

His words danced

A new narrative of his youthful travels

SEEDS OF MAN

By Woody Guthrie
E.P. Dutton & Co., New York

Woody Guthrie, America's hobo troubador, was 17 years old when the stock-market crash of 1929 ushered in the Great Depression.

Economic crisis, drought and dust storms spelled disaster for thousands of his relatives and neighbors in Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle and much of the Mid and Southwest. Faced with bankruptcy and foreclosure, these farmers and croppers had no choice but to gather up their families and a few belongings and hit the road. Most drifted westward toward California, where, according to current popular song, "...you can sleep out every night...and...the water tastes like cherry wine."

Woody ducked into this river of jalopies, hobos and hitch-hikers and spent the next 20 years wandering the (then) 48 states and most of the seven seas, never straying far from the hard-callused people who scrap out a living at the bottom of the heap. He was seldom without a pencil or a guitar, and in these years produced songs, poems and stories enough to fill a library.

Some of his songs, such as "This Land Is Your Land" and "So Long; It's Been Good to Know You" have worked themselves down so far into the fabric of American folk song that people will swear to you they are as old as the hills. Out in Oregon, every school kid learns "Roll On, Columbia" along with Yankee Doodle and Three Blind Mice.

Woody died in 1964, after 15 years' hospitalization for Huntington's Chorea, an incurable neurological disease. The disease slowly stifled his art and finally stopped his life at the age of 55.

From the papers Woody left behind, four books have been made. The best of them, *Bound for Glory*, is an autobiographical novel of his early years in Oklahoma and Texas. (It is the only one published before his hospitalization.) *Woody*

Sez is a collection of columns written for the West Coast radical *Daily People's World*. *Born to Win* is a potpourri of poems, sketches, doodles, letters, drawings and midnight meditations; a fascinating sampler of the best and the worst of an honest writer.

Now comes *Seeds of Man*, an unfinished prose narrative, assembled by William Dorflinger from three different versions written by Woody over a 10-year period.

The story is based on an experience of Woody's youth, and many of the characters, drawn from real models, will be familiar to Guthrie fans and historians. Papa Charlie, Uncle Jeff, the fiddler, and young Woody are involved in a doomed search for a lost (and possibly non-existent) gold and silver mine. But as the characters become involved in other projects (principally erotic), the dream of bonanza fades into the background. Folk eloquence becomes the main attraction.

Studs Terkel has written that the "words danced off the pages when Woody sat at the typewriter." There are signs of this intoxication with language in all Woody's writing.

Seeds of Man is rich with the style and metaphor of ordinary people's speech, studded with similes, puns, banter, and cheerful profanity: the kind of folk-talk that makes polite conversation pale.

For those who knew Woody only as a political crusader, or as Poet Laureate of the Dust Bowl refugees, *Seeds of Man* may come as a surprise and even a disappointment. But for those of his fans who always suspected that the incurable romantic lurked just beneath the surface of Woody's rough rhetoric, this latest—probably last—Guthrie book will be savory fare.

—Joe Stevenson and Gehla Knight

Joe Stevenson is a long-time Guthrie fan and the writer/director/producer of *A Tribute to Woody Guthrie* which played successfully in small theaters in Oregon, where he lives. Gehla Knight is a writer who lives in Astoria, Oregon.

Will the real Woody Guthrie please stand up!

He lives on in a new book, on the silver screen, in his old home and through a foundation that bears his



His old house: writing on the wall pays tribute

They hitch-hike from all over to the home of the poet of the people.



Guthrie's house in Okemah, Oklahoma

Anyone in Okemah, Okla., can tell you where Woody Guthrie's old house is—where he lived until age 15. When you get there, you find you could have seen it from Interstate 40 all along—a white frame house on a rock foundation, sturdier than they make most of them now. Still standing strong after having been deserted for over 30 years, with all the doors and window frames ripped out.

People have been coming on pilgrimage to the house since at least 1965. They hitch to Okemah and unroll their sleeping bags on the floor of Woody's house. Then they unpack their guitars and sing some of his songs. When they leave in the morning, they write a message for Woody on the walls.

Woody wrote several hundred songs (as well as an intermittent column for the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*), many of which are known to millions of people in the United States and other countries. Yet the only monument to him in Okemah is "Home of Woody Guthrie" painted on the town's water tank.

►Apathy, not hostility.

"I was in Okemah for a year as an editorial writer for the *Okemah Daily Leader*," says Patricia "Oro" Briscoe. "I wrote editorials back in 1961, asking for the city and the library board to consent to having a room in the city library dedicated to Woody Guthrie. A member of his family was going to give us Woody's first guitar and all of the hand-written manuscripts—

the songs he wrote as he traveled around—to put in the memorial room.

"People just weren't interested. Hostile is too strong a word. Apathy is a small town's strongest weapon."

►Woody sings to the young.

