

Will the Woody Guthrie Museum in Oklahoma distort the folksinger's views?

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Late last year, the George Kaiser Foundation purchased materials from the family of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) with the intention of opening a museum dedicated to the singer-songwriter in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The museum is projected to open some time around July 14, the 100th anniversary of Guthrie's birth.

There are indications that those involved with the museum are seeking to minimize or distort Guthrie's political views, including his involvement with the Communist Party.

The Woody Guthrie Center will contain an archive of Guthrie's numerous manuscripts and journals, including some 3,000 song lyrics and over 700 pieces of artwork and written material. Among the archive's more significant holdings will be Guthrie's original handwritten lyrics for "This Land is Your Land."

In a recent Associated Press (AP) story, which states that the museum "plans for a display that concentrates on his artistry rather than the populist politics that divided local opinion over the years," historians speaking in support of the museum distort Guthrie's politics.

Bob Blackburn, executive director of the Oklahoma Historical Society, said "Woody Guthrie never changed his opinion. Woody Guthrie was a populist who was fearful of big business, fearful of big government. That populist message came out of Oklahoma's red soil."

Responding to concerns over Guthrie's political sympathies, the AP notes that musician and music historian Steven Ripley has pointed out "that during World War II, Guthrie penned songs that railed against fascism, including 'All You Fascists Bound To Lose,' and sang for troops to buoy their spirits while serving with the Army and U.S. Merchant Marine."

Ripley told the AP, "He wrote so many great songs that are pointedly pro-American. They weren't running around knocking America. That stuff was not 'let's tear down America.' It was 'let's build up America.'"

No doubt Ripley, in attempting to protect Guthrie from neo-conservative assault by wrapping him even more tightly in the American flag, thinks that he is doing the singer a favor. However, this only underscores the generally right-wing atmosphere in official circles and how little of the historical truth can be discussed in the public arena in the US. To ascribe to Guthrie an unflinching patriotism, even outright conservatism, is simply false. Guthrie's well-known association with the Communist Party now can not be mentioned at all.

However, as a consequence of the Stalinist party's own adaptation to and even promotion of reactionary "pro-American" sentiments, especially during World War II, it is not entirely false to suggest that Guthrie authored and sang patriotic songs.

The era in which Guthrie wrote and performed his music was marked by profound social explosions and working class militancy. The events of the Great Depression and, in particular, the mass migration of workers from Oklahoma, Texas and other southwestern states to California in search of jobs, had an enormous impact on the future singer-songwriter. This found expression in his music, to the extent that he was an honest and socially aware songwriter, and indeed in folk music throughout much of the early 20th century. Some of Guthrie's best music, about the hardships facing migrant workers during the Depression, can be found on his 1940 collection *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

One expression of the profound radicalism that typified the era was the broad influence that the

Communist Party exercised on American artists. A great number, for whom capitalism had been discredited, joined the Communist Party, associating it with the Russian Revolution and believing it be the means for a revolutionary transformation of society. However, by the time Guthrie first involved himself with the CP in 1938, the Stalinization of the party had long since taken hold. The CP had thrown its full support behind Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats and would soon be a rabid supporter of US involvement in the Second World War.

Guthrie first came into contact with the party through CP member and Los Angeles-area radio host Ed Robbin, who invited Guthrie to play at a rally for imprisoned labor leader Tom Mooney. Although Guthrie apparently never joined the CP himself, this was the beginning of his extensive relationship with the party, and he would regularly perform at party fundraising events and even wrote a regular column, “Woody Sez,” for their West Coast newspaper *People’s World*, and later for the *Daily Worker*.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Guthrie enlisted in the Merchant Marines, and produced several songs in support of the war effort, including “Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,” “Talking Sailor,” and “When the Yanks Go Marching In.” These and other “pro-American” and pro-war songs to which those now involved in building the Woody Guthrie Center in Oklahoma pay tribute are among the songwriter’s weakest efforts.

After the war, Guthrie became involved with People’s Songs, Inc. (PSI), which was established to “create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people.” Guthrie and the PSI supported left-liberal Henry Wallace during the 1948 presidential elections, when Wallace ran on the Progressive Party ticket, supported by the Stalinists.

This was the beginning of the end of Guthrie’s active career, however, as he would soon become stricken with a disease that his doctor described as “stubbornly [defying] classification,” but which was later revealed to be the neuro-degenerative genetic disorder Huntington’s disease.

Guthrie’s name would come up during the anti-communist witch-hunts of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Giving some indication of the radicalism that prevailed amongst folk musicians was the extent of their persecution at this time. Even Burl Ives, best

known today as the voice of the snowman in *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964), was briefly blacklisted in the 1950s on the basis of his association with Communist Party-affiliated folk singers. Guthrie himself was primarily saved from more severe hounding only by the fact that his being virtually incapacitated by disease would have made it largely beside the point.

An honest history of Guthrie’s political life and of the Communist Party more generally and its impact on Guthrie’s art would be a complex but worthwhile undertaking. The decision of those involved with the Woody Guthrie Center to ignore or falsify Guthrie’s political views does a real disservice to the singer and historical truth.

Guthrie’s best music continues to move today’s listeners and inspire many contemporary songwriters. One would be hard-pressed to find the sort of concern for the plight of working people, much less the association with socialist politics that typified the Folk Revival of which Guthrie was a crucial figure, in contemporary the music.



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