

A Walking Guide

MY NAME IS NEW YORK

RAMBLIN' AROUND WOODY GUTHRIE'S TOWN



BY NORA GUTHRIE AND THE WOODY GUTHRIE ARCHIVES

This PDF is NOT the entire book

MY NAME IS NEW YORK: Ramblin' Around Woody Guthrie's Town

by Nora Guthrie and the Woody Guthrie Archives

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MY NAME IS NEW YORK

RAMBLIN' AROUND WOODY GUTHRIE'S TOWN

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GR 7-4192

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490 2 AVE
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LYON PETE GR35354
57 W 12 ST

LEAGUE AM. WRITERS
237 E. 61 AL 45728

I'm the town called New York,
I was struck by the winds;
I been froze and been blistered
And then struck again;
I was struck by my ~~XXXXXXXX~~ rich folks,
And struck by my bums,
Struck by my mansions,
And struck by my slums.

I was hit with disease
And with trouble and pain;
And I've seen my kids die
Under car wheels and trains;
I smelled the smoke roll
When it come from some hole
Where a cigaret spark
Killed a thousand good souls.

I'm the town called New York,
I'm a brick on a brick;
I'm a hundred folks running
And ten dying sick;
I'm a saint, a bum, a whore and her pimp;
And your ocean's the mirror I look in to primp.

I'm a sewer pipe and a steam cloud
And a little girl fell down;
My lights shine thrie brightest
When my nightgown comes down.

I'm vulgar, I'm legal,
Illegal and wild;
I'm the Hudson and East river's
One lost lonesome child.

I'm a stone on a stone;
I'm a rock on a rock;
And I comb my hairs back
With those ships in their locks.

Ten million wild notions
Are fighting in me,
To speak a little plainer
And try to agreee.

I read mountains of books
Every day but I'm frisky;
I wash down my brain cells
With Hundred proof whiskey.

I work and I slave
And I bless and abuse;
I waste twice as much
As I ever could use.

I'm the town called New York
With my all color paint;
And I curse and I run
And I hide and I faint.

I juice my blood full
Of every known dope;
And I'm the worlds biggest howler
Of nice friendly hope.

I been here so long
That the weeds has forgot;
And I intend to stand ~~right~~
Right here till I rot.

I'll see if my bad habits
Can ever tear down
More than my good ones
Can build up around.

I come here to look
For a nice standing place;
To make a scientific test
For the whole human race.

I'm going to try
Every earthly mistake
And see if your hands
Can fix me back straight.

I might boil and blow
And shake to the ground
And smoke and tremble
And blaze all around.

And no matter how low
Or how high I might fall;
Just remember, New York
Is the name I am called.

-----*



Will Geers' apartment building

East Battles Snow and Gale; City Streets Tied Up; 2 Die

Air Travel Suspended and Roads Blocked by
Storm—Help Speeded to Disabled Tanker
Aztec, Drifting Off Jersey Coast



1.

WILL AND HERTA GEER'S APARTMENT West 59th Street at 5th Avenue, Midtown Manhattan

FEBRUARY 16TH–22ND, 1940

Woody Guthrie first arrived in New York City on a cold, blizzardy day—February 16th, 1940—after hitchhiking across the country from Los Angeles. He took up residence on West 56th Street with friends, actors Will and Herta Geer, whom he first met in Los Angeles in 1939. Will Geer, years later well-known for his TV role as Grandpa Zebulon Walton in *The Walton's*, had come to NYC to star in the Broadway production of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*.

While in Los Angeles, Geer was incredibly influential, introducing Woody to the various political and labor movements. He also helped get him work, including a bit part as an extra in Pare Lorentz's 1940 film *The Fight for Life*. (In a five second shot, a 27-year-old Woody Guthrie sits on a stoop, strumming a guitar. The guitar part was later overdubbed by a "professional").

