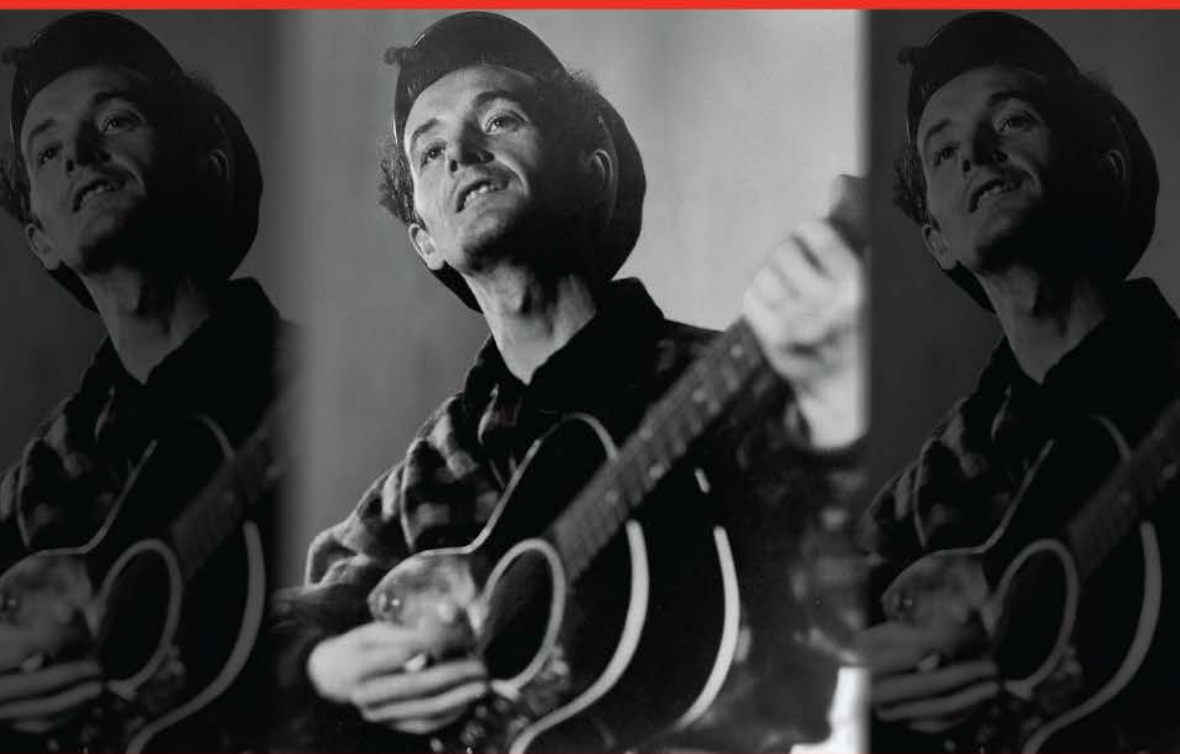


Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

An **Ashgate** Book

The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie

A Critical Appraisal



Edited by
John S. Partington

THE LIFE, MUSIC AND THOUGHT OF
WOODY GUTHRIE

For Franz-Sputnik

The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie

A Critical Appraisal

JOHN S. PARTINGTON

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott
Professor of Critical Musicology
University of Leeds

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Preface and Acknowledgements

John S. Partington

The idea behind the present volume arose as a result of a presentation I made to the conference, 'Utopias and Globalization: From Early Modernity to the 21st Century', in New Lanark during the summer of 2005. Having been active in the Utopian Studies Society for a number of years, I was taken by the wealth of disciplines which utopian studies embraced, and yet within those disciplines music rarely featured. American politics and society were central themes, and the New Deal era of Franklin Roosevelt was particularly popular, but the anger, criticisms and hope expressed by the folk music revival of the 1930s and beyond was muted (and remains so) within the utopian discourse. Although I contributed a presentation on Woody Guthrie at that conference, I felt there was much more to be said about his life, music and thought from an academic perspective. After spending a few years completing outstanding projects, I returned to the notion of a scholarly appreciation of Guthrie, and in 2008 I approached a number of researchers from the disciplines of cultural studies, history, literature, journalism and folklore. The result is this book.

