Better World A-Comin’

Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, and the Popular Front

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In his book on the intentionally communist upbringing of American youth, Paul Mishler observed that "folk songs became one of the most important mediums through which Communists connected their world to the traditions and culture of the United States." This offers an important key to understanding the work of Woody Guthrie, perhaps the best known of America's folk singers. Woody Guthrie was widely known even in his own life for his dust bowl ballads, his antifascism, and his anheimic celebrations of America. It is perhaps easy to lose sight of the fact that Guthrie also advocated for causes that were and are not widely popular, and that he worked with others who shared those values in order to do so. This insight offers narrative sense to what at first blush seems to be an otherwise-disappointing cache of letters exchanged between Guthrie and Alan Lomax, the famous American folklorist and musicologist who worked at the Library of Congress' Archive of American Folk Song in the 1940s. In these letters, Guthrie clearly sought to somehow document his own legacy, and the wider milieu of which he was such an important part. This was Guthrie's more obvious intersection with Lomax's own efforts to collect and preserve American folk stories and songs. However, both Guthrie and Lomax were also actively sympathetic to the contemporary cultural theories of the Communist Party (CP, or the Party). Therefore, the relevance of these two men's working relationship becomes clearest in the context of the CP's "Popular Front" strategy of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Guthrie and Lomax each sought to locate an indigenous cultural basis for communist cultural work in America, and each found the other an ally in his own attempts to do so. Such an understanding most clearly illuminates the Library of Congress' collection of Guthrie's and Lomax's correspondence.

Woody Guthrie's Communist Party was not what it once had been. In the early 1930s, the CP was in its "Third Period," in which it called for a hard line maintained by a small Party of ideological purists. Events both in America and elsewhere changed that outlook, however, and by the late 1930s the CP had changed both leadership and course.1 Earl Browder led the CP into a period of ideological tolerance and political cooperativeness, called the "Popular Front." The Party became much more willing to work with other people and organizations, both despite ideological differences, and for shared goals such as building the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) or fighting the Nazis during World War II.2

This change in line deeply affected the worldview of cultural workers in and around the Party. In the "Third Period," CP-affiliated musicians' groups like the Composers Collective and the

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2 Robert Cherney, "Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931-1935," in American Communist History 1 No. 1 (2002), particularly pages 9-11, offers a great deal of insight on the "Third Period" CP, and the means by which it opened up to the world around it, so to speak, in adopting the "Popular Front" strategy against rising fascism, under the ideological leadership of the Comintern and the American leadership of Earl Browder. Robert Cantwell, When We Were Good: The Folk Song Revival (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 88-94, discusses this as well, more specifically in terms of the impact it had on Communist and allied cultural workers, including folk musicians. See also Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson, Songs for Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs and the American Left (Hamborgen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 1996), 2 and 12-13.


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Pierre Degeyter Club had produced bombastic, classically-influenced "proletarian music" with little regard for the music to which working people actually listened.4 These musicians consciously eschewed the old Wobbly tradition of taking folk, religious, and other popular songs, and modifying the lyrics for propaganda purposes.5 The advent of the "Popular Front" era deeply influenced this circle of Communist musician-intellectuals as well, and they changed their minds, turning to America's rich folk traditions and searching them for radical uses as they documented them, often drawing paychecks from New Deal programs to do so.6 Guthrie shared these interests, whether organically or by influence, maintaining that "[a]ny song that points out something that is wrong, needs fixing, and shows you how to fix it—it is the undying song of the working people."7 Typically pithy, Guthrie put the CP's Popular Front-era cultural program into one sentence.

This is not to say that all folk enthusiasts were radicals. John Lomax was certainly not—he was a former banker with a love of cowboy songs, who managed to land the job of traveling around and recording American folk artists for the Library of Congress. John Lomax hired his son Alan, who was a radical, as his assistant in this endeavor. What was a satisfying pastime to his father, became for Alan the search for a basis for his ideological beliefs in the traditions of the American people themselves.8 Furthermore, immigrants made up the bulk of CP membership to that time, and propaganda against the Party frequently contained assertions that the Party represented a "foreign" ideology and so was thus "un-American."9 In this context, the CP sought a specifically American idiom in which to state their case, a task conducted by many kinds of cultural workers in and near the Party. Indeed, such concerns were at the heart of the party's Popular Front strategy.10

Many of these Communist cultural workers believed that they had found such a living link between leftist ideology and American cultural traditions in the person and music of Woody Guthrie. Guthrie was born and raised in Oklahoma and Texas, and had fled the Dust Bowl like so many other "Okie" refugees to California in the 1930s. Unlike most of those refugees, however, Guthrie sang catchy tunes in the local idiom. Some among Guthrie's audiences found that his songs communicated the thoughts and feelings of these "dust bowl refugees" articulately and poignantly. In Los Angeles, meeting people like Will Geer, Guthrie discovered and embraced leftist culture as an

