

To my music man, Tom Ratcliff

VIKING

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# Preface

## Rambling 'Round

“I hate a song that makes you think that you’re not any good. I hate a song that makes you think you are just born to lose. I am out to fight those kind of songs to my very last breath of air and my last drop of blood.”

Woody Guthrie could never cure himself of wandering off. One minute he’d be there, the next he’d be gone, vanishing without a word to anyone, abandoning those he loved best. He’d throw on a few extra shirts, one on top of the other, sling his guitar over his shoulder, and hit the road. He’d stick out his thumb and hitchhike, swing onto moving freight trains, and hunker down with other traveling men in flophouses, hobo jungles, and Hooverilles across Depression America.

He moved restlessly from state to state, soaking up songs: work songs, mountain and cowboy songs, sea chanteys, songs from the southern chain gangs. He added them to the dozens he already knew from his childhood until he was bursting with American folk songs. Playing the guitar and singing, he started making up new ones: hard-bitten, rough-edged songs that told it like it was, full of anger and hardship and hope and love.

Woody said the best songs came to him when he was walking down a road. He always had fifteen or twenty songs running around in his mind, just waiting to be put together.

Woody visiting the Shafter Farm Workers Community near Los Angeles, 1941.

*This Land Was Made for You and Me*

Sometimes he knew the words, but not the melody. Usually he'd borrow a tune that was already well known—the simpler the better. As he walked along, he tried to catch a good, easy song that people could sing the first time they heard it, remember, and sing again later.

Woody sang his songs the old-fashioned way, his voice droning and nasal, the words sharp and clear. Promoters and club owners wanted him to follow their tightly written scripts and sing the melodious, popular songs that were on the radio. Whenever they came at him with their hands full of cash, Woody ran the other way. "I had rather sound like the cab drivers cursing at one another, like the longshoremen yelling, like the cowhands whooping and like the lone wolf barking, than to sound like a slick, smooth tongued, oily lipped, show person."

Just after New Year's Day in 1940, Woody set off on one of his unannounced road trips. He left his wife and three kids in a shack in Texas and headed for New York City. It was a long, cold trip in the dead of winter, and every time he stopped in a diner he heard Irving Berlin's lush, sentimental song, "God Bless America," on the jukebox. It was exactly the kind of song Woody couldn't stand, romanticizing America, telling people not to worry, that God would take care of everything.

Woody thought there was plenty to worry about. The Great Depression, which had begun in 1929, was grinding on. For years, desperate, hungry people had been tramping the roads and riding the rails, looking for work or handouts. In Europe another world war was raging, threatening to pull America into the bloody conflict.

Bits of tunes and snatches of words swirled in Woody's mind, and a few weeks later in a cheap, fleabag hotel in New York City, his own song about America came together. Using an old Baptist tune for the melody, Woody wrote "This Land Is Your Land." His song caught the bittersweet contrasts of America: the beauty of our country, and the desperate strength of people making do in impossibly difficult times. Across the bottom of the sheet Woody wrote in his neat script, "All you can write is what you see," and put the song away.