Although my ponderings on folk music and utopia led me to develop this book, utopianism has not been the conscious theme behind its construction. Indeed, I do not think I have relayed the above anecdote to any of the book's contributors hitherto. Nonetheless, utopianism seems to emerge from its pages. Woody Guthrie lived through a traumatic period in American and world history – the Dust Bowl Migration, the Great Depression and the Second World War – and also suffered manifold personal crises, with his mother institutionalized with Huntington's Disease, a sister and daughter killed in fires, and his own eventual hospitalization with the disease that killed his mother. Nonetheless, despite all this, and despite the many wrongs identified in his music, and the anger which he expressed in song and prose, defiance, hope and even happiness continually rise to the surface in almost everything he wrote. For Guthrie, such things as fascism, unemployment, racism and war were not insurmountable problems, but challenges which a united effort could – and would – overcome. The spirit which emerges from his music – whether recorded by himself or sung by subsequent generations of musicians – is utopian in the best sense of the word. One listens, and one feels hopeful. It is perhaps appropriate, therefore, that Guthrie began writing his music and prose during the oft-cited utopia of Franklin Roosevelt, and we in this volume are critically assessing it in the possibly often-cited utopia of Barack Obama.

In addition to the contributors in this volume, there are a number of persons and institutions I must thank for their assistance in its production. First and

foremost are the staff at the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives¹ – Nora Guthrie, Tiffany Colannino, Jorge Arévalo Mateus and Anna Canoni. All have been extremely helpful in assisting with references, providing the cover illustration and granting permissions to quote from manuscript sources. Special thanks go to Jorge for providing the Foreword to the book, including some very kind words about what he considers these essays contribute to Woody Guthrie scholarship.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the two organizations which own the copyright in the vast majority of Guthrie's published and unpublished words and lyrics: Woody Guthrie Publications and The Richmond Organization. The respective copyright ownerships are listed in the footnotes throughout this volume. Special thanks go to Nora Guthrie, who was extremely generous and efficient in dealing with the permissions request to Woody Guthrie Publications, but who also intervened to smooth the process of permissions negotiations between the authors in this volume and The Richmond Organization.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from Ashgate Publishing and its staff. Having worked with Ashgate on the publication of my book, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H.G. Wells* (2003), I was delighted to be able to negotiate a publishing deal with them for this volume. Heidi Bishop and Derek Scott gave very useful feedback to my initial proposal, and I feel their comments made my revised proposal a much better offering. From initial proposal to the delivery of the manuscript, Heidi has been unfailing in her advice and support, and I thank her very much for making the editing of this volume so smooth and trouble free.

Throughout the course of this volume, Woody Guthrie's prose and lyrics are quoted extensively. The reader will quickly discover that Guthrie employed a very idiosyncratic spelling and writing style. What might at first appear misspellings or typographical errors are, in fact, deliberate acts by Guthrie and given this, his idiosyncrasies have not been altered. Our quotations have reproduced Guthrie's writings as he intended them.

The reader should also be aware of a second issue. Although Guthrie published many of his lyrics, he often recorded his songs several times and, in keeping with the traditions of folk music, he often performed slight variations of his own songs. The lyrics quoted in this volume often represent transcripts from numerous recordings and do not always follow the exact wordings of what he requested to be his final published lyrics. Conversely, quotations made from Guthrie's published lyrics do not necessarily correspond to recorded versions of his songs. Variations, therefore, are not errors, but rather they represent different presentations of his songs at different times and for different audiences.

¹ The Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives can be contacted at 125-131 East Main Street, Suite #200, Mt Kisco, NY 10549, USA; tel. +914-864-1789; email info@woodyguthrie.org. The website of the Foundation and Archives is: www.woodyguthrie.org.

