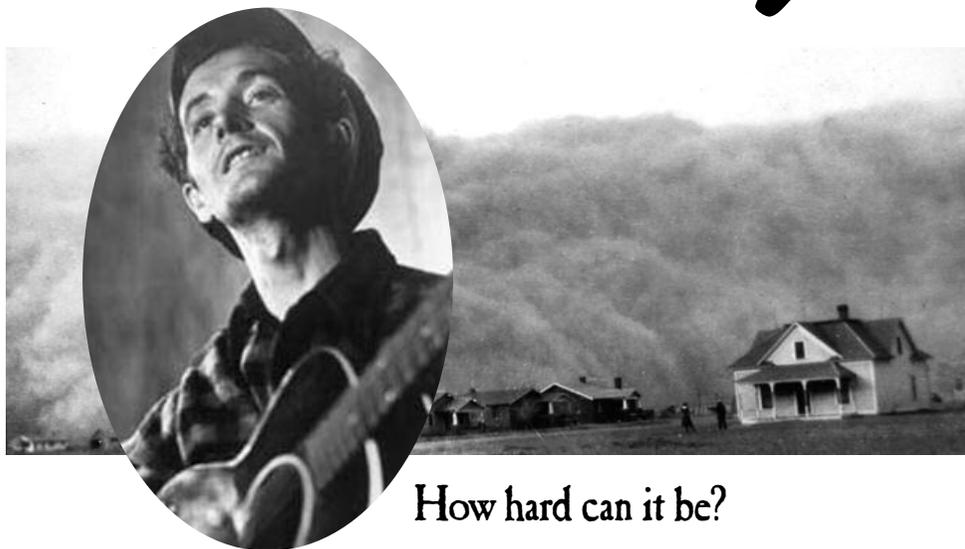


# Woody

For the People

*The creation of the Woody Guthrie Opera*



## How hard can it be?

I had never been to an opera before.

Never watched one on TV, never even listened to opera on the radio. And so, an acquaintance with intense classical training thought that was borderline criminal. So, off we went to see the opera *La Boheme*, considered one of the most popular operas in the world.

Now understand: I come from the folk singer, workboots, jeans and flannel shirt world. My brain is banjo-wired and my idea of a stage is a front porch with a couple dozen friends.

But this ... this was something else.

That night over 2,000 people crammed into the music hall in Cincinnati wearing gowns and all the men wore ties. Men with ties! At first I thought I stumbled into a insurance salesman convention.

So the lights dim and the music starts ... real musicians with real instruments. Then the actors came out, real singers with amazing voices. And the lights moved, and the sets moved, and the audience

was in hypnotic rapture through the entire production.

*Wow!* says I.

This is like an orgasm of three-dimensional art. Spectacular!

I really like this artform. I want to be part of it. I should write my own opera.

*How hard can it be?* I thought.

Well, it's pretty ding-dang hard.

## **The Humming Method**

I'm really good at composing and knowing how the finished piece should sound, it's just that I don't read music. I use what I refer to as the "humming method" of composition and arrangement. Once my song is written, if I hear a string section in my imagination, I will sit with someone who knows how to score arrangements and I will hum it to them. Literally. Each part, one at a time.

I discovered this incredible music notation software called Sibelius. You use a piano keyboard, hook it up to a computer with the Sibelius software and start composing. You can write the cello line, and it will play it back to you as a cello sample. Viola and violin, same thing. When you play it back you are actually hearing how the string quartet, or horn section, or harp, or voices will sound.

It's kind of odd, actually. When I write a song on my couch I hear the finished record in my head, much like a painter sees the completed canvas in his head before he even puts brush to paint. Adding string sections, quartets, horns and classical touches to my music is not foreign to me. I recorded *The Dream* album with a 61-piece orchestra that way. I wrote the quartet arrangements for my *Walden* album, and long used string sections on the *WoodSongs* broadcast.

But an opera ... Could I really pull this off? And can I ever learn what all those Italian words mean? And what would my opera be about? Why, the most important folk song in the history of music, of course. A song so famous yet tethered to a bone crunching, dramatic story virtually unknown to the public.

A perfect, powerful opera ...

So I set about the task of actually composing a full, traditional opera about one of the greatest ... albeit unknown ... stories in American music.

The day Woody Guthrie began writing *This Land Is Your Land*.

## **The Libretto: On February 23, 1940, the world is at war.**

It was a cold, winter day in early 1940.

It was February 23, and a songwriter hunkered down in his small New York City apartment, grateful to be home, sitting in front of a small heater by his window with his lyric pad and guitar in his lap, finishing the lyrics to a new song.

You see, the young folksinger had just returned home from a job in the Pacific northwest writing a batch of songs for a documentary about the Grand Coulee Dam. He made his way south to Texas for a visit with his estranged wife and children, where he decided to divorce and leave them for good.

As he made his way back to his apartment in Greenwich Village in New York City to be with his new girlfriend, he ran out of money. First he sold his guitar. Then, finally, he sold his car and began hitchhiking.

