100 years since singer Woody Guthrie's birth

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This year marks the centenary of American folk singer Woody Guthrie's birth. The anniversary has become the occasion for commemorations and conferences held throughout the US, as well as the opening of a new museum and archive in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (See: "Will the Woody Guthrie Museum in Oklahoma distort the folksinger's views? ") The celebrations underscore that six decades after Huntington's disease prematurely ended his artistic career, Woody Guthrie remains a contemporary figure.

Guthrie was a politically conscious artist, but he was an artist first and it would be wrong to appraise him solely through the lens of his social views. His prolific output embraced a broad swath of human experience down to the dozens of children's songs he recorded.

At the same time, it is not surprising that Guthrie's political material remains some of his most popular and enduring. After all, the scourges of capitalism which Guthrie sang about still plague the world's population.

At its best, there is an almost universal and deeply popular element in Guthrie's music. His songs rarely descended into pessimism or cynicism. On the contrary, much of his work, like his songs written for the Bonneville Power Administration promoting the construction of the Bonneville Dam in Oregon, is suffused with optimism. What was later released as the 17-song *Columbia River Collection* contains some of his best work, the later revisions reflecting his pro-Roosevelt and pro-war stance notwithstanding. In songs like "Talking Columbia," "Grand coulee Dam," "Roll On Columbia, Roll On," and "Pastures of Plenty," Guthrie's enthusiasm in the future of humanity is palpable.

Many who knew him marveled at his casual stage presence—a natural performance approach carefully cultivated by Guthrie. But he had real limitations as an artist as well. He did not stand out among his contemporaries for the command of his instrument, as for example, Leadbelly did on the twelve-string guitar. The allure of his vocal is derived almost exclusively from its plainness. Moreover, while the content of Guthrie's music evolved over his career, its form did not.

Woody Guthrie lived an extraordinary life. However, this was bound up more with the experiences he shared with his generation and his ability to articulate them artistically than it was simply with the individualism and vagrancy often celebrated by those on the left.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma to Charles and Nora Belle Guthrie. His youth and upbringing were decidedly middle class. Charles, a real-estate agent and land speculator riding the Oklahoma oil boom of the 1920s, was able to provide well for the family. By the close of the decade, however, the family was devastated both financially and physically. Guthrie's older sister Clara was killed in a house fire and his father nearly died in another fire, believed by Guthrie to be a suicide attempt stemming from his financial ruin. His mother would deteriorate mentally following his sister's death and eventually die in the Oklahoma State Mental Asylum, suffering the effects of the then-unknown Huntington's disease.

The ruination of his family, like so many others in the ravages of the Great Depression, could not fail to have had a radicalizing influence on Guthrie's life. By the time he left Oklahoma in early 1937, the scenes of desperation he left behind and those he witnessed on the road to California had made an indelible impression.

Guthrie's initial attempts to address these realities met with some success. His "Woody and Lefty Lou Show" with Missouri singer Maxine Crissman on Los Angeles' KFVD became fairly popular, especially with migrant labors in the American Southwest. Songs like "Do Re Mi" about the illegal "bum blockade" set up in 1936 to prevent migrants from entering California, "I Ain't Got No Home In This World Anymore," "Dusty Old Dust (So Long It's Been Good To Know You)," and " Blowin' Down the Road (I Ain't Going To Be Treated This Way)" directly addressed the life experiences of the migrant laborers escaping the Dust Bowl for California. By the time Crissman departed the show due to poor health, the station had received some 10,000 fan letters over the show's ten-month tenure.

