

The Artist As Busker:
 Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*
 by James C. McKelly

In 1940 Alan Lomax, the folk musicologist primarily responsible for the now legendary Library of Congress field recordings of American folk and blues artists, urged his friend folksinger Woody Guthrie to try his hand at the written word; Guthrie responded with an outline and a few stories for an autobiographical novel. As his biographer Joe Klein tells it in *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, Guthrie was amazed and delighted to discover in the spring of 1942 that "people were beginning to pay him money to write stories."¹ While in New York with the Almanac Singers, he met Charles Olson, who had taught Pete Seeger at Harvard. Olson, upon Seeger's recommendation, read some of Guthrie's writing, and asked him to write a piece for *Common Ground*. The story, called "Ear Players," was published in the magazine's Spring '42 issue; *Common Ground* subsequently went on to publish "State Line to Skid Row" (Fall '42) and "Crossroads" (Spring '43), the latter an excerpt from the new book.

William Doerflinger of E.P. Dutton signed Guthrie on for an autobiographical work, and Guthrie received a \$500 advance, half of which was to be sent to his wife Mary, then living in El Paso, Texas with their three children. The arrangement with Dutton specified that Doerflinger's wife Joy, herself an experienced autobiographer, was to act as Guthrie's editor. Guthrie wanted to call the book *Boonchasers*.

At the time Guthrie, twenty-nine, was in love with a twenty-five year-old married dancer named Marjorie Mazia, who performed with Martha Graham's company. Marjorie, soon to become his second wife, was instrumental in helping the rambling, distracted singer find the space, time, and discipline to fulfill his end of the contract with Dutton. "Even if you don't write," Klein quotes her as saying, "you should be sitting at that desk from nine to five each day. Something will happen. You have to be a daily worker, just like someone in a factory. Writing is your job now and you must take it seriously."² Guthrie would imbue his own autobiographical persona with the same ethic.

Somewhere between Joy Doerflinger's editorial cutting and shaping, Marjorie Mazia's persistence, and Guthrie's own unfettered genius, the book got written. Joy Doerflinger had succeeded in getting Guthrie to change the title of the book to *Bound for Glory*, after the song that figures prominently in both the first and last chapters of the book. Upon its publication in the spring of 1943, *Bound for Glory* garnered wide acclaim. Richard Reuss, Guthrie's bibliographer, reports "favorable" to "enthusiastic" notices from sources as varied as *Book Week* in the *Chicago Sun*, the *Columbus (Ohio) Citizen*, the *Daily Oklahoman*, the *Detroit Times*, the *Nashville Banner*, *New Masses*, the *New York Post*, *New Yorker*, the *Saturday*

Review of Literature, the *Washington Post*, and *The Worker Magazine*.³

Beyond this immediate popular reception, the book found an enduring place as one of the generational astringents that unify American culture by virtue of its influence upon a young man from small-town northern Minnesota named Robert Zimmerman, who later would change his last name to Dylan. Wayne Hampton recounts the story of Bob Dylan's first year on campus at the University of Minnesota in 1959: "He frantically searched the campus for a copy of Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, which he greedily devoured in a single afternoon, and then excitedly pursued his friends, reading them passages as if he were quoting from a holy text."⁴

Part of what must have appealed to the young folk-artist Dylan, himself on the cusp of a rise to iconic cultural status during a decade perhaps more consumed than any other in the century by the issues of war, race, and cultural identity, was the book's self-conscious portrait of a radically new archetype of the American artist, one who must be both in the world and of the world; one whose art must, to invert Willa Cather's phrase, be anything but escape. That Guthrie is guilty of what Klein calls "self-mythologizing and fudging of the facts," that his stories range from the "not always truthful" to the "utterly preposterous" is a testimony to the author's fictive, rather than strictly autobiographical, concern: to cast this new archetype in the dust and din of the actual while at the same time presenting a possibility of integrity, intelligence, power, and relevance that Guthrie knew full well he himself had fallen short of achieving. Klein is correct in saying that "he had written more of a novel than an autobiography."⁵ In *Bound for Glory* Woody Guthrie writes a myth of promise to America and Americans which would guarantee that in times of extreme

national exigency and confusion, their artists would not forsake them for refuge in aestheticism or abstraction.

