

Woody Guthrie

Woody's daughter, Nora Guthrie, recounts the story of a self-educated artist, musician and writer.

Chapter 1 – 1:20

Introduction

Announcer: One of Oklahoma's most creative native sons is Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Guthrie. Born in Okemah, Oklahoma July 14th, 1912, he became an American singer, songwriter and folk musician. He wrote more than 1,000 songs. *This Land Is Your Land* is his best-known song. He was also a writer of numerous essays, articles, poems and hundreds of letters. He also wrote two autobiographical novels. Many of his songs are about his experiences in the Dust Bowl era, earning him the nickname the Dust Bowl Troubadour. He traveled with migrant workers from Oklahoma to California and learned traditional folk and blues songs. Oklahoma's state folk song is *Oklahoma Hills*, written by Woody Guthrie. Many books and papers have been written about Woody Guthrie's life, but now you will be given a view of Woody Guthrie through the eyes of his daughter Nora as she talks about her famous father. We would like to thank our Founding Sponsors for making this oral history story available on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 3:46

Huntington's Disease

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is October 7th, 2010.

Nora Guthrie: My name is Nora Guthrie. My birthday is January 2, 1950. I am 60 years old.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York.

JE: Let's name your brothers and sisters.

NG: I have two older brothers, Arlo Guthrie and Jody Guthrie.

JE: What was your father's full name?

NG: Woodrow Wilson Guthrie.

JE: Who was he named after?

NG: He was named after the candidate for President that year, Woodrow Wilson, who became President of the United States.

JE: Where was your father born?

NG: My dad was born in Okemah, Oklahoma on July 14th, 1912.

JE: He passed away on October 3, 1967 and he was 55 years old.

NG: Correct.

JE: Let's talk a little bit about the cause of his death.

NG: He had inherited Huntington's disease from his mother. That's a kind of short-end statement because there were years and years in between when he was developing symptoms of Huntington's. His mother also had symptoms of Huntington's without anyone being aware of the disease at the time. There was nothing really known about it. She had been institutionalized when my dad was a young boy. They just thought she was kind of going nuts or something was wrong. She was falling apart. Then when my dad started having symptoms in the early 1950s, again they thought of all kinds of other causes for the erratic behavior. It wasn't until the 1960s when he was really diagnosed with the disease and hospitalized.

JE: What is Huntington's disease?

NG: It's a neurological disease. It's a degeneration of the nerves that eventually leads to loss of control of the body and death.

JE: Another symptom would be erratic behavior?

NG: Yes. There are different kinds of symptoms but some of the most common are erratic behavior, depression, loss of coordination and dizzy spells—all of the symptoms of alcoholism actually. They are very similar which is why they just thought my dad was just drinking too much.

JE: So you could have all of those symptoms and not drink at all?

NG: Well, that's when he realized that something was wrong. He was having these symptoms and he hadn't had a drink in a couple of days or weeks or whatever it was. That's when they started realizing something more was going on and it wasn't alcohol but it took a couple of years for them to get to that point.

JE: You were 17 when your father died?

NG: Yes.

JE: You have full knowledge of the disease—were you around him much when this was going on?

NG: He was in and out of hospitals throughout the 1950s, more in, than out. But he could sign himself in and sign himself out because there was nothing they could do about it. They

would keep him in the hospital and try detox and try different things like electronic shock therapy. They tried all kinds of things but again they would release him telling him there was nothing they could do. I was born in 1950 and my dad's symptoms were really starting to be everyday occurrences. So my relationship with my dad was wholly with Huntington's disease. In the beginning it was not so bad, but in the end his disease was really, really bad. My whole relationship with him was as a caretaker.

Chapter 3 – 4:37

Woody's Father

John Erling: Talk about Woody's parents, tell us who they were.

Nora Guthrie: Well, his mother's name was Nora Belle Sherman Tanner. Sherman was her father's last name and then he passed away. Her mother remarried and then she took her mother's new last name of Tanner. Her mother was like a log cabin dirt farm teacher in Kansas actually. His father was Charlie Guthrie. Originally his family was from Texas. Both sides of the family are Scots-Irish.

JE: His father Charles was a landowner who owned about 30 plots of land in Okfuskee County?

NG: He was a land trader. He had lots of different jobs. In a nutshell, he was a young, ambitious man. He lived very much in the spirit of Oklahoma at the time when anything went—you know, anything goes. A lot of young people were coming to Oklahoma to try to take a crack at becoming wealthy in oil or becoming landowners. My understanding of him was that he was very much in keeping with many of the time. He was ambitious. He was very interested in politics. He ran for office as County Clerk and different offices for the government.

JE: So that would have been Woody's first experience with that because didn't he accompany his father on some of the stump speeches?

NG: Yes. When his father would go around running for office, Woody would go with him and sit on a haystack someplace and watch his father make speeches. But he also commented that at the time, a lot of the elections were also fistfights. (Laughter) So his dad was also an accomplished fist fighter. He was number 1 in the County or something like that. It's funny to look back because you have to really change channels when you talk about Okemah in the 1910s and 1920s. It was quite a different atmosphere. It involved speechmaking. It involved fist fighting. It involved going around making friends with your neighbors. It also involves writing. Woody's father was a very, very eloquent

writer and also had some ambitions to be a writer. He actually wrote a book. He also wrote many, many articles in the local paper on politics and different subjects. I think he considered himself a very well educated man, very ambitious, with a lot of energy and a good fist fighter.

JE: So we don't know what Woody picked up from his father. I don't know if Woody was a good fist fighter or not, but he definitely was immersed in politics. Who knows what kinds of seeds were planted through that experience?

NG: Exactly. There has been some research done and some books written just on that topic about the influence of his father. The most obvious one is Woody's writing, his sense of culture and even penmanship. He was really encouraged by his father to have beautiful penmanship and to be eloquent, also a sense of humor. Even in politicking you learn it's not just a hard line. The way to win hearts is through humor and friendliness and things like that. So you look at a lot of those traits that his father had as someone in the spotlight, you know in the public eye, Woody really picked up a lot of those skills.

JE: So it's fair to say that his father obviously had a major impact on his life?

NG: I would say so. There have been people that have actually done a lot of research on that, Guy Logsdon, who's a professor here in Tulsa and very eloquent on that particular topic. I would say all the outward skills that one needs for success in the world, that's what Woody picked up from his dad. He picked up writing capabilities and also a respect for thought, debate and books. He was always encouraged to read lots of books and get information and make a good argument for something. You hear that way later in his songs. One of the things I always point out in the songs is that he's not really telling people what to do—he's educating people on facts. He always adds a line at the end of the song—"So what you going to do about it?" Or something like that, so that's where a little bit of activism comes in. His father was very much like that too. His father was a real activist trying to get laws passed to change the way business was done, etc.

Chapter 4 – 4:45

Painting & Music

John Erling: We might point out that as he was educating others, when did his formal education end?

Nora Guthrie: It probably ended by high school. He was already not showing up to classes in his junior year. The reason is because in a very short period of time, his middle-class

family life had fallen apart in just about every single way. Literally from their house burning down, to tragedies within the family, death and his mother becoming sick. It all happened in a very short period of time from about the time he was 5 years old to 10 years old. So his education was very good up until a certain point and then everything started to fall apart. By 13, he was pretty much on his own with no parents.

JE: As a 13-year-old was he singing?

NG: No, he wasn't. As a matter of fact, he was looking. One of the things that really attracted him in his early life was painting. He took to painting as a potential career. That's what he was doing. It's hard to say because to be honest he was surviving most of the time. By the time he was 13 or 14 he was living in a gang house in Okemah with a couple of other kids on their own. He writes about it quite a lot in his autobiography *Bound for Glory*. He tells what it was like to live that way has a 13 or 14 year old. He collected garbage and would bring it in and get money for garbage. He was out of school and on his own just trying to get by. He would go to neighbors' houses and knock on the back door for food. One of the things that I did learn about him, which really says a lot about him and his character, is that he wasn't depressing to be around. I thought that was a very interesting comment from some of the people that knew him at that time. Even though things are pretty bad he wasn't depressing to be around. He was still full of spit and vinegar and also a lot of hope. He seemed to be always looking for a way out and looking for something to do. He spent a good number of years from the age of 13 to 18 looking for something to do. One of the things that really caught his attention was artwork.

JE: Where are some of those pieces?

NG: Well, all of the art from his early years is gone. You know, he wasn't (known then as) Woody Guthrie and nobody was saving his paintings. He would really do art on commission. He laughed and said one of the things that he did most were portraits of Jesus. Everyone wanted a nice oil painting of Jesus for the home. So he would kind of be commissioned. Someone would say, "Hey Woody, I want one of those!" He would charge 50 cents or a buck or whenever it was and he would do portraits. One of the only portraits that still survives, to my knowledge is one that he did of Abraham Lincoln a few years later, when he was in his 20s. It's an oil painting that's now at the Smithsonian Institute in the Smithsonian Folkways Collection. But then he went on and also did art in Santa Fe having to do with the geography there and some of the Adobe houses that he saw and liked. Later on, he continued doing art as a supplement to his songwriting. There's a very close connection between art and his particular style of songwriting. He later wrote, "All you can write is what you see." That was his mantra for songwriting. He learned that from observing and doing artwork. How you really look at something—how something is shaped, what the weather is like, what the sky really is. So all of that training

in art, and I don't mean formal training—I mean just by doing it—he learned to look deeply at subjects and he was later able to translate that into lyrics.

JE: Did he use oil all of the time?

NG: He tried to use oil all of the time, but it was very expensive. He writes in his journals that it was very hard to keep that up and pay for a \$5 brush and the canvas and the oils. Then he realized that once you did a painting and you sold it once and you never saw it again, and that dollar you earned for it got spent...He realized with a song you write it once and someone says, "Hey, I like that song. Sing it again!" It was really a funny, very natural understanding that songwriting was a better way to make money in the early days than painting.

Chapter 5 – 4:05

Family

John Erling: This period of time from when he was 13 years of age to 19, somewhere in there, did he start writing and singing?

