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“Folk Songs for Sale: Woody Guthrie’s Columbia River Compromise”

“Grand Coulee Dam” (1941; rec. 1944)

Well the world has seven wonders, the travelers always tell:
Some gardens and some towers, I guess you know them well.
But the greatest wonder is in Uncle Sam's fair land.
It's that King Columbia River and the big Grand Coulee Dam.

She heads up the Canadian Rockies where the rippling waters glide,
Comes a-rumbling down the canyon to meet that salty tide
Of the wide Pacific Ocean where the sun sets in the west,
And the big Grand Coulee country in the land I love the best.

In the misty crystal glitter of that wild and windward spray
Men have fought the pounding waters, and met a watery grave
She tore their boats to splinters, but it gave men dreams to dream
Of the day the Coulee Dam would cross that wild and wasted stream.

Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of ‘thirty-three,
For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me
He said, “Roll along Columbia, you can ramble to the sea,
But river, while you’re ramblin’ you can do some work for me.”

Now in Washington and Oregon you hear the factories hum,
Makin’ chrome and makin’ manganese and light aluminum.
And there roars the flying fortress now to fight for Uncle Sam,
Spawned on the King Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam.

(Transcribed from *The Asch Recordings* version)

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In the thirty days he was employed by the Bonneville Power Administration in the spring of 1941, Woody Guthrie experienced the most intense creative burst of his artistic life. He was not quite 29 years old. In this short time on the federal payroll he wrote something like 26 songs, for which the Department of the Interior paid him 266 dollars and 66 cents, or about \$10.03 a song. Several of these are among his best-known and finest: “Pastures of Plenty,” “Roll On, Columbia,” “The Great Historical Bum,” “Talking

Columbia,” and the one we just heard, about what was then the largest dam in the world, “The Grand Coulee Dam,” set like the others to a familiar old folk tune that most working people in the Forties would have easily recognized. Woody would often say, “I didn’t steal the tune – I just borrowed it, and I meant to return it when I was done.”

That this independent and cantankerous poet-musician was celebrating a massive government-sponsored engineering and defense project seems just a little strange. Just one year earlier, at a New York City benefit for Spanish Civil War refugees, Woody had gotten a standing ovation for his song “Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?” urging FDR not to send military aid to Finland, then being threatened by a Soviet invasion (Klein 142). RCA Victor, while it was willing to record a dozen of the up-and-coming Guthrie’s dust bowl ballads, refused to record “Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?” and Woody wrote to Alan Lomax that the record company was obviously “afraid”:

The day will come [he wrote] when I will raise cain on the rich folks too much and they’ll turn me every way but a-loose. But I don’t care. (Cray 189-90)

Contrary to his popular image, Woody Guthrie was never a field worker. “I never picked nothin’ but a guitar,” he once said. He was as much at home on a typewriter keyboard, where he could bang out 150 words per minute, and often did, all night long. Although he worked sporadically for local and network radio stations, his longest steady stretch of employment was as a writer, contributing a self-illustrated column called “Woody Sez” to the California Communist Party’s *People’s Daily World*. “Woody Sez” appeared almost daily for eight months, until he left the West Coast for New York City. His editors were not sorry to see him go – he was always suspected of ideological impurity, and was liable to poke fun at Marxist jargon. Although he never signed up as a Party member, he did subscribe to a simplified and dogmatic version of Marxism in which cartoonlike capitalist bosses oppressed saintly workers (“Songs to Grow On” 80). “I ain’t a communist – necessarily,” Woody liked to say, “but I been in the red most of my life.” (“Woody Sez” in *People’s World*).

How the federal government ended up hiring a fellow traveler like Woody amounts to an “enemy of my enemy is my friend” kind of alliance. In the 1930s, private power and water producers in the Northwest had been lobbying heavily against the creation of public utilities, calling them “socialist boondoggles” and the like. As war with Germany loomed, the federal government declared Grand Coulee Dam a national defense project, its avowed purpose changing from irrigation for farmers to electricity for war production. Still, in March 1941, the dam almost completed, voters in four major northwestern cities rejected the idea of connecting to its generators. (Carriker) So the BPA needed to reach out to the grass roots of Washington and Oregon, and that’s why they called on the old Dust Bowl balladeer, the man *People’s World* had called a “progressive hillbilly ... the ultimate proletarian ... the voice of his people.”