The governing metaphor at the center of this myth of promise is that of the artist as busker. Guthrie explains the meaning and derivation of the word: "You are called a 'busker', from the Spanish or Mexican word, 'buscar' which means 'search'. The musicians play a few hours in one saloon and then say, 'Well, it's getting a little bit dead around here, let's go busking. Find a livelier joint."⁶ (punctuation *sic*) This artist-searcher, however, is looking for more than just "a livelier joint." Guthrie's narrative poem "Voice" helps to clarify and further articulate the object of the artist's search:

I don't know how far I'm going to
have to go
To see my own self or to hear my
own voice
I tuned in on the radio and for
hours never heard it
And then I went to the moving
pictures show
And never heard it there
I put handful of coins into
machines and watched records
turn
But the voice there was no voice
of mine
I mean it was not my voice
The words not the words that I
hear in my own ears
When I walk along and look at
your faces⁷

The poem characterizes Guthrie's art first and foremost as one of restlessness and uncertainty, a direct function of mobility, exposure, and experience. It is an art of distances ranged and inquiry assayed. The artist-searcher's movement outward across exterior landscape generates, reciprocally and simultaneously, a search over interior distances; the busker's rambling becomes a

modal execution of an interior condition, and hence a kind of honesty. The object of this search in both its exterior and interior instantiations is identity. This identity, like the search for it, is a knowledge which is reciprocal in character, one "of my own self" and "of my own voice," but one which depends absolutely upon the voices of those around him as sources of identification. This is what John Steinbeck was getting at in his famous "Woody is just Woody" endorsement: "He is just a voice and a guitar. He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people."⁸ Because, as the poem attests, he is unable to discover a paradigm for personal and aesthetic iteration anywhere in the mechanized, mass-produced, commercialized popular arts, it is his identification of his own voice in the living voices of Americans that finally enables Guthrie to sing both himself and them with confidence and authenticity.

Bound for Glory presents the guitar as the quintessential instrument of the search of the artist as busker. Guthrie finds in the American West a landscape hospitable to the journey: "Maybe the west country needs me out there. It's so big and I'm so little. It needs me to help fill it up and I need it to grow up in."⁹ The guitar allows for maximum mobility within the expansive context of the West, especially when that context is plumbed by a poor man whose primary modes of transportation are hopping freights, hitch-hiking, and walking. And because of its aggressively polyphonic design, it is capable both of making a prodigious racket and of creating a vehicle of intricate texture for the accompaniment of the singer. Its insistent, rhythmic jangle cries out for an audience; the resonant tonal stage it sets cries out for the more focused declarations of the human voice.

Appropriately, in "Soldiers in the Dust," the first chapter of his book, Guthrie uses the guitar symbolically to

inaugurate his presentation of the relationship of the American artist and American art to the land's people and culture. When a hard rain begins to pelt him and his three companions as they ride on the roof of a boxcar, both artist and audience make the instrument the object of their cheerful, voluntary sacrifice: they take off their shirts and sweaters and wrap it up. Guthrie then props up the guitar as a shield to deflect the wind and rain from the youngest of the three. The tableau is an exquisite image of a reciprocity of protection between art and audience: the community values the substantive, living utility of the art, and hence the instrument of its creation, enough to make substantive sacrifice to preserve it; in turn, the instrument offers substantive, literal shelter to a member of the community. Art is paired with human concern and generosity against the onslaught of natural upheaval. Out of an understood mutual vulnerability evolves a mutual protection, and from this mutual protection is derived a mutual strength.

