Recording Review of Woody Guthrie, American Radical Patriot

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Stuart Duncan, Bob Ickes, Rushad Eggleston, Barbara Higbie, Simon Chrisman, Andrew Conklin, and Steven Strauss. So are the lovely voices that harmonize perfectly: Laurie Lewis, Beverly Smith, Tom Rozum, and Chloe Tietjen.

This CD sustains Alice Gerrard’s tradition of great work, and makes a happy addition to her already extensive discography. I love this CD.

To order: alicegerrard.com

Woody Guthrie
American Radical Patriot

Disc 1
Lost Train Blues / Growing up in Oklahoma / The Railroad Blues / More talk of growing up in Okemah / The gang of kids Woody hung around with / Rye Whiskey / Old Joe Clark / Alan Lomax asks for a tune / Beaumont Rag / Alan asks for another one / Green Valley Waltz AKA Who’s Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Feet? / The troubles and tragedies that fractured Woody’s family in Okemah / Greenback Dollar / Lomax asks about the boll weevil / Boll Weevil / Jailhouse songs / The Midnight Special / When the great dust storm struck

Disc 2
The end of the world / So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh / Dust storms devastate the farmland / Talking Dust Bowl / Migrants arrive in California / Do Re Mi / Hard Times / Songs about hard times / Bring Back to Me My Blue-Eyed Boy / Songs about outlaws / Billy the Kid / Billy the Kid and Pretty Boy Floyd / Pretty Boy Floyd / Jesse James / Jesse James and His Boys / Takin’ it from the rich and givin’ it to the poor / Jesus Christ / Songs about bankers / The Jolly Banker / Another song about the depredations of the bankers / I Ain’t Got No Home / Hundreds of thousands made homeless / Dirty Overhauls / The story of Mary Fagan / Mary Fagan / The origins of the song

Disc 3
Origins of the song, continued / Chain Around My Leg / Let’s sing some blues / Nine Hundred Miles / Worried Man Blues / About the “Worried Man Blues” / Lone-some Valley / Railroad blueses / Walkin’ Down That Railroad Line / Interlude / Goin’ Down the Frisco Line / Riding the Rails / Going Down the Road / Interlude / Seven Cent Cotton / Wish I’d Stayed in the Wagon Yard / Interlude / Dust Bowl Refugee / Contractors duping the desperate / The dust storm of April 14, 1935 / Dust Storm Disaster / Foggy Mountain Top

Disc 4
Breathing in dust / Dust Pneumonia Blues / Leaving the Dust Bowl / California Blues / Jimmie Rodgers / Migrants arriving in California / Do Re Mi / Refugees pouring into California / Dust Bowl Refugee / California as one of the 48 states / Will Rogers Highway / The flood that took over 100 lives / Los Angeles New Year’s Flood / A good horse / Stewball / Interlude / Stagger Lee / Interlude / One Dime Blues / Interlude / Git Along Little Dogies / Interlude / The Trail to Mexico / Gypsy Davy / Introducing an old song / Hard Ain’t / Hard

Disc 5

Disc 6
The Girl in the Red, White, and Blue / Labor for Victory / Farmer – Labor Trail / Jazz in America, No. 93 / Whoopty Ti-Yi, Get Along, Mr. Hitler / Jazz in America, No. 116 / Sally, Don’t You Grieve / Narrator / Dig a Hole / VD Avenue / Intro / The Veedee Blues / Intro / Blessed and Curst / A Case of VD / VD Seaman’s Letter / VD City / VD Day / A Child of VD / V. D. Gunner’s Blues / Brooklyn Town / Narrator / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (AKA The Great Historical Bum) / The Old Cracked Looking Glass / Hard Times in the Durant Jail / Empty Boxcar, My Home / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done

Disc 7
VD City / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done

Three albums in the extensive catalog of Woody Guthrie sound recording releases have been nominated for the prestigious Best Historical Album Grammy Award: Live Wire (Rounder Records, 2011), a one-CD package that documented a single, long-forgotten, and meticulously restored 1949 concert, as well as My Dusty Road (Rounder Records, 2009) and Woody at 100 (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 2012), box sets that provided differently focused overviews of that multi-faceted artist’s music. While bringing widespread attention to Guthrie’s songs and performances, those three albums generally overlooked other aspects of his recorded legacy, including his interviews and radio work. Guthrie was a fascinating interview subject, combining a penchant for vivid if understated storytelling with keen powers of observation and analysis; and he was a talented radio actor, his voice displaying deadpan wit, dry irony, and keen timing. Examples of both types of recordings can now be heard in the newest historical album of Guthrie material, American Radical Patriot.