He made his way as far as Pittsburgh and got caught in a cold, icy snowstorm. The winds blew right through him as he walked along the highway, hoping for a ride. Soon, the freezing cold overtook him, his body temperature began dropping and he started to feel faint.

A Pennsylvania Ranger happened along and found the songwriter suffering from near hypothermia, gave him a ride to his home where he fed him a bowl of hot clam soup and gave him money for a bus ticket home.

This generosity had a profound affect on the young songwriter. He considered the beauty of the roads and country he just traveled, the ribbon of a highway he just hitched rides on to make his way home. It clashed with what he was hearing on the radio

## **God Bless America**

On the radio was song written by Irving Berlin called “*God Bless America*” which offended and angered the troubled singer. Actually, Woody hated that song to his core. He felt it was making fun of what was really happening to people in the country.

America readied for war. Nations are in the midst of a global economic meltdown and hundreds of able-bodied men were standing in soup lines across the country. Hitler is slaughtering millions of people in Europe, and influenza was killing millions more. The mid-

west is crippled by climactic changes that make “global warming” seem like a bad breeze, displacing hundreds of thousands of families into California for jobs promised but never realized.

There was every reason to be troubled, every reason to be angry, every reason to revolt over what was happening. And yet the the families of this land, folks like the Pennsylvania Ranger, were still so kind and passionate for each other. Their dignity superseded the troubles they faced.

Woody felt the Irvin Berlin song, as sung by the very operatic Kate Smith, made light of the true spirit, integrity and love of the average person. Every time he heard it on the radio he would erupt in anger. He felt people needed a song that reflected their true goodness and love for this land. As he made his way home on the bus, the ticket provided for him by the kindness of the Pennsylvania Ranger, he began writing the words to a song in retaliation to Irvin Berlin’s tune.



It was his *anti-Irvin Berlin* protest song. His song would be called “*God Blessed America*” based completely on his communist view of America. Now, keep in mind, I’m not promoting communism here, I’m just telling a historic event.

See, back in the 1930’s and 40’s communism was just another American political party. They had candidates for President and had quit a large following. Based on the bible account of the Apostles collecting material goods from the congregations and then redistributing them equally amongst the believers, communism had that same “share the wealth” doctrine ... which appealed to Woody and other poor, broke artists. That’s why so many singers, actors and poets were communists back in those days. It seemed very cost effective.

Of course, Communism failed because, well, there’s no money in it. But in Woody’s day, it was “pre-Russian” so still somewhat acceptable. And so, his song “*God Blessed America*” was written decidedly from his communist beliefs.

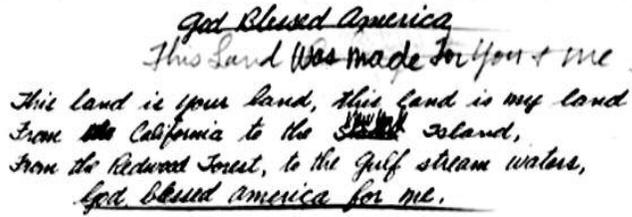
Because of the kindness of that Ranger, Woody began composing the song. During the icy bus ride home, he began writing and, once he made it back to his apartment on February 23, 1940, he write down the lyrics to one of the greatest songs in America history.

And then pretty much forgot about it.

## This Land Is FREE ... as in "FREE."

About seven years later his friend, the banjo player, fellow communist and folksinger Pete Seeger, was looking through Woody's book of lyrics and found the song. He liked the tune, lifted from an old Carter Family melody, but didn't like the title. Too "past tense" he said. So, Woody got a pencil, crossed out the original title and scribbled in the new one, "*This Land Is Your Land.*"

Woody never performed his song in public. He soon became quite ill and eventually was hospitalized, his body deteriorating from an inherited family disease. It was up to his friends Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, the Kingston trio, Judy Collins and others to sing the song to the public. Actually, it became one of Pete Seeger's favorite concert songs because the whole audience would jump right in and sing the chorus.



~~God Blessed America~~  
~~This Land Was made for you + me~~  
This land is your land, this land is my land  
From the California to the ~~South~~ Island,  
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters,  
God, Bless America for me.

By the late 1950's two very odd things happen:

- a) Sen. Joe McCarthy went on an anti-Communist man hunt
- b) Woody Guthrie's manager, who used to be a song plugger for Irving Berlin oddly enough, decided to give *This Land Is Your Land* away to schools ... for free. It was a bold move, as this was the era of sheet music, and writers made most of their money from the sheet music sales of their songs. Giving it away for free was, well, stupid.

Or was it?