6 Lieberman, Weapon, 36-38. He specifically maintains that the work of John and Alan Lomax was central to this change in thinking among Party musicians. See also R. Serge Denisoff, Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 70; Cantwell, Good, 94 and 122-123; Cohen and Samuelson, Songs, 9 and 13.
7 Guthrie, Sez, 137. Compare that to Lieberman, Weapon, 31, 39, on Party thinking on folk music—it is exactly the same idea.
8 Klein, A Life, 143-144. See also Ed Cray, Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 169, which describes both how this turned into a high-placed job for Alan Lomax, when his father retired, and the power to connect people with opportunities like recording contracts and radio shows that Alan Lomax's position represented.
10 Reuss with Reuss, Folk Music, 133 offers a somewhat critical analysis of the relationship between such concerns and Party ideology in 1939. They refer on page 189 to efforts "to build a contemporary sociopolitical statement on a nexus of American folk traditions." See also Klein, A Life, 147-148, where he goes on to note that "the cultural style of the Popular Front... virtually became the federal government's cultural policy in the late 1930s."

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external representation of his own worldview, and the left in turn embraced him. For several months and in a volunteer capacity, Guthrie wrote a column titled Woody Sez for the CP newspaper the Daily Worker. In it, he shared his thoughts on a variety of subjects, in a style that might even be considered avant-garde for its attempts to express vernacular idiom by means of irregular spelling and punctuation. The CP found Guthrie to be too independent for serious consideration as a recruitment and leadership-development target. However, his column was popular and his sympathies clear, so the Popular Front-era CP was glad to open their pages to Guthrie's written work.

Thus, when Guthrie moved from Los Angeles to New York in early 1940 at the invitation of Will Geer, he was not utterly unknown in New York's leftist circles. Neither was Guthrie's brilliance as a folk singer necessarily apparent to his New York audiences, who had read his work but had never heard him perform. All that changed, by all accounts, at a benefit concert in March 1940 that Geer produced and in which Guthrie performed. Guthrie's talents as a showman, his rural authenticity, and his leftist sympathies were a relatively unique combination, at the time and in that place. He grabbed the attention of all in attendance, including Alan Lomax, who at once saw in Guthrie a veritable horizon of potential. Lomax promptly invited Guthrie to Washington DC to record for the Library of Congress Archives. Also over the next several months, Lomax secured for Guthrie a series of jobs, ranging from recording contracts to regular appearances on radio shows. Guthrie's time in New York gave him the chance to connect with, and mutually influence, a whole milieu of folk singers who were also leftist activists. As Guthrie's close friend Pete Seeger put it,

Alan Lomax had said to Woody: 'You are a great ballad-maker. Do not let anything in this world stop you from being that. You're the same kind of person who wrote the great ballads of the past...' He took Alan's advice. And why not? Alan was a very persuasive individual. I had the authority of the Library of Congress behind him....

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Richard A. Reuss, "Woody Guthrie and His Folk Tradition" in The Journal of American Folklore 83 No. 329 (Jul. – Sep. 1970), 278. See also Guthrie, Sez, 128-129 for example, where Guthrie relates performing for picket lines with Geer and others.

Reuss, Tradition, 292.

Cray, Ramblin' Man, 171-172.

Klein, A Life, 142, 149.

Jeff Place, "Woody Guthrie's Recorded Legacy" in Hard Travellin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie, eds. Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 57. See also Lieberman, Weapon, 51; Klein, A Life, 141-142; Denisoff, Coming, 70, 80-81; Cray, Ramblin' Man, 168-169; Cantwell, Good, 110-111.

Cantwell, Good, 135.

Klein, A Life, 143; Cray, Ramblin' Man, 170; Cantwell, Good, 112. Cantwell, Good, 377 locates Alan Lomax as the pivotal figure linking the growing interest in folk music and Popular Front-era American Communism; Cohen and Samuelson, Songs, 4, 7 and 13, agree with Cantwell's assessment.

Place, "Legacy" in Hard Travellin', 57; Klein, A Life, 150; Reuss, Tradition, 283.

Place, "Legacy" in Hard Travellin', 58; Cohen and Samuelson, Songs, 14-16.


