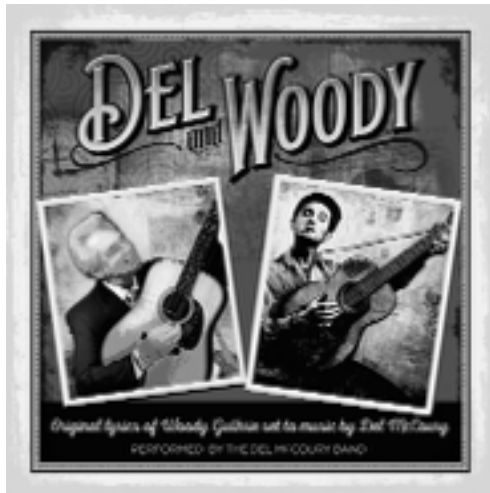


The Del McCoury Band, *Del and Woody*. McCoury Music, 2016.



It should come as no surprise that Woody Guthrie's songs lend themselves so readily to bluegrass settings. Not only did Guthrie and the fashioners of early bluegrass draw from the same wellsprings of black and white country styles, mountain music, church music, and Irish/British ballads and instrumentals; Guthrie was also an avid record collector and he knew a thing or six about bluegrass. We have seen pictures of him among the folk and bluegrass players of

Washington Square Park in the late 1950s, and one of the more memorable curiosities I saw in the Woody Guthrie Archives was a short handwritten note of Guthrie's simultaneously acknowledging and deprecating the pyrotechnics of Earl Scruggs in favor of the presumably more down-to-earth banjo playing of Pete Seeger. Arlo Guthrie felt confident enough in the adaptability of his father's songs to record an entire album with the Dillards, *32 Cents/Postage Due* (2008), comprising thirteen of Woody's songs in a bluegrass setting, including "Grand Coulee Dam," "East Texas Red," "Ludlow Massacre," and "Do Re Mi." What Woody would have thought about the banjo pyrotechnics of the late Doug Dillard or Rob McCoury is anybody's guess; but there is no doubt that the songs on *Del and Woody* fit themselves into bluegrass as though they were intended for it.

The McCoury band's album is the latest project to emerge from the Woody Guthrie Archives with Nora Guthrie at the helm as Executive Producer. Part of Ms. Guthrie's aim has been, as she has said elsewhere, to drag her father out of the Dust Bowl and to filter his words through contemporary sounds and voices: hence two albums by the Klezmatics, one by Jonatha Brooke, two by Billy Bragg and Wilco, one by Jay Farrar, Will Johnson, Anders Parker, and Jim James, and two by the German songwriter Wenzel (one in English, one in German), as well as contemporary versions by the various artists coming together to celebrate Guthrie's centennial. Yet, in bringing Guthrie back into the bluegrass setting, the McCoury band have provided us with one of the most stunning projects to come out of the archives.

Del McCoury's selection of previously unpublished Guthrie songs — which he has deftly set to music that at once reaffirms and tests bluegrass

chordal convention, often through a range of unforced key-changes mid-song — does much to fulfil Nora Guthrie’s ambition of expanding her father’s creative legacy beyond the pigeonholes of “Dust Bowl Balladeer” and “protest singer.” This is not to say that there is no social commentary in the chosen songs: “The Government Road” is one of Guthrie’s greatest odes to the New Deal vision and the benefits of public ownership and investment, while “Hotcakes and Fritters,” on the face of it a good-time biscuits-and-gravy romp, moans that the “Banker got my place / An’ I got the Chiggers.” Similarly, “Ain’t a Gonna Do” is an extended catalog of the markers of poverty — “Corn bread and creek water,” “Salt pork and hard biscuits,” “Red beans and thin gravy,” and “Old flour sack drawers” — that threaten to degrade the song’s implied singer.

But from the outset we see Guthrie adopting a host of viewpoints, roles, and voices, engaging with the broad panoply of modern life and revealing previously unseen (or unheard) sides to him. His passion for cars, both in themselves and as metaphors for progress, comes through in both “The Government Road” and “Cheap Mike,” the latter being a backhanded (and hilarious) attack on a seedy used-car dealer. Guthrie’s paradoxical exhilaration and discomfiture with urban life kicks in with the album’s first number, the hard-driving “New York Trains,” and continues with one of his earliest responses to Los Angeles, “Left in This World Alone,” with its rural protagonist seemingly crushed by cold unconcern of the big city. Such pathos is balanced with humor (“Wimmen’s Hats”), the satisfaction and delight of early fatherhood (“Little Fellow”), love of friends and family (“Because You Took Me In Out of the Rain” and “Family Reunion”), and outright devotion to the traditional musical and lyrical forms that inspired Guthrie’s creativity (“Dirty Overalls” and “Californy Gold,” both reaffirming inherited folk patterns, and “Government Road,” which — at least in the McCoury band’s hands — preaches the word like a white country gospel number).

The album’s production standards could not be higher, and Del McCoury’s voice carries all the authority and confidence of one of bluegrass’s legendary singers, recalling both Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley. The musicianship is humbling, whether in the tight harmonies of the entire band or in the instrumental mastery of Ronnie McCoury (mandolin), Rob McCoury (banjo), Jason Carter (fiddle), and Alan Bartram (bass). In sum, *Del and Woody* deserves as wide a circulation as possible, not merely as an archival project but as an arresting musical experience in its own right.

WILL KAUFMAN