



Ten Dollars a Song: Woody Guthrie Sells His Talent to the Bonneville Power Administration

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The director of the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) did not usually audition songwriters in his office, but this was a special situation. For a solid hour Woody Guthrie, a 28-year-old writer and singer who desperately needed a job, strummed the guitar, sang folk songs, and generally entertained the BPA's director, Dr. Paul Raver. What Raver heard that May morning in 1941 impressed him, so he rewarded the awkward young man from Los Angeles with a one-month contract worth \$266.66 to work as an "information consultant." Guthrie, in turn, obligated himself to write songs that would make people in the Pacific Northwest appreciate the work of the BPA and value the concept of public power.

Not everyone in the Pacific Northwest thought the BPA, or even its second giant dam on the Columbia River, the Grand Coulee, was a good idea. For 15 years prior to 1933, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt finally approved construction of Bonneville Dam as part of the New Deal, a bitter debate had raged in central and eastern Washington over the best location for a dam that would, first, back up water for irrigation and, second, produce electricity. Even after President Roosevelt settled the issue with his decision to place the dam at the head of a large coulee in the scablands of central Washington, few welcomed the prospect of a high dam on the middle Columbia River. The Spokane Chamber of Commerce and local press, both decidedly influenced by Washington Water Power, still favored private rather than public power.

Four years later President Roosevelt dedicated Bonneville Dam in the Columbia River Gorge, but many citizens of Washington and Oregon still gave only grudging acknowledgment to the advantages of public power: cheap electricity, irrigation of desert land, navigation and flood control. Undeterred, Roosevelt created the Bonneville Power Administration to market what was projected to be the near limitless electricity that would flow from any and all Columbia River dams. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the federal government declared Grand Coulee Dam a national defense project, and its primary purpose became one of electricity, not irrigation. That patriotic designation, however, still did not change many minds, and in March 1941, as Grand Coulee Dam neared completion, voters in Spokane, Portland, Eugene and Tacoma rejected the idea of switching to electrical lines connected to BPA. Some people used terms like "Socialist boondoggle" to describe the public power concept. Clearly, BPA needed to illuminate the advantages of public power to the people of Washington and Oregon. Woody Guthrie had his work cut out for him.

Following the administration of his oath of office on May 13, Woody embarked upon the most productive month of songwriting in his life. From outward appearances, it did not look to Stephen Kahn, BPA's acting chief of the information division, as if his new employee was capable of anything, much less swaying peoples' minds. Smallish in build, the wiry young man with the tipped-up nose and thin lips looked delicate, an impression accentuated by his tiny hands and feet. Rumpled clothes and kinky, uncombed black hair

were Woody's only likeness to the rugged men who worked for the BPA building mammoth concrete structures. But songwriting did not take muscle; it required brains and profound life experiences, something Guthrie had in abundance, and Kahn soon revised his first impression. In his single month of employment Guthrie wrote 26 songs for the BPA (Guthrie enthusiasts like to say he wrote 26 songs in 26 days, but there is a good deal of hyperbole associated with everything Woody did), including anthems, talking blues, and ballads. A half century later, Kahn told a New York Times reporter, "In retrospect, I don't think the government has ever gotten a better investment on its money."

The original description of the job Woody filled in Portland called for a homespun, folksy singer-narrator who could do voice-overs in a BPA documentary film called *The Columbia*. Kahn's first film production for the agency, *Hydro*, had come out the year before to lukewarm public reaction. It was, after all, thinly disguised government propaganda. The new film needed to appeal more to the proverbial little guy, thus Kahn's decision to include folk songs. Kahn intended that the sound-track songs later could be played from huge speakers at public power rallies.

Living, not working, was Woody Guthrie's great talent. Born in Okemah, Oklahoma, in 1912, he resided in Pampa, Texas, during the Dust Bowl years. A never-ending search for jobs took him from Ohio to California during the 1930s. Years of riding the rails gave him no specific work skills, but it did make him a songwriter and a singer. He always traveled with his guitar, and inevitably someone in the boxcar or the hobo jungle would urge him to sing a song he remembered from the days when families still had farms. He could learn it from them and then sing it better than his teachers. Three things happened to Woody. He learned a variety of folk song styles, from the Appalachians to the Ozarks. Second, he began to make up his own lyrics, improvising to make his message more appropriate to his location and audience. Finally, Woody realized that music has a profound impact on the way men think. People concentrate on lyrics to a much greater degree than the words in speeches or books.

Woody had arrived in Hollywood in 1937 a displaced Okie, a vagrant, but he left three years later a radio personality. It was the heyday of the singing cowboy. Once he persuaded station KFVD to give him some air time, Guthrie fit in almost as easily as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Although Guthrie received no pay, he made the most of the opportunity to promote not only his singing talent and Will Rogers-like wit but also his liberal political views. Though Woody never enrolled as a member, the Communist Party became one of his biggest supporters, especially after the publication of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* called attention to the same kind of injustices that Woody sang about on the radio. In 1939 Woody, on a lark, invited himself to be the Los Angeles columnist for the party's San Francisco newspaper, *The Daily People's World*. New York beckoned soon thereafter, and for a year Woody, now reunited with his family, enjoyed the luxury of celebrity status as the star of Model Tobacco's show, "Pipe Smoking Time." Impulsively, the morning after New Year's Day, 1941, Woody got himself fired. Probably, he just wanted to return to California. Perhaps he also did not like what he had become: a highly paid performer who sang militant songs about social injustice.