A box set released in October 2013 by Rounder Records, American Radical Patriot compiles over six CDs Guthrie’s various recordings made at the behest of the US Government. Some of Guthrie’s interviews and music performances recorded by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress had been released on LP by Elektra Records in the 1960s and on CD by Rounder Records in the late 1980s, but American Radical Patriot marks the first issuance of the complete Library of Congress recordings. According to the album notes in American Radical Patriot, “Lomax wanted to know where Woody came from and what he had to say, and why he wrote what he wrote.” In addition to including the entirety of Lomax’s remarkably unguarded conversation with Guthrie, in which the Okemah, Oklahoma, native reflected on his hard-traveled life, the Library of Congress recordings documented numerous performances by Guthrie of well-known folk, country, and blues standards as well as his own compositions.
At the time he recorded for the Library of Congress—1940—Guthrie, age 27, was largely unknown. His recordings for Lomax, fully included herein over four CDs, were Guthrie’s first-ever, and it is exciting to hear him unselfconsciously sharing several of his then unfamiliar but now classic “Dust Bowl ballads” with an interested listener (Lomax).

American Radical Patriot likewise includes several radio skits, including two made for the Office of War Information during World War II (unheard by the public since their original airing). In these skits Guthrie appears as an actor or as a performer of thematic songs he had written on commission to advance the skits’ narratives. Among the previously uncollected odds and ends from Guthrie’s public service career included here are some home demonstration recordings of songs that Guthrie composed for a late-1940s public health service VD education campaign. These latter songs confirm (if there was ever any doubt) that Guthrie was a remarkably versatile songwriter who could convincingly compose songs on virtually any topic.

Additionally, the box set features all of Guthrie’s extant recordings of the powerful circle of songs he wrote while employed by the Department of the Interior’s Bonneville Power Administration. Most of the BPA recordings have been previously available, such as on Rounder Records’ single-CD Columbia River Collection (1990), but American Radical Patriot makes available for the first time a rare minor-key version of “Pastures of Plenty,” Guthrie’s renowned song composed for that project.

Complementing the six CDs are two curios. The first is a DVD containing a revelatory 1999 documentary film (produced at the University of Oregon) that explores Guthrie’s BPA stint. The second is a 12-inch 78 RPM record specially manufactured for American Radical Patriot. On one side is a 1951 home recording of Guthrie performing his own composition “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done [AKA The Great Historical Bum]”; on the other side, underscoring Guthrie’s significant role in the urban folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, is a 1961 recording of Bob Dylan performing Guthrie’s song “VD City.”

The well-researched album notes for American Radical Patriot, written by box set producer Bill Nowlin, are available in two versions and several formats: an abridged short version (inserted into the box set over approximately 50 pages, interspersed with period photographs and various relevant graphics), and the 256-page “complete” version (available as a PDF download from a file embedded into the first CD on the box set, as a free e-book available online, and as an inexpensive Print On Demand hard copy). Nowlin, as a co-founder of Rounder Records and as a prominent Guthrie scholar, is clearly committed to bringing Guthrie’s legacy to the widest possible audience, and American Radical Patriot should expand general awareness of the full complexity of this difficult-to-categorize American genius.

Shortly after being interviewed by Lomax, Guthrie began recording for both major commercial companies (specifically, RCA Victor) and small folk music labels run by Moses Asch (most importantly, Folkways Records). Ironically, by the 1950s, the same federal agency that launched Guthrie’s recording career—the Library of Congress—shunned him after Duncan Emrich, chief of the Library of Congress’s Archives of American Folk Song and an alleged FBI informant, finger-pointed Guthrie as an unpatriotic radical. Emrich’s questioning of Guthrie’s unwavering if complex passion for America was of course partly a result of McCarthy-era hysteria. As a result of American Radical Patriot, such a misguided assessment of Guthrie’s patriotism will not happen again, as the box set convincingly illustrates the range and depth of Guthrie’s public service work. By bringing that work fully before a new generation of Americans,
American Radical Patriot will forever situate Guthrie as among the most genuine and generous of patriots, as in his commissioned songwriting and his other service roles he encouraged among his citizens deeper appreciation for and better stewardship of this nation's "pastures of plenty."

TED OLSON

To order: rounder.com


**Disc One: Secular Recordings**

Robert Dennis: Early One Foggy Morning / Boogie / Questionnaire Blues / Mean Mistreater Blues / Richard Williams: "Tain't But One Thing That Grieves My Mind / Baby Please Don't Go / Old Forty / Ella Mae Wilson and Richard Williams: Careless Love / Polk County Blues / Willie Gillard / Polk County Blues / Emmett Murray: Old-Time Rounders / She's a Fool, She Ain't Got No Sense / Mobile Blues / I'm Gonna Dig Myself a Hole / I'll Find My Way / Drinkin' Bad Bad Whiskey / Moses Williams: I'm from Itta Bena, Mississippi / Rolling and Tumbling / Sitting on Top of the World / Mama Got More Out of Me Away From Home / I Was Natalie Roberta's Son / Harmonica Solo / Harmonica "Hustle" / The Train / Catfish Blues / Come Back Baby / Apple Farm Blues / Highway / Which Way Did My Baby Go?

