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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Woody Guthrie's songs can help you focus on the spirit of the season

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If you want to celebrate the true spirit of Christmas, you might listen, and I mean really listen, with someone you love, to the double CD set "Ribbon of Highway Endless Skyway: Tribute to Woody Guthrie." The songs of Woody Guthrie haven't been this relevant since they were first written 50 to 80 years ago.

Guthrie's lyrics speak frankly about the major problems our nation faced and partly overcame during the Great Depression, World War II, the McCarthy era, early civil rights demonstrations and the Cold War arms race. The CD set brings to us the evolving tour of musicians and artists who give us the gift of Guthrie's life and thoughts through his own songs and stories. The guiding spirit of the tour is Austin singer-songwriter Jimmy LaFave, whose sympathies for Guthrie run as deep as their mutual Oklahoma roots.

I talked with LaFave while the CD was still in production. His admiration for Guthrie, as a singer, poet, writer, painter, traveler and champion of human causes and American values, was boundless. He told me that scholars and musicians working with the Guthrie archives in New York are just now appreciating the range of Guthrie's genius. Speaking about Guthrie's "great American life," LaFave said, "He was an American hero who got shoved aside and called a communist. He has just as many valid things to say as whoever they teach in schools now. They ought to teach more about Woody."

The tribute tour cd was released in September, just after U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., reminded his colleagues in the House of Representatives, and us, that "Jesus was a community organizer." Some thought that Cohen's words were impious, but they focus on the spirit of Christmas, a child born who will love and preach for the poor and powerless people who are discarded by society.

Guthrie's song "Jesus Christ" is not on the CD, but its lyrics are at woodyguthrie.org. Guthrie's Jesus, "a man who traveled through the land / Hard working man and brave," went to the sick, the poor, the blind and the lame, proclaiming that "the poor would one day win this world." Sheriffs, bankers, preachers and police, the "landlord and the soldiers that he hired" all rejected Jesus' message and "laid Jesus Christ in his grave."

Guthrie was speaking out bravely, just as Jesus did, it is right to say, against the inhuman conditions of the Depression and the Dust Bowl that Guthrie himself lived through. On the CD, listen closely to Austinite Eliza Gilkyson bring to life Guthrie's tale of crushing poverty, "I Ain't Got No Home."

In songs like "1913 Massacre" and "Ludlow Massacre," Guthrie spoke against the murderous union-busting practices of factory and mine owners and big landowners against laborers, miners, migrant workers and their families.

Listening to a song like the later "Deportee," about the fiery crash that killed a planeload of Mexican migrant workers on a regular run back from California, reminds us that Guthrie's songs were in the now. They gave voice and identities and hope to human beings who were exploited as tools for wealth from the Gilded Age to the deportee plane wreck at Los Gatos in 1948, and still are. In Guthrie's heart-piercing simile, the migrant workers he addresses as my Juan, Rosalita, mis amigos, Jesus and Maria "fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil / And be called by no name except 'deportees'."

It is natural in human societies to disempower things we find threatening. Erotic passion becomes a harmless baby Cupid. The terrifyingly destructive god Dionysus becomes jolly Bacchus. Christmas becomes the season of Santa Claus.

We barely know and rarely sing the stanzas of "This Land Is Your Land" that convey Guthrie's socialist message: Too much land or wealth in too few hands is bad for the people of our nation. LaFave echoes the message in his own song "This Land": "And the ones who have too much / Seem to never get enough."

I think if Woody Guthrie were alive today, he might tell us that the true Christmas spirit "redistributes wealth," at least in our hearts.

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