

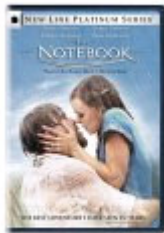
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Man in The Sand A Talk with Nora Guthrie

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Whether you know it not, odds are you've sung a Woody Guthrie Song. Best known for "This Land is My Land, This Land is Your Land" (This Land), Woody Guthrie has long stood as a symbol of the perseverance of man through hard times.

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Recently the image of Woody has begun to change with the discovery of his notebooks containing literally thousands of lyrics to songs about everything from Ingrid Bergman to Blintzes.

Nora Guthrie (Woody's Daughter), Billy Bragg, and Wilco have worked together to get some of these new songs recorded and released. The result are the critically acclaimed [Mermaid Avenue](#) and [Mermaid Avenue, Vol. 2](#). We sat down with Nora just as the film [Man in The Sand](#) - documenting this great project was released on DVD



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How did the whole Mermaid Avenue Man in the Sand project start? Where did it first begin?

Here at the Woody Guthrie Archives. In a little office on 57th Street.

What was the impetus to pursue putting together an actual album of songs and have somebody head up the interpretation of your dad's lyrics into music?

It's a very organic process and it started with first finding the stuff. Finding the stuff. That's where it starts. And after we discovered that there were so many hundreds of lyrics that no one had ever seen and I include most people on the Earth in that sentence. There's maybe like three people that had ever looked through these files and boxes of my dad's stuff that had been sitting around for forty years.

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But the lyrics are what surprised me. That there were just so many lyrics that I had never heard of and my family hadn't heard of. And don't ask me why they were never recorded, because I can only suppose why. I wasn't there so I don't know the real answer to that one. But anyway, I just started finding these great lyrics and they sounded, I mean just as a piece of written word poetry, I just loved them. And I started tacking them up on my tack board here. I thought "Hmm, someday I want to do something with this stuff." And then cut to the chase, I found Billy Bragg and asked him if he wanted to work on it. He kindly said, "Yes."

Of all the musicians, especially the ones who touched your dad's work over the years, how did you connect with Billy Bragg and how did you select him?

Well, I think it was like part faith and part design. I didn't have much of a design actually. I just had my antenna up. One of the things I really liked about Billy was he didn't come with a lot of baggage. And I don't mean that in a critical sense, but he really didn't know that much about Woody. Here we're discovering lyrics about topics that were so un-Dust Bowl balladeer, Un-Grand Cooley Dam, even un-folk song actually in a lot of their sensibility to me. So I wanted to work with someone who didn't have a lot of history with Woody in one sense and didn't have a lot of "should's;" what Woody should sound like, what Woody Guthrie should be like, what a Woody Guthrie album should be. I thought I just wanted to start from scratch and start with a lyric and see where it goes. And then there was Billy.

I had seen him perform and knew of his stuff. He had a wonderful sense of humor, which I liked. I really associated that humor with my dad's humor as well. Also he had the very standout political persona, which I also liked. Someone who could really be up front, which my dad was very up front politically. I thought that a lot of the American artists, for some reason, tend to be more reserved in some ways with their politics on stage. I don't know why that exists.

I remember going to a concert of Billy's and he just stood up there and sang with his electric guitar. He said "Now I was at a Union thing last night and we gotta do this and we gotta do that, and socialism is blah, blah, blah." And I went "Oh, this is so cool." This was someone who really talks on stage and uses that persona as part of his music. It's very "punk politics." So it all kind of fell together and I just liked dealing with someone who was that forthright. Not that there aren't other people who are like that, but he was the first one that I came across.

Now, were you involved with the decision to add Wilco to the project or was that something that Billy brought?

Billy brought Wilco. Yeah, that was his instinct. He said he wanted to have some kind of American connection and he was a big fan of Wilco's. So he thought that that would be a good collaboration for him as well.