Guthrie biographer Joe Klein explains how what he calls “the most productive month of his life” (190) came about:

[Director Gunther] Von Fritsch ... had already made one film, *Hydro*, about the building the first of a series of dams across the Columbia River ... he had a vague notion of centering the documentary on a homespun, folksy character who’d explain all the benefits the dams were bringing to the Pacific Northwest, and a friend of his in Los Angeles, a screenwriter named Eugene Solo, recommended Woody Guthrie. (189)

Folk songs had been used in soundtracks to other documentaries, but never to make an overtly political point. Here the purpose would be to highlight the BPA’s role in rural electrification and job creation, a radical role for the government at the time, but Woody was way more radical than they’d expected. The chief of the BPA’s Information Division, Stephen Kahn, said later in an interview that the first songs Woody composed for the project “indicated he was in the class struggle pretty deep.” (Cray 208). To keep Woody from wandering off on his own, Kahn assigned him a chauffeur – a minder, actually, to tour the Columbia River Valley in a late-model Hudson. “I can’t believe it,” Woody is said to have said. “I’m in paradise” (Cray 209). Having left the Dust Bowl for California not many years before, and toured the squalid, crowded labor camps, hobo

jungles and Hooverilles of the Golden State, he must have been feeling what Kevin Starr calls “the therapeutic presence of the federal government operating through public works during the Great Depression” (275). Or maybe it was just the change from the broken-down Pontiac he’d arrived in, which was soon repossessed by a Los Angeles finance company.

Having walked away just a few months before from a lucrative radio career, and having recently been surviving on odd jobs earning dimes and quarters at saloons in Los Angeles and the Sierra foothills, Woody needed the money pretty badly. He had just spent a year in New York City, drawing up to \$350 dollars a week for writing scripts and performing on the radio, the equivalent of \$4600 a week today. He was making so much money, as he put it, he was using it to sleep under. One of his regular jobs was hosting a weekly show called *Pipe Smoking Time*, sponsored by the Model Tobacco Company, for which he adapted one of his best-known Dust Bowl songs “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You”:

Howdy friends, it’s sure good to see you
 Howdy friends, it’s sure good to see you
 Load up your pipe and take your life easy
 With Model Tobacco to light up your way
 We’re glad to be with you today.

When he packed up in disgust and left New York not long afterwards, Woody said that he had done seven of them pipe-smoking shows, and that was six too many. “They wanted to choose his songs and tell him what to say,” said his first Mary Guthrie, “and nobody told him that” (Cray). But it seems that Woody, in the short term at least, had been more than willing to adjust his politics, have his words chosen and his songs corrupted, to placate a well-paying employer. But the sense of selling out grew on him, leading to an act which some might consider artistic suicide, but which others, including Woody himself, might call a sudden attack of integrity.

After leaving New York, Woody, his wife and three young children were all but living in their dirty and battered automobile, and Woody was no doubt eager to conform to the government's requirements, which were summed up in a later interview by Mary as "they didn't want any politics" (Cray 211). Woody had to audition for the BPA chief in Portland, Paul Raver, an avowed conservative. After an hour behind closed doors with Woody, Raver agreed to put him on the BPA payroll with the title of "Information Consultant." Woody moved his family into a Portland apartment, took his guitar to the office, and began writing songs (when he wasn't flirting with the BPA secretaries).

In *The Organic Machine* Richard White discusses the irony of Guthrie glorifying a system of dams that all but destroyed the salmon run on the Columbia, by taking on the persona of the salmon itself (62), as in "Talking Columbia":

"I pulled out a pencil and scribbled this song,
I figured all those salmon just couldn't be wrong
Them salmon fish is mighty shrewd
They got senators and congressmen too
'bout like a president, they run every four years"

In "Grand Coulee Dam" the river is no longer where salmon spawn; instead, factories "spawn" airplanes, and Woody celebrates this mechanical reproduction as a "challenge" taken on by a folksy personification of the federal government, good old "Uncle Sam."