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Guthrie had a deep and lasting impact on the leftist folk milieu, not least for his "dust bowl refugee" identity. 21

Guthrie did not settle in New York in 1940, but instead roamed for at least several more years. He was a merchant marine during World War II and went on to remarry a couple of times. He later entered a long, slow descent into utter physical impotence, becoming a victim of the Huntington's Chorea that had also claimed his mother. However, Guthrie did not abandon his business interests in the course of his travels—indeed, his family was dependent on the income from various recording contracts and book deals. Alan Lomax sometimes served as an agent for Guthrie's interests in these matters, often as a result of having connected Guthrie with the matter in which Lomax represented him. 22 Both men shared a passion for discovering and documenting authentic folk culture. They were friends as well, who shared a common tendancy towards great enthusiasm for all they did. All this resulted in a written correspondence between Guthrie and Lomax. Lomax diligently filed these letters in the archives at the Library of Congress, which has since preserved them and made them available online.

This collection of letters may seem to be something of a disappointment to those looking for fresh insights into Guthrie's music, life, or relationships with Lomax and others. In a sense, they do not tell us much that we do not already know. On the other hand, it is easy to miss what these letters do have to tell us, because the core concern shared by both men and expressed in these letters is now peripheral to American culture. The long Cold War, followed by the collapse of Soviet Communism, has all but buried the memory of how much cultural influence American Communists exerted for a few years in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It is necessary to recall the social and ideological commitments of those who dedicated themselves to the creation of an American socialism, in order to regain the frame of reference in which the Guthrie-Lomax correspondence speaks most clearly.

Several major themes emerge from these letters. 23 First, they show Guthrie and Lomax's shared desire to document and archivally preserve both Guthrie's work in particular, and American folk culture more generally. Second, these letters contain abundant evidence that Lomax secured important, high-profile employment for Guthrie on several occasions, and that Lomax acted as something of an agent for Guthrie. Third, the correspondence shows that Guthrie in turn sent Lomax his own material, and that Guthrie acted as a collector of material for Lomax. Finally, there are several major passages in which Guthrie exhibits what could be called "Popular Front" sensibilities. His ruminations on what makes a good folk song, on the right use of his music, and on the way he addressed others, all point to the conscious role Guthrie played in connecting his own communististic worldview with the way working-class Americans actually lived and thought.

Lomax and Guthrie established a system by which to archive Guthrie's work at the Library of Congress as early as July 1940, within about four months of meeting each other. Lomax wrote to Guthrie that "All your letters are being filed for posterity... If you want to swap, I'll do so, carbons for first copies..." 24 Letters exchanged between Lomax and his supervisor Harold Spivacke document Lomax's efforts to record Guthrie's music for the Archives. Lomax wrote to Spivacke in

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21 Lieberman, Weapon, 43; Klein, A Life, 142; Cohen and Samuelson, Songs, 6.
22 Reuss with Reuss, Folk Music, 183, describes Lomax's extensive work to connect leftist singers including Guthrie with high-profile, paying work during WWII. See also Cray, Ramblin' Man, 179-183, 207-108, 255 for other examples of Lomax getting paying jobs for Guthrie.
23 Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence citations are from the Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection, Archive of Folk Culture. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wwghome.html. The specific URL to each letter cited will be provided with particular citations.

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1942, seeking authorization to expend money to obtain the items needed to actually produce the physical recordings. When Spivacke requested more information on the potential usefulness of such an acquisition, Lomax assured him at length of the importance of Guthrie's music. Lomax wrote Spivacke that

"the continuing documentation of this most unusual of American ballad makers has a very great importance... the record of [Guthrie's band, the Almanac Singers] experiments will have much historical significance."

He goes on to add that "the only records which have gone from the Archive to Mrs. Roosevelt at her special request were a group made for us by Woody Guthrie and his singers." Lomax also corresponded with both Spivacke and Guthrie in the course of acquiring and microfilming manuscript books from Guthrie, which contained both songs and background information on songs. In the course of making these arrangements, Lomax told Guthrie that "someday, when you're about ninety, we will put [those manuscripts] in a big glass case upstairs, beside the Constitution, with two tall guards to prevent people from stealing them." Such were their ambitions, if somewhat playfully expressed. Guthrie, for his part, was grateful for such services, calling the song book made from his manuscripts "about the nearest thing that ever had my name on it."

Lomax also helped Guthrie obtain paid employment on several occasions, often work of a high-profile, public nature. For example, such jobs included one from "the Du Pont program Cavalcade of America," producing "a ballad telling about the life of Wild Bill Hickock," a job Guthrie offered to accept for $300. The same letter describes a similar request "from Sanka Coffee's program called We The People." Lomax also secured for Guthrie employment with the Bonneville Dam project of the Department of Interior. Guthrie and Lomax trusted each other enough that on at least some occasions, Lomax acted as Guthrie's agent in making arrangements with others for the use or publication of Guthrie's works. Guthrie in turn also sold some of his work to the Library of

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32 Guthrie to Lomax, 17 September 1940, http://memory.loc.gov/afc/afewwg/003/000iv.jpg. N.B.: Guthrie was notorious for his unorthodox spelling and grammar. Such idiosyncrasies were related to his efforts to capture vernacular speech in writing. All errors in quotes presented as found in source materials.