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**What was it like working with Billy Bragg?
Obviously the project seemed, from the
documentary to scope, far beyond just the music
and the songs, but also the film itself.**

It's absolutely a pleasure working with Billy Bragg. He can be tough at times. He can be somewhat, opinionated is not quite the right word, but he has his ideas. Whether it's political, or aesthetic, or artistic. When I first saw him perform it was on a stage and there were a lot of other different artists. He came up and was invited to sing with a number of different artists during the show. Some of them were rappers and some of them were folkies, and some of them were rockers, and some of them were punkers. And I thought "God, this is so cool. This guy has this ability to just dance between all these different styles of music and different aesthetics, and without a sense of judgement." He could easily play with a rapper and then go and play with Pete Segar the next moment.

I thought that I really needed someone who was a very good collaborator that wouldn't see himself either above Woody's writings or below his writings. I needed someone to see eye-to-eye because that's what a true collaboration is, like Rogers and Hammerstein. These guys have to see eye-to-eye and Billy was able to do that. He was able to just look Woody's lyrics straight in the eye and say "Okay, you got the words, I got the tune. This is where we're going to go." And he was also very good at collaborating with Wilco. So, that was one of the essential ingredients that I wanted to have, was of a hub-man who was very good at collaborating and dealing with a lot of different kind of people, which is kind of what socialism is, isn't it? It was kind of a musical socialism here.

A lot of people I noticed in the last couple of decades have become more seperative in a certain way. They kind of write their songs and they sing their songs and there's been a little bit of a resurgence in collaboration in the past few years, but at that point I was kind of feeling like Man, everyone's out for himself. Everyone's doing their own thing and people have forgotten to sing other people's songs on their own albums. They all do their own stuff by themselves.

I thought it's time for collaboration. It's time for a return to people singing each other's songs and one person writing words and one person writing music. I just thought it would be fun to do that and Billy is just a terrific collaborator and is able to connect with everybody that works on the process, whether it was Natalie Merchant or Corey Harris, and Wilco and me, and everybody. He really set a nice table we could all sit at together.

**When I first saw the cover for Man in the Sand, I did a double take. Because at first, it was like "Oh, Billy Bragg. Oh wait, no, no, that's Woody Guthrie."
During the process, were there times that you felt like Billy was channeling your dad or he did things that reminded you of your father?**

Well, Billy to me has always...and especially since I've gotten to even know him better and better...it's like a

science fiction movie where it's like one person and he's born in five different countries, well one spirit that's divided up into five different countries. And one of them lives in London and one of them lives in Coney Island. It's like the more I got to know him, the more I realized his spirit is so unbelievably similar, it's like their brothers in a funny way. And I didn't know any of this at the time. I really didn't feel this way at the time. It was really kind of destiny that just said, "Work with Billy. Work with Billy" and I said, "Okay, all right." But as I got to know him, I feel that he's so similar to my dad in his own language, in his own dress, and his own instrumentation. I don't mean the disguise, you know what I'm saying? The spirit of the guy underneath the clothing he wears or the way he sounds is so similar that it's almost eerie.

I've told him that so many times I feel like he has found his brother in a way by finding Woody, or a really close friend because he tends to be a bit of a loner in a social way, although he's very gregarious on stage. Like my father was really comfortable talking to 5,000 people, but on a one-to-one, he was a little bit elusive in a social way. There's something about that that's similar. And I thought these two guys would be like best friends. Like if there's one person on Earth that Billy could talk to, it would be my dad. And would feel comfortable talking to and would want to talk to and would be friends, and visa-versa. I thought my dad would just totally enjoy Billy's company as a human being.

There are a couple of other souls like that. I don't mean to just exclude these two, but there's a friendship there. There's a real soulful friendship that exists between these guys. And I felt it once Billy got into the project in a certain way, he kind of got past the appearances of it and then he really got into my dad and he got into the spirit of it. That's when things really started to shape and gel. I mean he has gone out and discovered so much about my dad under so much information that I never knew. He talks about him, plays his music.

