

Review

Joe Klein: *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1980. 476 pp. \$19.95 in Canada).



Woody Guthrie's great influence in folk music (in Canada as well as in the U.S.) stems from several sources. First, his prolific songwriting: over one thousand songs alone or with others (notably with Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and other members of the Almanac Singers). Some of these songs were forgettable, while others - such as "This Land is Your Land" have become so worn in the folk tradition that many people have forgotten who wrote them. Second, Woody's traditional influences and his traditional topics gave his songs impact: he wrote about ordinary people, especially working people, doing everyday things. He always strove for positive songs: he said he was against songs that made you feel no good, bound to lose. "I am out to prove to you that this world is about yourself and your work...and the songs I sing are made up by all sorts of folks just like you." Indeed, Woody borrowed tunes freely, often without realizing that they were borrowed, his head was so full of them. Thirdly, Woody had a great impact on other folksingers such as Pete Seeger, who spread Woody's music much further than Woody ever took it,

But Joe Klein's biography is more than just Woody Guthrie's life story: it is a biography of U.S. folk music from 1920 to 1980; from Joe Hill to Bob Dylan. Woody was a major part of that history, to be sure, but Joe Klein also introduces many notable folksingers who influenced (or more often were influenced by) Woody Guthrie: Will Geer, Alan Lomax, Burl Ives, Cisco Houston, Leadbelly, Blind Sonny Terry, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Lee Hays, and especially Pete Seeger.

The revitalization of folk music in the U.S. during the 30's and early 40's was tied very much to the struggles of the union movements and Klein's book necessarily outlines this

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movement, and illustrates some of the reasons that the folk movement became what it did. It was also this and the Dust Bowl and Depression which shaped Woody's music.

Woody was born in Oklahoma in 1912. During his childhood he learned numerous traditional songs from his mother. When the dust storms hit in 1935-36 Woody began to ramble, joining the flocks of "Okies" headed for California (cf. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*). There he found police blockades set up to turn back people they deemed "unemployable", but he managed to slip through. This experience was reflected in many of his songs, including "This Land Is Your Land", which included (until the commercial folk revival got hold of it) the verse:

*Was a big high wall there (California) that
tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property.
But on the back side, it didn't say nothing -
God Blessed America for me.*

(Ironically, this song, which started out as a Marxist reply to Irving Berlin's patriotic pop tune, "God Bless America", ended up becoming practically a national anthem.)

By 1940 Woody had gained something of a reputation, partly as a result of having been "discovered" by Alan Lomax, and he made numerous recordings, especially for Moses Asch, who later founded Folkways Records. But by the end of the war, Woody was starting to show signs of the rare hereditary disease, Huntington's Chorea, which had killed his mother, and from then on his health went steadily downhill until his death in 1965.

Joe Klein put in a tremendous amount of research to write this biography, and he had the complete co-operation of several of Woody's friends and relations; the text is both authoritative and personal. The work is illustrated with two folios of photos, many from family albums. I highly recommend this book, both as enjoyable reading in its own right, and as a record of a remarkable folksinger in a unique era.

(Woody's record legacy includes a number of albums re-released by Folkways, among them *Dust Bowl Ballads*, *Struggle*, *Woody Guthrie sings Folk Songs*, *Poor Boy*, and *Bonneville Dam*.)

- Chris Lobban

(Ed. note: this review also appears in *The Saint John Folk Club Rag*).