

Woody Guthrie Roll On Columbia: The Columbia River Songs

Foreword

by Alan Lomax

The torrent of song pouring through these pages mirrors the beauty and power of the Columbia River itself. To Woody Guthrie, poet of the rain-starved Dust Bowl, this mighty stream of cool, clear water, coursing through ever-green forests, verdant meadows, and high deserts was like a vision of paradise. He saw the majestic Grand Coulee Dam as the creation of the common man to harness the river for the common good — work for the jobless, power to ease household tasks, power to strengthen Uncle Sam in his fight against world fascism. Listening to the whine of generators in new factories, looking up at the shining grid of towers and power lines, Woody opined that maybe "the whole damn country ought to be run by electricity."

Grand Coulee and Bonneville Dams, and The Bonneville Power Administration were part of a long-term New Deal effort to bring cheap public power to rural homes and underdeveloped areas — a highly popular and successful program which private power companies were fighting tooth and nail. The year was 1941, and America was falling in love with its folk songs, so the Bonneville public power people decided to use a ballad-maker to tell their story in a film and a series of radio programs. This made sense, since many Northwesterners had a taste for countrified music.

I was then in charge of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress. I had worked with Woody on a prizewinning CBS broadcast, edited his Dust Bowl record album for RCA and recorded his oral history for the Library's collection. I knew that he was a serious artist and a major talent, whose ballads ranked with the best in the American tradition. Thus when the Bonneville Power Administration people called and asked me to recommend a ballad-maker, Woody was the first choice.

Nothing ever worked better. The two dozen-plus ballads Woody churned out in less than a month put steam into BPA's campaign and helped win the day for public power.

Unlike most topical pieces, Woody's Columbia River songs have staying power. The superb anthem, "Roll On, Columbia" and others like "Hard Travelin'" and "Ramblin' Around" are now folk standards. Listening to Woody singing the whole cycle is like riding through the Rockies on the Wabash Cannonball. I feel sure that his 26-song toast to electrified democracy will soon be transformed into a ballad opera or a musical.

This was not the first nor was it to be the last song cycle that Woody Guthrie put together. Earlier his much-broadcast *Dust Bowl Ballads* told the story of the dust-blighted Middle West as effectively as *The Grapes of Wrath* and with a poignancy that will keep that tragic period long in memory. Next came the classic, *The Union Maid* and a bundle of other union songs still being sung on America's picket lines.

When Woody heard that I was looking for morale-building songs for World War II, he appeared with a sign pasted on his guitar — "THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS" — and a sheaf of spirited songs that were broadcast all during the war. Turned down by his draft board, Woody joined the Merchant Marine and composed ballads about the Murmansk run and other sea adventures.

Later Moe Asch of Folkways Records asked him to record the children's songs he knew. Since nursery rhymes had been in short supply in the Oklahoma Panhandle, Woody composed two records full of ditties that have been delighting children and parents ever since. Indeed, it's hard to estimate how many songs he composed — certainly many hundreds — for he was always at it, frailing his guitar or leaning over his typewriter. He was a speed typist and could write three or four thousand words before

breakfast, just to warm up.

Woody claimed to be "nothin' but a little rusty-voiced guitar picker." His modesty, which was genuine, relates to the grandeur of the causes he espoused, and to his reverence for the working class. Here he resembled Gorki. However, you must also understand that he was of Welsh descent. Guthrie is from the Welsh *Guifrie*. His looks — the wiry, small frame, delicate hands and feet, curly to kinky black hair, and tipped-up nose — are typical of Wales and his character even more so. The Welsh are known for their fiery, volatile temperament, ready wit, and skill with words and music. They are famous for their abilities as speakers and singers. Thus Woody came by his talents naturally.

Never were these talents better displayed than in the Columbia River cycle, here for the first time published. Here Woody improved upon a dozen stanza forms and rhyme schemes, drawn from a wide range of American folk popular styles. These baselines include several forms of the blues, especially the Talkin' Blues, of which he was the undoubted master. The poetic style is equally varied.

At times the language is inspirational and romantic:

"She winds down the granite canyon and bends across the
lea, Like a prancing dancing stallion down her seaway to
the sea..."

Often it is rich in hyperbole:

"I been from here to yonder, I been from sun to sun,
But the Coulee Dam's the biggest thing that man has ever done..."