Young people still hitch to Woody's house, the kind of young people who are touched most powerfully by his songs, those whose glory, joy and misery is to go on the road from job to job. Woody wrote of their loneliness in songs like this one about the encounter of a young transient and a B-girl:

*Not a soul knows me in town,
I'm a stranger hereabouts.
I did ache to feel your hot hand touching mine.
But when you came up to me
And said, "Partner buy the drinks,"
Your hand felt colder than the night outside.*

At the same time his songs offer them the hope of comradeship and the unity of all workers as in Tom Joad's farewell to his mother in one of Woody's ballads:

*Everybody might be just one big soul.
It looks that way to me.
So wherever you look in the day or the night
That's where I'm a-gonna be.*

►It's warm in Woody's house.

Walt Peralle, Vietnam vet, one of the only three survivors in his Marine company, is one of those who have made the journey to Woody's house.

"People come by and say hello to Woody. They don't need to have a tourist place selling Woody Guthrie souvenirs," Walt says. "All they need to do is

just fix up the porches. It's you really feel comfortable in house even though it's cold as the wind is blowing. There's around there. It's warm."

►Messages on the walls.

All over the walls of Woody's house are the messages. Okemah school kids come out in the house to get away from and they have left the word "fuc" number of places. By one of the ties someone has written:

"I wonder what drove some to write the terrible things they c' Don't they know this is the home of the poet of the people?"

Other messages on the wall include: "Will Rogers made me feel A Woody Guthrie makes me feel home."

—Butch Galeello, New Rochelle
"Woody, I got this feeling t' to come and see your old home, understand until this morning when you. I believe in you, God, and i
—Pam Williams,

"Woody, the better world about may not be a reality yet, love for you that these writings leaves me with a more optimistic for a better, universal humanistic You are always living in your poems. The world was lucky to h smile—even for a short time."

—Alicia Pope—Kathlee
Seattle, Wash. 7

Walt Peralle adds: "That's the It's a heavy damn place. You g there if you're into Woody at all. ing back there. I told him that."

—Jody

Bound for Glory: too cool about a bad time

"There's an almost fanatical attention to the authenticity of detail. Nothing is out of joint—except reality."

BOUND FOR GLORY

Directed by Hal Ashby; screenplay by Robert Getchell, based on Woody Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*.

With David Carradine as Woody Guthrie
Rated PG

Bound for Glory is a strangely mild film about one of the most turbulent and painful periods in modern American history. Strictly speaking, the story is an account of four years in the life of Woody Guthrie (David Carradine), America's most famous folksinger, who gave voice to the indestructible spirit of youth during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The filmmakers have come to their subject in a mood of cool, remote sweetness that is very puzzling. It's puzzling because there's an almost fanatical attention to the authenticity of detail in this film. The clothes look right; the landscapes look right; the trains, the cars, the houses, the furniture, the language. Nothing is out of joint—except reality.

There's a veil of prettiness drawn across the image that makes the whole thing nostalgic. Anyone who can get nostalgic for the mid '30s hasn't been able to get his head or his heart around this material.

►Reality was not so pretty.

One-third of the work force of the United States of America was unemployed. There were hundreds of people available for every job. Shape ups were the standard way of hiring in the field, at the factory, or on the docks. Small independent farmers and businessmen had lost their all to the banks, and then the banks had closed. Entire families were on the road, not drifting but looking for a place where a living could be earned. Like squads of ghosts, men materialized at the back doors of restaurants after closing hours to collect left-over food. Encampments called "Hoover-villes," built of scrap lumber, packing boxes, and flattened tin cans, appeared on the outskirts of most U.S. cities.

Goon squads—legally deputized thugs who protected private property against



David Carradine as Guthrie and Melinda Dillon as his wife, Mary, in *Bound for Glory*

hungry, angry people—were the law and order of the day.

►No real bite.

In a sense, it's all there in this film. But we see it through the wrong end of a telescope. It is so generalized that it scarcely matters. There's no real bite. The radicalizing of Woody Guthrie happens at arm's length, and so you never really quite believe it.

The film begins in the Dust Bowl of the Texas Panhandle in 1936 or '37. Woody is married, has two children, is out of work. He earns a bit here and there, painting signs, playing his guitar at country dances, even telling fortunes.

There is a very moving scene in which Woody is brought to talk to a woman who has given up in despair over losing a child. She no longer eats, drinks or talks. He coaxes her to respond to him until he

finally gets her to sip some water. The scene is allowed to take time, to grow. David Carradine is beautiful—just watching, waiting, involved. But this is almost the only time Guthrie/Carradine is allowed to connect.

Most of the time he is slipping by the action. A recording device, letting you view the scene without being involved in it. A very 1970s sort of character—but not Woody Guthrie.

►The abandoned guitar on the porch.

There is one pivotal scene which contains, for me, a clue to the lack of understanding on the part of the filmmaker. It's where Woody leaves his wife and children in the backyard and walks out the front door. He's bound for California, and he leaves his guitar standing on the front porch. He looks back at it a couple of times (which is more than he does to his family) and

then goes on, leaving it standing against the wall.

That abandoned guitar is a metaphor for the way the film separates the man from his music. Woody Guthrie was his music. He was also of his time. In that time a guitar was worth money. A man leaving home needed money. He didn't leave his heart or his purse standing on the front porch.