A second idea that pervades *Bound for Glory* as one of Guthrie's central aesthetic tenets is that of art as work. Throughout the book Guthrie refers to his guitar as "my meal ticket." It is as if the inclusion of his art into the hard, physical labor that gives form to the American spirit is the only legitimate claim the artist has to it. This sense of the artist's literal collaboration with all working people in the construction of a cultural edifice is supported by Guthrie's understanding of his art as a frankly engaged facet of free enterprise. In the world of *Bound for Glory*, art is inextricably entwined into the fabric of culture, providing an influence of idea and entertainment so directly relevant and rousing that people want to see to it that it continues, in whatever way they can.

In his book, Guthrie displays a profound trust in the people for whom he

sings that despite their extreme economic and cultural dispossession, they too will realize the concrete relevance of his work to their lives and will not countenance his being forced by poverty into a line of work that will take him away from them. He maintains a sort of confidence that even when confronted by the disinterest or antagonism of those in positions of economic and political power, such as record company executives, his art holds such a vital place in the lives of working Americans that they are willing to grant it economic sustenance despite the paucity of their own resources. It is moot whether this is the position of a charming, sincere, romantic naif, or a self-important fool in love with the poetry of his own narcissism; what is beyond question is the artist's faith in the social indispensability of his art.

The fact of Guthrie's trust that his audience will provide for him, however, does not mean that his art will make him rich. Guthrie's physical body and moral imagination measure their range throughout a milieu in which serious, debilitating poverty is ubiquitous, even mobile; his aesthetic, so intimately joined to the condition of its subjects, must find its authenticity there. There is a power, relevance, and directness that Guthrie identifies in an art fired in the vulnerability, homelessness, and fortitude of extreme need. As he puts it, "somehow or another, the best singing just naturally comes from under the leakingest roof."¹⁰ The reason for Guthrie's consistent, willful refusal of the kind of money usually accorded to entertainers of national renown is presented in the penultimate chapter of *Bound for Glory*, appropriately titled "Crossroads." It is a highly fictionalized account of an audition at the Rainbow Room, on the 65th floor of Rockefeller Center. In it, after he has impressed the management and landed a job, Guthrie, abruptly and without explanation to the

staff, walks out. He plays and sings in the antiseptic orderliness of the lobby on his way out to the street that had beckoned him even at a distance of sixty-five floors:

I never heard my guitar ring so loud and so long and so clear as it did there in them high-polished marble halls. . . . People had walked hushed up and too nice and quiet through these tiled floors too long. I decided that for this minute, for this one snap of their lives, they'd see a human walking through that place, not singing because he was hired and told what to sing, but just walking through there thinking about the world and singing it.¹¹

For Guthrie, the independence of his art from the endorsement of economy and power is of definitive importance. This independence is essential to his idea of his art as a celebration of the radically unsponsored exhilaration of the human imagination and the human conscience. For those about whom and for whom he sings economically to sustain the artist is just and fitting. Guthrie depends upon this reciprocity of interest between artist and audience for survival. But to accept money from a source that is untouched by the vicissitudes into which his art is so resolutely woven is to fracture the integrity that is its strength.

Much of *Bound for Glory* chronicles the artist's search for this integrity, and the experiential, emotional, and intellectual constituents which accrue over the course of a youth to inform it. As the book portrays it, Guthrie's indefatigable concern for those all but vanquished in their struggle against forces of measureless strength finds its source in his mother, Nora Sherman Guthrie. With a poignant, reluctant uncertainty, Guthrie depicts her

as suffering from a kind of physically degenerative insanity, for which she is eventually institutionalized until her death. It is likely that her condition was a result of the symptoms of Huntington's Chorea, the genetically inherited disease of which her son was to die in 1967, some twenty-four years after the book's publication. Nora is cast by Guthrie as a damaged saint whose life imparts to him his abiding, personal and artistic identification with the victimized, and with those who struggle for dignity against the amoral rapacity of powers beyond their influence.

