

The Great Depression**Biography***Woody Guthrie*

1912–1967



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Woody Guthrie was an American singer-songwriter who sang about the social and economic problems of Americans during the 1930s and 1940s.



As you read the biography below, think about how Woody Guthrie's music has influenced many singer-songwriters of today.

Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma. Many of his ancestors were farmers and cowboys. Guthrie was a keen observer of life around him and was a very bright and **unconventional** child. During his childhood, Guthrie suffered many family tragedies, including the death of his older sister. After learning to play the harmonica and guitar, Woody took his act on the road and by the age of 16, he was a traveling musician.

In 1933 Guthrie formed his first musical group, The Corn Cob Trio. It was difficult for Guthrie to support his family as a musician during the Great Depression, however. By 1935 a long drought had turned the Great Plains into the Dust Bowl. Guthrie witnessed misery firsthand and he began to identify with the **plight** of farmers and workers. Soon, he was writing songs that spoke about their plight, yet expressed a hopeful view.

Some of Guthrie's songs were about the beautiful American landscape. Guthrie is perhaps best known for "This Land is Your Land," a traditional folk song that is still popular today.

Other Woody Guthrie songs were about the many people he encountered and got to know during his travels on the road and in railroad boxcars. Guthrie's music often described ordinary people



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VOCABULARY

unconventional eccentric, unusual

plight dilemma, troubles

Huntington's disease a hereditary illness

who fell victim to the Great Depression. The following lyrics are from his song “Pastures of Plenty”:

“It’s a mighty hard row my poor hands have
hoed
My poor feet have traveled this hot dusty road
Out of your dustbowl and westward we rolled
Your deserts were hot and your mountains
were cold.
I’ve worked in your orchards of peaches and
prunes
Slept on the ground by the light of the moon
On the edge of your cities you’ll see us and
then
We come with the dust and we’re gone with
the wind.”

During World War II, Guthrie served in the Merchant Marine and the Army. He also wrote many songs in favor of the war effort, including “When the Yanks Go Marching In.”

By 1952 Guthrie had written, composed and published over 1,000 songs. He inspired a generation of folk singers in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Bob Dylan, who used music to comment on their society and culture with the idea of changing it.

Guthrie was married three times and had many children. His son Arlo followed in his father’s footsteps and later became a famous folk singer.

Woody Guthrie was hospitalized later in his life, suffering from **Huntington’s disease**. He died in 1967.

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WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What did Woody Guthrie describe in his songs?

2. **Contrast** Woody Guthrie was known for writing songs that served as political protest. Do you think songwriters of today still do this? Explain your answer.

ACTIVITY

3. On a separate sheet of paper, write a song that describes your city, state, or country. Use concrete details to create a vivid portrait of your location, just as Woody Guthrie did in his songs.