

Guthrie's Bound for Glory

A Book Review by Alan Boye

There was a time when Woody Guthrie, the man and not just the name and legend, traveled with thousands of other jobless and homeless men across the United States looking for work, or a home, or just plain looking. That was before Woody Guthrie, the name and legend, was associated with the revival of the American folk ballad, labor movements and "Dust Bowl Ballads".

Bound For Glory is Guthrie's autobiography and covers the period in his life (1912-1942) before his recognition as the most important creator of songs of America. In it he spends over half the book (perhaps too much) talking about the first twelve years of his life in Okemah, Oklahoma and neighboring oil boom towns. The details of his fights, schooling, and watching his first home burning to the ground, and his realizations that thinking and believing, alone, do not change the nature of things, fill the section. His continual recognition that most people considered his mother insane, and his coping with his great love for the lady is weaved excellently through-out the first half of the book.

The Oklahoma section, although inconsistent in terms of style, and often times unbalanced in form, is the most haunting, piercing and revealing writing ever done about the dust bowl days of Oklahoma. What it lacks in literary talent it makes up for in enjoyability and effectiveness. In fact, in over-all effect it surpasses John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Not only do I now find myself remembering Guthrie's Oklahoma instead of Steinbeck's, but the details of how that Oklahoma left its psychological imprint on a man and a nation are, although not as well done, more vivid and lasting than Steinbeck's.

Given the Guthrie childhood, the remainder of the book, (which for no evident creative purpose, skips around in time and sequence), explains Guthrie's actions, inactions and values. Once, while in New York, he turns down a high paying job in a swank nightclub because the people he would work for do not fit his ideal of honesty and sincerity. He sneaks out a back door and walks through the streets of New

York singing and playing his old guitar. Soon there is an entire blockfull of kids, old men, women, blacks and whites, walking and singing along with him. To Guthrie, this performance was worth countless others at the nightclub. The unity of the people on the street was more genuine than he could have ever found in a club.

Guthrie is always searching for, and finding that ideal in all corners of America. Later that same evening when he is drinking "coffee and likker" on a houseboat with some new found friends, he excuses himself and he and a friend walk outside and sit on a barge to talk. After a while they realize that the barge has started to move. His friend jumps off and runs along side:

"Jump! Jump quick! I'll catch your guitar! Jump!" He was now trotting along side at a pretty fair gait. "Jump!"

I set myself down on the hind-end of the moving load of gravel and lit up a cigaret and blowed the smoke up toward the long, tall Rockefeller Building. Will had a big grin in his face there by the light of the moon, and he said, "Got any money on ya?"

I flipped a rock into the water and said, "Mornin' comes, I'll feel in my pockets an' see."

"But where'll ya be?"
"I dunno."

And he is off once again looking for that ideal that he was convinced existed in America.

Bound For Glory is not dishonest or too idealistic. Guthrie does not leave out a bit of the horror, corruption and evil in what he has seen. However, the picture one is left with is that the good will overcome the evil in America, and that the country will survive or be born again from the frankness and earnesty of the people of its roots. And in them alone exists the freedom of all our inner-selves:

It's always we've rambled, that river and I.
All along your green valley I'll work till I die.

My land I'll defend with my life if it be,
For my Pastures of Plenty must always be free.

A vagabond with silver
comes begging at your door
Pleading for your soft lips
and a place to sleep on your floor
You bring him hidden beauty
of sunrise and the moon
But now you are asleep
and he must leave too soon
And I've begged at this backdoor
too often to know that your hands
are only silver, your body only gold.

A wanderer at your window
a ribbon in your hair
A cat to sleep for drifters
and a bunk for those who care
Walking alone at midnight
you beg the poorest to stay
While cats yawn in the morning
the trainmen walk away
But I've climb up this window
too often to know that your hands
are only silver, your body only gold.

A begger at your bedside
his silver at your feet
You whisper to call your tenants
to the place where the lovers meet
You bring them hidden beauty
of sunrise and the moon
But now you are asleep
and they must leave too soon
And I've begged at this bedside
too often to know that your hands
are only flesh, your body only cold.

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Two Poems by Murry Stafford

I found your face dissapearing
As each quiet night was hardly crowded.
To your once glad grin
Any adventure I'd suppose was gone

I knew the noisy day
at your address in long rooms,
But many strong shoulders
stand at me
As baggage in a line
and never have helped.

It is all so american.
A thought that I won't
express however,
so only one knew.

A vagabond with silver

A song in favor of
the smile
that I will remember

you,
most of all
in past days of childlike
catching
last if I will be not
finding the way in
finding the way out
without even feathers
when you felt you were flying
remember
from the days we spent
left
you smiling at birds
over clouds
over even
my head

counting on you
to go
and praying that
you wouldn't

while a razorblade wind
slashes through my hair
with the lust of a half-crazed murderer
i burglarize the
early morning space
with moves that couldn't
be matched even by
Billy the Kid