Guthrie also presents in the book several parables of conflict that in effect serve as crucibles for the formulation of an ethical identity and as scaled-down paradigms of response to the larger, more universal conflicts which often provide either subject or context for his art. Guthrie constructs these childhood episodes as anatomically correct metaphors for the destructive internal confrontations that beset working people's battle for power and equity, and for the artist's increasingly precise, politically specific pledge of allegiance to the dispossessed, stated in terms unburdened by the rhetoric of ideology.

Given Woody's position in these parables of personal integrity and social confrontation, it is difficult to accept John Greenway's assertion that Guthrie was a "harmless. . . innocent captive of the cynical Left."¹² It is doubtful that Guthrie was ever a captive of anything but the disease that killed him, and if in fact he was a prisoner of the Left, it must have been a happy incarceration indeed, in the light of the profusion in *Bound for Glory* of episode and detail that consistently ally its young protagonist with liberal thought. The book, again without lapsing into the rhetoric of ideology, slowly builds for the artist an ideological orientation, and a currency of value the foundation of which

arises from the living contact with poverty, hate, danger, and struggle he encounters on the road and on the rails rather than being imposed by the politically correct authority of party or tract.

Guthrie also fills his narrative with episodes that, within a consciously wrought context of ethnic plurality, insist upon racial equity and the importance of racial cooperation in the face of social and economic oppression. In Guthrie's portraits of his childhood, he is full of a child's sensitivity and unabashed curiosity, and learns the human consequences of racial prejudice not through abstract socialization by majority culture but through direct, concrete contact with its victims. Guthrie's adult artist, Whitmanesque in his breadth of embrace, celebrates the difference among peoples, and finds subject and afflatus in their sheer diversity:

There was a big mixture of people here. I could hear the fast accents of men from the big Eastern joints. You heard the slow, easy-going voices of Southern swamp dwellers, and the people from the Southern hills and mountains. Then another one would talk up, and it would be the dry, nosy twang of the folks from the flat wheat plains; or the dialect of people that come from other countries, whose parents talked another tongue. Then you would hear the slow, outdoor voices of the men from Arizona, riding a short hop to get a job, see a girl, or to throw a little celebration. There was the deep, thick voices of two or three Negroes. It sounded mighty good to me.¹³

And in Chapter Thirteen, "Off To California," Guthrie reveals a fully

secularized spirituality for his artist that is consonant with the populist tenor of his political and aesthetic values. His religious discourse is as unburdened by the language of theology as is his political discourse free of the rhetoric of ideology. At the "rescue mission" in Fresno, Woody and some of the other homeless people who have come into the mission for shelter and a meal discuss the relative responsibility of God and humankind in the creation of the problems that plague life in the world, and the role of prayer, faith, action, and ambition in their solution. Woody proposes a version of prayer that equates it with a kind of clear-eyed reckoning of interior and exterior circumstances, an essentially political act that emphasizes the primacy of the human engaged in a reality that is not to be understood as permanently locked into patterns predetermined by an inexorable fate: "I believe that when ya pray, you're tryin' ta get yer thinkin' straight, tryin' ta see what's wrong with the world, an' who's ta blame fer it." Prayer becomes the catalyst of empowerment and change. Guthrie pushes this message of a secular spirit to its logical extension in the words of a toothless old man who has been quietly listening to the group:

All of this talking about what's up in the sky, or down in hell, for that matter, isn't half as important as what's right here, right now, right in front of your eyes. Things are tough. Folks broke. Kids bungry. Sick. Everything. And people has just got to have more faith in one another, believe in each other. There's a spirit of some kind we've all got. That's got to draw us all together.¹⁴

Guthrie depicts this spirit, stripped as it is of the mystical trappings of miracle,

mystery, and authority, as the *primum mobile* of social evolution. All change, if it is to be meaningful and of consequence and utility, must be plugged into this collaborative, communal spirit. And all art, if it is to figure in the flux of need and endeavor, must be suffused with this spirit as well.