Nora Guthrie: He didn't really start writing until he had moved to Pampa, Texas. The family house as I mentioned had burned down. The next house they moved into—a tornado took the roof off. His mother was institutionalized when he was about 9 or 10 I think. His older sister Clara had acted as his surrogate mother as his mother was falling apart with this depression—this unknown thing that was happening to her. His sister Clara I had become a very important figure in his life. She was 7 years older and she became a surrogate mother. She was the one who held him and played with him and took care of him. She also died in a fire in their house. This all happened in an amazingly short period of time, from the time he was 9 to 13 years old. Then shortly after that, his father was mysteriously burned also in a fire in the house. He was so badly burned that he had to go to Pampa, Texas to be cared for by his sister who was living there. That's when Woody was on his own. They tried to adopt some of the kids and house them out at different neighbors. There were four of them at the time after Clara died. It wasn't as formal as it is now with all kinds of child social service programs—it was really just the neighbors who helped out. At one point, shortly after his father left Woody was living with a family of 11 in a two-room house. He started to feel bad that these people could barely make a living and feed their own kids. He lived with them for about a year. Then after that he went and lived in the gang house. He decided that he would just try to take care of himself. He was about 13 or 14 when he was on his out. Then when

he was about 16 or 17 he went to join his father in Pampa, Texas. His father had recovered somewhat. His older brother Roy had moved to Pampa to be close with their father and they said, “Woody why don’t you come here and get a job?” So that’s when he left for Pampa. He had an Uncle Jeff in Pampa who played the fiddle. That was his real exposure to “being in a band.” His uncle had a band with his wife Aileen. She played another instrument, I’m not sure if it was the guitar or mandolin. He started playing with them every night. Again, you kind of have to remind people that this is what people did every night—everybody played music. You didn’t have to be a “musician” to play music. Every family had a banjo, or mandolin or a guitar to play music. They didn’t have television. They only had radio. They would pick up tunes from the radio. The Carter Family was really popular right about then and they were picking up Carter Family tunes and playing them at home every night. That’s what they would do socially. That’s when Woody really kind of lit up about being in a band. He wasn’t writing songs then, he was belonging for the first time in a long time. I think that was really the impetus for him getting into music and having a sense of belonging.

JE: In this case, belonging to family.

NG: Exactly. You can almost feel subconsciously a little child saying, “I still have a family. I’m going to hold on to that.” Really trying to keep a family together, whoever and we’re ever they were. You can take that metaphor and expand it certainly throughout the rest of his life in music, the sense of us, we and family.

Chapter 6 – 5:45

Self-educated

John Erling: What was the first song he wrote?

Nora Guthrie: To my knowledge, from what we have in the archives, the first song he wrote was called *Old Gray Team of Horses*. It was written in about 1935 or so, but you have to forgive me because I am not a scholar. I’m really telling you family stories. That’s where my information comes from. I could be wrong about dates, but I am going to give you the gist of it to the best of my knowledge. That’s my little disclosure here. (Laughter) But when he moved to Pampa, after he was playing music with his uncle and his aunt, they started playing around at a couple of local barbecues, church socials and community events. Through music he met a guy named Matt Jennings who also was his age. He and Matt formed a band of their own for the first time. They were about 18 or 19 years old. They formed the Corn Cob Trio. He started really getting into music as a job.

JE: The Trio—the third one would have been?

NG: I think it was Cluster Baker.

JE: So they formed the Trio and earned money?

NG: Well, he was working day-jobs. He worked cleaning rooms at a boarding house. He basically had odd jobs around Pampa for a year or two. He worked behind a counter selling “root beer.” There were always bottles under the counter. The guy told him, “If someone comes in asking for root beer, you reach under the counter and, you know.” I have to go back for a minute. He was exposed to lots and lots of different characters and different kinds of people in Okemah, through the oil boom. When he was a little boy, Okemah was a sleepy farm town where they grew cotton out in the fields. Then as it became an oil boomtown, when he was about 8, 9 or 10 years old, all kinds of other people were suddenly in Okemah overnight. From oil diggers to people that worked in the oil fields. They were a pretty rough and tough, rowdy bunch. They migrated from oil boomtown to oil boomtown living in tents. So overnight there were 5,000 tents surrounding this little sleepy town of Okemah and then all of the people that followed from the saloons, the bars, the whores, the pimps, the gamblers that would follow them around. You know, this is all about money. He was exposed early to other kinds of characters in his life. Because he was so young, I would surmise that he was more curious than judgmental about them. He was more concerned with who they were and what they were doing. So he got to see a real expanded view of humanity as a very young child—from the best to the worst—and all different colors as well. There was a town that was a couple of miles away from Okemah that was predominantly an African-American community that he was intrigued by. He had heard stories in Okemah about the Ku Klux Klan and lynchings that had taken place in that area, so he was aware about a lot. Just the circumstance of the oil boom I think, really brought a lot of information to this kid. He was just walking down the streets looking at everything. So then when he went back to Pampa, he took a lot of that with him—the understanding that there are all kinds of people in this world doing all kinds of work to get by. One of the things that he was really interested in, I am going to go back to the influence of his father, is reading—an interest in books. Before he got into music, the first thing he did in Pampa was go to the library. There was a wonderful librarian there that kind of took him to heart. She realized that he wasn’t in school and she took it upon herself to educate him. She would ply him with books. He would walk out of the library with 10 or 15 books and come back a week later having read every single one of them and ask for more. So he was educated—book-learned, but also worldly. Then music comes into the picture with his family and then starting his own when he was about 18.

JE: I’m intrigued—a lot of kids who don’t want to go to school couldn’t care less about a book.

Here he should have been in high school, but instead he goes to the library so he can read. That is a very unusual young man.

NG: Woody was a very curious person. I would say that was one of his main attributes. If you were to really list his attributes as a human being, curiosity is at the top of the list. Like I was saying before, his neighbors would say that he wasn't depressing to be around. No matter what happened, he took it in stride. The oil boomtown, his mother falling ill, all of the different tragedies that happened to him—he still stayed hopeful. I think those two characteristics are intertwined—hope and curiosity. You always think that something's coming up tomorrow. I'm going to find out something tomorrow. It's intriguing. It gives you motivation for staying alive and hanging in there. You know what? I won't eat today, but maybe tomorrow. That curiosity created a lot of hopefulness in him and you can see that in his entire life.

Chapter 7 – 9:05

Jesus Christ

John Erling: By the time he was 18 or 19, his experience had given him a wealth of material to write songs.

Nora Guthrie: Exactly.

JE: He didn't know he was laying the foundation for that.

NG: Exactly. I just go back to his mother a little bit because we've talked about the influence his father had on him. His mother was equally important in a number of different ways. She sang a lot of the old Scots-Irish ballads. She played piano. She would play these long, somewhat morbid at times, because sometimes Scots-Irish ballads are all about how he left me with nine children and I am going to go to the river and jump off. You know, they can be morbid at times. They are long and they tell stories about real people. He memorized all of the songs that his mother sang to him. One of his most beautiful memories was of his mother sitting at the piano playing these long ballads and he would brush her hair. She had long hair. He would stand behind her when he was 8 or 9 years old brushing his mother's hair while she would sing these long ballads to the children. They would put their heads on her lap. So the whole sense of love and maternal nurturing is music to him. Whereas to other kids, it might be, my mom took me to all of the soccer games, or my mom did all of my laundry. (Laughter) Everyone has his or her own connection to what that maternal love is and to Woody it was music. A few other

important things that he got from her were empathy and compassion. Through her oncoming symptoms of Huntington's disease she was falling apart. People in the town made fun of her. They made fun of the way she walked and the way she dressed. They made fun of her moods. She was pointed out. This is true in any small town. Anyone that starts to develop something or starts acting strangely, everybody is talking about it. Kids were making fun of it in particular. Kids were saying, "Oh, I saw your mother, she tripped. She looked terrible." He was so hurt by that. He understood at a very early age what it was to have misfortune handed to you by fate. There's nothing you can do about it. There was nothing his mother did to cause this. She was a victim of a disease and she was ridiculed for it. You find that motif also running through every single song that Woody wrote. This sense of empathy with people who are—disenfranchised has become a popular word to describe it—I think it's almost more basic than that. You just feel bad when people make fun of someone who's had hard times, whether they are homeless or hungry or whatever. That became the signature and the heart of all of his music.

JE: And at a very early age he learned to be protective.

NG: That's a really good point. He learned to stand up.

JE: Right.

NG: When his father was going through hard times in the early 1920s because of the Depression and a number of other things, his father lost everything. I didn't mention that before. We talked about how he was a landowner and he lost 30 properties in 30 days or some extraordinary number like that. So financially the family collapsed as a lot of people were starting to feel the effects of the Depression.

JE: Why did he lose that land?

NG: People foreclosing on mortgages and the Dust Bowl happened. There was just a general economic depression and there was a drought.

JE: We're talking about the 1920s.

NG: Exactly, so things were going downhill all over the country. In the Midwest you had the drought and a number of other things happening in addition to economic collapses. It was a real tragedy. But you mentioned the idea of him being a protective person. His mother would tell the children, "Go out there and fight for your dad. Don't let people make fun of him because of what's happening to him." So they were a very close-knit family in that sense. He remembers his mother's words, like "Don't let them bully your father. Don't let them hurt him either. Stand up for him." So, yes, that would become something he learns from his mother. Not only do you feel for other people, but it's important to stand up for them too.

JE: This could have affected his self-image. He could have thought, well, look who we are—we're not anybody and all. Do you think he always maintained through his life a good self-image?

NG: I am not quite sure what you mean by self-image—but self-worth definitely. I think there is a difference between self-image and self-worth.

JE: Is self-confidence another way to put it?

NG: Yes. I would attach that to a sense of curiosity and hope. You have to like yourself to some extent to go out and forge your way, even though circumstances are really bad. The other thing he learned really early on was how to live without. That's a really, really big thing. One of his heroes in this sense was Jesus Christ. He really co-opted for himself to some extent this image of someone who had so much value to society. It wasn't because he was rich and it wasn't because he was famous—it was because he cared and he was a teacher. Woody really liked that idea. (Laughter) He probably liked it because that was his only choice. He also didn't have stuff. So how does someone who doesn't have stuff survive? The way you do that is to go deeper within yourself and say that it's about who I am looking at in the mirror. It's not about my house or my car or whatever. It's about who I am—so that gave him a lot of self-worth, that relationship that he had early on with the persona of Jesus Christ. He knew Jesus Christ didn't have anything either. He walked around in one piece of clothing and one pair of sandals. Not only that, but he was happy, wise and good. He was everything we all strive to be. So how could he be so happy, wise and good with nothing? Here I am with nothing so maybe I could also be happy, wise and good. (Laughter) You know, it's a formula. He really used that formula a lot when you talk about his self-perception or persona—that was something that he created based on his relationship with the man Jesus Christ.

