

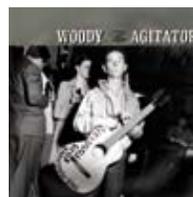
→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

WOODY GUTHRIE

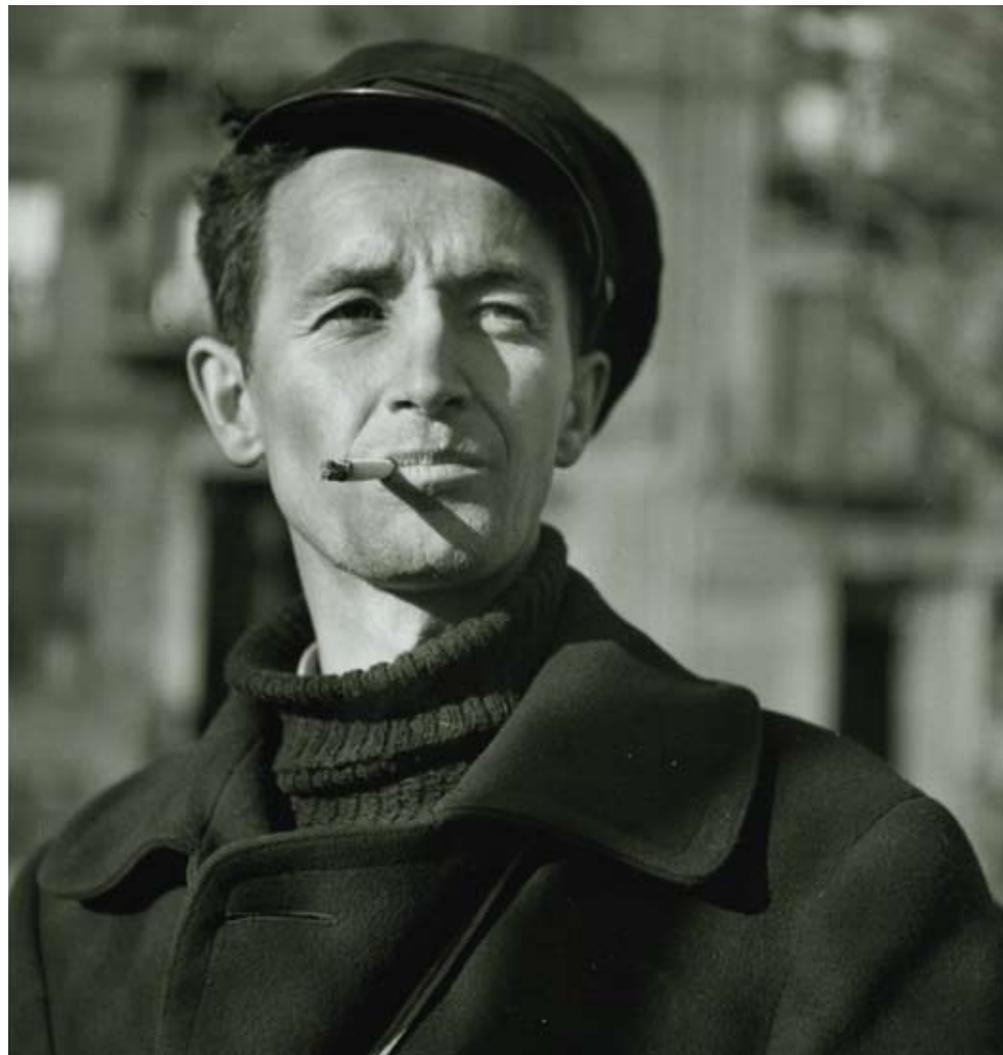
The American singer-songwriter left a musical legacy admired by fans from Bob Dylan to Joe Strummer. Nigel Williamson looks at this folk icon

All these songs together one after another made my head spin', Bob Dylan wrote of his first exposure to the recordings of Woody Guthrie, in his autobiography *Chronicles*. 'They had the infinite sweep of humanity in them. Not one mediocre song in the bunch. Woody Guthrie tore everything in his path to pieces. For me it was an epiphany, like some heavy anchor had just plunged into the waters of the harbour.'

It was 50 years ago last month, in January 1961, that Dylan first travelled to New York in search of his hero. By then, Guthrie was in hospital, stricken with the degenerative nerve disorder, Huntington's disease. Thanks to Dylan and other Guthrie disciples from Joe Strummer and Billy Bragg to Bruce Springsteen and Steve Earle, his name is honoured in a rock'n'roll world which he totally predated, for his illness meant that he had already finished his recording career by the time Elvis Presley cut his first disc at the Sun studios in Memphis.



Woody Guthrie – a true voice of the people – whose legendary songs included 'This Land is Your Land' which was written as an alternative national anthem



Yet it would be totally wrong if Guthrie's inheritance was filtered only through those whom he subsequently influenced. Despite a bit of hiss and crackle, his recorded legacy reveals him to be one of the most compelling folk-poets in the American oral tradition. Few have ever given expression so potently and convincingly to the passions and struggles, travails and humour of ordinary working people, the disfranchised and dispossessed. He was the ultimate folk singer, a genuine voice of the people.

