonna eat!"

Through the dry ink on a printed page, it is still easy to hear the warm relish in Terry's voice, and he ended his story with a comment I suspect Woody would have been proud to have engraved on his tombstone: "Yeah," Sonny Terry said. "Woody was an all-right cat."<sup>20</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Railroad Blues," *The Complete Library of Congress Recordings*, on *Woody Guthrie: American Radical Patriot* (Rounder Records, 2013), Disc 1, Track 1.

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, "Railroad Blues."

<sup>4</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Long Ways to Travel," *Long Ways to Travel: The Unreleased Folkways Masters, 1944-1949* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1994), Track 17.

<sup>5</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Going Down the Road," *Complete Library of Congress Recordings*, Disc 3 Track 13.

<sup>6</sup> The first and only recording of this song by an African American group to be titled in dialect was made in 1922 by the Florida Normal and Industrial Institute Quartet, but it was recorded by eight groups or artists as "This Train," including a phenomenally popular hit version by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. By contrast, only one white country group recorded it before 1942 as "This Train," and three recorded it as "Dis Train": Dick Hartman's Tennessee Ramblers, S. E. Mullis, and the Vaughan Quartet.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie quoted in Max Gordon, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston, "More Pretty Girls Than One," on Guthrie, *My Dusty Road* (Rounder Records, 2009), Disc 4, Track 14.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Texas Novelty Co., Beaumont, Texas, 25 February, 1939, in *The Billboard*, 4 March, 1939, p.71.

<sup>10</sup> Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston, "Lonesome Day," *Folk Songs*, Vol. 1 (Stinson Records, 1952), Track 6.

<sup>11</sup> Guthrie quoted in Gordon, pp. 46, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Guthrie quoted in Gordon, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Woody Guthrie, Sonny Terry, and Lead Belly, "We Shall Be Free," *Folkways: The Original Vision* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2005), Track 26.

<sup>15</sup> Josh White's original recording of this song is available, among other places, on White, *First Recording Sessions, 1932-33* (Earl Archives, 1982), Track 15.

<sup>16</sup> Woody Guthrie, "Hangknot, Slipknot," *Woody at 100* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2012), Disc 2, Track 9.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Dick Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus* (New York: Avon Books, 1962), p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Longhi, *Woody, Cisco and Me: With Woody Guthrie in the Merchant Marine* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Sonny Terry quoted in Robert Neff and Anthony Connor, *Blues* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1975), p. 46.