

Introduction to Volume 3, which is dedicated to the memory of Marjorie Guthrie (1917-1983)



Will Kaufman, Volume Editor

On September 25th, 2017, at the Pfefferberg Theater in Berlin, Nora Guthrie and Michael Kleff launched the Bear Family Records CD and book package of the legendary Woody Guthrie Tribute Concerts of 1968 and 1970. The launch was at the center of an evening devoted to the Huntington's Disease Association of Germany (Deutsche Huntington Hilfe e.V.). Bear Family Records are a German concern, so the event marked both a fitting location and a fitting beneficiary. As Ms. Guthrie explained to the audience: "You are my family, whether you know it or not. If you're from the music side of my family, you're Cousin Music, and if you're from the Huntington's side of the family, you're Cousin HD; but we are all together in this."¹ Also fitting was the year of the launch, not only because 2017 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Woody Guthrie, but also because that same year marked the hundredth anniversary of the birth of his wife, Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia Guthrie.

When Marjorie Mazia met Guthrie in January of 1942, she was already one of the star dancers and teachers in the Martha Graham company. She did not need a Woody Guthrie to establish a formidable public or artistic profile; she already had that under her belt. If anything, it is Marjorie's influence on Woody that is the most

noteworthy. As scholars and biographers have noted, Guthrie's incorporation of a modern dance sensibility into his perception and output owed an incalculable debt to Marjorie and the world to which she introduced him. In a very real and tragic sense, Guthrie repaid this debt; for, in losing him to Huntington's disease, Marjorie ultimately found an all-consuming mission. As I have encapsulated it elsewhere:

While their marriage could not, in the end, withstand all the strains that were placed upon it, it has left a powerful legacy — not only in the form of their progeny or in the vast Woody Guthrie Archives launched by Marjorie, but also in the Huntington's Disease Society of America that has grown out of Marjorie's Committee to Combat Huntington's Disease — itself a product of her determination to find an explanation and, ultimately, a cure for the monstrous affliction that had destroyed the man she loved. Through her lobbying and her tireless commitment, Marjorie Guthrie became the patron saint of Huntington's disease research....²

In this issue of the *Woody Guthrie Annual*, 2017 BMI-Woody Guthrie Fellowship winner Jamie Fenton engages directly with the spirit of the dance that captivated Guthrie and transformed his output. Fenton's extended essay directs our attention to facets of Guthrie's art that are inextricably linked to the windows opened for him by Marjorie.

Indeed, Guthrie and Marjorie were brought together over a dance project headed by Sophie Maslow, Marjorie's colleague, who had invited Guthrie to perform in a choreographed staging of *Dust Bowl Ballads*. This event was just one in a history of staged performances that is also a relatively overlooked thread in Guthrie's biography. It is not generally known that he was, as well as a balladeer, an aspiring stage actor. Nor is it generally known that the initial lure for him to leave Los Angeles for New York was the possibility of a role in the Broadway production of *Tobacco Road*, starring his close friend, Will Geer. We can never be sure how Guthrie would have fared as a professional actor, but we do know that, as a character in his own right, he has posthumously graced the stages of many theatres on both sides of the Atlantic. Hence this issue's contribution by Jorge Arévalo Mateus — the founding curator of the Woody Guthrie Archives and now Executive Director of Alan Lomax's Association for Cultural Equity — examining the David Lutken production, *Woody Sez*, in conversation with another musical, Conor McPherson's imaginative setting based on the songs of Guthrie's celebrated protégé, Bob Dylan: *Girl from the North Country*.

But none of this is to say that critical attention to Guthrie's own songwriting has in any way been diminished or deflected. Former BMI-Woody Guthrie Fellow Mark Fernandez ensures in this issue that Guthrie's songwriting method remains front and center in his analysis. Fernandez's essay on Guthrie's "Balladsongs" marks one of the few sustained examinations of Guthrie's philosophies as a songwriter.

In addition to these essays, issue no. 3 offers book reviews by Fernandez and Darryl Holter, as well as a review of the aforementioned Bear Family package on the Carnegie Hall and Hollywood Bowl Guthrie tribute concerts by someone who was there. Dick Flacks, long known as a leading progressive activist (indeed, he was one of the founders of Students for a Democratic Society in 1962) as well as an emeritus sociologist, brings his first-hand recollections of both the New York and Hollywood concerts to his assessment of the Bear Family reissue.

2017 was, of course, a momentous year at large, for reasons that hardly need explanation. For many, it marked a great test of the capacity for political optimism. But in the two anniversaries commemorated this year — the passing of Woody Guthrie and the birth of Marjorie Guthrie — our attention has been redirected to two examples of real-world commitment and activism on behalf of those buffeted by a host of adversarial forces, whether they be political, economic, social, or neurological. Woody and Marjorie Guthrie both left their mark on a world made much better through their presence.

¹ *Woody Guthrie Abend Berlin Audio-Mitschnitt Vortrag Nora Guthrie* (Wir Sind Huntington - Deutsche Huntington Hilfe e.V.): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7A2G6i4eZU>

² Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), p. 205.