**Disc Two: Sacred Recordings**

Johnny Brown: That's All Right / Precious Lord, Take My Hand / Will the Circle Be Unbroken / He Got the Whole World in His Hand / I Don't Know What I'd Do Without the Lord / Ella Mae Wilson, Lillie B. Williams and Richard Williams: Motherless Children / Do, Lord, Remember Me / Trial in Judgment / When the Saints Go Marching In (When the Moon Go Down in Blood) / You Got to Move / I Knew It Was In the Blood / In the Morning / He's a Battle Axe / Testertina Primitive Baptist Church: I Don't Know What I'd Do Without the Lord / Did Christ O'er Sinners Weep? (The Weeping Savior) / Miccosukee Church of God of Prophecy: Altar Call / Congregational Prayer / He Set Me Free / Florida-Alabama Progressive Seven-Shape-Note Singing Convention: God's Gonna Set the World on Fire / Inside the Pearly Gates / Southeast Alabama and Florida Union Sacred Harp Singing Convention: The Old Ship of Zion / Florida Storm / Service of the Lord / Sweet Morning / Alas! and Did My Saviour Bleed / Psgah / Parting Hand

Florida is a peculiar place, and so much of that peculiarity is thanks to its being a place to move to. As anyone who has ever read Zora Neale Hurston will tell you, it has long been a haven of rich African American culture. Members of the African diaspora had found their way to the Sunshine State from the Caribbean when Florida was still in Spanish hands. This history, mixed with an early twentieth century influx of Southern blacks determined to get out from behind the mule and the indentured servitude of sharecropping, who came from other states to Florida after the end of legal slavery, must have created one hell of a musical stew. Hurston found it a rich place to collect folklore in the early twentieth century, including music by the hard-driving dual harmonica and guitar trio led by Booker T. Sapps. She found literally books' worth of material in the state, which not only guided her anthropological surveys but her fiction as well. Yet the blues recording boom of the 1920s had passed, which likely explains the dearth of shellac-pressed aural evidence of the state's musical fruits.

In the mid-1970s, Peggy Bulger and a handful of NEA grant-given souls were determined to change this. Bulger's work, with cohorts Dwight Devane and Brenda McCullum, coincided with the establishment of the American Folklife Center in Washington, DC, as well as the yearly Folklife Festival performances on the Washington Mall. Traveling the South, Central, Gulf, and Panhandle regions of the state to find African American sacred and secular musicians, Bulger, Devane, and others ultimately compiled a double LP and booklet funded by the Florida Folklife Center. Titled, then as now, Drop on Down in Florida, the collection featured one LP of blues and one of gospel. Yet, no doubt due to lack of distribution outside the state, most people, even obsessive of raw, rural field recordings, never heard it. And that has been a shame, as it not only included some hypnotically gentle acoustic guitar-based blues, but also black Sacred Harp and droning a cappella Primitive Baptist service fervor. More intense still was its handful of recordings by the absolutely singular Moses Williams, who played a single-stringed instrument that utilized a wooden door as its frame.

Dust-to-Digital has swooped in to shine a spotlight on this state's too-often overlooked contributions to black American traditional music by publishing this new edition of Drop on Down in Florida. Now expanded not only to include updated commentary from the original folklorists, there's twice as much music too, sounds persistent as a catbird in summer but subtle enough to influence a spring housecleaning without drawing attention to themselves. And anyone who was frustrated by Williams' paucity three tracks on the vinyl can now hear an extra 10, including snippets of interview as well as examples of his harmonica work. No doubt, in the under-recorded subgenre of one-string musicians, Williams is the king. His door, or yakkedy board, playing makes up in sheer buoyancy and drive what it lacks in variety. The only recording session ever documented of Emmett Murray is also here, with two extra tracks. Murray, who plays a gentle but pungent solo electric guitar, shows a style as unique in its way as anything from the North Mississippi hill country. With pinches of early country, and unusual finger-snapped chords, he takes his cues from work gang "Captain" songs, familiar blues lines as well as observations of his own. His guitar, undistorted but still jagged, seems to wrap itself around and under his voice, making it hard to imagine one without the other.

The sacred disc is stronger still, featuring tracks performed by a few of the musicians on Disc One, as well as multiple examples from the Southeast Alabama and Florida Union Sacred Singing Convention in Campbellton, in the extreme northern Panhandle.

It's a powerful polyphonic earful of what took place 35-odd years ago at a convention originally founded in 1893. And then there's the book. The original LP release boasted 24 pages, which, keep in mind, filled a book nearly as large as the cover that housed it. However, Dust-to-Digital has added radically more substantial notes, changing the focus from a double LP of music with an accompanying booklet to a book that happens also to contain two CDs. There's Peggy Bulger's story of how the project came to be in the first place, followed by updated comments from folklorist Blaine Waide. But then there's an entire essay on Moses Williams, which, coupled with notes on