



AFTERSCHOOL EXCHANGE ACTIVITY

WOODY GUTHRIE -- LIFE AND ART

PREPARATION

Grade Levels: 4-8

This activity is most effective if delivered in at least two separate 45-minute periods with groups of approximately 12 students.

Prerequisite:

Group leaders will need to have access to the Video on Demand service, available to New York state educators at <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/ity>. If you do not live in New York State, get a password by calling 1-800-323-9084.

Materials:

- Flip Chart/Markers
- Posterboard
- Paints, brushes
- Pencils
- Computer with Internet access or printouts of Web sites (optional)

Academic Goals:

Children will:

- Develop skills in non-fiction reading comprehension.
- Interpret primary source material. (see below)
- Using multiple media to convey ideas.

Social Goals:

Children will:

- Participate in group decision-making and follow through.
- Communicate with others in a group.

STEPS

Activity 1: Introduction (40 minutes)

1. Ask kids to sit in a circle around a flip chart. Ask if anyone knows the song, “This Land Is Your Land.” Remind them of the words to the chorus and sing it with them twice. Ask if they know how the song starts. While some may know all or part of the first verse, it is unlikely that anyone will know the entire song. Play the first segment of the

video, “Endless Skyway, Golden Valley.” Encourage the group to sing along with the video.

Tell them that later, they will have a chance to make music and paintings like the writer of the song, Woody Guthrie.

2. Tell kids a few facts about Woody Guthrie's life. Highlight the main points by using a flip chart that says:

- Born poor in Oklahoma, raised in rural farm towns -- loved music and painting
- 1930's: farms in Oklahoma and Texas had years of drought, got the nickname “Dust Bowl.”
- Woody moves with family to California.
- Works as singer and radio host, writing songs about the working people he sees in his travels.
- 1940's: Moves to Coney Island in New York City. Enlists in the Merchant Marine and then the Army to fight in World War II.
- 1950's: Ill with a disease of the nervous system that eventually hospitalizes him permanently. He died in 1967.

3. Prepare kids to watch the video of “This Land Is Your Land” by asking them to watch and listen for things they think come directly from Woody's life story. Tell them that after the video, you want them to help you match pictures and lyrics to the biography on the chart.

4. Watch “This Land Is Your Land,” pausing the video at the end of the song, when the music stops and the screen fades to black.

5. Discuss the song with the group, asking:

- What did you see or hear that made you think of his early farm life?
(example: “wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling.”)
- What about his travels to California?
(pictures of Hollywood, San Francisco, fruit farms, redwood trees.)
- When he moved to New York?
(Urban street scene and verse: “In the shadow of the steeple, I saw my people; By the relief office I seen my people...”)

Then, show the rest of the video, which gives biographical information about Woody Guthrie (The Woody Guthrie Story).

6. Explain to students the difference between primary and secondary sources:

- Primary source: Woody Guthrie's song lyrics come from him, and describe how he experienced things. They are a primary source.
- Secondary source: The paintings in the video are by Kathy Jakobsen. They are her interpretation of what Woody's life was like. They are a secondary source.

Ask kids what other kinds of primary and secondary sources they can think of. Be sure to praise kids who come up with interesting or unusual answers.

Activity 2: Art from Experience (two to four 40-minute sessions)

1. Opening Discussion: Ask the group: As you heard about Woody Guthrie's life and how he took his experiences and made them into songs and pictures, did any of your own experiences come to mind?

As kids describe their experiences, write them down on flip chart paper. This chart will make a good reference point later when kids are working on their projects.

2. Mention that Woody Guthrie often used familiar tunes and gave them new words. He grew up in a singing family and knew hundreds of folk songs. With his words, the songs had a fresh and important meaning. His drawings seem simple, but they carry their message clearly. (Hold up copies of his dust storm drawing and his "Punching the Clock" cartoon, found in the book *This Land Was Made for You and Me* by Elizabeth Partridge.)

3. Tell students that they are going to create "primary source" materials that document their experiences, as Woody Guthrie created primary source materials about his. Ask each student to think about an experience from their own lives and, as Woody Guthrie did, either paint or draw a picture or write a song or a rap that reflects that experience. Allow several sessions for kids to work on their projects.

4. Have each student present their work to the group. If your environment allows, display the art work and song lyrics for others to see, or invite family and friends for a performance of the group's original work. Songs and art work can also be published on the Web.

Optional Activity: Presenting Woody Guthrie's Life (two 40-minute sessions)

If kids are interested in Woody Guthrie, you may want to let them explore his life history further. The following project can be done at another time or with the above activities. It is based on having the group interpret primary source material. For this part, you will need the book, *This Land Was Made for You and Me*. If you can only get one copy of the book, your small groups will have to meet at different times or you will need lots of photocopies. If you need to have everyone working at once, try to have a copy for each small group.

If your group is not experienced with working independently in small groups of 3-4, you may prefer having them work on this project one small group at a time. That way, you can help facilitate each group more closely. You will still need to schedule a time when all the groups come back together for the final presentation.

1. Explain that, as a group, you will be presenting scenes from Woody Guthrie's life. The kids will be able to choose if they want to paint, as Woody did, write and/or sing songs, as Woody did, or tell a story. But they will have to base their scenes on information taken from Woody's own work. Remind students that Woody's works, like their drawings and paintings, are primary source materials -- so, as they make projects that interpret his works, students are actually creating secondary source materials.

2. Show kids the book, which is filled with pictures by Woody, his songs and music, and excerpts from his letters and writing. Ask kids to get into groups of 3-4. Each group should find a picture, song or quote that interests them. The group should then figure out:

a) How does this picture/song/quote fit into the life story of Woody Guthrie?

(For example: One of the images in the book is a painting of hobos by a railroad. When did Woody see this and what was he doing at the time?)

b) What art project can we make based on this picture/song/quote? Some ideas are:

- Paint a picture of something Woody Guthrie wrote or sang about
- Tell a story based on a Woody Guthrie song or drawing
- Write an extra verse for one of Woody Guthrie's songs

3. Web site exploration: If your program has technology available, encourage students to learn more about Woody Guthrie on the Internet. There are many interesting Web sites related to Woody Guthrie:

- The Woody Guthrie Archives, www.woodyguthrie.org, has extensive resources, including lesson plans.
- A biography of Woody Guthrie is available at www.rollingstone.com/artists/bio.asp?oid+4165&cf+4165.

Woody Guthrie was also a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee in 1988; you can find information about him at: <http://www.rockhall.com/hof/inductee.asp?id=115>

4. Final presentation: Bring the group back together. These projects were planned quickly; so only expect each presentation to only be about 3-5 minutes long. Have students make their presentations in chronological order.

5. After the presentations, pull the pieces together by showing how they are beginning to construct a biography of Woody Guthrie, telling the story of his life by drawing on primary sources. They are interpreters and creators, using the older material to create something new. This is what the writers of non-fiction are doing.

Extension:

Interested students can read Woody Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*.

CREDITS

This AFTERSCHOOL EXCHANGE activity was developed by Jonathan Shevin, Executive Director of Standing By Water, using the following resources:

Guthrie, Woody and Jakobsen, Kathy (illus). *This Land Is Your Land*. New York, Little Brown and Company, 1998. (This is the book that is available on Thirteen's Video on Demand service.)

Neimark, Anne E. *There Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me*. New York, Atheneum Books, 2002. (3-6 grades)

Partridge, Elizabeth. *This Land Was Made For You and Me*. New York, Viking, 2002. (7-12 grades)