

American MASTERS

20
years

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press information

Director Q&A

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AMERICAN MASTERS Woody Guthrie: Ain't Got No Home



Producer, director and writer Peter Frumkin has traveled the planet making documentaries on such diverse subjects as global environment, Burmese refugees and technology and engineering. He recently turned his attention to folk music in *AMERICAN MASTERS Woody Guthrie: Ain't Got No Home*, premiering Wednesday, July 12 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Here's what Frumkin has to say on the subject of the quintessential American songwriter:

Q: What do you think compelled Woody Guthrie to rise so far above his humble childhood?

A: Woody didn't actually have such humble beginnings. His family was fairly prosperous, at least by the standards of the time and place in which he was born. The Guthries had one of the nicest houses in Okemah, Oklahoma – until it burned down just before Woody was born. But even in the replacement house, the young Woody was surrounded by books and music and never lacked for food and clothing. They were doing well. But then they suffered a series of horrible tragedies that thrust them all into abject poverty and broke apart the family. That's what he was able to rise above – the loss of both family and material comfort. What enabled him to do so? This is speculation of course but in my view it was first, an uncontrollable need to express himself combined with the talent to do so. And second, he had a burning sense of social justice that made him want, or need, to get his message out there.

Q: If he had come of age after the Dust Bowl, after the Great Depression, how do you think his songwriting would have differed? In other words, how great an impact did those historic episodes have on his artistic development?

A: The hard times that Guthrie lived through certainly inspired some of his greatest work. And I do think that Guthrie was the right person at the right time – the perfect confluence of history and an artist uniquely able to address that history. But it's worth noting that he was creative and quirky and expressive before he understood the horrors of his time. It's also true that he wrote and drew and painted about a huge range of topics other than these big historic events. So I think he would have been equally expressive in the absence of these events. But they sure did give him a focus for a large part of his creative career.

Q: Guthrie once said, "Left wing, chicken wing, it's all the same to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em." What do you think he meant by that?

A: I think it meant very simply that he was looking for an audience. He wanted to entertain and he wanted to get his message across and he'd sing to anyone who was willing to listen.

Q: Every few years folk music seems to enjoy resurgence. We're seeing it today with the release of Bruce Springsteen's Seeger Sessions album (Springsteen appears in Ain't Got No Home). Why is folk music still relevant?

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Q&A

A: Good music is good music and there are always going to be people who want to listen to good music. And any musical form that wants to stay vibrant reinvents itself periodically. Folk music does that very well. Part of that reinvention can be a rediscovery of some of the older material. Bruce Springsteen takes these old folk and spiritual and work songs and makes them his own. He reinvents them in a way that works really beautifully. My guess is that Pete Seeger was doing the very same things when he made them part of his repertoire. Similarly, a number of artists over the last decade have rediscovered and reinvented Woody's music. Billy Bragg and U2, as well as an ongoing stream of folk and country artists, have recorded Guthrie's music in ways that are very fresh. But it's broader than that. The Boston punk band the Drop Kick Murphys, the Klezmates, a world-famous Klezmer band, Blackfire, a Native American metal band from Arizona – they've all put new spins on Guthrie's music and they're all really great. The amazing thing is that when you hear Guthrie's lyrics in these contemporary musical settings, the lyrics are absolutely fresh. There's no way to tell that they were written 50 or 60 years ago. This tells me that we shouldn't pigeonhole Woody, or maybe anyone else, as a "folk" artist. Good songs are good songs and they work in a lot of contexts.

Q: What did you learn during research for this film that surprised you the most?

A: Visiting the Woody Guthrie Archives and sifting through his papers was always both revelatory and overwhelming. The guy just had so many interests and could write about such a broad range of subjects. Some of the material is filled with social or political ruminations; some of it is incredibly personal – letters to his family members, thoughts on his kids. This was a man who wrote in an almost compulsive manner and to see one person's inner life in that kind of detail is powerful.