Born in Oklahoma in 1912 and named after soon-to-be president Woodrow Wilson, at the age of 18 he was busking in Texas. But by the mid-30s, the depression and the dust storms which hit the Great Plains had driven him – like tens of thousands of his fellow 'Okies' – west to the promised land of California.

Hitching rides and riding the rails on freight trains, it was the start of his hard travelling' hobo persona, playing and singing for small change along the way. Once in Los Angeles in the late 30s he found fame performing hillbilly and traditional folk songs on the radio with his singing partner 'Lefty Lou' (Maxine Crissman). He also started writing prolifically.

But he could never stay in one place for long and in 1940 he moved east to New York City, where he was feted by left-leaning, intellectual society and made his first recordings with the folklorist Alan Lomax, who taped hours of song and conversation for the Library of Congress. In that same year he made his first commercial recordings for RCA Victor, a set of six 78rpm's titled *The Dust Bowl Ballads*, featuring some of the songs giving voice to the downtrodden and dispossessed that he had written over the previous three years. Among them were 'I Ain't Got No Home', 'Blowin'

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Down This Road', 'Talking Dust Bowl Blues', 'Vigilante Man', 'Pretty Boy Floyd' and 'Tom Joad' – tales of those whom the American Dream had passed by and yet remained resilient in the face of adversity.

With his famous '*This Machine Kills Fascists*' sign stuck on his guitar, he also joined a collective of left-wing folk singers called the Almanac Singers, and which included the likes of Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, Pete Seeger and Josh White.

In 1944 he hooked up with producer and label owner Moses 'Moe' Asch and over the next few years recorded a couple of hundred songs for Folkways Records. They constitute



McSorley's Pub in New York City, 1943



The excellent cast of *Woody Sez*, with David Lutken (right) who plays Woody

the core of his work and include 'This Land is Your Land,' written as an alternative American anthem, 'Ramblin' Round,' 'Pastures of Plenty,' 'Hard Travellin' and many more which have since become folk standards.

But by the early 50s, it was clear that all was not right with Guthrie. His increasingly erratic behaviour was at first misdiagnosed as alcoholism or schizophrenia, but it was eventually resolved that he was suffering from Huntington's disease, an incurable genetic disorder inherited from his mother.

Like many of his friends and colleagues such as Pete Seeger and the Weavers, he was blacklisted during the McCarthyite witch-hunt against left-wing sympathisers in the arts and the entertainment world. But sadly for Woody, it made little difference to his ability to work. He made his final recordings in 1952 and, by now unable to play his guitar, in 1956 he was hospitalised.

He was to spend the rest of his life in hospital until his death in 1967, his final decade of institutionalisation enlivened only by a few

visits from the young Dylan and the occasional Sunday, when he was discharged for a day into the care of friends and family. It was a tragic, stunted ending to a life once filled with restless energy and boundless creativity.

So what relevance can Guthrie's songs about dust bowls and hobos possibly have in a world that has changed so dramatically since he wrote and recorded them? John Steinbeck, no less, provided an enduring answer more than 60 years ago. *'He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people,'* he wrote. *'Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who still listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression.'* ●

SHOW *Woody Sez – The Life & Music of Woody Guthrie* runs until April 2 at the Arts Theatre, London

ONLINE www.artstheatrewestend.com

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Dust Bowl Ballads (Buddha)

The first bunch of recordings made in spring 1940, on which Guthrie chronicled the hard times caused by the Great Depression. Vivid, poetic realism, often delivered in his classic talking blues style and nicely remastered in 2000 on the 60th anniversary of the original sessions.



The Asch Recordings Volumes 1-4 (Smithsonian Folkways)

One hundred and four of the recordings he made for Folkways founder Moses Asch in the 1940s, themed across four discs devoted to best-known favourites, covers of traditional folk and country material, topical compositions and songs about cowboys and outlaws.



The Ultimate Collection (Not Now Records)

If you're looking for a decent introduction at a bargain basement price, this set containing 50 of his most important songs on two CDs does the trick very well.



Nursery Days (Smithsonian Folkways)

Sweet, playful, amusing and sometimes downright silly, an entire album of the songs Guthrie wrote for his children might be too much in one sitting. But they represent an important and engaging facet of his work and this collects the best of them, including 'Car Song,' 'Race You Down the Mountain' and 'Howdido.'

...BOX SET



My Dusty Road (Rouner)

The hobo poet repackaged as chic, coffee table icon, with four discs, reproduction postcards and other memorabilia presented in a dinky box made to look like a depression-era suitcase. The price – if you're lucky enough to get hold of a copy – is high-end and would probably feed a hobo for a month – but it's a lovely thing to own. Reviewed in #65.



We have one copy of the *My Dusty Road* box set (pictured above) to give away. To enter, simply answer the following question:

What is the name of the show about Woody's life currently on in London?

See p7 for *Songlines* competition rules and address. Closing date April 1 2011

IF YOU LIKE WOODY GUTHRIE, THEN TRY...

BILLY BRAGG AND WILCO



Mermaid Avenue (Elektra)

Unrecorded lyrics found by Nora Guthrie in her father's papers, set to music in 1998 by Barking's very own answer to Woody and one of America's finest alt-country bands.

It sounds improbable, but it works a treat.