Every effort has been made to locate the copyright holders of the lyrics quoted in this book. Where those holders have been identified, their copyright has been acknowledged in footnotes beneath the songs in question. If any copyright holder has not been credited, I apologize for this, and my publisher and I will make good the omission in subsequent printings of the volume on request.

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Foreword

Hard Discoursin': Multidisciplinary Perspectives and the New Guthrie Scholarship

Jorge Arévalo Mateus, Curator, Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives

Beneath the parched Dust Bowl lands of the 1930s Southwest lay the High Plains Aquifer, one of America's most abundant underground reservoirs. Woody Guthrie, a product of this region, is like that subterranean ocean, an aqueous resource – full of life, electrolytic – a conductor of charges that sparks ideas and movements; once nearly depleted, it slowly replenishes itself. The metaphor is apt and we may ask: What is the source of Guthrie's enduring cultural value? Why are artists and academics alike drawn to the mythology and reality of his life and times?

It would be facile to attribute the renewed academic turn towards Guthrie as either a by-product of Guthrie's popularization or as an advantageous refocusing upon ongoing narratives associated with the Oklahoma-born bard. Fortuitously, the editor and contributors to the present volume demonstrate how traditional and recent analytical and critical frameworks combine with interdisciplinary and intertextual dialogics in a variety of ways to throw new light on Guthrie's songs, iconicity and political aesthetics. From my perspective, the merging of politics and aesthetics that weave through the vast majority of Guthrie's artistic expressions and documentary artefacts remains Guthrie's greatest yet still under-recognized contributions to 'folk' culture. *A Critical Appraisal* thus represents the beginning of an exploration into and below the encrusted layers of earlier Guthrie scholarship, an intensification of academic interest in the life and work of the quintessential American musician, writer and 'rabble-rouser'.

The recent history of writings on this rather liminal subject has been voluminous, approached through variegated discourses and disciplines. Academics and cultural critics have long struggled to capture and interpret the multiple currents of ideas that Guthrie absorbed and articulated while he meandered through diverse sociocultural and political arenas. Though most Guthrie scholarship of the past fifty years has been rather monochromatic, grounded somewhere between celebratory acceptance or rejection of Guthrie's ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, the challenge for a new generation of Guthrie scholars is, of course, to discover new data, offer fresh insight(s) or provide alternative analysis and perspective(s). While folk musicians generally continue to revere and reference his songs (and image), folklorists have wrestled with the issue of disciplinary inclusion (i.e., fakelore, poplore), humanists

have coped with notions of social and political consciousness, and historians and biographers have worked particularly hard to locate Guthrie within the cultural time-space continuum he occupied. The possibility for a Guthrie studies subdiscipline (Guthrieology!) to emerge is therefore not only remarkable but exciting for what it might mean for the academy, interdisciplinary research and scholars' discursive methods and practices (i.e., for Cultural Studies, American Studies, Folklore and Popular Culture Studies, History, Literature, Philology, etc.).

A Critical Appraisal provides a promising glimpse of the many directions Guthrie Studies is starting to take. Its sections include essays on song text analysis and iconicity, expected areas of focus given the centrality of songs to Guthrie's legacy. Still, there are novel perspectives to be gained from the consortium of American, British and German (male) scholars. Referencing several of Guthrie's songs, Richard Nate's analysis notes similarities in song texts to New Deal discourse, linking them as a way to open analytic pathways. 'Pastures of Plenty', for example (and other BPA period songs), as the author contends, encapsulates the *intent* of Guthrie's communitarian 'message' of hope for a better American future. John S. Partington, examining post-1940s labour union activism of urban progressives (during the New Deal era), attempts to reconcile Guthrie's 'seemingly divergent visions for the urban and rural working class'. His contribution offers a neo-Marxist analysis that convincingly reveals the centrality of 'the masses' to Guthrie's union ideology. In the first of Martin Butler's two contributions, Guthrie is positioned as a 'cultural seismographer', taking the pulse of a worried society to emphasize the malignancy of fascism. Both Partington and Butler carefully apply intertextual referencing strategies and close readings of labour union history and anti-Nazi rhetoric, respectively, to illuminate class and ideological issues as Guthrie confronted them. Mark Allan Jackson addresses Guthrie's recontextualization of archetypal 'folk heroes' through a textual analysis of a 'John Henry'-'Jackhammer John' dyad. Cleverly extracting song phrases to illustrate his points (e.g., 'Grand Coulee Powder Monkey'), his analysis notes Guthrie's gradual turn toward modernity. Jackson thus depicts Guthrie not only as a man of the past (folklore, tradition) but of his time (the present), and always looking forward (to the future).

