

85th Anniversary of “This Land Is Your Land”

The story of what motivated Woody Guthrie to write the song.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

John Erling in 2025 (JE, 2025): For Voices of Oklahoma, this is John Erling. This year, 2025, marks the 85th anniversary of Woody Guthrie's song, This Land Is Your Land. Woody wrote it in February 1940 while living in New York City as a response to Irving Berlin's God Bless America, which Guthrie thought was perhaps too detached, didn't tell the full story of America. Originally titled God Blessed America for Me, it wasn't recorded until 1944 and wasn't widely published until 1945. Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma, July 14, 1912. Voices of Oklahoma interviewed Nora Guthrie, the daughter of Woody, October 7, 2010. And in that oral history interview, Nora talked about the song God Bless America and what Woody thought of it, and then gives a background to what led up to the writing of This Land Is Your Land.

Nora Guthrie, 2010 (NG, 2010): And I've heard people say this over and over that he hated Irving Berlin's song, so let me paint the picture of what's happening at that moment. He's hitchhiking from Los Angeles to New York. It's 1940. All kinds of things are going on. Hundreds of thousands of people in America are displaced because of the Dust Bowl, we've gone through the Depression. It's a mess out there. And as he's hitchhiking across America—now Hollywood's in good shape, New York's in good shape—but from California to the New York Island, everything in between, it's really not so great.

So as he's hitchhiking, it takes him a month to hitchhike across the country and get to New York. And in every jukebox, at every truck stop, at every diner, Kate Smith's hit song God Bless America is blasting out of the radios. Now we're also inching towards war. There's all kinds of stuff happening, so the rallying cry of God Bless America is appropriate in some way. I mean, I can see it historically, why it had such popularity with a great singer like Kate Smith.

But his experience is he's seeing people homeless. He's seeing people

hungry. He's seeing people walking across the country because they've lost everything. Families in jalopies going across Route 66. They've lost a homestead that they've had for generations. There is no FEMA at the time, there is no government support. Think of Katrina and all the things that we have now in place, and he was thinking to himself, "Why isn't anyone helping these people? Why isn't anyone helping? They're American citizens. They've been here for generations. Where's the government?"

At that time, it was considered naughty to say, "Where's the government?" The country hadn't decided that government organizations should have any responsibility in this area. Now we have FEMA. It's a given. You get a hurricane, FEMA's gonna come in and help you. You get a flood, FEMA's gonna come in and help you. But at that time, there wasn't anyone to help these people. So I would say he was a really early advocate questioning where is the help.

So as he's hearing God Bless America blast through the radio, he's thinking, "Man, if God blessed America, everybody would have a home, everybody would have food, everybody would have a job. We'd be OK." And he says, "I'm not getting it. I'm not seeing it." So that's why I say Woody responded to the song after he heard it. He got into New York in February. Within the first week, he was in a little fleabag hotel boarding house on 43rd Street and 6th Avenue. He's looking out the window and again he's seeing some homeless people and things are not so good.

And he writes this song as a parody almost. And I don't mean that in a humorous sense. I mean that strictly in the literal sense of parody is a response to something. Something triggers a thought in you and you write a parody. The original title of This Land was God Bless America for Me. He crossed it out later and called it This Land Was Made for You and Me. See, the parody turned into a more mature comment.

So that's the story of that song, and at the bottom of the lyric on This Land Is Your Land, we have the handwritten lyric. He writes, "All you can write is what you see." He's hearing one thing from the radio, but he's seeing something else, and he says to himself, "Well, all I can write is what I see."

John Erling, 2010 (JE, 2010): You kind of wonder what he'd be thinking, writing, saying. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have him here commenting on this time?

NG, 2010: Yeah, you know, I think about that a lot. There was a moment at Obama's inauguration concert when Bruce Springsteen and Pete Seeger led millions of people around the world singing This Land Is Your Land, and again, integrating the song into popular consciousness and mentality—we're all in this together. So you can have everybody singing their songs and including This Land as opposed to separating it. It's an inclusive song.

I really looked up at that moment. I was awfully teary-eyed and I thought, "Oh man, that song, your time has come." I couldn't have thought of a prouder moment for me, and that has nothing to do with just politics. It has to do with an African-American president and we are moving forward, we are moving ahead. There are always forces that want to hold back to the familiar, and again, I'm very generous of spirit about all the different parties and their different things. I'm very, very generous of spirit because I really understand. My dad taught me this: everyone has a point of view because of their experience and because of their interests. The bankers, they have interests. You can't put it down. You can't be stupid and say, "Oh, they're all bad" or anything like that. Wouldn't it be great if we had a world of great people who were bankers? I need a banker. I need someone to help me save money and explain money to me. I need a guy like that. I need industry. I need manufacturing. I need a job. We're all in this together.

So I'm very much against anyone who pits anybody against anybody. I'm very generous that way and I really believe that if you really looked beyond the facade and all the costumes and the branding—everybody's branding everybody else—it's just bull. It really is bull. I see behind it a lot of really good, kind people out there of every party, of every religion and of no religion, of every gender and of transgender. I really look at the human being inside, and if you really sat everybody down in a circle and said, "What are your concerns, deeply? Don't bull me. What do you really care about?" I think we'd come up with top three priorities that we all share together. And the differences have to do with methodology—how we're gonna get there.

How do you fight branding? You don't pay any attention to it. You leapfrog over it. Visionaries look way down the road. I'm not looking at this afternoon in one sense. I'm looking at 100 years from now, and that's what Woody did. That's what visionaries do. So that's my advice when I see all the pettiness, and I really think it's childish. I'm 60 years old and I see people older than me acting like they're in nursery school. The behavior is of nursery school level, kindergarten, when you say to one kid, "Don't bully." You can't get away with this in kindergarten. You can only get away with it in politics.

JE, 2025: Now we are fortunate in Oklahoma and specifically downtown Tulsa to have the Woody Guthrie Center where you can see the original handwritten lyrics of This Land Is Your Land. The entire exhibit also includes an interactive timeline wall that follows his travels from Okemah, Oklahoma to Pampa, Texas, then on to Los Angeles and New York. And I encourage you to listen to Nora's full oral history interview about her father. You can also hear Woody's sister Mary Jo Guthrie, along with historian Guy Logston, talk about her brother. Go to Voices of Oklahoma and search Woody Guthrie, and both interviews will come up.

JE, 2010: So let's hear you sing just a little bit of This Land Is Your Land.

NG, 2010: Yeah. You almost say the poetry of it. It's poetry to me.

*"This land is your land, this land is my land,
From California to the New York Island,
From the redwood forest to the Gulfstream waters,
This land was made for you and me."*

JE, 2010: Tears in my eyes. That was wonderful.

JE, 2025: I would like to remind you that we have over 300 storytellers who would love to have you listen to their story. Give them a listen. You'll be glad you did, and I thank you for listening.

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