

SINGER SONGWRITER STAGE

THE WILDFLOWER! ARTS & MUSIC FESTIVAL & KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL *Celebrate Woody Guthrie*



The centenary of Woody Guthrie's birth, the hobo troubadour who died aged 55, is a couple of years away. In 1972 Marjorie Mazia, his second wife, and Woody's manager, Harold Leventhal, established the Woody Guthrie Foundation. Concurrently Marjorie, who passed away in 1983, lodged boxes of latter day Guthrie drawings, musings and unpublished lyrics in Harold's office. Circa 1992 Leventhal and Nora Guthrie, Marjorie's daughter, began delving into those boxes. The compactly housed Woody Guthrie Archive was opened in April 1996 at West 57th St, New York City, and recently relocated to Mt. Kisco. With Nora at the helm, for almost two decades there's been a virtual explosion of all things Guthrie.

In 1992 the songbook *WOODY'S 20 GROW BIG SONGS* was published. The album (of the same name), co-produced by Nora and her brother Arlo, was subsequently nominated for a Grammy. The annual Woody Guthrie Folk Festival began in 1998 in his birthplace of Okemah, Oklahoma, on the weekend nearest the musician's July 14 birthday. Given access to Guthrie's unpublished lyrics, Billy Bragg and Jeff Tweedy/Jay Bennett of Wilco composed the music for the collaborative recordings *MERMAID AVENUE* (1998) and *MERMAID AVENUE VOL. II* (2000). Translating unpublished Guthrie lyrics into Hebrew and setting them to music, the Klezmatics *WONDER WHEEL* (2006) picked up the Best Contemporary World Music Album

Grammy.

Meanwhile down in Texas, Woody's sometime home ... circa 1993 Jimmy LaFave and other Austin-based musicians took part in a Greg Johnson organised Guthrie tribute at La Zona Rosa. When Nora heard Jimmy's contributions on the live recording *PASTURES OF PLENTY*, she contacted him and a close friendship developed. In 1996 at Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum, Nora co-produced the musical tribute *HARD TRAVELLIN': THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF WOODY GUTHRIE*. The star-studded bill included Pete Seeger, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Bruce Springsteen, Arlo Guthrie, and at Nora's invitation, Jimmy LaFave. Memorialising the event Ani DiFranco's label, Righteous Babe, subsequently issued the live compilation *'TIL WE OUTNUMBER THEM* (2000). At Nora's instigation, Jimmy delivered a speech and sang at Woody's 1997 induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame. At the Y2K SXSW Music Conference in Austin, Jimmy contributed to the panel discussion *Made For You And Me: Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl Legacy*.

Given access to Guthrie's unpublished lyrics, since late last century Ellis Paul, Slaid Cleaves and Eliza Gilkyson are among the many artists who have placed Woody Guthrie co-writes on (their) album releases. In that regard LaFave remains the exception, although he is rumored to be working on some two-dozen previously unheard Guthrie lyrics. Helmed by LaFave and featuring

Paul, Cleaves, Gilkyson and others, and narrated by the late Bob Childers, the Woody Guthrie tribute-show *Ribbon of Highway, Endless Skyway* debuted during early 2003. Merging Woody Guthrie songs and narratives that date from the dust bowl era though the years following the world's second great war, in performance contemporary parallels are drawn including the style in which the songs are performed.

The foregoing introduction brings us neatly to the Singer/Songwriter stage at the Wildflower! Arts & Music Festival in Richardson, Texas on the evening of Sunday May 16. Titled *Walking Woody's Road: His Words And His Music*, this ninety-minute Woody Guthrie presentation, helmed by LaFave, featured Slaid Cleaves, Eliza Gilkyson and Terri Hendrix, aided by Lloyd Maines (guitar, Dobro, pedal steel), and La Fave's current band Radoslav Lorkovic (keyboards, accordion), John Inmon (guitar), Glenn Schuetz (bass) and Bobby Kallus (drums). In essence a curtailed edition of *Ribbon of Highway, Endless Skyway*, LaFave prefaced many songs with a, long or short, narrative that thematically meshed with the lyric of the Guthrie song subsequently performed.

LaFave sang the opening verse of *This Train Is Bound For Glory*, and in addition to instrumental solos from Radoslav, Lloyd and John, the lead vocal on subsequent verses was taken by Slaid, Eliza and Terri. Following his rendition of *Oklahoma Hills*, Jimmy delivered a narrative about the escapades of outlaw

and modern day Robin Hood, Pretty Boy Floyd that included the (politically motivated) Woody quote: 'We ain't never had a governor down there that was half as popular as Pretty Boy. He tried and done it wrong. The governor won't even try.' Supported by Lloyd's guitar, Slaid sang *The Ballad Of Pretty Boy Floyd*. Maintaining the theme of hardship and poverty, Terri performed *Pastures Of Plenty*, and, accompanying himself on accordion, Radoslav gave a rendering of *The Jolly Banker* a lyrically amusing, but sadly very honest number.