JE: How was he exposed to the teachings of Christ?

NG: That happened early on in the town he grew up in. His parents were Protestant and did read from the Bible. He went to church and things like that.

JE: Were they any particular denomination?

NG: No, I think all people to some extent use religion and religious characters as mirrors for themselves, as role models. In other words, if you are really poor and you are in a farm town, you try to see through religious teachings how to live the best life in the circumstances that you are in. So the whole town—this whole Western approach to religion, was, in a way I want to say very socialistic. Woody used the word commonistic. When he was older he would say, "I'm not a communist, I'm a commonist." He attributed that directly to the teachings of Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ tells the rich to give all of your goods to the poor—a rich man can't get to heaven. These are the teachings that they called out because that's what supported them—people without money and who were homeless during the Dust Bowl. These are the attributes that Woody really took to be debated in today's times—whether Jesus Christ telling the rich to give their money to the poor is Socialist or communist. You know, that's a contemporary discussion that

has taken place as well. But to Woody, that was the ideal—very much like the Eastern philosophy. He read Omar Kiam when he was at the library in Pampa, Texas. So the whole idea that you didn't have to have stuff—you didn't even have to have a house. A lot of these Omar Kiam guys were sitting out cross-legged meditating with nothing in the desert somewhere. (Laughter) these were the wise guys. So he pulled on a lot of this kind of imagery and values to support his lifestyle.

Chapter 8 – 6:33

Rich or Poor

John Erling: Did he resent the rich?

Nora Guthrie: I don't think so at all. I don't get that feeling emotionally. He wrote in one journal that he felt sorry for the rich. He goes into it in depth in a very human way. First of all, he says, they tend to be lonely because the only people that surround the rich are people that want their money. So they don't really have any true friends or true friendships. It's really hard to find people you can trust that are not after you for something. So he said that the rich are the very loneliest people in the world. He was talking in a very deep sense. They might be surrounded by an entourage, but does anybody really love them for who they are? He said it's much easier to be loved when you're not rich. People will see exactly who you are and what your qualities and human traits are. You can't hide them—no camouflage. So he always felt bad and felt sorry for the rich. He said that they were just the loneliest people that he knew. He wasn't anti-rich, but he thought that circulating your wealth was a very good idea. This idea again, is going back to Jesus. Even if you are rich, there are things you can do to get to heaven. (Laughter) There are actually practices that you can follow and still get to heaven. It's okay.

JE: You can be forgiven for being rich.

NG: Forgiven wasn't even in his consciousness. If you are poor you can get to heaven and if you are rich you can get to heaven.

JE: Right.

NG: It's all circumstances. I think he was very nonjudgmental for the most part. You know, wealthy people inherit money. They come into wealth as little babies. They are little naked 7-pound things. What do they know about anything? They didn't create anything. So that's a circumstance as valid as being born into anything. That's through Woody's eyes. So he

wasn't judgmental about that at all. It's just what you do with your circumstance that really chisels your soul and tells who you are as a human being.

JE: As he grew older, maybe the last 10-15 years of his life, did he accumulate any wealth at all?

NG: No, he really didn't. My parents didn't make enough money even to have Social Security taken out of their paychecks. My dad, for most of his life, played for nickels and dimes. In the Woody Guthrie Archives you have many, many receipts for all the gigs that he did. You have to go back in time and imagine where he sang and who his audience was, unions and workers. He would go out in the fields and sing for free for migrant workers. That's where he wrote a lot of his material on the West Coast when he went to California. He came to the East Coast and was educated about union politics and some other things. So he would sing at boycotts and picket lines and any kind of gathering that was usually a fundraiser for somebody else. When you look at these receipts or in his diaries it says that he got paid 5 bucks to sing one place one night and 10 bucks another night to sing someplace else. Lead Belly and Woody got paid \$7.50 each. Lead Belly got paid \$7.50 to sing in front of a group of people. He was never interested in money. Although I have to say he had a number of opportunities throughout his life to become a major star and make a lot of money. When he first went to Los Angeles he had a radio show. He was a tremendous hit because all of the Okies had come to California, so he had the biggest audience in Los Angeles. He had 150,000 Okies who were displaced who all listened to his program. He got 10,000 letters a week in fan mail. They were raising his salary and asking him to make his show longer and telling him that he could write hit songs. The same thing happened when he came to New York. He had a very, very successful radio show. They were paying him more than \$350 a week when he came to New York for his first radio show. That would be like getting \$4,000 or \$5,000 a week now. When he first got the gig, he was giddy. He wrote to Alan Lomax and he said, "They are giving me money so fast I have to sleep under it." He didn't know what to do with so much cash flying around. What happened in every single circumstance was the more popular he got, the more censorship he encountered. So the more people that were listening to his shows, then the producers and radio heads and their sponsors would come in and say, "Man you're great! You are the coolest hillbilly this side of the Mississippi." They would throw money at him and they would say, "Tone it down on some of those songs Woody. Tone it down." That's how they said it then. He got really upset about that. He had a short fuse at times. He had been living on his own for so long and doing things his way. The idea of someone telling him how to do a radio show or what songs to sing—he didn't take to it. He had a short fuse and he would walk out of the studio even without notice. He would just say, "This isn't for me. I'm not doing this." He did that over and over and over again. I want to point out that it wasn't that he was against success. It wasn't that he was

against making money. I think the point is he didn't want anyone telling him what to do and what songs to sing.

JE: I think that's admirable that he had to do it his way. A lot of people would have sold out.

NG: Yes. That goes back to what we were talking about with his mother. It would be like selling your mother out. It was so close to him. That's what I mean. It's not an intellectual idea. It's not like he read something somewhere that convinced him that this is a good idea. This was right in his heart. This is what makes him cry. This is what makes him laugh. This is about his parents. It would be as if someone was saying— don't sing me a sad song about your mom—sing me a happy tune.

Chapter 9 – 5:57

God Bless America

Nora Guthrie: I will just segway from that. The difference between *God Bless America*, which was a popular song at the same time that Woody was writing *This Land Is Made For You And Me*, is kind of the exact same thing. It's not like he's against *God Bless America* for you and me—because people wanted a façade. We all do. We are all guilty of this. We want a façade of happiness where everything is okay and we have a great life—we are the best and this and that. We all have a natural tendency to want to convince ourselves that everything is great. That is also part of a survival mentality. Woody was so sensitive to things that were not perfect and he felt obliged to point that out. That's how civilizations better themselves—when people do come in and say, “You know, this is great but this isn't. I like the way you do this, but this could be better.” So that was his place. Again, it goes back to his caring for his mother.

John Erling: He didn't care for the song *God Bless America*? Or maybe that's too strong—but he had a distain for it?

NG: I'm going to put it another way—he had a response to it. I've heard people say this over and over that he hated Irving Berlin's song. So let me paint the picture of what's happening at that moment. He's hitchhiking from Los Angeles to New York. It's 1940. All kinds of things are going on. Hundreds of thousands of people in America are displaced because of the Dust Bowl and The Depression. It's a mess out there. As he is hitchhiking across America— Hollywood is in good shape and New York is in good shape. But from California to the New York Island and everything in between, is really not so great. It takes him a month to hitchhike from Los Angeles to New York. In every jukebox at

every truck stop and every diner was Kate Smith's hit song *God Bless America*. We were also inching toward war. There were all kinds of things happening, so the rally and cry of *God Bless America* is appropriate in some ways. I can see historically why it has such popularity with a great singer like Kate Smith. But Woody's experience was seeing people homeless and hungry. He was seeing people walking across the country because they had lost everything. He saw families and jalopies traveling on Route 66 who had lost the homestead that had been in their family for generations. There was no FEMA at the time. There is no government support. Think of Hurricane Katrina and all of the things that we have now in place. He was thinking to himself why isn't anyone helping these people? They are American citizens. They had been here for generations. Where is the government? At that time, it was considered naughty to say, "Where is the government?" At that time, the country hadn't decided that the government organization should have any responsibility in this area. Now we have FEMA. It's a given that if you get a hurricane or a flood, FEMA is going to come in and help you. But back then, there wasn't anyone to help these people. So I would say he was a really early advocate that asked, "Where is the help?" So as he is hearing *God Bless America* blast through the radio, he is thinking if God blessed America everybody would have a home and food and a job. We would be okay. He said I'm not getting it and I'm not seeing it. You know? So that's why I say Woody responded to the song. After he heard it, he got into the New York in February. Within the first week he was in a little fleabag hotel & boarding house on 43rd Street & 6th Avenue. He was looking out the window and again he is seeing homeless people and things were not so good. He writes this song as a parody almost. I don't mean that in a humorous sense—I mean that strictly in a literal sense. A parody is a response to something. Something triggers a thought in you and you write a parody. The original title of *This Land*, was *God Blessed America for Me*—but he crossed it out later and called it *This Land Was Made For You and Me*. You see, the parody turned into a more mature comment. So that's the story of that song. At the bottom of the lyric on *This Land* we have the handwritten lyric he writes, "All you can write is what you see." He's hearing one thing from the radio that he's seeing something else. He says to himself all I can write is what I see.

JE: I think the melody was taken from an old gospel song?

NG: Yes, a Carter Family tune.

JE: Was it *Oh My Loving Brother*?

NG: Oh gosh, I'm not up on my hymnals (chuckle).

JE: In that song he also protested the class inequality. On the fourth verse: "As I went walking, I saw a sign there, and on the sign there, it said no trespassing. But on the other side, it didn't say nothing. That side was made for you and me."

