

# This Day in History... July 14, 1912

## Birth of Woody Guthrie

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. He was a major figure in American folk music, writing over 1,000 songs, including his most famous, "This Land is Your Land."

Guthrie grew up among cowboys, farmers, Native Americans, coal miners, and railroad workers. His parents were successful business owners, until Huntington's disease changed his mother's behavior, and the family split up. At about 15, with his mother in an institution and his father in Texas recuperating from burns, Woody left home and played the harmonica to earn extra money.

After discovering an old guitar behind a drugstore, Woody began performing at barn dances and revival meetings, earning a living despite the Depression. During the Dust Bowl, he joined with thousands of others who moved to California in search of work.

He found work at a radio station and began writing protest songs that were later collected on his first album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

In 1939, Guthrie traveled to New York City, where he became active in the folk movement with Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger. He became known as "the Oklahoma cowboy." In 1940, Guthrie wrote his most famous song, "This Land is Your Land." He wrote it in response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," which he felt was overplayed on the radio.



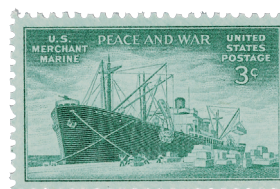
*Guthrie provided music for a documentary on the Grand Coulee Dam in 1941.*

In New York, Guthrie hosted another radio show and provided music for the dance performance, *Folksay*, which included text from Carl Sandburg's book, *The People, Yes*. In 1941, Guthrie moved to Portland, Oregon to provide music and some narration for a documentary about the Grand Coulee Dam. He was greatly inspired by his time there, writing 26 songs, including "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On," "Pastures of Plenty," and "Grand Coulee Dam."

Guthrie returned to New York and joined the folk-protest group, the Almanac Singers. He wrote thousands of pages of poems and prose and worked on his autobiography, *Bound for Glory* (which was later made into a movie). During World War II, Guthrie performed on the *Labor for Victory* radio show. He also wrote "The Sinking of the Reuben James," about the first US ship sunk by Germany in the war. In 1943, he joined the Merchant Marine, participating in convoys in the Battle of the Atlantic. Guthrie entertained his fellow crewmen with songs on their long voyages. He was also aboard a transport ship that was torpedoed by the Germans during the Battle of Normandy in 1944.



*From the 1998 Folk Musicians issue.*



*Guthrie served with the Merchant Marine during World War II.*



*Guthrie wrote a song about the sinking of the Reuben James.*

By the late 1940s, Guthrie's health began to decline, and he was diagnosed with Huntington's disease. There were few treatments for it at the time, but his fame helped raise awareness of the disease. The folk revival of the 1950s and 60s made him a prominent figure again, but he died on October 3, 1967.

Guthrie's songs about migrant workers, ordinary people, and America's beauty made him a folk legend. Despite his misfortunes, his music expressed a hopeful view of life. Guthrie's style, which influenced such artists as his son, Arlo, and Bob Dylan, earned him a spot in the Rock and Roll Music Hall of Fame.

# This Day in History... July 14, 1912

## Birth of Woody Guthrie

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. He was a major figure in American folk music, writing over 1,000 songs, including his most famous, "This Land is Your Land."

Guthrie grew up among cowboys, farmers, Native Americans, coal miners, and railroad workers. His parents were successful business owners, until Huntington's disease changed his mother's behavior, and the family split up. At about 15, with his mother in an institution and his father in Texas recuperating from burns, Woody left home and played the harmonica to earn extra money.

After discovering an old guitar behind a drugstore, Woody began performing at barn dances and revival meetings, earning a living despite the Depression. During the Dust Bowl, he joined with thousands of others who moved to California in search of work.

He found work at a radio station and began writing protest songs that were later collected on his first album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

In 1939, Guthrie traveled to New York City, where he became active in the folk movement with Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger. He became known as "the Oklahoma cowboy." In 1940, Guthrie wrote his most famous song, "This Land is Your Land." He wrote it in response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," which he felt was overplayed on the radio.



*Guthrie provided music for a documentary on the Grand Coulee Dam in 1941.*

In New York, Guthrie hosted another radio show and provided music for the dance performance, *Folksay*, which included text from Carl Sandburg's book, *The People, Yes*. In 1941, Guthrie moved to Portland, Oregon to provide music and some narration for a documentary about the Grand Coulee Dam. He was greatly inspired by his time there, writing 26 songs, including "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On," "Pastures of Plenty," and "Grand Coulee Dam."

Guthrie returned to New York and joined the folk-protest group, the Almanac Singers. He wrote thousands of pages of poems and prose and worked on his autobiography, *Bound for Glory* (which was later made into a movie). During World War II, Guthrie performed on the *Labor for Victory* radio show. He also wrote "The Sinking of the Reuben James," about the first US ship sunk by Germany in the war. In 1943, he joined the Merchant Marine, participating in convoys in the Battle of the Atlantic. Guthrie entertained his fellow crewmen with songs on their long voyages. He was also aboard a transport ship that was torpedoed by the Germans during the Battle of Normandy in 1944.



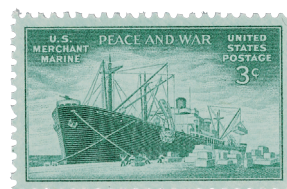
*Guthrie wrote a song about the sinking of the Reuben James.*

By the late 1940s, Guthrie's health began to decline, and he was diagnosed with Huntington's disease. There were few treatments for it at the time, but his fame helped raise awareness of the disease. The folk revival of the 1950s and 60s made him a prominent figure again, but he died on October 3, 1967.

Guthrie's songs about migrant workers, ordinary people, and America's beauty made him a folk legend. Despite his misfortunes, his music expressed a hopeful view of life. Guthrie's style, which influenced such artists as his son, Arlo, and Bob Dylan, earned him a spot in the Rock and Roll Music Hall of Fame.



*From the 1998 Folk Musicians issue.*



*Guthrie served with the Merchant Marine during World War II.*