In the 1947 version of "Talkin' Columbia" an interesting detail pops up, as recorded by Moses Asch of Folkways Records. While improvising the tail of a later verse to "Talking Columbia," Woody drops an allusion to another defense industry subsequently situated along the Columbia in close proximity to cheap electrical power and far away from urban populations that might be endangered (though the Army didn't seem to care too much about the scattered rural populations). In 1943, two years after Woody's stint with the BPA, the Manhattan Project would build a plutonium plant on the Columbia just above its confluence with the Snake River, at Hanford. In this 1947 recording, as he trails off in

a poetic catalog of the benefits that harnessing the river will provide, Woody adds the line “everything from fertilizer to sewing machines to atomic bedrooms ... and plastic, everything’s going to be plastic.” Even if Woody did improvise the line after the war, when Hanford’s existence became known, it was an early and daring reference to the top-secret site, which remained classified until the end of the Cold War.¹ Woody once told folklorist Alan Lomax that “music is some kind of electricity that makes a radio out of a man ... and he just sings according to how he’s a-feeling” (Cray 175) and in this passing reference Woody was picking up and transmitting early vibrations of the Atomic Age that thus far were inaudible to most Americans.

Reflecting his feelings as well as his BPA-assigned task as he surveyed the Columbia’s undammed stretches from the window of that government Hudson, “Grand Coulee Dam” takes a turn midway from romantic rapture to populist rhetoric, from an appreciation of the free-flowing ecosystem to a celebration of human domination over it, from exploration to exploitation, with emphasis on the benefits of this sacrifice for the displaced working class, “his people,” as he called them, whose voice he assumes in another lesser-known Columbia River song “End of the Line”:

We got hold of a piece of la-a-a-nd
 15 miles from the Coulee Dam
 Now the Coulee Dam is a sight to see-ee-ee
 Makin’ eeeeeee-leck-tricity

Now Oregon State is mighty fiiiiiiine
 If you’re hooked op to the power line
 But there ain’t no country extra fiiiiiiine
 If you’re just a mile from the end of the line

As Pete Seeger said, “A good song is a triumph of oversimplification” (*Strange Fruit*).

¹ Hanford’s official history claims that it produced more weapons-grade plutonium than any other facility in the world (1.55), and its legacy of chemical and radioactive pollution continues to afflict the region.

Recordings of these songs were played over loudspeakers in the Columbia River region at rallies to sell bonds to finance power line construction (“My Life” 9-10) and influence voters to support public utilities. As White says, “They are *not* songs of raping a river” (63; emphasis mine). But they are songs celebrating an almost Soviet-style version of industrial agrarianism, reflecting the naïveté of Woody’s compromise between the competing forces of market capitalism, New Deal socialism, and what he often considered burdensome domesticity. Surrendering his art to a totalitarian unity might have seemed appealing. At the end of “Talkin’ Columbia” we get this throwaway line:

I don’t like dictators none myself, but then I think the whole country ought to be run by ... eeeeeee-lecktricity.

Besides electrifying farmhouses and rural settlements, cheap power on the Columbia made possible the large-scale aluminum smelting mentioned in “Grand Coulee Dam,” and aluminum producers continued to monopolize the BPA’s power output and Washington state politics after the war, parlaying their defense priority into domination of Northwest hydroelectricity (White 73). Woody’s songs may not have significantly enabled this corporate takeover, but they foreshadow the dictatorial control exercised by big business over everyday life along the river, and Woody excels in reducing this complex situation to catchy couplets: “The folks need houses and stuff to eat/the folks need metals and the folks need wheat.” Still, Woody must have learned a thing or two from his seven weeks on *Pipe Smoking Time*: when he was driven through town on his chauffeured tour, the Spokane Chamber of Commerce, a fervent opponent of the Coulee Dam and apparently unaware of Woody’s mission, asked him to play background music for a meeting. Woody replied, according to driver Elmer Buehler, “I wouldn’t play background music for any chamber of commerce, let alone in the foreground” (Cray 210).

In his recent Guthrie biography, Ed Cray notes that the documentary film, titled *The Columbia*, wasn’t released until 1949, in abbreviated form with only three of the twelve

songs Woody had recorded for it: according to Cray they were “Roll On, Columbia, Roll On,” “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done” (a.k.a. “The Great Historical Bum”) and “Pastures of Plenty.”²

The film is difficult to find because, in 1953, the incoming Eisenhower administration ordered all surviving copies of the film destroyed when some official learned that an informer had called Woody “Joe Stalin’s mouthpiece” in testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee and that he had played at communist labor rallies before the war.