Many lines ripple with laughter:

"I pulled out my pencil and scribbled this song,
Figgered all them salmon fish couldn't be
wrong..."

Many have the drive and the beat of machines on the job:

"I'm a jackhammer man from a jackhammer
town, I can hammer on a hammer till the sun
goes down.
I hammered on the Boulder, hammered on the
Butte, Columbia River on the Five Mile
Schute..."

There's a lovely play with the sound of the words — using assonance, and especially alliteration, so dear to the Celts:

"In the misty crystal glitter of the wild and windward
spray..." "Making chrome and making manganese and light
aluminum..."

Like some western Chaucer, Woody assembles a colorful cast of western characters to

tell the story of Northwest public power's early days. Some he met on his wanderings, others are mythical folk. They have come to build dams and power lines and settle the land. There are dust bowl farmers whose chickens have been laying flint rock eggs; migrants who come with the dust and are gone with the wind; hard gambling, hard rambling, hard traveling hoboes; tree-topping lumberjacks; jackhammer men born with a jackhammer in their hands; powder monkeys who push the handle and raise the country ten miles high; girls in love with longshoremen; salmon that run every four years like politicians; and the great historical bum: the hobo worker, who built the rock of ages in the year of one, signed the contract to raise the rising sun, and calls the Coulee Dam the biggest thing that man has ever done.

In the manner of his ballad-making ancestors, Woody set his Columbia River song cycle to familiar melodies. There's great wisdom in this ancient practice. The well-loved tunes tug at the hearts of listeners, guaranteeing attention. Woody's choice of melodies, including "Old Smokie", "Irene", "Brown's Ferry Blues", "Pretty Polly", "One Dime Blues", "Cumberland Gap", and "Muleskinner's Blues" comprised a solid core of folk and country melody, varied enough to set many moods. Perhaps more important it gave him time-tested baselines which were known so well that the new lyrics literally sang themselves into existence.

The magic of song is the match of the sounds of the words to the flow of the tune. Woody knew how to make these contacts sizzle, leap, laugh and thunder. In fact, his new settings of tunes are so artful that the originals often vanish from memory. For example, he used the chorus of "Irene Goodnight" with entirely different effects in "Ramblin Around" and in "Roll On, Columbia." In both, Leadbelly's classic song simply disappears. The starkly brooding melody of "Pretty Polly" endows "Pastures of Plenty" with somber melancholy. Even more remarkable is the transformation of the nonsense piece, "I Was Born Ten Thousand Years Ago" into the wonderful tall tale epic, "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done", the second song in this collection.

All in all, Woody's Columbia River saga was a remarkable achievement. In one month this Oklahoma song-slinger gave the Northwest a budget of ballads that capture its pristine beauty and its sanguine spirit. They remind us of the halcyon days of the New Deal and of its compassionate and progressive character. They are, moreover, among the most singable of America's folk songs, as Woody demonstrates in his electrifying non-electrified performances, recorded more than forty years ago and now rediscovered and reissued in an accompanying album. It is Woody at his wonderful best.

His voice carries utter conviction, resounding with truth, warmth and humor. The quality is manly; the rather gruff, pleasantly nasal, low-pitched tone which is common among western ballad singers is good for ordering a drink at a bar in a strange town late at night. His perfect enunciation rings every vowel and consonant like a bell. There are beautiful long, rounded o's, and d's and is and k's with the smack of two bagger hits.

The moans and howls and mutters of his harmonica combine the sounds of a lonesome freight train whistle and a semi's klaxon. The vibrant underbelly is Woody's hard-driving Carter family lick on his guitar; the left hand constantly hammering on, pulling off and sliding to create all sorts of syncopations in the base runs and melody, the right hand frailing with a very flexible pick to make rhythmic rattles and rustles and bumps such as a hobo hears in a freight car or a hitch-hiker feels in the cabin of a big cross-country trailer.

Woody's sound is of America on the move down that long, lonesome road. No set of amplifiers or fuzz-boxes or computers can match it, just as few other poets or song makers can equal Woody's outspoken candor and his stubborn concern with social justice. Long

ago, Walt Whitman called for writers to listen to America's native voices and to create a truly indigenous poetry. What he could never have expected was that, when this poet appeared, he would sing his poems to guitar and harmonica accompaniment and that the whole country would sing along with him.

New York, September 1987