But he's done more for my father than any one in an awfully long time. And not out of an obligation. That's the big difference. Some artists do it like in a tribute kind of way, like an obligation. Billy is totally there. He's not doing it out of obligation. He's doing it out of real love. And that makes a difference. I think that's what made the difference in why Mermaid Avenue did so well.

Well I think it definitely shows when you see him in the movie going back to your father's homestead, sitting among the rubble of the house, going "Where's Woody's Graceland?"

That's very funny, isn't it?

Yeah, and I think it's really ironic that here we have one of America's most distinguished voices of the people and yet when you go to scratch the surface of finding him, the things that you find really are just the notebooks and the songs.

Isn't that great? There's something about that. I mean sometimes I kind of flip-flop. One part of me says "So all the big to do about Woody..." there are no monuments or plaques or nobody knows where we lived in Coney Island, like where's our Graceland? I mean, it's like a shabby tenement apartment on Coney Island. I was just out on Coney Island the other day and there's not a sign, and I don't mean literally a plaque or a sign, but there's not even a memory or a history that my dad lived there for so long and wrote all this material out there. So much of his New York City story takes place on Coney Island and in Brooklyn, and there's not a clue. There's not a whiff anywhere that this existed. And then sometimes I kind of pull back and I think there's something very poetic about that and elusive. It's like maybe Woody really meant it when he said "I come with a dust and I go with the wind," but it wasn't just a poetic metaphor. Maybe there's some truth in what he was saying in that there's something beautiful about not having a plaque. We just have to remember through his music and through what his artistry brings back to the people, it will be remembered or forgotten. Whichever way the people want to go, that's where Woody's going to go. We're not going to force him on anyone. We're not going to create a monument and we're not going to make a Woody Guthrie "This World" type thing. It's like if he's relevant, he'll be relevant and if he's not, then we'll just sit low.

I thought one of the touching moments in the movie was when you and Billy drew a man in the sand and you laid down on the man's chest and it was almost like for this project and the way it materializes Woody, that he's as close as just drawing the figure in the sand. You don't have to search down a plaque on Coney Island. That he's very much present.

Yeah. It's funny because my husband is from Germany and when he first came to the United States, the first thing that struck him was how everyone was trying to become like a museum or have a sign made for them. He was laughing and said, "It's like it's such a Disneyland culture. Everyone needs a museum and when you drive down the road, it's like 'here's the museum of this and the museum of that'." Or the Hall of Fame. That's what he would say. "Everybody has to have a Hall of Fame." It's like if we don't have a monument, we don't exist. Or if we don't have a plaque, we don't exist. I've kind of had to go through this a lot with my dad because people tell me he existed and people send me stories and people sing his music. And then there are periods of time when nobody sings his music and he's really forgotten. And there's just a couple of people who keep his stories around. You know we don't have press agents that keep our name in the public eye. Things like that. It's not manipulated.

That thing with the writing in the sand and knowing that a tide will come and will wash that figure away. It washed my dad away and it's going to wash Billy away. And then there's going to be some other guy. It's this kind of continuity and we have to really struggle to believe there's such a thing as our spirits in a way will permeate and aid or help or be present somehow. We have to avoid the plaque syndrome that our particular culture is just so enamored with.

It gets to a point, especially in New York, where every corner has a plaque and it's like "Oh, so and so lived here," great. You know, the irony. I have to laugh at that so much. I'm on 57th street and there's a plaque on the building across the street that Bella Bartok lived there for six months and wrote something there. I happen to love Bella Bartok, so that's okay. But I had to laugh. You know I walk by Ledbelly's apartment all the time and there's not one plaque that said or suggested that Ledbelly lived there. The apartment my dad had on Charles Street and then later on 14th Street where he wrote Jesus Christ and so many other songs, there's not a plaque on 14th Street or a historical plaque. There's a building on 6th Avenue where he wrote This Land is Your Land and there's not a plaque.

