

WOODY

When was the first time I heard a Woody Guthrie record? At Camp Echo Lake the summer of 1944? On Oscar Brand's folk music program on WNYC in 1945? I listened to a lot of folk music including Woody Guthrie during my years at CCNY from 1945 to 1950. And it was reinforced in 1951 by the wonderful coincidence of having Folkways Records on the same floor as the union I was working for, Local 38 ILGWU. We were located in the WEVD Building, 117 West 46th Street. Being "neighbors," I met Moe Asch who created Folkways, and his assistant, Marion Distler. It was Marion whom I sheepishly asked if I could buy some records. She said, of course. I asked how much, and she said \$1 for 10 inch and \$1.50 for 12 inch records. They were retailing for \$4.95 and \$5.95. And I bought a lot of records, including every Woody Guthrie record they had.

We shared the third floor for almost three years, until I left for the army in 1954. Though I saw Moe Asch dozens of times, my attempt to make small talk was rebuffed. I found him unapproachable. I knew that he was the son of the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, but I couldn't use that as an entrée to conversation: "Mr. Asch, my mother read several of your father's stories." "Mr Asch, I am glad that you recorded all those union songs, and Jewish folk songs, as well as American folk songs." "Mr. Asch, I guess producing folk music records must be a tough way to make a living."

The decade from the mid '40s to the mid '50s was filled with music for me: jazz, and classical and folk. I had discovered 52nd Street, started collecting jazz records, and there was the Dixieland Revival with groups playing Friday nights in ballrooms on Second Avenue like Stuyvesant Casino. I was exposed to opera as a super at the Metropolitan Opera House, and classical music during the summer concerts at Lewisohn Stadium, the summer home of the N.Y. Philharmonic, and my friends and I sang folk songs and went to the many "hootenannies" around town. Folk singers were everywhere. In concert halls, in Washington Square Park, in church basements, and in rented storefronts.

It was January or February 1954. Sylvia and I were getting together with our friends Lennie and Thelma Rubin. They had a fantastic apartment at 10 Fifth Avenue (thanks to Thelma's uncle,) and in addition, they had a car. We took the subway to Astor Place and walked over to the their apartment. From there, we drove to a "hoot" we had read about. The MC was Will Geer who was a fairly well known actor. I did not know of his folk music involvement (or of his longstanding relationship with Woody Guthrie.)

Writing this in 2012, I must admit, the location of the "hoot" is a bit fuzzy. I thought it was in a storefront on Second Avenue where about 10 or 15 rows of benches were set up. Sylvia believes it was a church basement in Greenwich Village, and the benches were arranged in a semi-circle. There was a raised stage in the front, and someone collected the few dollars admission as we entered. The program consisted of about six or eight performers, and Will Geer introduced them and kept the show moving, by interspersing stories and anecdotes between the acts.

Toward the end of the evening, a shabbily dressed man came in, carry a banjo case in one hand and a guitar case in the other. I was sitting at the end of the bench, on the center aisle in my row. The newcomer put down his instruments and sat down next to me, by putting his rear on the few inches of bench that was visible, and pushing me over, to make room for him. Sylvia, Lennie

and Thelma moved down. I looked at my seatmate and smiled. When the performer on stage ended, Will Geer said, "I see Woody Guthrie is with us tonight." Turns out the shabbily dressed man sitting next to me was Woody. He got up, picked up his instruments, walked up to the stage, and took over. He talked a bit aimlessly, he played, and sang a few songs, but he mostly talked. Everyone was spellbound. It was 1954. Woody was 42 years old, but looked much older. We all knew the songs he wrote, but none of us, other than Will Geer, knew of his illness. Woody was enjoying himself on stage. A couple of times, Will Geer tried to wind it up. "Woody, how about ending with So Long, It's Been Good to Know You?" Woody ignored him. The audience left their benches and gathered around him. Then Geer shut off the lights. Everybody protested, but Geer ignored them and made it clear that the "hoot" was over.

Lenny offered to drive Woody wherever he wanted to go, and Woody said he would certainly appreciate it, and gave Lenny an address which was fairly close. The five of us got into the car. Woody was friendly and easy-going. I do not remember any indication that he was not well—no noticeable tremor, stumbling, or slurred speech. It was exciting to be in his company. The most important folk singer of our time. We were big fans of Pete Seeger and Leadbelly, but it was Woody who wrote The Dust Bowl Ballads (including "So Long..."), and This Land Is Your Land. He was a great song writer, a terrific folk singer. He was authentic. I should have asked him for his autograph. I did get his imprint on the left side of my pants.

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