California had changed. The Okies who had come West with him in 1937 were now happily employed in wartime industries. His old job on KFVD was not waiting for him, a finance company threatened to repossess his family's new Pontiac, and Mary Guthrie contemplated divorce. Heavy drinking lessened Woody's daily pain. It is easy to see why film director Gunther Von Fritsch wanted to consider others for the position of singer-narrator for the BPA film. Woody, however, needed the work, so he piled Mary and the children into the Pontiac and drove to Portland. Funding for the film had been temporarily delayed, as Woody found out when he arrived, but Dr. Raver liked him, so he got the job anyway. Obviously, no one at the BPA was familiar with his column in *The People's Daily World*; otherwise Woody's journey would have been in vain.

When the repo man looking for Woody's Pontiac found him in Portland, Von Fritsch arranged for Elmer Buehler to drive Guthrie around Washington in a 1940 Hudson. Woody himself said he viewed the "Columbia River and the big Grand Coulee Dam from just about every cliff, mountain, tree and post from which it could be seen." He also visited logging camps, farms, skid rows and granges. "The poor guy had BO so bad you could hardly stand it," Buehler remembered, adding that "a lot of people just couldn't." But when he unlimbered his voice and guitar, the Professional Okie, as Woody often referred to himself, touched the hearts of working people in the Pacific Northwest. He made up songs about powder monkeys, lumberjacks, jackhammer men, hoboes, farmers, and migrants-the people who made up the work force in rural Washington.

Information chief Kahn demanded that Woody produce three pages of songs each day. "Like in Hollywood," he said, "where they require a script writer to turn out three pages a day, or something you know, no matter how good or bad it is." As a result, Woody sometimes threw in songs he had written before, or he just changed a few lines. Sometimes he just scribbled down lyrics, neglecting to supply a tune. (Not until the 1980s did folk singer Pete Seeger match all of Woody's lyrics to tunes.) At other times, he attached new words to old, familiar folk baselines, which allowed Woody's listeners to concentrate on his new stanzas, because they already knew the tune.

Woody's signature song in the Pacific Northwest became "Roll on, Columbia," and it, for example, uses a chorus from "Irene Goodnight," the classic authored by Huddie Ledbetter, or Leadbelly as he is known to the ages. Similarly, Woody borrowed from "Old Smokie," "Pretty Polly," "Muleskinner's Blues," and others. Folksinging is, after all, a process. But when he felt completely original, Woody said he liked to "knock off two or three pretty fair songs a week and a pretty darn good one over the weekend." Music, he volunteered, "is some kind of electricity that makes a radio out of a man and the dial is in his head and he just sings according to how he's a-feeling."

There is no doubt that Woody deeply loved what he called the mineral mountains, chemicaldeserts, rough canyons and sawblade snowcaps of the Pacific Northwest. Moreover, he believed in what he wrote and sang about Grand Coulee Dam, considering it a "necessary humanitarian experiment." Consider this verse from "Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done":

*I clumb the rocky canyons where the Columbia River rolls,
Seen the salmon leaping the rapids and the falls,
The big Grand Coulee Dam in the state of Washington
Is just about the biggest thing that man has ever done.* ©TRO

To Woody the dam stood as a monument of working-class consciousness and solidarity. Still, when his month was over in mid June, Woody gladly returned to New York where he scratched the words "This Machine Kills Fascists" on his guitar and ferreted out new opportunities.

Before he left Portland, Woody recorded 11 of his new songs on acetate disks for the BPA. Alan Lomax of the Smithsonian Institution describes the historic cuts this way: "The moans and howls and mutters of his harmonica combine the sounds of a lonesome freight train whistle and a semi's klaxon. The vibrant underbelly is Woody's hard-driving Carter family lick on his guitar; the left hand constantly hammering on, pulling off and sliding to create all sorts of syncopations in the base runs and melody, the right hand flailing with a very flexible pick to make rhythmic rattles and rustles and bumps such as a hobo hears in a freight car or a hitchhiker feels in the cabin of a big cross-country trailer."

Only a handful of Woody's songs made it into the sound track of The Columbia. Budget problems caused by World War II delayed the film's debut until 1948, but by then no one needed songs and celluloid to describe the impact of the BPA in the Pacific Northwest. A new Republican administration in 1953 ordered all copies

of The Columbia and its songs destroyed when it learned of Guthrie's leftist connections. As a result, Woody's Pacific Northwest documents consist mostly of copies and the acetate disks.

But these are enough. Woody's work songs about Jackhammer John and the "Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done" are still sung today wherever folklorists gather.

In 1987 the legislature named "Roll On, Columbia" Washington's official state folk song. A whole generation of folksingers, including but not limited to Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen, consider Woody Guthrie its special inspiration. Many of these singers gathered in New York's Central Park in 1992 for a celebratory concert on what would have been Guthrie's 80th birthday. Political scientists have also taken to Woody Guthrie, or at least that seems to be the case if one can understand quotes like this from Wayne Hampton in his book, *Guerrilla Minstrels* (1986): "The Guthrie mythos has thus contributed to the corruption of the communal ideal and the utopian values of altruistic love, which have been replaced by a more banal Dionysian lust for an ego-based ecstasy."

Joe Klein's superb 1980 biography argues that Guthrie's stature derives from the fact that he had something to say and he said it in songs that could be sung by anyone. A mediocre guitarist and a technically limited singer, Woody used the typewriter as his most effective instrument, Klein writes. Rolling Stone magazine agrees, speculating that, had Woody not died in 1967 he would be heavily into rap today because he always loved words better than music. And what words would he be singing? Spokane native Bill Murlin, the BPA officer who assembled all 26 of Guthrie's 1941 song sheets and records, told Timothy Egan of The New York Times on the BPA's 50th anniversary, "If we hired Woody Guthrie today, we'd have him singing about saving salmon and conserving energy instead of using him to sell power." Can't you just hear it?

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