And there's so many other people, whether it's Ledbelly or Woody or so many other people that are not "plaquable" for some reason. I suppose there's some kind of beauty in that actually. It's kind of perfectly Woody. It would be so anti something or other to have not have the plaque. You know? Like the boy writing on the guitar was almost like anti-instrument, but using, redefining a guitar as something as more than just a musical instrument or other than a musical instrument. He describes it as a machine. It kind of makes me personally have to re-evaluate every single day, like do I want to plaque? Would it be right to have a plaque? I mean part of me says "Gosh, how come there's no plaque for where he wrote This Land is Your Land? How come there's no plaque for Ledbelly?" And then I have to pull back and say "Because. Just because." Maybe if the people ever want it, then people will do it. It's not my job to create that type of thing. It's not what I do. I mean I just make records and things like that. Anyway, it's kind of a funny irony, isn't it?

Definitely

A beautiful irony. Or even like one of those most wonderful moments was going out to Coney Island with Billy and being on the beach where my father's ashes are scattered and my mother's and my sister's. I have to giggle because in Okemah, Oklahoma, there's a gravestone and there's like a family graveyard. It's kind of big. It has a beautiful drawing of Woody and "Woody Guthrie from Okemah, Oklahoma" and his sister put it up. It's a wonderful, personal memory that she put up, but of course, he's not buried there. He's buried in Brooklyn. And I had to laugh and it was like I was walking on this beach and showing Billy where the ashes are and I have to giggle to myself and I go "I don't think, anybody knows this." I mean other than the family, it was never written about. It was never talked about it much and to be honest, no one has even asked. It's like no one ever said to me, "So, where's your dad buried?" Or if you go by, are there ever flowers there? You know? Like did anybody ever come out and just put flowers where his ashes are? Does anybody know? I don't know. It seems to be that Woody just wants to keep it that way, so I kind of follow his lead on all these things.

So your dad left behind thousands and thousands of lyrics. Did you have input in picking which ones would make the record? Did you have favorites?

Well I started with thirty or forty that I first sent to Billy just as an invitation, just as a beginning. And then once he got involved, once he got hooked, he said, "Well, let me come to your archives and let me see what else you have." So then he started coming in and spending some time and picked out some stuff himself. He worked with Wilco for the first time in Chicago and then afterwards, they said, "Well, can we look at stuff too?" So they came over and they picked out some stuff as well. So by the time we got to Dublin, everyone had had a chance, they had their moment in the sun in the archives and pulled out stuff. California Stars was Jeff's pick and that was not one of my earliest selections. And Billy picked Ingrid Bergman, which was also not one of my early selections. But Unwelcome Guest was on my hit list from the beginning. So really both CD's really represent all of our tastes, which is so great because I saw things they wouldn't have seen and they saw things that I wouldn't have seen. And even between Billy and Jeff, they're such different types of artists. I mean for Billy to find Hanns Eisler was miraculous, Eisler on the Go, which was my favorite personal song on the first one. And Jeff always finds things like Remember the Mountain Bed, which is on the second CD. Washed in the Blood of the Lamb Jeff picked and California Stars.

So between all of those, I mean you just have the perfect union of family, politics and good lyrics and love songs and everything else. Then a lot of the stuff was just recorded. We had about 40 or 45 tunes recorded in Dublin. Then the choice was "Do we do two CD's? Do we do one? Do we do one and then another one? How are we going to work this?" I think we all kind of agreed in the very beginning, once we heard the material, that it would be best to start with one because underneath it all, I thought "Maybe I'm going to be lynched for doing this." This is a huge moment in time, particularly in folk music history because we were kind of really coming out with un-Guthrie-esque lyrics. I mean if you have Woody as your Dust Bowl icon, a lot of this stuff is going to blow that. It's what I called loving deconstruction. And it's all true. I just tried to tell the truth, that he wrote stuff like this.

