Woody Guthrie is America’s best-known, important, influential, obscure, protest folksong writer. Most folks don’t know his name or his story but many recognize his songs. A man very much of his time and place, his books, essays, articles, poems, scribbled observations, letters, lyrics and over a thousand songs contain volumes both topical and timeless, introspective and universal.

He came from Oklahoma in the American Great Plains, the son of an up-and-down land speculator, part-time politician/merchant, and the beautiful but troubled daughter of a pioneer school marm, both of Scots-Irish descent. His father named him in honor of the then-democratic presidential nominee, Woodrow Wilson.

Woody’s songs and his message stand on their own. The local and world events that surrounded his life produced his politics and his rustic philosophy. Molded in the very American manner of Mark Twain and fellow Oklahoman Will Rogers (both avid banjo players), Woody’s ironic humor and pointed social commentary are either more hard-edged and less worldly and intelligent, or farther ahead of their time depending on your point of view. It is his personal history, his restless, tragic, prodigal, triumphant, gut-wrenching and defiant life that gives astonishing depth and dimension to his achievements and his famous obscurity.

Woody was always determined and hopeful, even through his stubborn orneriness. He was a Homeric figure— a soldier engaged in a never-ending siege against those who abused their power, and on behalf of those with only the power of their spirit and voices, ever yearning to set off for the next and newest site of conflict. Throughout his short life, and for as long as he could continue during his last years as he gradually succumbed to Huntington’s disease, Woody sought to make himself the voice of the common people; to sing their thoughts, desires and accumulated wisdom. His own life story is the catalyst that brings his elemental art into a singular and progressively less obscure light. — *David M. Lutken*

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**Woody's Music, Woody's Way**

The musical "Woody Sez" is a show about the man and his songs. So we've made it our job to sing and play Woody's tunes in the style of his times. It creates a real link for the audience to his life, his passions, flaws, and to his spirit. We are unamplified—which is why my guitar looks the way it does—because that's our route back to the source. It's as close as we can get to the "genuine article" without artifice. The cast doesn't imitate or impersonate Woody or his family or cohorts; we play and sing the way we know how, as they did (and still do, some of them).

Woody Guthrie fits into American history as a kind of troubadour/broadside politicist/court jester all rolled into one. Like thousands before him, one of Woody's methods was, as he often said, to "make up new words to old tunes," the particular old melody chosen because of some link or relationship to his new lyric. How and why his 'new' and 'old' are put together is like brushwork in a portrait, illustrating the artist almost as completely as his subject. Many of his most famous songs' melodies have long histories, but usually it is Woody's lyrics that have given a broader significance to what were already well-loved fiddle tunes, nursery rhymes, outlaw ballads or love songs. Woody said, "just let me be known as the man who told you something you already knew." It's not only his words that tell you something.

"I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" and "The Ballad of Tom Joad" are two examples. The first, one of Woody's simple masterpieces from "Dust Bowl Ballads," recorded by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress, is a starkly beautiful, dark ode to victims of poverty—no matter its cause. Woody chose a very common Baptist hymn: "This World is Not My Home," and with gentle adjustments to the tune and tempo and a searing parody of the hymn's subject and its own verses, he created a quiet knock-out punch of protest from the first familiar notes.

*"This World is Not My Home" "I Ain't Got No Home"*

*(after the Carter family) (Woody's words)*

*This world is not my home, I ain't got no home*

*I'm just a passing through. I'm just a ramblin' round*

*My treasures and my hopes Just a wanderin' worker*

*Are all beyond the blue. I go from town to town.*

*Where many Christian children The police make it hard boys,*

*Have gone on before, Wherever I may go.*

*And I can't feel at home And I ain't got no home*

*In this world anymore. In this world anymore.*

*Oh, Lord you know, I've mined in your mines*

*I have no friend like you. And I've gathered in your corn.*

*If heaven's not my home, I've been workin' mister,*

*Dear Lord, what can I do? Since the day that I was born.*

*The angels beckon me I worry all the time now,*

*From heaven's open door Like I never did before*

*And I can't feel at home And I ain't got no home*

*In this world anymore. In this world anymore.*

With the devastation of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl all around him, Woody's song speaks pridefully but plainly. His choice of the hymn shows his contempt for organized religion and leads both the hearer and the listener to his message.

The second song, "The Ballad of Tom Joad," is something of a thesis all its own! Woody said that it was his greatest song, all seventeen verses. The song he used, "The Ballad of John Hardy," is itself an old tune retooled by an anonymous author after the 1894 hanging of a West Virginia murderer. John Hardy himself and his eponymous ballad encapsulate the age-old poetic genre of the sympathetic outlaw as romantic, "desperate" and guilty hero, who fails in his attempt to escape and goes resignedly to his fate on the gallows. The tune supplies the perfect context for Steinbeck's hero and the epic outlaw escape odyssey of Tom and the Joad family. The repeated final lines in each verse are used to great effect in both songs to drive the stories and build suspense, and, in Woody's version, to underscore terrible irony and deep injustice.

*"The Ballad of John Hardy" "The Ballad of Tom Joad"*

*(after Eva Davis) (Woody's words)*

*John Hardy was a desperate little man, Tom Joad got out of the old McAllister pen,*

*He carried two guns every day. There he made his parole.*

*He shot a man down on the West Virginia line, After four long years on a man killin' charge,*

*You oughta seen John Hardy gettin' away, poor boy, Tom Joad come a walkin' down the road, poor boy,*

*Oughta seen John hardy gettin' away... Tom Joad come a walkin' down the road...*

*John Hardy stood in his old jail cell, They stood on a mountain and they looked to the West.*

*The tears runnin' down from his eyes. And it looked like the Promised Land.*

*He said, "I've been the death of many a poor boy, A bright green valley with a river runnin' through it,*

*But my six-shooters never told a lie, Lord, Lord, There'd be work for every single man, he thought,*

*No, my six-shooters never told a lie... There'd be work for every single man...*

*I been to the East and I been to the West. Everybody might be just one big soul,*

*I traveled this wide world around. Well, it looks that-a-way to me.*

*I been to the river and I been baptized, Everywhere that you look in the day or the night,*

*And now I'm on my buryin' ground, Lord, Lord, That's where I'm a gonna be, Lord, Lord,*

*Now I'm on my buryin' ground. Yeah, that's where I'm a gonna be.*

Woody Guthrie created and sang and wrote until he could write no more, when his body let him down because of Huntington's disease. He composed many unforgettable melodies that have become Country, Bluegrass, Blues ("and other folk music from underground") standards: a one-man "CBGBs." Performing his songs, borrowed and original, in his style—or as close as we can get—learners and listeners experience his work in a way that both demonstrates and examines the deceptive attention to detail he displayed, the weight as well as the lightness of his touch, his passion for his calling and his profound belief in its necessity. Woody wanted his music to speak for those neglected and disregarded voices around us and within us. We created the musical "Woody Sez" to follow in those footsteps; to change people's minds about the world and about the music they already knew. *—David Miller Lutken*

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