Chapter 10 – 4:56**California**

Nora Guthrie: Right. I could spend an hour just talking about that verse and all the meanings and the impetus for including that verse in the song. As far as why he wrote it, just one quick story. When he left Pampa, Texas in the early 1930s, he migrated to California with a couple hundred thousand other people to see if they could get work in the fruit orchards there. They were trying to get pickers to come out to the fruit orchards in California, so everyone in the Midwest who was homeless went out there. Woody was among those hundreds of thousands of people. When he got to the California border there were roadblocks—they were stopping people from crossing the state line. Try to imagine that. Try to imagine that you are driving and you get to a state line and they won't let you cross the border. You are an American citizen, this is your country and they won't let you cross the border. It's not another country. This is America and these are American citizens. They wouldn't let you cross the border unless you had \$50 in your pocket. There was a real backlash to the number of people that were coming and that were displaced. Talk about no trespassing. It was like a sign in California that was a metaphor that said you can't come in. But he was thinking, I'm from Oklahoma. I'm not a foreigner. I'm from Oklahoma. I've walked across the desert a thousand miles and you are telling me I can't come in? He saw families being turned around and being sent back. How in the world are these people going to have \$50? They don't have anything to eat, let alone have \$50 in their pockets. Woody writes in the song *Do Re Mi*, "*If you ain't got that Do Re Mi, well you had better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia and Tennessee.*" People were coming from all over the country. So it was a rough concept and it was a hard lesson. It was one of the first hard lessons he learned. He was in his early 20s when this happened to him and it was confounding. Not only that it was downright wrong. His heart was telling him that someone was asking for help and you are just saying no? That's it? No discussion? Just turning them around? Send a family with 12 kids back to where they came from so they can starve? So anyway, that's one story about the sign "No Trespassing"—he writes it literally, but it's also a metaphor for exclusion.

John Erling: He had money so he was able to get in?

NG: No, he didn't. He snuck in. When you were traveling alone it was easier to cross the border. It was mostly families that were being turned around because they were coming in their jalopies. They were very, very visible. Woody sneaked in through the desert in the middle of the night.

JE: When he gets to California, he also marries?

NG: He actually marries in Pampa, Texas before he goes to California. He and a man named Matt Jennings and a man named Cluster Baker formed the Corn Cob Trio. Shortly after that they formed a bigger band called the Pampa Junior Chamber of Commerce Band. This band was really sexy. They dressed up in chaps and cowboy hats and fancy cowboy shirts. One of Woody's real motivations to go to California was to become a popular singer. He wanted to make it in music. At this point he had married Matt Jennings' sister Mary in Pampa. She was all of 16 or 17 and right away they had two children. He was 21, can you imagine? It was pretty common in those days though to get married that young. But he wasn't happy and he was settled and he wasn't inspired. Well, Pampa was the middle of the Dust Bowl. On the 14th day of April he writes in 1935, "there came the greatest dust bowl that had ever hit." Pampa was destroyed in these dust bowls and people were leaving. Farms were closing and there was no work. It was a pretty depressing place and curious Woody said, "I'm going to go to California and see what's put there for me. That's why he went in the first place. He left Mary and the family behind until he got work in Los Angeles. Then he sent for them and they followed him there.

JE: That was where he landed the radio show?

NG: Right.

JE: How long was he married?

NG: They were actually married until the mid-'40s, but they had separated before then.

Chapter 11 – 4:23

Will Rogers

John Erling: By the way, did he ever have a comment on Will Rogers at all?

Nora Guthrie: Not only did he have a comment on Will Rogers, he named his son after Will Rogers. Is that a comment? (Laughter)

JE: That's a big comment.

NG: He had three children with Mary. His youngest was a boy and Woody named him Will Rogers Guthrie. During those years when the kids were young, Mary did come to New York when Woody had his popular radio show and they were throwing money at him right and left. They got him a really nice apartment up in Central Park West in Manhattan with a piano and a house cleaner and a nanny and all kinds of expensive things. He sent for Mary and the kids and they came to set up shop in New York. He was going to be a popular radio star. They were there for two months and then Woody had a disagreement

with the producers and the sponsors and Mary says that he came home one night and said, "Get packing—we're leaving tomorrow." It was that abrupt. At this point the three children were with them. Mary had been really suffering under poverty and all kinds of things like that with the Dust Bowl and what happened to her family. She was really longing for a stable and secure life and she really wanted a guy who had a job and could pay the bills. She was getting really tired of this rambling-around lifestyle. I want to point out that a lot of Woody's ramblings were not juvenile ramblings. It wasn't like he was just a restless idiot. He was rambling because many people in the country were rambling at the time. They were homeless and they were trying to find a place to settle down and find a new life. A lot of his ramblings were serious ramblings. But right after that they left New York. Then he got the job with the Bonneville Power Administration writing songs for the building of the Grand Coulee Dam. He was hired for a month by the Department of the Interior to go up there and wrote songs for a film they were working on. So Mary, once again had already trudged from Pampa with the kids to LA, then from LA to New York, and now from New York to the Coulee Dam in Oregon. After 30 days of work they had to move again because the job was up. Now where are we going to go? Now where are we going to live? Mary had three little children with her at the time and she said, "I'm going back to Pampa with my family and Woody, you need to figure out what you are going to do with your life." She really was exhausted at that point with the babies and having no income. She kept seeing Woody make it and she kept seeing Woody turn it down. It was a no-win situation for her. I am totally sympathetic with her situation. It was a no-winner. She went back to Pampa, Texas. Woody kept going and looking for something and he told her, "I will, call you. I will be in touch." He went back to New York where his "career" as the Woody Guthrie we now know really began professionally in New York with his first recording and his first band with people like Pete Seeger and Lead Belly and Sonny Terry.

JE: I am going back to Will Rogers. Did he have any interaction with him? Did he meet Will Rogers?

NG: I don't know. I don't think so.

JE: He just admired his commentary and his humor.

NG: Absolutely. Again, he learned the skills of presentation. In his song *Pretty Boy Floyd* he tell this wonderful, typical wild-ballad story of the Robin Hood-esque character Pretty Boy Floyd. You could almost hear Will Rogers telling the story. You know, yeah, he was a robber and you know some people rib you with a six-gun and some with a fountain pen. That's pure Will Rogers. The line isn't Will Rogers but the attitude and the approach and the skill with which he would deliver a line is Will Rogers.

JE: I can see why Woody would really idolize him.

NG: I think he used him as a role model as a performer.

Chapter 12 – 6:00**New York**

John Erling: In the 1940s when Woody arrived in New York, was he embraced by the so-called leftist folk music community?

Nora Guthrie: At that time in New York, there was a whole influx of people coming from all the different states, Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi and all kinds of places. Again, we already talked about the hardships that rural America was experiencing. It was also a natural migration. We know about the blues musicians who came up from the South end of Chicago and a lot of the rural musicians who came up into New York. At the exact same time that Woody is coming to New York, you have Lead Belly coming up to New York. You also have Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee coming up. You have people like Lee Hayes, the singer from Arkansas coming and Pete Seeger coming in to New York from the northeast. What was happening all across the country is hubs of arts were forming with different groups of people, different groups of ethnic people and different kinds of arts coalescing in different cities. It was kind of the beginning of the importance of cities in a way in the arts and therefore in politics, because right after arts comes politics. In America it was a really interesting time. You have to see Woody in context of American history. In that sense you have people coming over from Europe escaping fascism that was taking place in Europe in the late 1930s. You have all of the great composers and actors and actresses coming out of Germany and going to Hollywood and becoming the next generation of screenwriters and scorers and directors. You have that hub happening in Hollywood and they are also bringing with them their experiences and their political history. You have Charlie Chaplin and Brecht coming to LA. You have musicians and African American groups coming to Chicago and other groups also coming to New York. So I just want to set the scene. There were a lot of new voices, all different kinds of voices coming into the big city, with all different kinds of experiences and difficulties. The political conversation at the time was trying to address all of these various difficulties and inequities that were taking place. Whether it was fascism or Ku Klux Klan stuff happening in the South, or geographical kind of stuff—you had a full plate of issues that needed to be addressed. Artists are always the first to dive in. They feel free. They tend to be outspoken free thinkers with ideas. They were not running for office and they were not hired or paid by anyone. They will open their mouths and say what's on their minds pretty much. Woody was part of that movement of people who said, "You know what? I'm just going to say what I think and what I feel and see what people think about it." So getting back to your question, Woody formed a group with Pete Seeger and a couple of

other singers. For instance, just in terms of some history, they formed a commune. What I mean by that is that they all lived in one place together. None of them could afford a place of their own. This grew into the loft movement, which is now a cheeky thing to do in New York City. At the time it wasn't a cheeky thing to do it was a desperate thing to do. You had seven or eight people living in one big space together. They got the cheapest loft space they could find. They sang music on one side and they slept on the other. They slept on beds or on the floor. They shared the cost of the loft. They shared food. Everyone had jobs. They would put their money in a common till. With the musicians, they wrote songs communally as well. That was the idea. They were called The Almanac Singers. They decided that what they liked doing most was to write songs about what's wrong and how to fix it.

JE: I guess we call them protest songs?

NG: No, not necessarily—you would call them topical songs. They are songs about topics. They didn't always have the answer. The idea was to come up with solutions. Lead Belly had come up from the South and had been imprisoned. He had experienced racism and discrimination. Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee had come from the South and experienced violent racism there. They all brought their own personal history and the idea was to write songs together about what had happened to them. So in a very simple way it was about what's wrong and how to fix it—suggestions.

Chapter 13 – 3:43

Sing-along

John Erling: It's a nicer way to tell that story through music than it is to be standing on a platform speaking.

Nora Guthrie: One of the skills that Woody brought to the table as a songwriter was his background in community singing like when he was playing with the Pampa Junior Chamber of Commerce and his early bands. He realized early on that you create a chorus that was easy to sing. The idea was to get everybody singing. You have to go back in time and realize there were no movies there is no television in small, rural communities. So the fun of music in the 1920s was to get everyone singing. Everyone came to a show to sing along, not to sit back and watch someone do a three-and-a-half-hour performance, which is what we think of now when we go see musicians. If you think of going to a show you think I'm getting going sit back for three hours and they are going to sing for me. But it

wasn't like that back then. Music in Woody's time was participatory. So he always created simple choruses that people could learn in two seconds. He would sing a verse that would tell a story, but it would always go back to the chorus so people could participate. That's motivating too. You know when people are singing along, that's how you get people to stand along and cheer along and march along and change along. (Laughter) There are all kinds of "alongs" you can get to through the basic premise of common words and common ideas. An easy chorus is a perfect example of that use of language to create common movement.