Following a Guthrie narrative on the subject of borders, Gilkyson, accompanied by LaFave's band, stepped up to the microphone for *I Ain't Got No Home*, although I don't recall that the Oklahoman's lyric originally contained references to Monsanto and BP. Supported by Eliza, Slaid and Terri, LaFave took the lead vocal, on the powerful protest song *Deportee (Plane Wreck At Los Gatos)*. The latter lyric recalls 28 migrant workers who perished on January 28, 1948 while being deported from California to Mexico. Terri Hendrix's performance of the children's song *Riding In My Car*, was prefaced by a narrative that included the Guthrie prioritisation: 'Kids first, hobo's second and rich folks last.'

Slaid and Eliza dueted on the former's inspirational Guthrie co-write, *This Morning I Am Born Again*. Prior to *Peace Call*—the audience also sang one verse—Gilkyson recalled finding this previously unheard song in the Guthrie Archive immediately prior to the commencement of the war in Iraq. Written during the early 1950s Cold War era, it surfaced on Eliza's *LAND OF MILK AND HONEY* (2004). Following Woody's October 3, 1967 passing, the novelist John Steinbeck wrote: 'Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings,' adding, however, that Guthrie's lyrics truly captured: 'the American spirit.' That said, the whole company were joined by other festival performers and closed with a rendition of *This Land Is Your Land*.

The two-hour Sundown Concert on Tuesday June 1 was listed in the official Kerrville programme as Woody Fest Night, the billed performers Jimmy LaFave, Ronny Cox and the Burns Sisters. Following some initial comments, Dalis Allen handed the microphone to noted photographer Jim Dirden, a current

member of the Woody Guthrie Coalition's Board of Directors. A free event since its inception thirteen years ago, Jim urged the Threadgill Theatre audience to attend this year's festival in Okemah. As was the case at Wildflower!, LaFave acted as master of ceremonies and narrator for the Kerrville presentation.

Having opened with *This Train Is Bound For Glory* and *Oklahoma Hills*, accompanied by Jack Williams (guitar) and Karen Mal (mandolin), Ronny Cox (guitar) took the stage and sang the Woody favourite *Hear The Wind Blow* (Lester Flatt/Earl Scruggs). Marie Burns, accompanied by siblings Annie and Jeanie, took the lead vocal on *Vigilante Man*, and following Jimmy's rendition of *Deportee*, Marie once again took the lead on her Woody co-write *The Hills Of Ithaca*. Appropriate, since the sisters are based in Ithaca, New York.

Lonesome Valley and Radoslav's party piece *The Jolly Banker*, followed by *Hobo's Lullaby* on which Ronny Cox took the lead vocal. LaFave having delivered *I Ain't Got No Home*, Annie Burns took the lead vocal on the Ellis Paul/Woody Guthrie co-write *God's Promise*. Called from the audience, Wisconsin-based singer-songwriter Johnsmith joined the company for *This Land Is Your Land* and they encoored with *Ain't Gonna Be Treated This Way*.

The musical portion of Kerrville's celebration over, in a festival first, there followed a showing of 1976 Hal Ashby directed biopic *Bound For Glory* in which the late David Carradine took the lead role of Woody Guthrie. The storyline only covers a fragment of Guthrie's life—the late 1920s through the early 1930s—with Ronny Cox taking the role of the musician/union organiser Ozark

Bule. In reality a composite and fictional character, Bule was modeled on Woody's acquaintances singer Cisco Houston and activist/actor Will Geer.

In an interview with Jimmy LaFave a few days after Wildflower!, I discovered that his Woody Guthrie connection dates from last century. 'When I lived in Stillwater, Bob Childers and I would go hang out at Woody's house before the walls began falling down. It's only 70 miles from Stillwater to Okemah. Woody was a big influence on Bob, and I was a Dylan fan. Of course Woody influenced Dylan, so I started delving into his music. Since then, Joel Rafael and I have thoroughly researched Woody's life.' In talking with Al Johnson, the Wildflower! producer, it transpired that the festivals hadn't discussed programming Woody Guthrie celebrations. Kerrville producer Dalis Allen added: 'We do a lot of things together, but the Woody celebrations fell into place independently. I loved the fact that I got to see it there, and then here with different players. Showing a movie, and that one in particular since it featured Ronny Cox, had been in my mind for a long time. There was too much segue there for me not to take advantage of it.'

While writing the Kerrville segment, Carolyn Rebecca 'Becky' Grider, a member of the Woody Guthrie Coalition's Board of Directors passed away. I'd like to dedicate this Woody Guthrie inspired feature to her memory. **Arthur Wood**



Photos:

26: L. to R. Radoslav Lorkovic, Eliza Gilkyson, Glenn Schuetz, Jimmy LaFave, Bobby Kallus, Terri Hendrix, Lloyd Maines and Slaid Cleaves

27 top: L. to R. Bobby Kallus, Glenn Schuetz, Eliza Gilkyson, Jimmy LaFave, Slaid Cleaves, Terri Hendrix and Lloyd Maines

27 bottom: L. to R. The Burns Sisters – Marie, Annie & Jeanie.