Crissman's departure in the summer of 1938 provided Guthrie the opportunity to report for the station's manager J. Frank Burke on the conditions in California's migrant camps for Burke's newspaper *The Light*. Guthrie's popularity among the migrant laborers from the "Woody and Lefty Lou Show" enabled him to gain access to places few journalists could. In one migrant camp he reported seeing "4,000 people hungry and dirty and bogged down… There are flies crawling over babies faces. There are little pot bellies by the hundreds swelled up with the gas that is caused by malnutrition." [1]

Guthrie's tour of the migrant camps had a powerful impact on his consciousness and led him to befriend KFVD's left-wing news commentator Ed Robbin. Robbin, a member of the Communist Party would prove to be Guthrie's link to the Stalinist movement. Robbin introduced Guthrie to his close friend, and fellow CP member, actor Will Geer. Once brought into their circle, Guthrie would meet other important cultural figures on the Left, including writer John Steinbeck, who would soon be enjoying fame from his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

It was through Robbin that Guthrie also met Daily *People's World* editor Al Richmond who agreed to let Guthrie begin writing his "Woody Sez" column for the West Coast Communist Party publication in May 1939 (the column was subsequently picked up by the *Daily Worker* in New York).

Guthrie was pulled deeper into the movement during the summer of 1939, becoming involved with Geer in the John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization. Together the two lent their talents "singing for cotton pickers, cannery workers, lettuce grabbers, and all kinds of picket lines, union meetings, and picnics where union people sung and danced." [2] Guthrie also experienced firsthand the brutal repression meted out against migrant workers, particularly at the hands of the Associated Farmers.

These experiences found expression in the growing militancy of Guthrie's songbooks. For example, his "Pretty Boy Floyd" compares the morality of the famous outlaw favorably to that of the bankers and capitalists profiting from the impoverishment of the population and their rush to drive countless families from their homes. Similar anti-capitalist sentiments are heard in his song "Jolly Banker." Even the crucifixion of Jesus was retold through the lens of the class struggle by Guthrie in his

song “Jesus Christ.”

As far as the historical record can tell, Woody Guthrie never joined the Communist Party. According to CPUSA members that knew him, Guthrie’s individualism and aversion to serious political study made him a poor recruit. However, the singer fell firmly within the party’s orbit, moving in its circles as a fellow traveler. The more Guthrie closed ranks with the Communist Party, the more his outlook conformed to Moscow’s line, which necessarily found reflection, directly and indirectly, in his music. It is within this context that Guthrie’s subsequent political evolution, beginning in 1938, must be viewed.

Under the Stalin leadership, the Communist International was then advocating a Popular Front strategy. In the name of fighting fascism, the Comintern instructed the various Communist Parties to form coalitions with liberal sections of the bourgeois establishment wherever they could. Independent expressions of the class struggle were to be suppressed in order that they not “scare off” their courted allies. Bound up with this was the goal of exerting pressure on the national bourgeoisie of each country to adopt a friendly foreign policy towards the USSR. In the United States, this meant above all the subordination of the CPUSA and the working class to the Democratic Party.

Guthrie was even less prepared than many of his contemporaries for the major political events on the horizon because of his limited theoretical grounding. To many around him, Guthrie gave the impression that he shunned political theory. However, biographer Will Kaufman suggests this may have been only an appearance to disguise his frustration with theoretical material. Regardless, Guthrie’s attraction to the Stalinist CPUSA cannot be simply chalked up to political naveté. If the political foundations of Stalinism were not comprehended, its realities were well known. There was a certain level of political self-deception which had to be involved even for those, like Guthrie, who approached the Stalinist CPUSA without the benefit of a firm foundation.

In subscribing to the Stalinist perspective of the Communist Party, Guthrie committed himself to the Comintern’s abrupt zig-zags in political line. Thus, the signing of the Stalin-Hitler Pact on August 24, 1939 and the resulting shift in Comintern policy played a major role in Guthrie’s temporary hostility towards President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Guthrie adopted the noninterventionist line of the CPUSA and opposed the Roosevelt administration’s drift towards war.

