




7-4-2017

Teach Your Students Well: This Land Is Their Land

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Powell, Dave. "Teach Your Students Well: This Land Is Their Land." *The K-12 Contrarian* (blog). July 4, 2017.

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Abstract

Most people know Woody Guthrie as the author of the song that's often called our second national anthem, "This Land Is Your Land." Not everyone knows that it's a protest song. In the winter of 1940, Guthrie was hitchhiking his way east to New York City at the invitation of Will Geer, an actor best known later in his life for playing Grandpa Zebulon Tyler Walton on the show "The Waltons." At the time, Geer was a stage actor and political activist who saw something in Woody Guthrie that he wanted to share with the rest of the world. Guthrie, for his part, was a down-and-out Okie with limited prospects and four mouths to feed besides his own. He had been spending time traveling back and forth between California and Texas trying to stir his fellow Americans out of the slumber caused by the Great Depression. He had already written hundreds of songs but he wasn't done yet. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Social Studies, protest music, Woodie Guthrie, This Land Is Your Land

Disciplines

Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

Comments

This piece appeared on *Education Week* as part of Dr. Powell's opinion blog, "The K-12 Contrarian." The original version is available online [here](#).



Teach Your Students Well: This Land Is Their Land

By Dave Powell on July 4, 2017 5:19 PM

Most people know Woody Guthrie as the author of the song that's often called our second national anthem, "[This Land Is Your Land](#)." Not everyone knows that it's a protest song.

In the winter of 1940, Guthrie was hitchhiking his way east to New York City at the invitation of Will Geer, an actor best known later in his life for playing Grandpa Zebulon Tyler Walton on the show "The Waltons." At the time, Geer was a stage actor and political activist who saw something in Woody Guthrie that he wanted to share with the rest of the world. Guthrie, for his part, was a down-and-out Okie with limited prospects and four mouths to feed besides his own. He had been spending time traveling back and forth between California and Texas trying to stir his fellow Americans out of the slumber caused by the Great Depression. He had already written hundreds of songs but he wasn't done yet.

As the story goes, Woody's long trip east was marred not only by frigid weather but also by what he considered to be an awful earworm: Irving Berlin's now famous paean to America, "God Bless America," seemed to follow him everywhere he went. Guthrie hated it because, as he saw it, the song discouraged people from solving their own problems. "Woody couldn't stand such vaporous wishfulness," [John Shaw](#) has written. "He was freezing, broke, and hungry; he had endured the Dust Bowl, homelessness, and jail time for vagrancy; he had seen police violence, bloody labor disputes, and starvation stalking the California migrant camps." He had seen the dark underside of the American experience. He had been in the places where people struggled to make their way in the world and had no time for the misplaced sing-song optimism of Berlin's ballad. As Shaw puts it: the song *provoked* him.

So Guthrie decided to write his own song. He drew on some of the same sweeping images of the American landscape Berlin included in "God Bless America," but added some social and political commentary for good measure. Originally titled "God Blessed America For Me," Guthrie's song suggested that we all share responsibility for what we've inherited, but that it was, after all made for *us*. The simple change in the title—from God blessed America for *me* to this land is *your* land (and *mine*)—indicated an inclusive change in focus. This, in a nutshell, was

Woody Guthrie's genius: he could take his own thoughts and feelings and connect them to others effortlessly. It's this sensibility that makes the song an anthem.

And that's a striking fact because the song, as Woody originally wrote it, is explicitly political, and biting so. Almost everyone has sung or heard the most popular verses of the song—the ones about about "Redwood forests" and "Gulf stream waters"—but there were also two "lost verses" that spoke clearly about the ways we sometimes put walls or fences between people to keep them apart. One, for example, said:

As I went walking I saw a sign there

And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."

But on the other side it didn't say nothing,

That side was made for you and me.