JE: In the 1960s we had The Hootenannys. Didn't that find its origination with Woody and Pete?

NG: I've heard two different stories on the origin of the word hootenanny—one from Pete Seeger and one from Bess Hawes who was another singer in The Almanacs in New York. The thing they all agree on is that they are the first to use that word hootenanny.

JE: What was a hootenanny?

NG: Well, a hootenanny—they would get together once a week and invite all of their friends to come in sing. They would have one large room and one space where everyone could bring instruments and sing-along. You could introduce a song. You could write a song. You could play a song that everybody knew, but basically you would go around the room and everybody would decide which one to sing. You didn't have to be a professional, genius guitar player—if you knew two or three chords you could probably play along with most of the songs. (Chuckle) Again, we talk about the common choruses where everybody could sing along. They were communal jams. They were very inclusive. Everybody could come. They would put up a notice and just show up for hootenanny every Sunday afternoon in the loft that they lived in. Then years and years later it became a TV show. (Laughter)

JE: Right.

NG: Years later—that was a joke—years and years later, the idea of the Hootenanny. Of course it evolved into regular hootenannys in parks. It grew into a national pastime where in every city in every place people would get together and have hootenannys in parks and schools wherever people with instruments could find a way to get together.

JE: It became very popular on college campuses.

NG: Right. It was very inviting because a lot of folk songs only used two or three chords, so a lot of the songs you could sing along and play along. You didn't have to be a genius. Any instrument you could play you could learn to record and participate.

Chapter 14 — 4:10**Common-ist**

John Erling: Throughout much of his life he was associated with the U.S. communist groups, though he was never actually a member of any communist group.

Nora Guthrie: Right.

JE: Talk about that.

NG: Well, it's kind of like the way he said it "I'm a common-ist." He truly believed the idea of people working together to be a more powerful force than one. He wrote an essay called *What Is An Outlaw?* Now again he's romanticizing the idea of a Pretty Boy Floyd / Robin Hood type of outlaw and he said, "A lot of times it's the outlaw that's trying to do the most good for people, but the problem is the outlaw tries to do it alone. There are a lot of people in government that are more corrupt and are worse people than an outlaw, but they're surrounded by a lot of people." So, a government is already a community because there's more than one. He said, "The problem with an outlaw is he has to do it alone." (Laughter) His introduction to left-wing politics actually started in Los Angeles when the Communist Party was very active in organizing unions for migrant workers. I have to giggle when you look back in history because now the idea of the union is almost ho-hum. It's common now and everybody knows about them in either likes or dislikes them. But they do exist. They are part of the fabric of America. The idea of nurses, teachers, policemen and plumbers having a union— This idea that if there's more than one you can probably get better pay and better hours and healthcare or whatever it is that you can fight for together for your specific group of people. At that time in America, the idea of a union was a new idea. It had just kind of come over (to the United States) during the turn-of-the-century and had become active in the 1920s. Woody was introduced to this idea of organizing farm workers. Cesar Chavez was a continuation of that idea. Nowadays it's ho-hum, but that was the idea that fascinated him when he saw a couple of hundred thousand people like we talked about living in dire poverty. They were living in where they would take pieces of paper and cardboard and tin and try to create a shelter in a migrant camp living on potato stew. He thought that if all of those people got together they would have a force and be something to reckon with. So he was very much in favor of this idea of unity, people gathering together to work for the common good and for their needs. So that idea definitely continued and always still now continues. I don't think that's an idea he ever gave up. What he didn't abide by was the rigidity. I'm not sure if I'm being callous to say this about any political party, but he was a little bit suspicious of anything that was just too organized. He always wanted an opt-out. So he would feel

his way through something and if he got a whiff that something didn't smell right or if he thought that he didn't want to do this, he always wanted his independence. It was very important to him to have self. Whether it was leaving a radio station even though they were throwing him thousands of dollars—he would say, “Nope, doesn't feel right.” He did the same thing with politics. He never signed up for anything. He wasn't a going to meetings kind of guy. He wanted to be educated and he read a lot of political books and things like that, but he wanted to think it through himself. He always wanted an opt-out.

Chapter 15 – 6:35

Blacklist

Nora Guthrie: The idea of him being branded one thing or another politically it's really incorrect. It was really created by the McCarthy period to blacklist people so that they wouldn't have any influence in the culture. That's my take on it. Knowing Woody and knowing his writings and knowing the man, I would really disagree with a lot of that. I think the philosophy of communism was his central motivating force and correctly so. I happen to agree with him on that. (Laughter) But also a balance with individual rights and individual opt-outs and having your own thoughts about how you want to do things. He was also a rugged individualist in that sense. He wouldn't be in lockstep with anybody about anything.

John Erling: He could sympathize with parts of what communism is about. As we find out now in our society we are all kind of accepting.

NG: I think the idea of public school education is a common-ist idea.

JE: Okay.

NG: I think national healthcare is that common-ist idea. I don't think anyone on Medicaid has a problem with it.

JE: But he did kind of hang out with some of the people who were very serious about the Communist Party.

NG: Absolutely.

JE: Like the actor Will Geer who played Grandpa Walton on the TV series *The Waltons*. He hung out with him and others. So while they were very serious about it and Will Geer organized communist groups, Woody wasn't that serious about it. He was branded I suppose by those he hung out with.

NG: Well I would say because of his nature that we talked about, it would be impossible

for him to lockstep with anybody, a Democrat, Republican, Communist or anything. He wanted to get educated about everything. Of course the Communist Party ideas were really intriguing. First of all, they were the only party that was really addressing the idea of working together and unionizing when other people were pulling back. There was real friction between the big industrialists and the unions. So those were the two forces at work and of course he would side with the workers. The blacklisting that happened after that, I want to say in a way had—and you might wince when I say this, but I almost think it had nothing to do with politics. It had to do with capitalism and industry. It had to do with protecting bankers. I think we've seen the result of that. I think it's easy to label it like he's a commie or he's a socialist. Basically, most of these people were workers. They were trying to get very simple, basic rights for workers. Now to go off the deep end and label any of these people as hard-line communists is so stupid. I'm sorry, but it's just really stupid. There were very few hard, hard-line communist involved in any of these movements actually. You know, the heavy communists were over in Russia. (Laughter) So a lot of things get labeled and I want to say branded in a way. They do it very forcefully and very quickly so that no one has a chance to really think about it, because if they did think about it, they might like some other ideas. So this is a strategy that people have used forever by the way. It's not new. It comes and goes in waves and you see this very quick branding because they don't want people to even think about the possibilities—the choices that are available to them. That's what a blacklist is. You know it's funny because I knew so many people that were blacklisted during 1950s. Some of them were the most simple people. I have to giggle because some people think of blacklisted Commies as having guns in every pocket in trying to overthrow government. They were just regular people with little apartments they were teachers and plumbers. They were very innocent in that sense. Not only that but they tend to be really, really kind and good people. If you really got to know what they were thinking and who they are, you actually might like them.

JE: Right.

NG: So that's when the blacklist comes along and says: "He's bad. Kick him out. Get rid of him." I think that happened to Woody who is one of the most beautiful—I'm not saying important or anything like that—but one of the most beautiful human beings. This is a man with such heart and such love in such humility. He never wanted to take anything from anyone. He was a really nice person. He never wanted your money. He never wanted to be better than the Joneses. All of this was just not in his consciousness at all. Everything he did was to try to shine light on something that was happening that seemed wrong to him. He thought if he could shine some light on it someone could do something about it. That's such a simple humanistic attribute. How you got from that attribute to being a red commie somebody was doing some advertising and some propaganda work. (Chuckle)

JE: And it worked even in his home state of Oklahoma and his hometown of Okemah, because it took many, many years for them to say all right, we give up. Maybe we should honor this man after all. There was a feeling of resentment toward him.

NG: There was a vulnerability to the blacklist. A lot of people in the country were vulnerable to the propaganda. I don't have anything bad to say about any of these people. I really don't. I know they're kind and sweet and gentle people. They were living their lives and trying to be decent people going to church and however they consider living a good life. I think they were the victims of the blacklist, not Woody.

JE: (Chuckle) That's very good.

NG: They lost. Look at the people they lost in the talent that had to leave. I'm not just talking about Oklahoma, but this is true anywhere. The citizens are the victims of the cruelty.

JE: Yes.

Chapter 16 – 4:36

Arlo Guthrie

John Erling: Somewhere along the line here he meets your mother Marjorie.

Nora Guthrie: Marjorie Mazia Greenblatt.

JE: How did Woody and Marjorie meet?

NG: They met in New York at a dance performance. My mother was a modern dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company in New York. When my dad came to town he did some collaborations with Martha Graham's dancers and some other composers and dancers as well. They met in a rehearsal.

JE: Please state again your brothers' names.

NG: I have two brothers. My oldest brother is Arlo Guthrie and my middle brother is Jody Guthrie.

JE: Did Arlo show music ability at an early age and did you as well?

NG: Yes, everyone in the family studied music since nursery school. We were all about 2 years old when we picked up recorders. That was the first instrument we all learned and played together. The three of us were very close in age. We are only a year apart so we are like triplets in some sense. We basically did everything at the same time so we all studied recorder, that was our first instrument and we used to play classical music and folk tunes and three-part harmony on the recorder in nursery school and kindergarten. From there we went on to study a lot of other instruments, the piano, clarinet, flute and dulcimer in

addition to the usual folk guitar and mandolin and fiddle around the house.

JE: You were all singers?

NG: Well, in the folk sense everybody can sing. (Laughter) My dad used to say, "Everybody sings." Again going back to the idea of hootenanny, it was just about participating.

Everyone should participate. So we all knew enough chords and could carry a tune well enough to sing together. Of course the musicians came to our house all the time. We had hootenannys at our house on Sundays. Every musician came and you could either sing along or not—it was open. But yes, we all played instruments.

JE: As a family did you have your own little hootenanny with your dad?

NG: We really didn't because at the time my dad was in and out of hospitals. He was really deteriorating rather quickly, so the three of us kids and my mom would play at home. But with my dad, he would come home from the hospitals on Sundays, so that was the hootenanny day.

JE: So you sang for him?

