

THE VILLAGE TRIP

A New Festival Celebrating the History and Heritage of Greenwich Village

Folk Symposium: Woody Guthrie and the Birth of the New York Folk Revival
Discussion, live music and drinks at a historic Village venue
Sunday, September 30, at 6.30pm

If you had to pick a date when what became known as the New York folk revival took root, you'd probably choose March 3, 1940. The place was the Forrest Theater on West 49th Street, the occasion a benefit for the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers. The evening's performers included Lead Belly, Aunt Molly Jackson, Josh White, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who alone hailed from New York City. Seeger fumbled his performance of "John Henry" and the evening's star was Guthrie, "offhand and casual... spinning out stories and singings songs he'd made up," Seeger recalled. "I just naturally wanted to know more about him."

"Go back to that night when Pete first met Woody," musician and folklorist Alan Lomax would later reflect. "You can date the renaissance of American folk song from that night."

Soon Seeger and Guthrie, along with Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and Bess Lomax, had formed the Almanac Singers, the first urban folk music group whose line-up, over time, included Josh White, Sis Cunningham, Cisco Houston and Burl Ives. Some of them shared an apartment on 10th Street in the Village. There the Almanacs held "hootenannies" – a made-up word coined by Guthrie and Seeger – to help pay the rent. The group dissolved during the Second World War, and in 1943 Guthrie and Houston shipped to Europe with the Merchant Marine.

By that time, Guthrie had already written and recorded the semi-autobiographical *Dust Bowl Ballads*, which chronicled the plight of the displaced Okies who headed to California - a collection that can now be seen as the first concept album. He had also completed the songs that comprised the Columbia River Project, commissioned by the Bonneville Power Association as FDR's New Deal brought cheap hydro-electric power to the Pacific Northwest. And he had written the song by which he is best known: "This Land Is Your Land," penned as a response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." *Bound for Glory*, the autobiographical novel that would have such a profound influence on a university freshman named Robert Zimmerman, known to the world as Bob Dylan, was published in 1943.

Woody Guthrie is widely regarded as the father of the folk revival and the singer-songwriters that follow in his footsteps were described by Seeger as "Woody's children." Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma, to middle-class parents but he lived a life marred by tragedy, even before the dust storms and the Depression laid waste to so many lives. He was an autodidact - an artist, poet, journalist and self-taught musician who spoke up for "the little people" who felt they were "just born to lose." *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton, who edited the first

collection of his writings and drawings, described him as "the archetypal American troubadour... equal parts Whitman, Sandburg, Will Rogers and Jimmie Rodgers."

Dylan, so obsessed with Guthrie's music and with *Bound for Glory* that he hitchhiked from Minneapolis to New York to meet him, wrote in his memoir *Chronicles* that Woody was "the true voice of the American spirit."

By the time Dylan met the man he described as his last idol, Guthrie was hospitalised with Huntington's Disease, which had killed his mother. He was then still able to spend weekends at the home of Robert and Sidsel Gleason in East Orange, New Jersey, where old friends and new - among them Cisco Houston, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and a Clancy brother or two - would come to chat and sing. After his visit, in early 1961, Dylan wrote "Song to Woody," which he would record for his debut album.

By the early 1960s, the folk revival was well underway and Greenwich Village was the ground zero of the movement. On rickety stages in clubs and coffee houses along Bleecker and MacDougal streets, the latter home to Izzy Young's Folklore Center, young singers and songwriters clambered to raise their voices, among them Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Judy Collins, Eric Andersen, and Peter, Paul and Mary. On Sundays, students and school kids from out of town, among them Janis Ian, gathered round the fountain in Washington Square Park.

By the time Woody Guthrie died in October 1967, the folk revival had spread around the world. The baton had been passed - and in retrospect it's possible to see that the second critical moment was the 1956 concert, *Bound for Glory*, at New York's Pythian Hall in which Millard Lampell's script wove together Guthrie's poetry and song in a fundraiser for Woody's family as their father was permanently hospitalised. Joe Klein, in his biography, cited the evening as "the beginning of Woody Guthrie's canonisation" and the Folkways recording of the event provided the basis for the tribute concerts at Carnegie Hall in 1968 and the Hollywood Bowl in 1970.

Folk went electric, new acts with their roots in folk music got their start on Village stages, and in the 1980s the arrival of punk and new wave in the East Village served to reinvigorate the Greenwich Village folk scene, with figures such as Jack Hardy, Rod MacDonald and David Massengill launching a series of workshops which found a home at the Cornelia Street Café as The Songwriters Exchange. Hardy founded a new monthly magazine, *The Coop/Fast Folk Musical Magazine*, from which emerged such figures as David Massengill, Suzanne

Vega, Tracy Chapman, Nanci Griffith and Richard Shindell, all of whom found success on the world stage. And all of them owe a debt to Woody Guthrie.

“The best way to get to know any bunch of people is to listen to their music,” Guthrie observed. In a symposium chaired by Stephen Petrus, historian and co-author of *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*, “a bunch of people” will talk about Woody Guthrie and the folk revival he ushered in, celebrating in discussion and in song his own music and some of the music and musicians it inspired.

Come take a trip down “the foggy ruins of time” (to borrow from Bob Dylan) and share in an unforgettable evening of talk and live music.

The Village Trip is a celebration of the history, heritage and culture of Greenwich Village. The inaugural festival will take place from September 27 - 30, 2018. It is a sponsored project of Fractured Atlas, a non-profit arts service organization. More information: www.TheVillageTrip.com

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