Bound for Glory chronicles the artist's search for this spirit, and for the ways in which his art might achieve identity with it, and serve it most effectively. In order to fulfill this cultural and aesthetic imperative, according to the paradigm Guthrie offers, the American artist must be in a position to offer an immediate response to the exigencies of Americans. In Chapter Seventeen, "Extry Selects," the family with whom Woody has hitched a ride blows a tire; the group is forced to drive ahead on the wobbling rim, pushed forward by the desperate hope of a fruit-picking job. The singer, even closer than he usually is to the source of hardship, rides in the seat just above the jarring wheel. In response to a friendly challenge, he composes a song that simultaneously bathes the trying circumstance in good humor and inspires the family and all others who hear it to persist despite hardship. The fact of the artist's literally riding along with his audience through the material difficulty resulting from economic and political powerlessness not only authenticates his art, but assures his improvisation of accuracy of detail and adequacy to human experience. A scripted, rehearsed art engendered in tranquil recollection, although perhaps superior in refinement of technique, is by definition incapable of the modal intimacy that more than any other quality distinguishes improvisational art. Yet it is not merely the spontaneous overflow of a culturally aloof, socially detached *auteur*; the artist's vulnerability and love of contact guarantee the improvisation of its precision, relevance,

and passion, as well as its "spiritual" responsiveness.

At the center of Guthrie's narrative is the young American artist's busk for two conditions vital to desire's satisfaction: a personal and aesthetic identity as well as a functional, universally acknowledged place in the human community of work, struggle, and accomplishment. Guthrie's singer achieves the first of these in the message of his art. In the passage that Hampton cites as the inspiration of Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," Guthrie uses a discarded scrap of newsprint buffeted by "the rain and the wind and the soot and smoke and the grit that gets in your eyes in the big city" as a metaphor for the artist struggling to articulate against the din of living:

Keep on trying to tell your message, and keep on trying to be a picture of a man, because without that story and without that message printed on you there, you wouldn't be much. Remember, it's just maybe, some day, sometime, somebody will pick you up and look at your picture and read your message, and carry you in his pocket, and

lay you on his shelf, and burn you in his stove. But he'll have your message in his head and he'll talk it and it'll get around.¹⁵

It is in its enduring, abiding message, in the didactic outreach of his art, that Guthrie's artist places his faith and establishes his sense of self. And it is precisely in the artist's act of bequeathing this message to the public domain that the artist's yearning for community is assuaged as well. After Woody walks out on the Rainbow Room audition, in the city below he speaks with his friend, actor Will Geer. Geer rationally assesses the implications of his companion's unwillingness to accede to the well-imbursed institutionalization of his art, suggesting that "money's what it takes" to make a lasting donation to the cause of social justice. Woody's reply is telling: "Cain't I jest sorta donate my own self, sort of?"¹⁶ For Guthrie, the mark of the artist is a generosity beyond economy, an ontological compulsion to give the very identity that his art engendered in him to his people. With this final gift the artist as busker discovers the community in which the self can find meaning.

ENDNOTES

1. Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 230.
2. *Ibid.*, 233.
3. Richard A. Reuss, *A Woody Guthrie Bibliography* (New York: Guthrie Children's Trust Fund, 1968), 34-35.
4. Wayne Hampton, *Guerilla Minstrels* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 152.
5. Klein, 243.
6. Moses Asch, ed., *American Folksong: Woody Guthrie* (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 40.
7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. Hampton, 94.
9. Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1943), 193.
10. Klein, 176.
11. Guthrie, 296.
12. John Greenway, "Woody Guthrie: the Man, the Land, the Understanding," *American West* 3 (Fall 1966): 28.
13. Guthrie, 216.
14. *Ibid.*, 230.
15. *Ibid.*, 295.
16. *Ibid.*, 307