NG: (Chuckle) Sometimes we did. To be honest, sometimes we just went out and played while they sang. My dad and his friends you know Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Cisco Houston and Sonny Terry, Pete Seeger would come, Dylan would stop by, Phil Ochs all of those kind of people that were around at the time. It was just the beginning of the 1960s folk scene, so they all played for my dad. He really couldn't hold a guitar too well at that point. So the idea was, they would come and they would sing all of his songs to him. That's what he liked. He loved hearing his own songs. I think he needed that sense of, I've done something and it will be remembered. He was in the hospital for 15 years. I think he really used music to keep him going. People have also told me this when they went to visit him in the hospital—Dylan and John Hammond and all of these others—they were kids at the time and Woody would say, "I don't want to hear your songs. Play me my songs." (Laughter) That's what kept him going. As a funny aside, in the '50s and early '60s, of course we were preteens and teenagers so all we really cared about was rock 'n' roll. (Chuckle) We used to laugh my brothers and our friends and I would go upstairs when the adults were downstairs playing all of their Woody Guthrie tunes and fiddle jigs and stuff like that. We would sing the Everly Brothers harmonies—you know that kind of stuff. It was definitely a generation gap but my brothers, Arlo in particular, always did take to folk music and to my dad's music and to all the guys. A lot of it had to do with his image as a preteen. You know, all of these kind of cool guys would be coming to our house in jeans and flannel shirts and on motorcycles and he thought that was cool. He was very much influenced by the music and the guys.

JE: Arlo was?

NG: Arlo, yes. He's the youngest of his generation. He's a couple years younger than Dylan and Phil Ochs. He was the baby of that group.

Chapter 17 — 5:52**Bob Dylan**

John Erling: About Bob Dylan, Bob Dylan looked upon Woody as a mentor? How do you see the relationship between the two of them?

Nora Guthrie: I think he's explained it but I'm not sure if he ever has really. It's kind of very elusive isn't it—his relationship—because he hasn't really talked about it except early on. He said he was a Woody Guthrie jukebox. There was something about Woody's craggy voice. It was not a perfect voice. He didn't have the singer's voice like Bing Crosby or Elvis Presley or somebody like that. There was something kind of gritty about Woody's voice that Dylan liked. There was something in the skill of songwriting that he really was attracted to because you have different kinds of songs written at that time. You had rock songs with a simple two verses and a chorus, dance tunes, Pop tunes and things like that. Woody's songs were really poetry. If you just look at his lyrics and read them out loud without any music they are very, very poetic. I think Dylan early on was also attracted to the style of writing, which he then took and really evolved in his own way. That's why he's the poet laureate and was also attracted to Allen Ginsberg later and some of the other great poets of his generation. I think that was the initial songwriter attraction. Plus, I think the idea of being this kind of everyman, invisible character that he also to this day embraces. It's a very elusive attitude of don't tie me down. We talked about Woody in that sense—don't tie me down—I'm not in lockstep with anybody. That was also I think, an attractive quality to Bob. He didn't want to be fenced in either. So there are a couple of basic things. People have written really long books about it. I can't talk about it too much—that maybe those are some of the things that attracted him.

JE: Would you see Bob Dylan at your home when he would come there? Did you see interaction between the two of them?

NG: Yes. He was a kid. It wasn't anything heavy at the time. He was 20 or 21 years old. He hadn't made a record. He hadn't done anything. I want to say also that I think it's my intuition—he's very genuine. A lot of people have kind of, I don't know, nailed him a few times for this or that. But my experience with him as a young man was of real genuineness. He had a real concern for my dad. I think he was stunned when he came to New York and actually saw my dad, because my dad was in really bad shape. If you look at a cover the *Dust Bowl Ballads* or portraits of Woody before he had Huntington's disease, he's a really cool looking young guy. You now, much like a Jimmy Dean kind of good-looking guy.

JE: Yes.

NG: He was very popular with the ladies in very charismatic and charming. When he got Huntington's and a lot of the kids came and saw my dad really in very bad shape—skinny as a rail—uncontrolled movements—dirty. He was put in a psychiatric ward most of his time in the hospital because there was no care for Huntington's disease. So they just kind of put these patients in these large wards with about 50 patients and it was pretty bad. So when Bob came I think he was shocked that this was the guy. And rather than not come back, and I think at times he didn't want to go back—he didn't want to see Woody, but he did go back. He went to the hospital and he sang Woody all of his songs and he brought him a cigarettes. He was respectful of him. I remember one story when he came with John Hammond who used to bring out some of his friends to meet Woody. He would warn them. He would say, "This is pretty sensitive. This guy is in pretty bad shape. So be respectful." I remember my dad couldn't light his cigarettes. It was really, really hard for him to light cigarettes. He couldn't control his arm to get the lighter to the cigarette. A lot of times people would try to help. They would reach over and say, "Woody do you want me to light it?" Bob would shake his head and he would say, "Nope, let him do it himself. Show respect." Woody really did want to light his own cigarette. He wanted to be the alpha male even with these young guys. I think that took an extraordinary sensitivity on Bob's part. I've always been really grateful.

JE: Have you been in touch with Bob over the years?

NG: Off and on sure yeah, he's a busy guy and elusive. But my memories and my foundation of our relationship as a family with him are very solid and loving actually. I am very grateful. He was there when nobody else was in his generation. He was one of the first kids other than Jack Elliott who was the first kid (chuckle), my older brother and then Bob is next.

JE: Bob Dylan probably carries the spirit of Woody Guthrie to this very day with him.

NG: Also we talked about how Woody culled parts of the story of Jesus Christ to become his mentor and his role model—and I think Bob culled aspects of Woody to be his persona, to help in his formative years. Of course he has grown way, way past that now—but in those times I think they were qualities that he decided that he liked and he took them and ran with them.

Chapter 18 – 5:06
An Amazing Woman

John Erling: There's a period of Woody's life that was very productive when your father and mother lived in Coney Island on Mermaid Avenue. Do you recall that?

Nora Guthrie: I recall a lot of it. I was young then. It's funny, over the last 20 years I've started the Woody Guthrie Archives—that's a fancy way of saying I have unpacked all of my dad's boxes and read everything. (Chuckle) So in that sense, I am not a learned scholar or anything. But I have gone back to those years in particular so often because I do have memories. All of his writings and lyrics and everything that for me helped fill in a lot of blanks. Part of it I lived and part of it I remembered through his writings and then part of it I would say, I envisioned because his writings are so clear on that so it's a combination of those three.

JE: Your mother maintained the work and you have overseen the work, which also contains some scribblings by Arlo I understand.

NG: Yes, scribblings by everybody, mostly by dad's. (Laughter) When we talk about the archives now, in short it's everything my mom packed in boxes and saved from my dad. When he died, my mom decided that it be her mission in life to cure Huntington's disease of which there was nothing known. One paragraph in a medical journal had been written about Huntington's. So she took it on herself to try to find a cure and find out more about it and get some research done. So, the stuff had basically stayed in boxes because my mom had gone in a different direction with her life in trying to bring attention to the disease itself. It wasn't until she passed away and into the late '80s and early '90s that we unpacked the boxes. Believe it or not, it was a good 30 years after Woody's death. I was off on my dance career. I was a dancer at the time. My brother Arlo was off on his career. My brother Jody lived in California. The boxes were just sitting there. It wasn't until 1992 to be quite frank that I looked into the boxes and that is now what the archives is—all that stuff from home.

JE: It's the largest collection of Guthrie material in the world.

NG: I guess so. Thanks to a good woman who saved everything.

JE: I think it's interesting about your mother Marjorie, that Woody and your mother divorced and yet she reentered his life and came back into it. That's an interesting dynamic that took place.

NG: Well, it was actually a very strategic thing because when my father was diagnosed with Huntington's and they realized that he would be spending the rest of his years in and out of hospitals. If they were married, my mother would be responsible for all of the costs.

My mother was a dancer so she didn't make a lot of money. My mother always was the main supporter of the family—with or without Woody being healthy. My mom opened up a dancing school in Brooklyn and she raised us financially. We had just acquired a little house in Queens for the first time in my mother's name. It was a little track house that they had built. We got it for a couple of thousand dollars. She was able to get a mortgage because she was teaching dance and she had an income. But if she was responsible for my dad's hospital expenses for life—and we knew it would be a long haul—we wouldn't have had a place to live. So it was best to get a divorce and he could stay in the hospital and we could have a home.

JE: So they never were separated?

NG: They were pretty smart. That's the thing is that all of us learned a lesson early in life about what love is. It comes in all sizes and colors and manifestations. He was hard to live with. You couldn't live with him anyway because of the disease. I'm not saying it was just strategic. He was violent. He would have episodes of violence so my mom knew he couldn't be around the kids. It was for a bunch of very smart reasons that they were divorced. My mom took care of him and oversaw his well being for the rest of his life. After his death, she went on to find a cure and created singlehandedly the international organization called Huntington's Disease Society of America, which is pretty active. They were at the forefront of genetic research, which affected Parkinson's and all of the other diseases. She was an amazing woman. She deserves the Medal of Honor. I would say her whole life was dedicated to Woody in one form or another.

Chapter 19 – 6:09

State Song

John Erling: The song *Oklahoma Hills*, which is the official state folk song of Oklahoma was written by Woody Guthrie. Can you comment on that and the background of it and what you know about it?

Nora Guthrie: It really comes from the early days when Woody was in Los Angeles with his radio show on KFBD. His first show was with his cousin, who was also a musician who was living in Los Angeles at the time. He had a little radio show and his name was Oklahoma Jack Guthrie. His real name was Leon (laughter) but his stage name was Oklahoma Jack Guthrie. When Woody first came to Los Angeles he did duets with Oklahoma Jack Guthrie. They were very, very popular. They were two young guys in their early 20s. They

were both talented and funny and brought that Okie rye humor and wit to their show. Woody had a little loose-leaf, three-ring binder that he kept as a songbook. He would write down songs in that book. They sang that song on their show. When Woody left California he left his songbook with his cousin, who at that time had stopped his radio show and was becoming a real recording artist and made an album. Woody didn't know about it until six or seven years later. He was in New York with my mom and they heard *Oklahoma Hills* on the radio. Woody said, "That's my song. Oh my God. How did they get that?" Well, he had left that songbook with his cousin and his cousin had recorded it and it was a big hit. That's why you know it and that's why it's the state folk song. (Laughter) It's because his cousin made a hit out of it—not Woody. His cousin also got sick shortly after that. In order to allow him to keep the royalties on the recording, Woody put it in his cousin's name so his family would receive the royalties, but Woody wrote it. Everybody knows now that Woody wrote it, but for a while they were listed as co-writers. When Woody heard it on the radio, he got in touch with his cousin and he heard that they were having some tough times and some illnesses. Woody said, "All right. We will just keep it that way. Your family will get the royalties."