Was Woody’s compromise with the federal government worth it? The same question has been asked about his abandonment of several families and numerous children in order that he could be free to travel and write. Prints of the documentary may be rare, but we have the songs, and they have aged well. Many of them he recorded more than once, and they are still frequently covered by other musicians. “Pastures of Plenty,” often cited as his best, has most recently been recorded by Lila Downs on *The Border (La Linea)*. It contains an alternate verse seldom heard when it is recorded or published today, as on Lila Downs’s updated version that alternates between traditional a capella singing and rapping over a heavy rhythm. Perhaps Downs and others leave out this verse because its urban vision too harshly contradicts the rest of the well-known song’s ode to rural radicalism:

Look down in the canyon and there you will see
The Grand Coulee showers her blessings on me;
The lights for the city, for factory and mill,
Green pastures of plenty from dry barren hills.

By the mid-Fifties the BPA had overcome opposition by investor-owned utilities and its great water projects along the Columbia’s 1200-mile valley were not just powering smelters, refining plutonium, and irrigating farmland, but also supplying municipal water

² or were they? Cray apparently contradicts himself on 213n

and electricity for the postwar expansion of Portland, Seattle, Tacoma and other Northwest cities. Somehow this metropolitan focus seems appropriate, for although Woody contrived a media persona as untutored Dust Bowl balladeer, riding the rails and singing the lives of farmworkers, his actual career was launched in large part within the city limits of Los Angeles and New York, where as he said, “he had stuck his head a good piece in both directions and noticed that the sissier, the smoother, the slicker and the higher polished that you get, and the furtherest from the truth, the higher wages you’ll draw down” (Cray 239).

His contract with the BPA ran out in June 1941. Leaving his wife and children in Portland, Guthrie hitchhiked back to New York City where, as Pete Seeger recalls, he walked into the younger folksinger’s fifth-floor Lower West Side apartment saying, “Well, I guess we’re not going to be singing any more of them peace songs. Hitler flip-flopped and I guess we gotta flip-flop too.” Nazi Germany had just invaded the Soviet Union, and two years later, a newly enlisted Woody would be on board a Liberty ship carrying ammunition in a North Atlantic convoy under attack by German submarines, and defying shipboard segregation to play music with the black sailors. Three years later he would be under enemy fire again, anchored off the Normandy Coast a month after D-Day, and scrambling below the burning decks to rescue his guitar.

Shipping out for the third time, a new wife and infant child left behind, he once again adapted the words of that Dust Bowl song of his:

So long, it’s been good to know you
 So long, it’s been good to know you
 There’s a mighty big war that’s got to be won
 Then we’ll all get together again.

Back home in New York City, he would continue to write a little, perform a lot, and occasionally travel. He had just turned 33 and his great creative burst was over. Not many radio stations, labor unions or public utilities came calling anymore. He was beginning to

feel the effects of Huntingdon's Disease, and deteriorated mentally and physically at an accelerating clip. In the early 1950s successful recordings of several of his songs including "So Long It's Been Good to Know You" were released by Pete Seeger and other former bandmates, now calling themselves The Weavers. In 1966, a year before his death, Interior Secretary Stewart Udall presented the incapacitated and institutionalized Woody with a Conservation Service Award for his Columbia River songs. In addition, a BPA power substation was named after him. Formerly blacklisted³, Woody was again embraced by the power elite, and this angered his radical former collaborators: folklorist Irwin Silber stated they were "taking a revolutionary and turning him into a conservationist" (Cray 389) and Woody's own son Arlo said about a later federal tribute to his father: "For a man who fought all his life against being respectable, this comes as a stunning defeat" (Cray 389n).

Postscript

Woody Guthrie generated his entire known creative output took place over an 18-year period beginning in 1935: thousands of songs and hundreds of recordings, plus three novels and countless poems, articles, reviews, columns, letters, reams of other manuscripts, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and ephemeral creations that have not survived. His last known recording was in 1952, and from all of that Ed Cray estimates that Woody made "no more than \$50,000 his entire working life" (396). However, the royalties from "This Land is Your Land," "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On" (adopted in 1987 as the Washington state folk song) and a few others among his most popular songs have earned the closely held family corporation Woody Guthrie Publications over \$100,000 in each of several recent years. A stunning defeat indeed. Or ...

Or, as Woody often said, "Life is pretty tough – you're lucky if you live through it." (Cray 314)

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- Carriker, Robert. "Ten Dollars a Song: Woody Guthrie Sells His Talent to the Bonneville Power Administration." In *Columbia* 15 (Spring 2001):32-36.

³ He wasn't blacklisted by the US Congress, though a California committee allegedly put him on one. He was named in testimony before the HUAC, but by that time he was so ill, according to Cray, they didn't bother formally listing him.

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