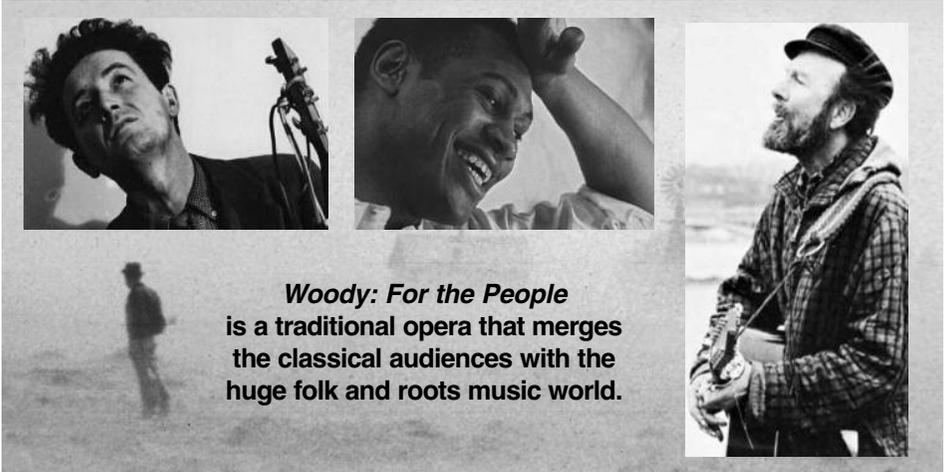
Before anyone could realize it, millions of kids began singing Woody Guthrie's song in classrooms, then festivals, then coffee houses. Giving away the song for free made people find out about Woody Guthrie, and then sheet music to all of his other songs began selling like crazy. The US Congress even considered making the song replace the harder-to-sing *Star Spangled Banner*.

Imagine that.

Millions of kids were singing the *pro-communist This Land Is Your Land* anthem across America at the height of the *anti-communist* activities ... and nobody realized it was a communist song.

*Now that, I thought, was an Opera.*

## So, can a Folksinger compose an Opera?

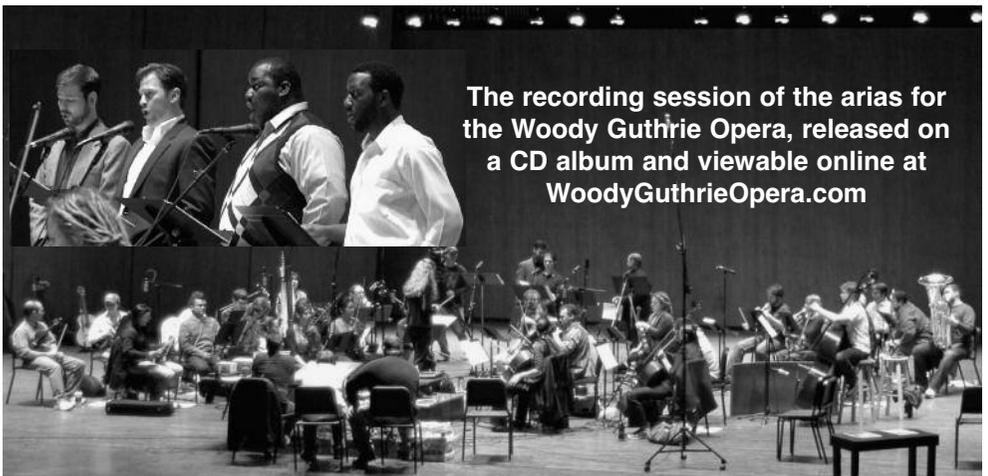


The answer is “Yes.”

The opera is set in February 1940 as Woody is making his way back home. The dust bowl, the war, the depression is raging across America. The main characters are Woody, Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson. In real life they were good friends.

The overture, arias and librettos were written on a guitar and banjo in my cabin. I literally hummed the parts of each instrument as a musical scribe would write the arrangements down. Quickly, the musical story of Woody’s majestic song began to take shape and on a sound stage of the University of Kentucky, the *Woody Guthrie Opera* burst to life with a full symphony orchestra and brilliant opera singers.

It was a hard as I thought it was ... but we got it done.



# Believe

From the Woody Guthrie Opera

Words & Music

©Michael Johnathon/RachelAubreyMusic/BMI

Performed in the key of G

VERSE

I be - lieve in re - demp - tion. I be - lieve in the  
truth. I be - lieve there's a mo - ment when all that is  
good comes shin - ing on through. CHORUS And I — be -  
lieve — noth - ing could be so fine — As  
love and for - give - ness and mer - cy di - vine.



At the end of Act I, Woody is in a cafe with Pete, Paul and the Pennsylvania Ranger. He hears “*God Bless America*” on the radio. Woody is incensed and says he doesn’t believe in that song. Pete asks, “*What do you believe.*”

This aria is Woody’s answer ...

I believe in redemption  
I believe in the Truth  
I believe there’s a moment  
when all that is good  
comes shining on through

I believe in transition  
I believe change is good  
It’s the steady confusion of life  
that transforms us from old into new

And I believe ... nothing could be so fine  
As Love and Forgiveness ... and Mercy Devine

I believe in remorse  
that forgiveness is Truth  
And that nothing else matters  
as much as the love  
between me and you

And I believe ... nothing could be so fine  
As Love and Forgiveness ... and Mercy Devine