With issues of iconicity, questions regarding constructed authenticity are bound to be raised. Drawing upon postmodern, performance and cultural studies analytics, Jeff Morgan and Frank Erik Pointner, respectively, provocatively deconstruct the manufactured 'static "radical" model' created by 'other agents', and the truly iconic unofficial American national anthem, 'This Land Is Your Land' (1940). In my opinion, the irreverential tone with which they treat their subject is one of the most refreshing aspects of the new Guthrie scholarship (Guthrie would most certainly have approved). Rounding out the section, Butler's second offering questions the authenticity of Guthrie's hobo-itinerant traveller. A finely nuanced essay, it also allows for Guthrie's own ambivalences about the constructed image he deployed so effectively. Followed by a discussion of Guthrie's role in the Popular Front, Will Kaufman situates him within the cultural milieu that helped form an ideology

and aesthetic that continues to exist among the ‘political’ folk music practices of contemporary artists.

The final section explores Guthrie’s relationships to Will Geer (Ronald D. Cohen), Alan Lomax (Ed Cray) and Bob Dylan (D.A. Carpenter). Cohen’s and Cray’s essays dovetail nicely with each other, highlighting the intersection of personal and public political lives. Carpenter’s comparative between Guthrie and Dylan, based on an individualistic versus collectivist nature, which, as he argues, are not dissimilar, is motivated by a common humanist drive for equal justice and rights. Carpenter thus engenders a deeper cultural understanding of idolatry and iconicity, where the folk musician is defined by qualities shared through an ‘outlaw’ image: honesty and individualism, to oneself first, then to the world.

For more than fifteen years, the Woody Guthrie Archives has served numerous researchers, including several of the contributing authors to the present volume. Several scholars have benefited from the annual BMI-Woody Guthrie Fellowship programme. From its inception, Harold Leventhal, Woody’s trusted friend and manager, emphasized that the archives were to serve as a historical resource to inform and educate. Less interested in institution building than creating an archive permeated with progressive thinking and values – perpetuated through Guthrie’s considerable popular ‘legacy’ – a central goal of its mission has been to inculcate and foster a heightened level of Guthrie scholarship, not limited to either US or Western cultures. This process has taken root, evidenced here and through the efforts of an extended Guthrie family that, despite monumental shifts in sociocultural, political and economic movements and paradigms, invokes his music, words and ideas often to increasingly attentive and diverse audiences.

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List of Abbreviations

ABC	American Broadcasting Company
AFC/LOC	American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
AFL	American Federation of Labor
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BMI	Broadcast Music Incorporated
BPA	Bonneville Power Administration
C	Cents
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
FSA	Farm Security Administration
GI	American soldier (colloquial)
IBWA	International Brotherhood Welfare Association
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KFVD	A former Los Angeles radio station
KZ	Concentration camp (German, <i>Konzentrationslager</i>)
LOC	Library of Congress
Nazi(s)	Of the National Socialist German Workers' Party
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NMU	National Maritime Union
RCA	Radio Corporation of America
RPM	Revolutions per minute
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SS	Steam ship
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UCAPAWA	United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UWA	Unemployed Workers' Alliance
VE Day	Victory in Europe Day
WGA	Woody Guthrie Archives
WNEW	A former Newark, New Jersey, radio station
WNYC	A New York City radio station

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PART I

‘All you can write is what
you see’: Woody Guthrie’s Songs
as Diagnosis and Cure