

“FOLK SONGS AS ORAL HISTORY: EXAMINING WOODY GUTHRIE’S *DUST BOWL BALLADS*”

Abstract

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This panel presentation will examine Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* as oral history, focusing on the role that these songs play in depicting the actual working, living, and economic conditions faced by hundreds of thousands of workers who fled areas affected by the dust storms of the 1930s in search of employment. Woody Guthrie personally experienced the severe dust storms of 1935 that hit Gray County, Texas, and was among the first to leave the area, migrating west along Highway 66 in search of work. In all, over half a million individuals were displaced from areas in Texas, Oklahoma, and other states affected by the Dust Bowl, and headed to California following the false promise of easy work, warm weather, and good pay. Written in the late 1930s and commercially released by RCA-Victor Records in July 1940, Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* document this journey and the hardships experienced by the migratory laborer. As such, these songs can be viewed as valuable primary source resources detailing a first hand account of the laborers struggles.

In March 1940, Elizabeth Lomax interviewed Woody Guthrie about his Dust Bowl songs and his experiences migrating to California. Although his songs stand on their own as sources of oral history – providing a factual, first-hand account of the Dust Bowl – their value expands greatly when placed within the framework of Lomax’s formal oral history interview. Guthrie is able to provide additional information about his experiences, enabling listeners to more fully understand the motivation behind each of his songs. This panel presentation will focus on two of the songs contextualized in this oral history interview: “If You Ain’t Got The Do Re Mi” and “Dust Bowl Refugee,” exploring the way they depict the experiences of the migratory laborer.

Beginning in the 1930s, Guthrie performed these songs to a broad audience, and these oral histories can be seen as having an impact on three separate groups: the migratory laborer, the contemporary nation, and the present day scholar. By examining these two songs, it will be shown that Guthrie’s Dust Bowl ballads helped the laborers better understand their own experiences and realize that they were not alone in their struggles. Through these songs, which he performed on his California radio shows, Guthrie let the laborers know that their desperate situation was not brought on by personal failure, but rather was due to unavoidable circumstances. It will also be shown that, because of their wide commercial release, Guthrie’s songs played a role in educating the nation as to the plight of the laborers, and advocated for their right to seek employment and housing. Finally, it will be shown that these songs remain valuable today – nearly 75 years after they were written – as a resource for researchers and scholars who cite these songs as sources of oral history, elucidating the living, working, and economic conditions faced by these 500,000 displaced workers.

Many other artists documented the Dust Bowl during the 1930s: Dorothea Lange’s photography provides a visual history; John Steinbeck’s “Grapes of Wrath” presents a textual history; and Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads* provides an oral history of the plight of the migratory laborer.

Sources: Guthrie, Woody. *Dust Bowl Ballads* (RCA-Victor Records, 1940).

Guthrie, Woody. Interview with Alan and Elizabeth Lomax. *Library of Congress Recordings* (Rounder Records, 1988).