I also enjoyed reading about the history of the country during Woody's life. They were dramatic times from the oil booms of the '20s straight through the Red Scares of the '50s. It's hard to imagine – and good to recall – how bad things were in the '30s for a lot of Americans. It's even harder to imagine now what a robust left there was at the time. There was to some extent an idealistic feeling that things could get better through citizen participation – and with the help of the government. Sure, people were cynical about politicians but they also came to believe that the government could do some good, as it did through New Deal programs. We all might be a little better off if more people felt that way today. You know, this land is your land.

Q: What do you think is Woody Guthrie's greatest contribution?

A: Woody wasn't the first person to sing topical or political songs. But he did write great songs that had a lot of substance. And he sang them in a musical vernacular that made this very substantive and pointed music available to a lot of people. He reminded us that songs – or any art for that matter – can be can be weapons for social change, for organizing people. This became important not so much in his prime but near the end of his life, in the '60s. At that point he served as an example that music could carry a powerful message. It could be about more than cars and love. And this lesson was transmitted at a time when music became the primary and most powerful form of social expression. Since the early '60s a lot of popular music from folk to rock and roll to punk to rap has carried a message. That's in part due to the influence of Woody Guthrie.

Q: Most people associate Guthrie with music – not art. But he was as passionate about his drawing and painting as he was his songwriting. Has his art been equally embraced?

A: It hasn't been but I think that's changing, and it deserves to change. More people have become aware of his art over the past few years and in 2005 Woody's daughter Nora, along with Steven Brower, produced a truly beautiful book (*Woody Guthrie Artworks*, Rizzoli) that collected a lot of

Woody's visual art in one place. It gives a great sense of the range of his work from cartoon-y and political to abstract and sensual. It's really worth seeing.

Q: Along with his classic folk anthems, Guthrie wrote a number of children's songs, including the still-popular "Riding in My Car." Why did he move from politically-charged music to kid's music?

A: He was writing, as he always did, about what was going on in his life. He was head-over-heels in love with his beautiful daughter, Cathy Ann. He was involved with her in a way that he hadn't been with his first three kids. What could be more inspirational than that? But it's not as if he wasn't also writing about other things – about unions and struggle and love and whatever. The children's songs didn't replace other writing – it was just one more direction and it happened to be something that he was very good at. I can tell you that as the parent of a young kid, those songs still work!

Q: If Guthrie were alive today, what do you think he'd be writing about?

A: Your guess is as good as mine or anyone else's. But my guess is that Woody would take on a lot of the issues today that he did 60 years ago. There's no shortage of injustice in the country, no shortage of unnecessary suffering, no shortage of corrupt corporate executives and lying politicians, no shortage of poor people getting slammed while rich people get richer. The thing is, he might not have to write too many new songs because the ones he already wrote are unbelievably on the mark today. Listen to his great song "Deportees." It's a song about hard working illegal immigrants being scorned. Last time I read the paper, that was still on the front page.

But I also suspect that Woody might have changed his instrumentation a bit if he were alive today. He could be very in-your-face. He didn't put up with anything from anybody. He wasn't going to change his tune for anybody. He was known to sing songs with a single chord. To me it sounds very punk. So I have an image of a contemporary Woody with a beat up Stratocaster banging out very smart, very pointed, hard-core punk songs. But that's just my guess.

Q: What makes Woody Guthrie an American Master?

A: Guthrie's life and art, which are inseparable, reflected the life of the nation. He was born in Oklahoma when the frontier was still a very recent memory. He experienced the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. He was involved in the great union movements of the '30s and '40s. He became part of an urban intellectual scene in New York. He was in WWII. And all of this intense national and personal history provided the basis for his work. He reflected what was going on in the country. On top of that, he worked in a medium that was very American. His musical roots were in rural American music – country music, ballads, African-American songs. And love of the country and its citizens was always a big part of what he did. You don't get much more American than Woody Guthrie. As for the "Master" part, I'll just note that Woody is the archetype for a particular kind of music – the basis of the whole thing. And I'll let his thousands of songs speak for themselves.

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