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Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Folk Songs and Inflation**  
*Music Lessons from Woody Guthrie*

**By David Frew**  
**March 2023**



*Woody Guthrie*

During the 1950s, the “authorities” insisted that we kids listen to real music: Bing Crosby, Big Band, or Broadway stage and screen tunes. But we were much more interested in popular new stuff and that music was beginning to change. “Shake

"Rattle and Roll" by Bill Bailey and the Comets had invaded the Top 10, Elvis had emerged, and rock 'n' roll was looming on the horizon. I was exploring the radio airwaves at the time and had discovered the Grand Ole Opry, which was being broadcast from one of the early superstations. Nashville arrived in my headphones more clearly than some local AM programs. And I listened regularly.

I did not dare mention my secret musical predilection to friends or family. It seemed way beyond odd to be listening to hillbilly music. But I loved it and searched for ways to justify this new obsession. Hank Williams, Webb Pierce, Hank Snow, and Jim Reeves were the stars of Nashville as opposed to Perry Como and Doris Day. They wore oddly ornate cowboy shirts and played guitars with round center holes rather than the f-holes that seemed standard with guitarists in traditional bands. And their music was simple. As Ken Burns recently noted in his PBS country music series, most of these songs were "three chords and a sad story."

I loved the acoustic sound as well as the attention to stringed instrument sounds. Arrangements that featured banjos, mandolins, and a stand-up, slap bass in addition to multiple guitars appealed to me. In much of Nashville music, guitars were elevated from rhythm and background instruments to the lead. It was an odd combination of simplicity inside orchestral complexity. But how was I to come out of the musical closet and admit to such taste?

Two forces squeezed me toward admitting my affection for this music – my old cowboy heroes and a quiet but powerful shift toward "folk music." Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were often cited and celebrated on Grand Ole Opry programs, as was a folk singer I was just beginning to learn about: Woody Guthrie.

Guthrie was a virtual songwriting machine and his music, which was as simple and lyrical as the Nashville stuff, seemed to tell the story of America. He was a traveling poet and musician who believed in immersing himself in the lives of the people he wrote about. Guthrie was also a left-leaning progressive who criticized the government in songs that he wrote about the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, and wars. Born in Oklahoma, Guthrie had experienced poverty and learned to live on nothing before he began to travel and write. He was enormously prolific, often writing several songs in a day and setting them to simple three-chord melodies. He played an old guitar that he had taught himself to play without the benefit of professional instruction or learning to read music.

In 1941 when two new dams on the Columbia River were about to open, offering plentiful and inexpensive electricity to residents of the states of Oregon and Washington, Stephen Kahn was commissioned to create two films to tout the incredible new river-generated power system. The underlying mission of the films was to create a PR campaign intended to dampen rising criticism involving the destruction of natural ecosystems in the historic Columbia River Gorge. Kahn decided to hire a narrator to enrich the films and contacted Alan Lomax, who was

director of the American Folk Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Lomax suggested Woody Guthrie, who was living in California, unemployed and more than willing to take on the challenge when Kahn contacted him.

Excited to have a narrator for his films, Kahn returned to his Bonneville Power Administration office in Portland, Oregon, where for the first time he began to gather information about his prospective artist in residence. Kahn quickly learned that Woody Guthrie had accumulated a reputation for being a left-wing radical who had affiliations with the Communist Party. The more he told associates at the new power administration about his contract with Guthrie and listened to their stories, the more his reservations grew. After considering the options, he shortened Guthrie's contract to a one-month tenure, reasoning that by the time anyone realized what he was doing and who he was doing it with it would be too late to stop the process of the two films.

Woody Guthrie moved to Portland in 1941 and was given a stipend of \$266.66 for which he was asked to write 30 songs. One a day. Kahn provided a hotel room, a driver, and a book detailing the history of the Columbia River Gorge. The driver took Guthrie on several trips through the gorge, including the two new damsites. He also drove him to several river access points as well as Mount Hood. Guthrie rode along quietly, sketched what he was seeing and made notes. Then at the end of the 30-day period, he produced 28 new songs, including "Roll on Columbia," and "Hard Days," classics that are still being performed. "Roll on Columbia" subsequently became the official song of Oregon. Given the total stipend that had been paid to Woody Guthrie, the final price of each song was \$9.56.

Eventually, Woody Guthrie moved to New York City, where he dedicated himself to writing. A few years later, at age 27, he published a final version of the song that is considered by many to be Guthrie's masterpiece, "This Land is Your Land." Students of Guthrie's writing have drawn connections between his time in Portland and the roots of this song. Guthrie had written a version of "This Land" the year before he moved to Portland but was unhappy with it. The new lyrics were inspired by his time in California at age 20 and the melody from an old Baptist Church song recorded by the Carter Family (When the World's on Fire).