When Hitler violated the nonaggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, the American Stalinists and their supporters were sent scrambling in confusion. The CPUSA changed its political line virtually overnight, this time from one of strict nonintervention to strident calls for the US to enter the imperialist war. This abrupt turn in political outlook was apparently shrugged off by Guthrie, who remarked to fellow singer Pete Seeger in late June, “Well, I guess we’re not going to be singing any more of them peace songs.” [3]

Upon his arrival in New York in June 1941, Guthrie promptly joined the agitprop folk group The Almanac Singers, which had been set up by Seeger. The Almanacs had already released two anti-war albums that spring—*Songs for John Doe* and *Talking Union*. However, the invasion of the Soviet Union had rendered the group’s anti-war repertoire obsolete and the group turned to writing interventionist songs, the most famous of which was Guthrie’s “Sinking of the Reuben James” detailing the death of 115 American sailors on October 31, 1941 aboard a cargo ship in the North Atlantic delivering arms to Great Britain.

Guthrie would eventually be drawn into the war on a personal level, joining the CP-dominated National Maritime Union and enlisting with the US Merchant Marine to avoid conscription into the army. Throughout the war, he focused on composing new songs, as well as rewriting many of his older tunes, to reflect his adopted and often obsessive, pro-war outlook. Much of this material is distinguished by a decline in artistic creativity and marks a low point in his career.

Whatever optimism Guthrie may have felt about the possibility of an alliance between CP-influenced forces and the Democratic Party was short-lived. Following Roosevelt’s victory to an unprecedented fourth term as president, a new political atmosphere set in during the first months of 1945. Guthrie was increasingly censored, and in February his seaman’s papers were revoked by Naval Intelligence on the charge of Communist Party membership.

Guthrie reacted to the growing right-wing climate by returning to the militant labor songs of an earlier era. In March 1945, Guthrie recorded a six-song album entitled *Documentary #1: Struggle* for Moe Asch. In addition to “Union Burying Ground,” the record also contains two of his most moving songs—“Ludlow Massacre” and “1913 Massacre.” These strong efforts were followed up with a year-long project detailing the lives and execution of Italian immigrants and anarchist martyrs Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

By the close of the decade, Guthrie’s life began to unravel. He suffered personal tragedy with the death of his and wife Marjorie’s child Cathy Ann in a house fire in 1947, and the eventual disintegration of the marriage. His increased drinking mixed dangerously with the onset of Huntington’s disease leading to mood swings, violent outbursts and erratic behavior, further isolating him from friends and loved ones. Discouragement in the environment of red-baiting, blacklisting and FBI surveillance no doubt worsened his mental state.

Guthrie’s physical collapse allowed him to escape the worst of the post-war purges in the entertainment industry. As early as June 9, 1941, the FBI had opened a file on Guthrie based on information passed along by an informant. By the 1950s Guthrie was being actively followed by government operatives in his last ramblings across the country. FBI agents even interviewed doctors at Brooklyn State Hospital who diagnosed Guthrie with Huntington’s disease, before reporting to Director J. Edgar Hoover: “In view of the subject’s health status and the lack of reliable firsthand information reflecting Communist Party membership in the last five years, it is believed that his name should be deleted from the Security Index.” [4] This only terminated active surveillance of Guthrie, however, his file remained open even after his death.

By 1952, Guthrie’s mental deterioration found expression in both his increasing “linguistic anarchy” and strained handwriting. Quickly deteriorating was his ability to play music as well. While joining Jack Elliott, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry at Asch’s studios for a recording session on January 18, 1954, “Guthrie had trouble remembering the words to even his most familiar songs. His guitar playing had slowed; his right arm, hardly bending, could only strum the strings up the neck of his Martin.” [5]

Tragically, Guthrie would live the last decade of his life in hospitals, first at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital from 1956 to 1961, then Brooklyn State Hospital from 1961 to 1966. He passed away on October 3, 1967 at the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center and his ashes were spread in the waters off Coney Island.

Guthrie’s life and career were inextricably bound up with the great events of the last century. Along with many other artists and intellectuals, he fell victim to the Stalinist betrayals of the heritage of the Russian Revolution and the international working class. Tragically, this allowed Guthrie to become at times the unwitting tool of forces quite hostile to social revolution, the forces he despised the most. Yet his genuine and artistically eloquent dedication to the oppressed remains evident in the body of work he left behind and will certainly inspire generations to come.

[1] Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 7.

[2] Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie*, 20.

[3] Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 215.

[4] Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie*, 180.

[5] Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 367.