

Lost lyrics change anthem to protest

By **JEFF RANDALL**
Senior staff writer

For most people, the mention of Woody Guthrie brings about hazy recollections of grade-school sing-alongs and a few fragmented melodies.

Some people are more familiar with the man and his songs. They can relate stories about his anti-commercial, pro-leftist ways and spout off titles such as "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Ya," "Bound for Glory," "Union Maid" and, inevitably, "This Land is Your Land."

But Guthrie was more than a singer, songwriter and occasional activist. For a period of 15 or so years, beginning in the mid-1930s, Guthrie was a spokesman and a conscience for America.

"Woody Guthrie's music and lyrics are literally a national treasure," said Elly Muller, spokeswoman for the Smithsonian Institute's upcoming touring Guthrie exhibition. "And it's a pity that more people don't know very much about him."

Even more people don't know the whole story of Guthrie's most famous song, "This Land is Your Land." What is now a thoroughly celebratory and optimistic song about the American landscape and way of life was — in its original version — a sidelong glance at American injustice and a protest song.

"Without knowing the whole song, the listeners and Guthrie's legacy are both being somewhat cheated," Muller said.

Linda Knopp, an assistant professor of English at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, will present her research on the omitted verses of "This Land is Your Land" Saturday morning as part of the

Great Plains Music and Dance Festival and Symposium.

It is the missing verses, the last one in particular, that give a sarcastic and critical aspect to this song that is lost in most sing-along versions.

The original last verse goes:
*One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple/
By the Relief office I saw my people/
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering/
If this land was made for you and me.*

These lyrics were undoubtedly a reflection of Guthrie's own experiences. He was born in Okemah, Okla., in 1912. In 1935, he joined the migration from the Dust Bowl to California.

It was on the West Coast that Guthrie first began actively contributing to his legend as a folk artist of immeasurable influence.

He wrote and sang songs about the people he had seen back home, and the people he saw arriving in California every day. "Do Re Mi," "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Ya" and "Pastures of Plenty," along with dozens of other songs, reflected Guthrie's love of the land and the people who relied on it for a living, as well as his exasperation with the government's inability to aid them in their plight.

But it was Guthrie's leftist politics, along with his admitted resentment of the spotlight, that kept Guthrie's greatest songs and his most ardent beliefs buried somewhere in history.

His off-and-on relationship with the Communist Party and his loyalty toward union

organizers were used against him in the anti-red hysteria of the Cold War. In addition, his long battle with Huntington's Disease left him hospitalized after only 1½ decades of performing.

But by the time he died in 1967, Guthrie's legacy had been passed on to contemporaries such as Pete Seeger and up-and-comers such as Bob Dylan.

Today, Guthrie's works are again emerging with the help of re-issues and tributes such as the Billy Bragg/Wilco project, "Mermaid Avenue."

Who knows — in a few years Guthrie's songs may be more well-known and widely heard than they were in his lifetime. And better yet, they will be played in their entirety.

Literature Preview

The Facts

What: A Rock-Bottom American Song: The Unsung Verses of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" with Lisa Knopp
Where: Cornhusker Hotel, Arbor Room
When: 9:45 a.m. - 11:15 a.m.
Cost: Free for students, \$75 for registration to symposium
The Skinny: UNL Alumnae returns to sing praises of Woody Guthrie



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