JE: There was no anger that he had gone ahead and recorded it and he didn't know it?

NG: Oh, I think there probably was immediately. First there was surprise—and probably pride thinking wow, that's cool, somebody recorded it—my cousin. He was a pretty well known recording star and he was the one that made it a hit, not Woody. So, he deserves his piece.

JE: *Way down yonder in the Indian Nation I rode my pony on the reservation.* How many singers sang that song? Gene Autry, Chet Atkins—all of these people. There's a whole list of them.

NG: You were asking me before if Woody had money in the end. No, but Jack his cousin did. (Laughter) All of those recording royalties go to his family. There are not a lot of people who really have hit tunes with *Pastures of Plenty* or *Roll On Columbia*. We talked a little bit about his career in radio and how he earned money as a performer. But the first money he got as a songwriter was in the 1950s. The first hit singles folk group was The Weavers. The Weavers pre-dated Peter Paul & Mary. Peter Paul & Mary got everything from The Weavers. The Weavers were Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes, Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman. They were actually on the Billboard Chart at Number 1 with Lead Belly's hit song *Goodnight Irene* in 1950. Then on the B-side, another hit song, another number 1 hit on the Billboard Charts—now we're talking money. This is the Billboard Charts. After the first two hits they decided to go for it again. The third song they recorded was *So Long It's Been Good To Know You*, which was Woody's song. At that point he got a large royalty check for the song. That was the first payment he ever received as a songwriter. He had

his family in Pampa at the time and he also had family in New York at the time. He had already divorced Mary but he had Mary and her children. He sent half of the payment to Mary and he gave the other half of the payment to my mom. That's the money that she used to open her dancing school in Brooklyn, New York, which she had for 35 years and that's how she supported the family. So I want to say that he personally never took a penny of that. He gave half to his first family and half to his second. We mentioned earlier the apartment in Coney Island on Mermaid Avenue. It was a one-bedroom apartment and the rent I think was \$39 a month. There were three kids in the bedroom and a foldout couch in the living room, which was also a dining room and kitchen. We were really squashed in that apartment. With the recording royalty from *So Long It's Been Good To Know You*, we were able to move a couple of blocks away to a 2-bedroom apartment. So the kids had one bedroom and the parents had one bedroom and there was a living room where Jack Elliott came and stayed. (Laughter) We were crowded there too, but that was doable.

JE: How old were you?

NG: It was until I was about five. When I was looking through my dad's papers and unpacking the boxes—that second apartment that we moved into, the two-bedroom apartment was \$120 a month which was a big jump from \$39/month. Also, the building was owned and managed by the Trump family—Donald's father Fred Trump, who was a big real estate guy. So one of the cute things that we have in the archives is the original lease that Woody Guthrie signed with Fred Trump. (Laughter) So, there's a little piece of New York history there.

Chapter 20 – 5:37

Jewish Influence

John Erling: We could talk about many songs, but I think it's interesting though about some of the Yiddish songs he wrote with his mother-in-law Aliza Greenblatt, your grandmother.

Nora Guthrie: Exactly.

JE: That was an interesting relationship that he had with her.

NG: First of all, Woody's MO for songwriting tended to be song cycles. He would get hung up on one topic and he would write hundreds of songs about it. Not one event, but one topic. The Dust Bowl Ballads are a perfect example of that song cycle. He would just write 30 or 40 songs about the Dust Bowl. Walking in the Dust Bowl, driving in

the Dust Bowl, living in the Dust Bowl, when the Dust Bowl came and when it went—everything. Then later on he wrote a lot of songs about Oklahoma and his hometown and home when he was in LA. It was kind of a nostalgic look back at his people. Then the next song cycle you could say was more political with unions. The World War II song cycle followed where everything he wrote had to do with fascism—he wrote hundreds of songs about that. So that’s what I mean. He would just get on one topic and write the heck out of it from as many points of view as he could. So when we moved to Brooklyn, my grandmother lived across the street, which is why we moved to Coney Island. My parents had a couple of young babies and just like any other young couple they needed help from mom and dad with babysitting and food and things like that. So we moved across the street from my grandparents. It was a Jewish Community with a lot of early and Russian and Eastern European immigrants. Yiddish was heard on the street everywhere you walked. My father had never really been introduced to Judaism coming from the Midwest and his culture. There weren’t a lot of Jews living in Oklahoma at the time. So the two most important people he met were Moses Asch who was Jewish and had a recording studio. So every recording you’ve ever heard of Woody probably came from Moses Asch’s studio. Mo was an intellectual who was really interested in folk and roots music and activist recordings. He was very influential in Woody’s life. Woody became interested in Jewish history through people like Mo. He wanted to know who are you? Where did you come from? What’s your story? Moses Asch was the son of Sholem Asch who was a very famous Yiddish writer and playwright. So, there are all of these really interesting stories that Woody is intrigued by when he comes to New York and that includes my grandmother who was a Yiddish poetess and songwriter herself. My grandmother collaborated with many, many Jewish songwriters and composers including a guy names Solomon Golub who wrote the Dreidel Song, one of the Jewish standard Hanukkah songs. So she was right in the middle of that Jewish artistic culture. Woody came along and was very interested in my grandmother’s culture. Not only that but he taped all of these conversations with my grandmother and my great grandmother who had come from the Ukraine. Anyone who has seen *Fiddler On The Roof*, that’s where my mom’s side of the family comes from. Anyway so my dad would turn on the tape recorder and say, “Tell me about your people and where you came from. Why did you come here? What are the songs that your people sang? What’s you language?” He would just ask her question after question and made these tapes. Then Mo Asch said, “There’s a lot of commonality between the history of the Jewish people in terms of being kicked out of one homeland and they were always the outsider and discrimination. There are a lot of the commonalities between African-American communities and Jewish communities and the Okies and the Arkies who experienced

the Dust Bowl and were kicked out and homeless. He suggested that Woody try writing something on Jewish history and topics that became a song cycle. Woody wrote from actual Jewish history one of the longest songs he ever wrote called *The Many And The Few*, which is the history of Hanukkah name by name, town by town, state by state. It was one of those nice long Woody Guthrie ballads where he doesn't leave out anything. So you see the Scots-Irish influence of the ballad being used to tell Jewish history. He also wrote some lighter songs about Jewish holidays and Jewish food and culture. He wrote a couple of hundred songs based on Jewish topics. Something that many people don't know is that Woody wrote one of the first noted songs about a concentration camp. So he wrote from the very light topics to the very serious topics. In 1948 he wrote a ballad of Ilsa Koch who was a Nazi who worked in Buchenwald. He wrote the whole story of who she was and what she did. It was a very serious piece of work. I am telling you that because a lot of scholars out there don't know. Some people are trying to determine historically the history of music and The Holocaust and this is one of the first compositions noted.

Chapter 21 – 4:06

The War

John Erling: The album *Dear Mr. President* after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, The Almanacs went into the studio to record songs supporting the American war effort.

Nora Guthrie: Overnight they went from being pacifists to being fighters once Hitler turned against Russia and went against the pact. Pete Seeger tells a story that one day Woody knocked on the door and when Pete opened the door Woody said, "Well, it looks like we are not going to be singing any of those peace songs anymore." They went overnight to war songs and songs supporting the war effort. In addition to writing a ton of material to be sung by and for people involved in the war effort, whether it was people working in factories or building munitions, to songs for the sailors and the Army so that they could sing along. They also joined the Merchant Marine for three years in the Liberty Ship Convoys. It was one of the most dangerous places to be—other than probably at the war front itself. It was the second-most dangerous because Liberty Ships were carrying munitions and supplies to the troops in Europe unaccompanied by any protection. There would be a convoy of 100 Liberty Ships, which were huge freighters bringing all of the troops their supplies. They didn't have any protection and they were going through

dangerous areas. They were torpedoed or something almost every day. They were very visible because they would travel in convoys of 100 ships or more at a time. It was a crazy, crazy job. Woody worked for three years in the mess room with Cisco Houston and another buddy of his Jimmy Longhi. If anyone wants to know more detail about that, Jimmy Longhi wrote an absolutely wonderful, fabulous page-turner of a book called *Woody Cisco & Me* that really tells about their life aboard the Liberty Ships for those three years.

JE: Woody served in the Merchant Marines but he also served in the regular Army as well.

NG: Yes, he was inducted into the Army in May, the day that Germany surrendered, but they were still inducting people into the Army so after the three years in the Merchant Marines he went into the Army as well.

JE: I'm thinking about how they were branding him as Communist. If you were a Communist you would probably be considered anti-American and here he is being so supportive and writing songs to support the war effort.

NG: Well, that's what we were talking about before. The point of branding is to turn people against you. Anyone who knows the story and the facts, you just have to roll your eyes and hopefully laugh at it. Here's an example. When Woody was on the Liberty Ships they were segregated at the time they were bringing the troops over. There were two or three thousand guys on a ship. African-American troops were on one part of the ship and the white guys were on another part of the ship. One of the things my dad did was he would go over to the African-American group and he would sing with them and play with them with his guitar. Then the guys on the ship would say, "Woody, you are not allowed to go sing with them. You have to stay with the white group." He would say, "You're crazy. We are all in this together." So he would force integration on the ships. He would bring white guys to the black guys and black guys to the white guys to play music together. That was considered a Communist thing to do at the time. That's what I am saying is the absurdity of what now is our natural life of integration. He was pointed out and the FBI kept a file on him at the time for encouraging integration on a military ship. Now if you want to call that communism all I can say is go get a life. (Laughter) It's such a ridiculous thing. But in those times so many people were blacklisted for simple acts of kindness and conscience like that.

Chapter 22 – 5:38**What Would Woody Think?**

John Erling: I am wondering with today's climate. We have the extreme rightwing and the Tea party and all of this—you wonder what he would be thinking and writing and saying. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have him here commenting here on this time?