So there was a moment when we don't know how everyone is going to react to this and I could go through the fire for this, you know? So we first say "Well, let's do one" and then there was the stuff that came out and the movie as well. There's some additional cuts there. We were totally surprised by the response, which was so positive. And then really so many people got in touch with us and said, "Are you going to do another one?" Well we already had one in the can, then we decided to release the second one.

So are there plans to publish the thousands of songs?

I've never believed in publishing a ton of stuff all at once because it's too overwhelming. I know because I sit in the archives every day and see people in there researching. 15,000 documents. Woody was an unbelievable writer and lyricist. You could get seasick if you're in there for more than two or three hours reading. So what I decided for

myself to do is to release, in increments, different aspects of his writing.

I'm working on a new album right now with Rob Wasserman, a brilliant, virtuoso bassist. He's played with everybody. I wanted to create an album using the base and it's Woody's kind of poetry and diary entries that are written in prose style. We're recording now. It's going to be one instrument and one band, but with different artists doing the vocals so that there's continuity. Musically, there's continuity. We get a variety of artists that are matching up with different poems and so far, we've recorded with Ani DeFranco did the first piece and Michael Franti (Spearhead) did the second piece, and Lou Reed did the third piece. This is going to be a very selective group because I've picked out certain pieces of writing that I think are very representational of different qualities of Woody's either style of writing or interests. So it's very selective. There will only be about ten people on the album all together, doing these kind of like a jazz version of recording when you go into a lot of improvisation, musical improvisation that goes on. So that's the album I'm working on now.

Also Woody wrote a lot of songs on Jewish topics while he was living out on Coney Island, which in the 1950's was the huge kind of Yiddish/Russian/Jewish/Yiddish speaking community. He was highly influenced by the stories and the culture that were around him. He wrote a lot of material on Jewish cultural things like blintzes, latkas, and Hanukah and all kinds of stuff like that. So I've been in touch with the Klesmatics. So we're hopefully in the next year we'll be working together on the Klesmatics writing music to these Jewish topical songs.

So I'm sure a Klesmer Woody Guthrie will definitely change the perception of somebody who sees him only as a Dust Bowl icon.

But you can't make this stuff up. It's all there. That's what we find in the archives. There's so many different kinds of stuff. So many songs about blitzes and latkas. Who else can record it if not a Klesmer band? I mean, who am I going to get to set music to it? So there's a lot of things down the road.

There's a new children's album that we've been working on that's going to come out this year as well where we have some unusual suspects again, singing Woody's songs, like Cissy Huston and Taj Mahal, and you know Kim Wilson from Fabulous Thunderbirds. She's on that one. It's not a kid's album for kids, it's a kid's album for parents. We're focusing on the spirit of Woody as a father, you know, just this one little area. So that's what I'm trying to do. Not record everything. I can't record everything, and I can't even publish anything yet. It's just like little by little, focus on different aspects of his writing. So that's like four or five albums already that we're going to be working.

And there's a lot of publishing coming out too like books. There's three new young adult biographies being written as we speak. They'll be published and on the shelves in

the next year or two. And they're absolutely beautiful books.

There's kind of all this interest that really Billy created, that has lead to new books. There's a new adult biography coming out next year. There hasn't been a biography written on Woody in almost twenty years now. So, in other words, if you're a 20-year-old now and you're trying to look at Woody Guthrie's life, and you go and you read the one biography that was written by Joe Kline almost twenty years ago, things have changed. There will not be any mention of Mermaid Avenue or Ingrid Bergman or Eisler on the Go in the old biographies. That's the problem. So you really need a new biography to play catch up with all the information that's coming out of the archives right now and the new work that the artists have been doing to tell Woody's story.

It's really different now than it was fifty years ago. The story. So in that sense, Billy has single-handedly changed folk music history. Because what's going to be written in twenty years or even next year, about Woody, will be really different than anything you've read before. Because that information hasn't been published as yet. They're just doing it now.

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