The fact is, Woody pawned his guitar when he took off. He left with money (and paint brushes and a harmonica) in his pocket. And he left not as a drifting fool, but as an experienced traveler, heading for a place where his Aunt Laura had led him to believe she could get him a job.

If you can't put your head or your heart into rock bottom poverty, you can't begin to understand Woody Guthrie, his times, or why he was so important to his times. Nor can you understand why the Department of the Interior named a power substation after a singing, radical union organizer.

Bound for Glory catches the charm of Guthrie, but never his force or his real social commitment. It would be a lovely film if it were not about a real person in a real time, and meant to be taken seriously as such.

►Carradine is cool.

David Carradine gives a surface-simple, very deep performance as a charming, alienated, inarticulate fellow, who loves people in general, but nobody in particular. A man who won't let you get closer than 100 yards. With no particular loyalties to anyone or anything. He's cool.

What's wrong with that hits you at the last moment, when a new voice is heard over the end-credits—supple, rasping, driving, it sounds like the real Woody. It makes you want to get up and go. Nothing cool about it.

P.S. Haskell Wexler's photography is spectacularly beautiful. The dust storms are miraculous. Surely they'll all win awards.

—Mavis Lyons

Marjorie Guthrie: 'A beautiful film'

"My children say David Carradine has Woody's vibes."

Q: How do you feel about the film *Bound for Glory*?

A: I like it. It's a beautiful film. Not just a story about Woody. It's a story about a man in relation to his times. To me it's about anybody who's between 25 and 30 and has to grow up and make a decision about what they're going to do with their lives, and a commitment.

So much in the film—the relation to the migratory workers, the problems in terms of unions—all of this is still with us. And I think seeing what happened is an inspiration to young people today. I would hope they get that out of it.

There has been comment to the effect that the filmmakers soft-pedaled Woody's radicalism. Do you agree?

I think that's so unfair. Every single theme in the film leads up to his political commitment. I suppose some old-timers want to see every inch of the way... Well, you can't. I'm enough of an artist to know you don't depict reality in a work; you depict the essence of that reality. And that's what this film does.

You know, I was consulted. I read the script. (I've been reading scripts since 1943.) This is the first one I've really liked. Even so I was worried.

But when I saw the film, I went up to the director and the other top people and said, "When I think of what I feared about what Hollywood would do to Woody Guthrie, I'm so pleased—I really do hope you get your money back!"

Did you like David Carradine's performance?

Very much. The subdued quality some people have been critical about is absolutely right. My children say David has Woody's vibes.

You know, many people bring to the film their own preconceived idea of how Woody was, and it's inaccurate. The part, as David plays it, is very much what Woody was...

I'm concerned about Woody's image. Concerned about what I can live with. And I was worried. But here when somebody has done me a favor, and done it so poetically—in a film that is so relevant today, and so important politically, I don't want people to be critical when Hollywood has gone so far forward to make this picture about a time—a whole period—in relationship to a sensitive human being.

And I mean it. If I had to defend this film dishonestly it would be the greatest disservice I could do.

Can you tell us about the work of the Woody Guthrie Foundation—and especially what it's doing about restoring his old home in Okemah?

For the present, nothing.

When I started the foundation I had the intention—the hope—of doing several things. Restoring the house was one. I wanted to have what I call a living museum, where young people could come and study, hear and see and learn about the Depression and the Dust Bowl. That's still a far-off dream because I don't see where I'm going to get that kind of money.

What's needed, you see, is not just money to put the house in shape, but to keep it in perpetuity. So unless the state, or someone else, is willing to guarantee that... well, I just have to put that idea aside for now.

But there were three other things I had in mind on which the foundation has made some headway. First and most important, I have a collection of what I call Woody's "archives." We're working on that all the time. We've got his writings xeroxed and in chronological order. (We haven't got to the songs yet.)

Anyone who comes—and young people do come from all over the world—can look through the files and get whatever material they need for their papers, or whatever. Already I've been able to retrieve the material that is published in *Sees of Man*. And the work is still nowhere near finished.

The second thing I had in mind was to give money to the sort of things I think Woody would like us to support. We gave a few hundred dollars to the film called *Union Maids* (see *ITT* Dec. 6). And just a few months ago we gave a good deal more to a young woman who sent me the most magnificent photographs of child migratory workers. She wants to do a collection—probably a book—about child labor in the fields. And we want to help.

The third thing, of course, is my work in the Committee to Combat Huntington's Disease. The Foundation has given quite large sums to that. And I'm hoping this picture will help. The picture and the poems and the new records and books—all this gives me a chance to talk to the world about what we're trying to do to relieve human suffering in Woody's name. Because he suffered; we suffered as a family. I want to spare other people that sort of agony. And if all this makes it possible for me to do that, that will be the greatest tribute to Woody that anything could be.



In *These Times* interviewed Marjorie Guthrie in connection with the opening (in New York) of the film *"Bound for Glory."* She was married to Woody after the period covered in the film, and is the mother of his sons Arlo and Joady, and his daughter Nora.

Marjorie Guthrie heads the Woody Guthrie Foundation, whose work is described in the interview. Questions about it, and contributions to it may be addressed to her, at 250 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019 (Room 2017).