Nora Guthrie: Yeah. You know, I think about that a lot. There was a moment at Obama's inauguration concert when Bruce Springsteen and Pete Seeger led millions of people around the world singing *This Land Is Your Land*. Again integrating the song into popular consciousness and mentality that we're all in this together. So you can have everybody singing songs, including *This Land* as opposed to separating it. It's an inclusive song. I looked up at that moment and I was awfully teary-eyed and I thought man, the time has come for that song. I could not have thought of a prouder moment for me. It has nothing to do with politics. It has to do with an African-American president. We are moving forward, we are moving ahead. There are always forces that want to hold on to the familiar. Again, I am very generous of spirit about all of the different parties and their different things because I really understand. My dad taught me this. Everyone has a point of view because of their experience and their interests. You know, the bankers, they have interests. You can't put it down and say well they are all bad. Wouldn't it be great if we had a world of great people that were bankers? I need a banker. I need a banker to help me save money and explain money to me. I need a guy like that. I need industry. I need manufacturing. I need a job. We are all in this together, so I am very much against anyone who pits anybody against anybody. I am very generous that way. I really believe that if you really look beyond the façade and all of the costumes and the branding—everybody is branding everybody else. It's just bull. I see behind it. There are a lot of really good, kind people out there in every party and every religion and of no religion, of every gender and transgender. I really look at the human being inside. If you really sat everybody down in a circle and said what are your real concerns? Don't bull me. What do you really care about? I think we would come up with three top priorities that we all share together. The differences have to do with the methodology in how we are going to get there. How do you fight branding? You know what? You don't pay any attention to it. You leapfrog over it. Visionaries look way down the road. I'm not looking at this afternoon in one sense. I am looking at 100 years from now. That's what Woody did and that's what visionaries do. So that's my advice when I see all of the pettiness and I really think it's childish. I'm 60 years old and I see people older than me acting like they are in nursery school. Their behavior is of nursery school

level. Like in kindergarten when kids are told not to bully. You can't get away with it in kindergarten. You can only get away with it in politics. (Laughter) But it's that kind of behavior, where if there were an adult in the room you would be sent to the corner for a minute of silence. So my philosophy and my methodology is to work with visionaries and just leapfrog over all of this pettiness and get to the common ground that we all want to get to in the near future or far future. However we get there, we've got to just move forward.

JE: Maybe you've already answered my question here. What do you carry with you that is a direct influence from Woody? You have already at least spoken to part of that, is there any more to that?

NG: I have very curly hair.

JE: (Laughter)

NG: (Laughter) I carry genetically certain traits that are unmistakably Guthrie. I also carry a lot of visionary ideas and a lot of interest and curiosity. I'm really curious about everybody and where they come from and where they are going. One of the reasons I like doing the work I do is because in this day and age when you become a singer or a pop star or something like it becomes harder and harder for you to walk down the street with a hot dog in your hand and hear what people are saying and look at them like a fly on the wall. I really like that. I'm a street girl from Brooklyn. So I really position myself in a way that I can feel very much in touch with the pulse of ordinary people on the streets. Not only that, I really like them! (Chuckle) I have a real affinity. They're my kind of people. I carry that from my dad also. You know the guy that sells fruit in the stands is a fun guy to hang out with. My plumber is funny. I like that kind of relationship with people. I find those people much more friendly and personable, amusing and nice than most people who are in high offices or looked upon highly in society. Those people tend to be pretty boring because they actually lose touch with everybody else. They can't help it. I know so many people who can't walk down the street anymore. They are bombarded with autograph seekers or whatever and it's kind of a shame. I wouldn't want to live that kind of life. So, I'm here in Tulsa walking around the streets and going into shops and talking to people. I ask them what you do? Who are you? Just friendliness.

Chapter 23 – 7:18**Woody Archives**

John Erling: Do you find interest in Woody's work more today? You started unpacking the boxes in 1990 or 1991 and here we are almost 20 years later. Is there an interest? The city of Tulsa has an interest in your work I know that, that's why you are here in Tulsa. Is that true that there seems to be an increased interest that Woody never felt in his lifetime?

Nora Guthrie: I think he always had enough people interested in him. He always had a circle of people. That was enough for him. My dad's first album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, they made 500 copies and it sold out. That was considered a lot in those days. He was so proud. Five hundred albums— can you imagine that in today's music industry? Woody Guthrie's biggest hit sold 500 copies. I want to say that he was more interested in people than he cared if people were interested in him. People were his muse. He would walk the streets. He would always carry a notebook. He would see someone on the train, on the subway, in the car or in the fields. He wrote a song about everyone. All of those songs were left behind. My dad wrote over 3,000 songs that I know of. Which means that there are others that I don't know of out there because he wrote a song for everybody and about everybody he saw. He could write five songs a day. He wasn't a big editor. He didn't work on a song for days and days and days. He would whip them out 5 songs a day. So all this material and to answer your question, I discovered these boxes in 1992. I was already my 40s. The excitement, the childish excitement that I personally felt when I looked into these boxes, because I really thought, you know it's dad's stuff, what could be in there— *Pastures of Plenty* and *Dust Bowl Ballads*—I really thought I knew it all. When I started opening up all of the boxes I realized that of all of my dad's works that he only recorded like 150 out of 3,000 songs. That's ridiculous. That's beyond ridiculous. So I had this excitement like a kid. I used to open up my parents' drawers you know at night when they were gone. I was curious what was in their drawers? I was kind of like that—like a little kid again opening up the boxes. My God dad, I didn't know you wrote that and that and that. My own enthusiasm just went nuts and I started working with contemporary musicians and publishers and filmmakers. I was like a kid in a candy shop. Anyone want to play with me? So I started all of the records and the books and all of this other stuff. So I would say that the momentum that we feel now that has led up to this moment really parallels my own personal excitement and all the musicians that didn't know Woody personally but the next generation and then the generation after that. Bands like Wilco and Billy Bragg, folk bands, punk bands, rock bands, classical musicians, filmmakers, just everybody

has said, “yeah, I will come over and play with you.” It’s just really been that kind of experience. Like one of the things you first said, it wasn’t just book reading, although I am a big fan of book reading—but there has to be some big discovery and excitement—the excitement of discovery. That’s been my experience personally. Anyone who’s come to the Archives says, “Oh my God! I didn’t know he wrote that.” Generations have to discover everything for themselves. You can tell a kid, “Go read this book.” And one day they will call you up and say, “Mom, did you see this book!” You say, “Yeah, I’ve been telling you about it for 20 years but you didn’t hear me.” They discover it for themselves. There has to be that natural evolution of personal discovery. We are going through that right now. The Archives has allowed a lot of kids and musicians—without me hitting them over the head or anything like that—to discover Woody in their own time. We talked about what Woody culled from his friend Jesus Christ and what Bob Dylan culled from his friend Woody Guthrie and now you have kids culling from their friend Bob Dylan. Bob brings them back to Woody and so now there are all sorts of interesting connections that kids are discovering. They knew about Bob Dylan, but they might not have known about Woody Guthrie. It’s like “Hey man, did you know about this guy Woody Guthrie?” I get a real kick out of that.

JE: And you’ve reached out like you’ve said about Billy Bragg albums *Mermaid Avenue* and *Mermaid Avenue Volume 2*—those were all upon your invitation. A Native American Trio called Black Fire recorded his songs at your invitation. So who knows how many more are going to be invited and they get to expand on their musical experience and it all comes from Woody.

NG: What’s great about this is that this is a creative process. Woody left behind the lyrics but he didn’t do musical notations. He would write a key up in the corner of the lyric sheet, or something like that, but he never wrote the music. So we really had this opportunity to use the sounds that were current. Every decade has a tone, whether it’s disco or Lindy Hop or folk or blues or rock or whatever. So using the tones—and I say that in a very deep sense, not just the chords, but the tones of today. These guys come in, or I match them up. I’m a good matchmaker too. That’s maybe the Jewish side of me. I will look at a lyric and I will say, oh my God the tone of this—the tone of the words—this just feels like The Ramones. (Laughter) So in a way I’m liberated from the folk music small circle that my dad had. Knowing his ideal of inclusiveness and growing up with that, whether it was religious or musical or anything else. By the way, our religion on our birth certificate, it says, “All or none,” under religion. (Laughter) I got the message that it’s all about inclusiveness so I’m completely free and relaxed about inviting a classical composer or a punk rock musician or a rock musician or somebody from another country. I really look at the lyric and I think where do I want to go?

JE: What are you going to do with a rap artist?

NG: Oh, I've worked with a number of rap artists. Absolutely. First of all, Woody was well versed in talking Blues. Talking Blues is the ancestor of rap music. So a lot of his material is absolutely primed for rap. As a matter of fact I have recorded with Michael Franti from Spearhead, an early rap artist and some others I have worked with. I dare you—you can't name anywhere I haven't gone with this material, because this material is for everybody.

Chapter 24 – 1:52

How to Remember Woody

John Erling: How should we remember Woody?

Nora Guthrie: July 14th, every year, say hi. (Laughter) *This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is Made For You and Me*. Think about it. Just think about it. What does that mean to you and where do you want to take that message? How far do you want to take that message? I once had an older man who was an engineer, come up to me and say, "I love the work you are doing. I was an engineer at the Bonneville Dam. I met your dad and he wrote songs about me hammering and shoveling." You know, I can make myself cry when I talk about it. My dad was very inclusive. He wrote a song for everyone. He wrote songs for oil workers, plumbers, teachers, a baseball player, a Jewish kid and a Christian kid. I can just go on and on. I will never ever complete that work. None of us will ever complete that work. We just have to keep including and keep going.

JE: So can we hear you sing a little bit of it? *This Land Is Your Land*? You almost sang it before.

NG: I'll say the poetry of it. It's poetry to me.

This land is your land, this land is my land From California, to the New York Island From the redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream waters, this land was made for you and me.

JE: I've got tears in my eyes. That was wonderful. Thank you so much.

Chapter 25 – 0:37**Conclusion**

Announcer: (*This Land Is Your Land* music playing in the background) Nora Guthrie has just shared her remembrances of her father Woody Guthrie. We encourage you to click on our For Further Reading Section and Our Bookstore to continue your study of Woodrow Wilson “Woody” Guthrie. We would like to thank our Founding Sponsors for making this oral history website possible on VoicesOfOklahoma.com.