Another verse described a line of hungry people waiting at the local relief office and issued a challenge to all of us: "Is this land made for you and me?" My favorite verse includes the line "Nobody living can ever stop me as I go walking that freedom highway." It's no wonder so many people consider "This Land Is Your Land" to be our second national anthem.

So why don't more teachers teach this song, and the life of Woody Guthrie, in the classroom? To be sure he was no saint; Woody was only really a family man briefly after he married his second wife (and before he endured the most crippling tragedy anyone could face, losing a child in an accident—one of an endless string of tragedies he endured), and his alcoholism and other pursuits make him a less-than-ideal role model. Or do they? The role he played was flawed wandering troubadour who cared more about the welfare of others than he did about himself. He was an artist, and a flawed person just like the rest of us. He's exactly the kind of person young people should be learning about. At the very least they should be learning his songs because his songs speak to the possibility inherent in a democratic America. He believed in people. He knew they weren't all good but he also believed there were more of us than them. Because there have to be.

So if you're spending this July 4th contemplating what it means to be an American you might consider listening to some protest songs and heeding the words of Shirley Chisholm, who once suggested that we shouldn't measure America by its achievements but by its potential. A lot has been achieved by Americans to make the world a better place, but we still have a lot of unfulfilled potential too.

To get you started I have a few playlists for you: one suitable for young listeners, one for those in the middle, and one for students getting closer to making their way in the world. Feel free to listen and share.

Protest Songs For Younger Students: [Teach Your Children Well](#)

- "The House I Live In," performed by Josh White
- "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," performed by Nina Simone
- "We Shall Overcome," performed by Pete Seeger
- "I Hear Them All," performed by Old Crow Medicine Show
- "Freedom Highway," performed by the Staple Singers
- "A Change is Gonna Come," performed by Aretha Franklin
- "They'll Never Keep Us Down," performed by Hazel Dickens
- "This Little Light of Mine," performed by the Montgomery Improvement Association
- "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)," performed by The Byrds
- "Everyday People," performed by Otis Gibbs
- "Paradise," performed by John Prine
- "The Times They are a-Changin'," performed by Bob Dylan
- "Teach Your Children," performed by Crosby Stills Nash & Young
- "This Land Is Your Land," performed by Woody Guthrie

Protest Songs for Middle-Level Students: [We're In the Same Boat, Brothers \(and Sisters\)](#)

- "We're in the Same Boat, Brother," performed by Lead Belly
- "Birmingham Sunday," performed by Joan Baez
- "Oxford Town," performed by Bob Dylan
- "A Change Is Gonna Come," performed by Aretha Franklin
- "Strange Fruit," performed by Billie Holiday
- "The Bourgeois Blues," performed by Lead Belly
- "Everyday People," performed by Otis Gibbs
- "Union Maid," performed by Old Crow Medicine Show
- "The Times They Are a-Changin'," performed by Bob Dylan
- "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos," performed by Bruce Springsteen
- "Do Re Mi," performed by Nanci Griffith & Guy Clark
- "Steve's Hammer (for Pete)," performed by Steve Earle
- "Better World a-Comin'," performed by Woody Guthrie

Protest Songs for High School Students: [What It Means](#)

- "Christmas in Washington," performed by Steve Earle
- "The Preacher and the Slave (Pie in the Sky)," performed by Cisco Houston
- "Masters of War," performed by Bob Dylan
- "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," performed by Bob Dylan
- "Only a Pawn in Their Game," performed by Bob Dylan
- "White Man's World," performed by Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit
- "Christ for President," performed by Billy Bragg & Wilco

- "Ludlow Massacre," performed by Barbara Dane
- "Against th' Law," performed by Billy Bragg & Wilco
- "Dress Blues," performed by Jason Isbell
- "Rich Man's War," performed by Steve Earle
- "We Can't Make It Here," performed by James McMurtry
- "What It Means," performed by Drive-By Truckers
- "I Ain't Got No Home," performed by Bruce Springsteen