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Congress for publication, for example a performance of the song "The Gypsy Davy," Guthrie in turn attempted to be something of a field agent for Lomax, collecting his own and others' material. Guthrie even requested formal letters of introduction from Lomax to Library of Congress letterhead, to facilitate his efforts. Clearly, these two men trusted each other, worked well together, and undoubtedly shared common goals.

Finally, among Guthrie and Lomax's shared values, they held aspirations and a common political basis that reflected a commitment to the Communist Party's Popular Front theory and practice. These values and commitments show through quite clearly if only occasionally in their correspondence. For example, in September of 1940 Guthrie wrote a long letter to Lomax in which he went into some detail describing his own thinking on a variety of subjects. Guthrie explained what makes a good folk song, observing that one mistake some folks make in trying to write songs that will interest folks is to try to cover too much territory or to make it too much of a sermon. A folk song ought to be pretty well satisfied just to tell the facts and let it go at that.

Guthrie went on to describe the effective use of humor to present serious material in palatable form, also noting the importance of having a clear reason to write a song. He describes how I hear so many people coming around me and going on about where you get your words and your tunes. Well I get my words and tunes off of the hungry folks and they get the credit for all I pause to scribble down.

Guthrie maintained that honesty was critical to the success of folk music's social mission. Guthrie felt that the radical truth of a folk song is what's wrong and how to fix it, or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is—thats folk lore and folks made it up because they seen that the politicians couldn't find nothing to fix or nobody to feed or give a job of work. We don't aim to hurt you or scare you when we get to a feeling sorto folksy and make up some folk lore, we're a doing all we can to make it easy on you.

This quote in particular makes quite clear the programmatic nature of Guthrie's work, in his own words and quite in keeping with other Communist musicians' contemporary ideas. Guthrie was playfully demonstrative of this characterization of his relationships, addressing a letter to his fellow

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musicians in the Almanac Singers to "Comrades, Commandos, and Fellow Workers, Technicians, United Engineers... Factory workers, miners, railroaders, Peasants, Sharecroppers and Union Labor! Hold The Fort!" This is not to characterize Guthrie's views as merely theoretical or assumed. He once wrote to Lomax that he hoped "everybody's back of me and I harry Bridges and Joe Curran and Franklin D., in this fight to plow I Hitler under." His audiences ranged from "Peace Rallies, Womens Teas, Union Meetings and so forth" to Mrs. Roosevelt and her staff, again with help from Lomax. Lomax once urged Guthrie to hurry up and change your [band's] name, and for heavens sake make it a good old countrified name... Your chief point of contact in America is that of the background of the American soil and American folk songs. Don't become 'Headline Singers,' even though you may be singing the headlines.

Of course, such views were controversial, and Guthrie's career as a Popular Front-influenced cultural worker did not pass without controversy. For example, he wrote to Lomax complaining of how a positive review of one of his shows which had appeared in the New York Sun, drew a widespread negative response. Guthrie complained that

lots of people wrote in hollering that the reporter fell for a lot of fifth column stuff. They called me a communist and a wild man and everything you could think of but I don’t care what they call me. ...I’ve always knewed this was what I wanted to talk and sing about and I’m used to running into folks that complain but I don’t ever intend to sell out or quit or talk or sing any different because when I do that drug store lemonade stuff I just open my mouth and nothing comes out. 

Despite such views, however, Guthrie did not see his opinions as anti-American. Rather, he maintained that "[i]f I thought for two minutes that anything I do or say would hurt America and the people in it I would keep my face shut and catch the first freight out of the country."

In other words, these letters speak plainly of Lomax and Guthrie’s shared efforts to build an American cultural basis for the development of an American socialism. Indeed, it is an objective both men shared with many of their peers, a goal embraced and cultivated by an American Communist Party that was more open to the world than it ever had been or perhaps ever would be again. These topics are frequently reduced in scholarship to the issue of whether Guthrie had ever formally joined the Party, or to broader but still somewhat two-dimensional concerns like tracing the minutiae of the arc of Guthrie’s and Lomax’s careers. Such histories belie what each of those men would have undoubtedly seen as the full scope and implications of their relationship, their careers,

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and perhaps of their very lives. There was, after all, "a better word a-comin'" and our buddies Woody and Alan aimed to tell us "why, why, why."²

² See Notes at end of paper.