In New York, he returned to the song and reworked it, releasing the now familiar version in 1944. Guthrie knocked about the city for decades before leaving to serve in the Marines during World War II and coming home after the war to start a family. His work was partly successful but sadly he began to physically deteriorate in the late 1950s. Observers were sure that he was suffering from some kind of mental illness. It was later discovered that he was slowly dying from Huntington's Disease, a degenerative neurological disorder.

*"This land is your land, this land is my land,  
From California to the New York island.*

*From the redwood forest, to the Guff Stream waters ...'*  
**--- Woody Guthrie, 1940 and 1944**

Meanwhile, in Duluth, Minnesota, a young singer-songwriter and guitar player named Robert Zimmerman was becoming obsessed with Guthrie and his songs. The most astonishing thing about Guthrie, for Bob Zimmerman, was his ability to write the songs that he was singing. As of 1960, Zimmerman was exclusively singing (covering) other people's material. In 1961 Zimmerman changed his name to Robert "Bob" Dylan and moved to New York, where he began spending time with Woody Guthrie. It was not the best of times for Woody, since he was confined to a psychiatric hospital, but Bob Dylan persevered.

Dylan later said that it was Guthrie who inspired him to write and to sing his own compositions and that the elder folk master had a profound impact on him. Dylan remained loyal to Guthrie, visiting him regularly until he died of Huntington's Disease in 1967.



*Bob Dylan, performing on a college campus in 1963*

Beginning his New York City tenure with Woody Guthrie compositions and other traditional folk songs, Bob Dylan eventually began writing and singing his own work. By the mid-1960s, he had earned a reputation for being one of a new wave of folk poets and was releasing albums that featured his own writing. Dylan still credits Woody Guthrie for his success as a composer and performer. His success grew steadily and has continued for more than 60 years. Dylan is now generally regarded as one the very best folk singers of all times and he has added art as well

as writing to his contributions. In 2016, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

When the Bob Dylan Music Center (museum) opened in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2022, the singer explained his choice of locations. “Oklahoma is the heartland of America, the place where real people live and work, and it was the birthplace of Woody Guthrie,” he said. Not surprisingly, the museum archives feature the entire collection of Woody Guthrie’s writing, in addition to all of Dylan’s work.



*The Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma*

It is noteworthy that Bob Dylan’s estimated net worth, according to Forbes, is approximately \$500 million, and his 2022 income was \$130 million. This is a bit more than Woody Guthrie managed to earn during his long career. And it represents a few more dollars per song than the \$9.56 that Woody earned for his work in Portland. Inflation?

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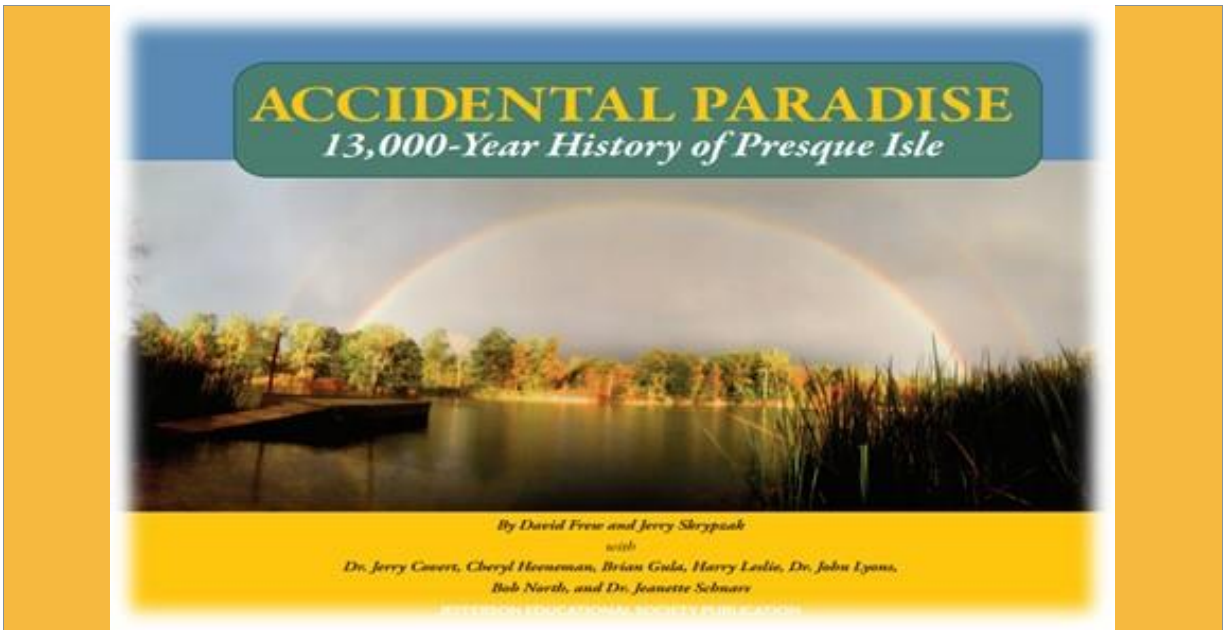
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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