

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. Woody was the second-born son to Charles and Nora Belle Guthrie. His father was a cowboy, land speculator, and local politician. His Kansas-born mother profoundly influenced Woody in ways which would become apparent as he grew older. Slightly built, with an extremely full and curly head of hair, Woody was an unconventional boy from the start. A keen observer of the world around him, during his early years in Oklahoma, Woody experienced the first in a series of tragic personal losses - the death of his older sister, Clara - would haunt him throughout his life. This followed by the financial and physical ruin, and the institutionalization of his mother would devastate Woody's family and home, forming a uniquely wry and rambling outlook on life.

In 1931, when Okemah's boomtown period went bust, Woody left for Texas. In the panhandle town of Pampa, he fell in love and married Mary Jennings in 1933, the younger sister of a friend and musician named Matt Jennings. Together, Woody and Mary had three children, Gwen, Sue and Bill. It was with Matt Jennings and Cluster Baker that Woody made his first attempt at a career, forming *The Corn Cob Trio*. However, if the Great Depression made it hard to support his family, the Great Dust Storm, which hit the Great Plains in 1935, made it impossible. Due to the lack of work, and driven by a search for a better life, Woody headed west along with the mass migration of "dust bowl refugees" known as "Okies." These farmers and unemployed workers from Oklahoma, Kansas, Tennessee, and Georgia had also lost their homes and land, and so set out with their families in search of opportunities elsewhere. Moneyless and hungry, Woody hitchhiked, rode freight trains, and even walked to California, developing a love for traveling on the open road --a practice which he would repeat often.



By the time he arrived in California, in 1937, Woody had experienced the intense scorn, hatred, and antagonism of resident Californians who were opposed to the influx of outsiders. Woody's identification with outsider status would become part and parcel of his political and social positioning, one which gradually worked its way into his songwriting, as evident in his Dust Bowl Ballads such as *I Ain't Got No Home*, *Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad*, *Talking Dust Bowl Blues*, *Tom Joad* and *Hard Travelin'*. His 1937 radio broadcasts on KFVD, Los Angeles, and XELO (just over the border in Mexico) brought Woody and his new singing partner, Maxine Crissman or *Lefty Lou*, wide public attention, while providing him with a forum from which he could develop his talent for controversial social commentary and criticism on topics ranging from corrupt politicians, lawyers, and businessmen to praising the humanist principles of Jesus Christ, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Union organizers.

Never one to become comfortable with success, or being in one place for too long, in 1939 Woody headed east for New York City.

In 1940, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Woody in a series of conversations and songs for the Library of Congress. Also during the 1940s, Woody recorded extensively for Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records. The recordings from this period, which have been reissued under the Smithsonian Folkways label, continue to be touchstones for young folk music singers/songwriters everywhere.



Woody Guthrie continued to write songs and perform with the Almanac Singers, the politically radical singing group of the late 1940s, some of whose members would later re-form as the Weavers, the most commercially successful and influential folk music group of the late 1940s

and early 1950s. Managed by Harold Leventhal, a trusted friend and confidante, and supported by music publisher Howie Richmond, the Almanacs helped to establish folk music as a viable commercial entity within the popular music industry.

Leaving New York and traveling in his large new-bought Plymouth, Woody received an invitation to go to Oregon, where a documentary film project about the building of the Grand Coulee Dam sought to use his songwriting talent. The Bonneville Power Authority placed Woody on the Federal payroll for a month and there he composed yet another remarkable collection of songs: The Columbia River Songs, which include *Roll on Columbia* and *Grand Coulee Dam*.



Despite Woody's constant traveling and performing during the 1940s, and with the final dissolution of his first marriage, Woody strenuously courted an already married young Martha Graham dancer named Marjorie Mazia. Woody and Marjorie were married in 1945.

This relationship provided Woody a level of domestic stability and encouragement which he had previously not known, enabling him to complete and publish his first novel, *Bound for Glory*, in 1943. A semi-autobiographical account of his Dust Bowl years, *Bound for Glory* generally received critical acclaim. Together, Woody

and Marjorie had four children: Cathy, who died at age four in a tragic home accident, Arlo, Joady, and Nora Lee.



Moved by his passion against fascism, during World War II, Woody served in both the Merchant Marine and the Army, shipping out to sea on several occasions with his buddies Cisco Houston and Jimmy Longhi.

In 1946, Woody Guthrie returned to settle in Coney Island, New York, with his wife and children. The peace he had fought so hard for seemed finally within his reach. It was during this time that Woody composed *Songs to Grow On*, a collection of children's songs which gained him a great deal of success, yet again. However, soon thereafter, Woody's behavior and health began to deteriorate, becoming increasingly erratic and creating tensions in his personal and professional life. He left his family once again, this time for California with his traveling protégé, Ramblin' Jack Elliott. In California, Woody remarried a third time, to a young woman named Anneke Van Kirk and had a daughter, Lorina Lynn.



Becoming more and more unpredictable during a final series of road trips, Woody eventually returned to New York, where he was mistakenly diagnosed several times as suffering with everything from alcoholism to schizophrenia. In fact, Woody suffered from Huntington's Chorea, the degenerative disease which would gradually and eventually rob him of all his health, talents and abilities. This was the same disease which had forced his mother's institutionalization thirty years earlier.

In 1954, Woody admitted himself into Greystone Hospital in New Jersey, one of several that he would go in and out of for the next thirteen years. While at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens, New York, Woody Guthrie died on October 3, 1967.

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DOMINANT ALLELE**