

Organizers for Students: The Lyrics of Woody Guthrie

"God Bless America" Words and music by Irving Berlin

One of Woody Guthrie's biographers noted that, "'God Bless America' was another one of those songs that told people all was well, that God was in the driver's seat." Read the lyrics to "God Bless America" and answer the questions below.

1. "While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
2. Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
3. Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
4. As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer. "
5. God Bless America,
6. Land that I love.
7. Stand beside her, and guide her
8. Thru the night with a light from above.
9. From the mountains, to the prairies,
10. To the oceans, white with foam
11. God bless America, My home sweet home.

1. This song was popular in the 1930s. What are the storm clouds referred to in the first line of the song?

2. Who is being addressed in lines seven and eight? What does the speaker want?

3. Does this really say that God is in the driver's seat? Why or why not?

"This Land is Your Land" Words and music by Woody Guthrie

The original draft of this song read, " God Blessed America for me" at the end of each stanza. The version below is the one that is used today.

1. This land is your land. This land is my land
2. From California to the New York island;
3. From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
4. This land was made for you and me.
5. As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
6. I saw above me that endless skyway:
7. I saw below me that golden valley:
8. This land was made for you and me.
9. I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
10. To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
11. And all around me a voice was sounding:
12. This land was made for you and me.
13. When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
14. And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
15. As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:

16. This land was made for you and me.
17. As I went walking I saw a sign there
18. And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
19. But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
20. That side was made for you and me.
21, In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
22. By the relief office I seen my people;
23. As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
24. Is this land made for you and me?
25. Nobody living can ever stop me,
26. As I go walking that freedom highway;
27. Nobody living can ever make me turn back
28. This land was made for you and me.

1. This is a very popular song, and most people have heard at least the first four stanza. Is there anything in these first four stanzas that demonstrate Guthrie's bitterness? Explain your answer.

2. What is Guthrie's meaning in lines 17 - 20?

3. In line 21, Guthrie places the people in "the shadow of the steeple." There are any other number of types of buildings he could have chosen for this image. Why does he select this one?

"Can't Feel At Home" Recorded by the Carter Family May 23, 1931

Both Alan Lomax and his father, John, were devoted to finding and recording as much American folk music as possible. They were two of many folklorists of the early 20th century who were traveling through the country gathering the roots of true American culture, folk and blues music. This is just one of many songs that may have been brought to American with the earliest immigrants and passed down from one generation to the next until it was finally captured and preserved by folklorists.

1. This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
2. My treasures and my hopes are all beyond the blue
3. Where many friends and kindred have gone on before
4. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
5. Over in glory land there is no dying there
6. The saints are shouting victory there's singing everywhere
7. I hear the voice of them that I have heard before
8. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
9. Oh lord you know I have no friend like you
10. If heaven's not my home oh lord what would I do
11. Angel's beckon me to heaven's open door
12. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
13. Heaven's expecting me that's one I know

14. I fixed it up with Jesus a long time ago
15. He will take me through though I am weak and poor
16. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore
17. Oh I have a loving mother over in glory land
18. I don't expect to stop until I shake her hand
19. She's gone on before just waiting at heaven's door
20. And I can't feel at home in this world anymore

1. Is this a song for rich people or poor people or for all people? Explain your response.

2. What are the "treasures" the song refers to in line 2?

3. According to this song, what is the solution for the troubles of the world?

"I Ain't Got No Home in This World Any More" Words by Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie wrote new words for old songs often keeping the old melodies intact. Even though Alan Lomax was searching for the deep roots of American folk music, he, "realized that Woody Guthrie hadn't allowed himself to be touched by popular styles and was an unwitting classicist, someone who understood the power and integrity of the traditional forms and sang the old songs in an old-fashioned way."

1. I ain't got no home, I'm just a-ramblin' round
2. I'm just a wandrin' worker, I roam from town to town.
3. The police make it hard wherever I may go
4. And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.
5. My brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road
6. A hot and dusty road that a million feet done trod;
7. Rich man took my home and drove me from my door
8. And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.
9. Was a-farmin' on the share, and always I was poor
10. My crops I laid into the banker's store;
11. My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor
12. And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.
13. Now as I look round, it's mighty plain to see
14. The world is such a great and a funny place to be;
15. The gamblin' man is rich and the workin' man is poor
16. And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.

1. Point out at least three differences in the Carter Family lyrics and Guthrie's lyrics.

2. What do you think the Carter Family's response was to Guthrie's song? Explain your response.

3. Does the fact that a piece of music is copied from another source make it less authentic? Explain your answer.

