

• *Book Reviews* •

Woody Guthrie: American Radical. By William Kaufman. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. pp. xi + 270, acknowledgements, introduction, 20 black and white photographs, notes, sources, index).

Woody Guthrie was one of the most influential and iconic folksingers of the twentieth century. In his book, Will Kaufman gives a new, thorough, and insightful look at Guthrie's life, work, and development as an artist and activist. Kaufman presents Guthrie not as an icon or political saint, but as a man who speaks out and struggles with the complexity of his situation. Tracing major events in Guthrie's career and personal life, Kaufman presents a personal Guthrie in a larger historical framework, illuminating not only his lasting imprint on America but America's imprint on Guthrie. Kaufman's book reads more like a narrative than a historical account, giving the story of Guthrie's radical development through a balance of Guthrie's work, letters, and other personal sources, as well as providing historical contexts for these artifacts of Guthrie's life.

In his first chapter, "Awakenings," Kaufman traces Guthrie's migration to California and his early thought, commenting on the seeming contradiction between the legend of Guthrie and his life. Kaufman explores contradictions and revisions between Guthrie's life and the narrative that would soon form around him. Although Guthrie's style and narrative would rely on an Okie and lower class persona, he came from more complex beginnings. Kaufman explicates how Guthrie's early work both hides and plays off his reactions to his father's life, his upbringing, his experiences, the people he met, and the beliefs he held. Kaufman introduces the relationship between Guthrie's experiences and the content of his music and art through exploring the people and events that connected Guthrie to publications such as the *People's World*, radical groups, and the people and events connected to how Guthrie obtained and lost his radio show on KFVD.

In his second chapter, "Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People," Kaufman turns to Guthrie's art and gives an analysis of the processes, people, and events that

influenced Guthrie's early songwriting and recordings, especially focusing on recordings made with Alan Lomax. Guthrie is portrayed as a man who understands that a myth is forming around him and uses that rhetorical power to his advantage and the advantage of his cause. Kaufman also details the relationship that would form between Woody and Alan Lomax; one of awe. Guthrie had traveled across the country to come to New York, and along the way he experienced the poverty and affliction that would soon find its way into his music, with an angry and radical tone. Kaufman also uses these recordings to further understand the growing militancy in Guthrie's early thought, influence, and agenda. Although Guthrie does not directly advocate a violent revolution, his militancy is apparent early in his work.

Guthrie's work would not be a solo career, although his legend and following may reflect that idea. In Chapter 3, "Almanac Days," Kaufman describes Guthrie's formation within the Almanac Singers, his agenda, and how his personality and personal life affected his work and the band. In great detail, Kaufman outlines the complex web of events that contributed to the development and decline of the band. Guthrie's influence is interwoven with events in the political parties, world affairs, and personal lives surrounding the group. It is during his time in the Almanacs that Kaufman pinpoints Guthrie's flip-flop, among others, from an anti-war stance to a pro-war or anti-fascist stance. As the Almanacs sought to form a new movement, Guthrie saw himself gaining influence and exerting his direction as he intentionally crafted their music as well as the iconic "Hootenanny" to further the movement, despite the band's many ideological changes over a period of short time. Guthrie's and the Almanacs' switch from anti-war stance to a pro-war stance resulted not only in the need to explain themselves, but also led Guthrie to eventually enlist into the Merchant Marine to prove his sincerity.

In the fourth chapter, "Union War," Kaufman describes the events and Guthrie's ideological developments leading up to Guthrie's pro-war writing, active service, and his involvement with the Merchant Marine and the Army. Guthrie continued to be prolific through this time and Kaufman traces the development from

anti-war activist to pro-war, through an anti-fascism stance, and back again. Once again, Kaufman weaves the relationships between Guthrie and the Almanacs, his family, his past, political leaders, and the experiences Guthrie could not always reconcile to form a humanizing narrative.

Although World War II was a war Guthrie supported, soon the "red scare" and the atomic bomb would shake and shatter his moral landscape and make him the anti-war activist he would remain for the rest of his life. In the fifth chapter, "Lonesome Radical Soul", Kaufman makes clear the slow decline of the movements in which Guthrie had been a part. During this post-war time period, Guthrie would help with the *People's Songs* organization, and although influential for a time, it too, like the wave of labor militancy following the war, waned. The post-war "red scare" and the growing McCarthyism left Guthrie under political pressure with few allies. Kaufman describes how these and other events led to the political isolation of Guthrie, who felt the movements of a golden era were gone. Kaufman traces these developments in Guthrie's life as well as the themes and tone of his writing during this time, giving depth to the legend of Guthrie that Kaufman is rewriting.

In the sixth chapter, "Road to Peekskill," Kaufman devotes an entire chapter to Guthrie's development as a race activist. Kaufman traces Guthrie's lax attitude toward race during his early radio days through his writing on race over the years with a narrative culminating in the Peekskill riots, one of the key events in Guthrie's life. Guthrie's rage against the racism of his day and the failed American century is demonstrated through his letters, communications, and writing. As Kaufman lays open Guthrie's work, we see a radical wrestling with his family's participation in racism, forcing him to struggle to work out his guilt and anger. Kaufman details and explores how Guthrie's presence at the Peekskill riots would both be a political and personal milestone that provides important historical connection for the development of civil rights as well as later radical movements.

Kaufman wraps up the narrative in Chapter 7, "The Last Free Place in America," by describing the growing power and influence of the House Un-American

Activities Committee as well as Guthrie's Huntington's disease. Kaufman describes the effect of the HUAC on the folklife program and Guthrie's activities, as well as the growing difficulties of Guthrie's illness, through the changes in his lyrics and interactions with others. These events led to chaos and confusion that would define the later Guthrie in his demeanor and output. Kaufman paints a portrait of a man who fought for his beliefs and for a greater good to his last day. Kaufman aptly notes that as Guthrie was slowly fading, the American folk revival was beginning.

Kaufman's conclusion, "The Miners and the Mill," directly focuses on Guthrie's legacy and his continued influence on radical politics and music. Even here the complexity between Guthrie's ideals and the practical realities are given space as Kaufman continues to include an impressive amount of information. Kaufman details how Guthrie's influence extends musically as well as ideologically through his later collaborations and as an inspiration to later movements, activists, and artists worldwide. The reader is left with a final view of Guthrie as a complex man within a complex set of relations who had a profound effect on radical politics and art. Kaufman wraps up the rebuilding of Guthrie's mythos by describing the influence his work continues to have, giving his narrative the final note of complexity and depth that makes this book a challenging exploration of Guthrie's work, life, and legacy.

Kaufman presents a human and complex Woody Guthrie as well as a rich background for understanding his life and his development. His book is well researched and a powerful resource for the life and development of Woody Guthrie, as well as an insight into the development of radical politics during Guthrie's life. Although the mix between a thematic treatment and narrative treatment can sometimes be confusing, Kaufman's writing is clear, interesting, and exudes a storytelling style that is accessible to both layman and expert. His text provides a solid foundation for understanding the later folk and radical movements of the '60s and '70s as well as the influence of folk music and culture on the American political landscape. Kaufman's work neither completely tears down the mythos of Woody

Guthrie nor perpetuates an ideal of Woody or his work. Kaufman's book pulsates with the writings, art, and lyrics of Guthrie and others who shaped his life and the movements of which he was a part. This is an important and much needed text that boldly and masterfully explores Woody Guthrie as both man and radical icon.

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