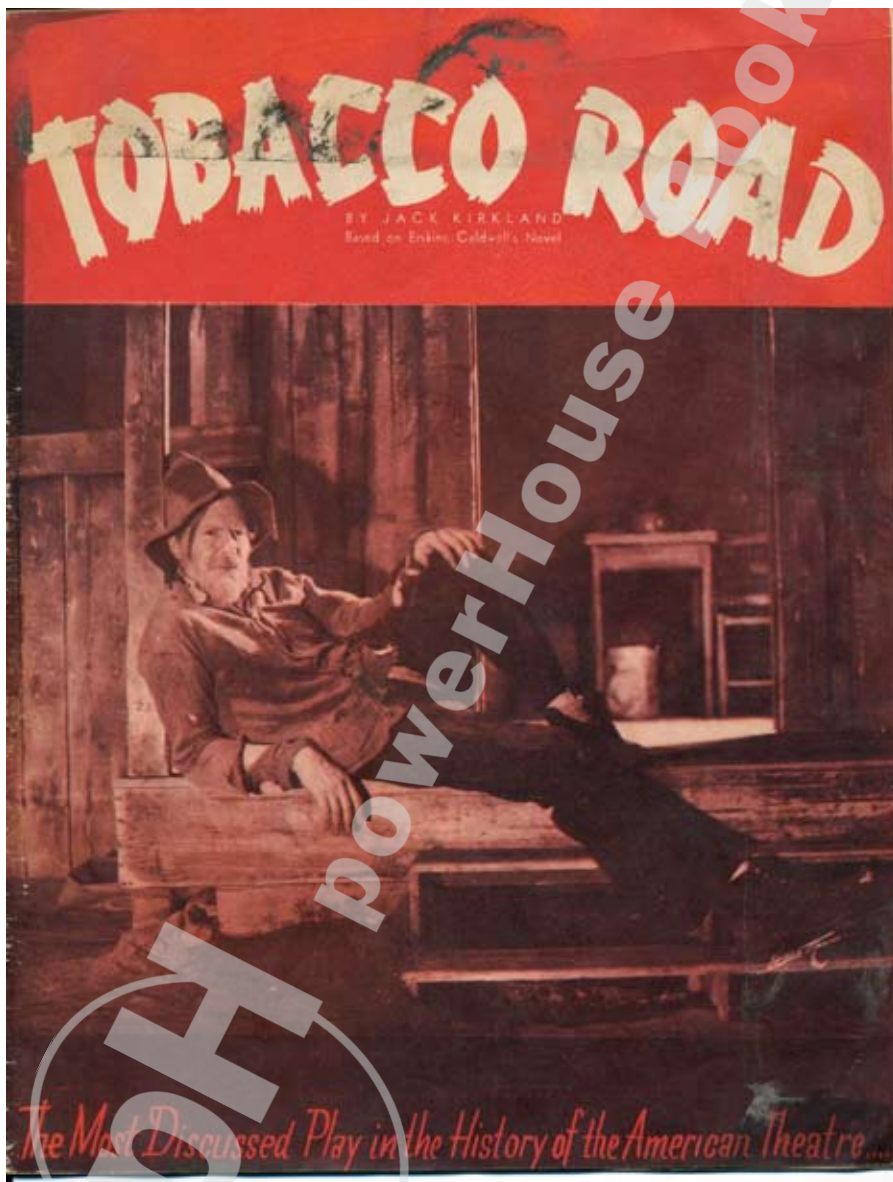
The Geers' provided Woody with a couch to crash on, and connected him to the progressive NYC entertainment community. As a result of Geer's efforts, Woody was booked into several benefit concerts; perhaps most importantly the "Grapes of Wrath Evening" to benefit the John Steinbeck Committee for agricultural workers at the Forrest Theater (230 West 49th Street, now the Eugene O'Neill Theater) on March 3rd, where he met some of the most important people in the burgeoning folk scene: Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Harlan

County coalmining organizer Aunt Molly Jackson, and Alan Lomax who worked at the Library of Congress.

Excited by Woody's performance and his discovery of a new "authentic" voice from the West writing original material, Lomax immediately invited Woody to Washington, D.C. In March, 1940 he recorded hours worth of stories and songs about Woody's life and travels for the Library. **The Library Of Congress Recordings** was eventually released in 1964.

While living at the Geers', Woody spent his days writing songs like **I Don't Feel at Home on the Bowery No More**, and his evenings earning a few bucks gigging at bars along the Bowery and 10th Avenue where the merchant seamen hung out. When he had earned enough for a week's lodging, he moved over to Hanover House located at 6th Avenue and 43rd Street, taking Herta's prized Martin guitar with him.

Written while at the Geers; Woody's lyric, **I Don't Feel At Home On The Bowery No More**, gives us a nice portrait of this elegant apartment building, which no longer stands, and describes Woody's reaction to finding himself living in NYC's finest: "I seen an apartment on 5th Avenue/a penthouse, and garden, a skyscraper view/A carpet so soft, with a hard-wood floor/I don't feel at home on the Bowery no more."



Tobacco Road playbill starring Will Geer, 1940

I DONT FEEL AT HOME ON THE BOWERY NO MORE

I'll sing you a song of the place that I stay;
Once, on the Bowery I used to be gay,
Carefree, and rambling in days of yore;
But I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

The flops they are lousy, the men are so thick,
You can't go to sleep, no you can't sleep a wink;
They mumble, they grumble, they snarl and they snore,
I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

The beds are so small that your feet touch the wall,
The bedbugs so big that they swallow you whole;
The lice are so thick that they cover the floor,
I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

I seen an apartment on 5th Avenue
A penthouse, and garden, and skyscraper view;
XXXXXXXX A carpet so soft, with a hard-wood floor,
I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

I like my good whiskey, I like my good wine,
And good looking women to have a good time;
Cocktail parties, and a built-in Bar,
So I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

The girls on the Bowery have now advanced
To dancing for nickels at the old Taxi-Dance;
I like pretty gals, as I told you before,
So I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

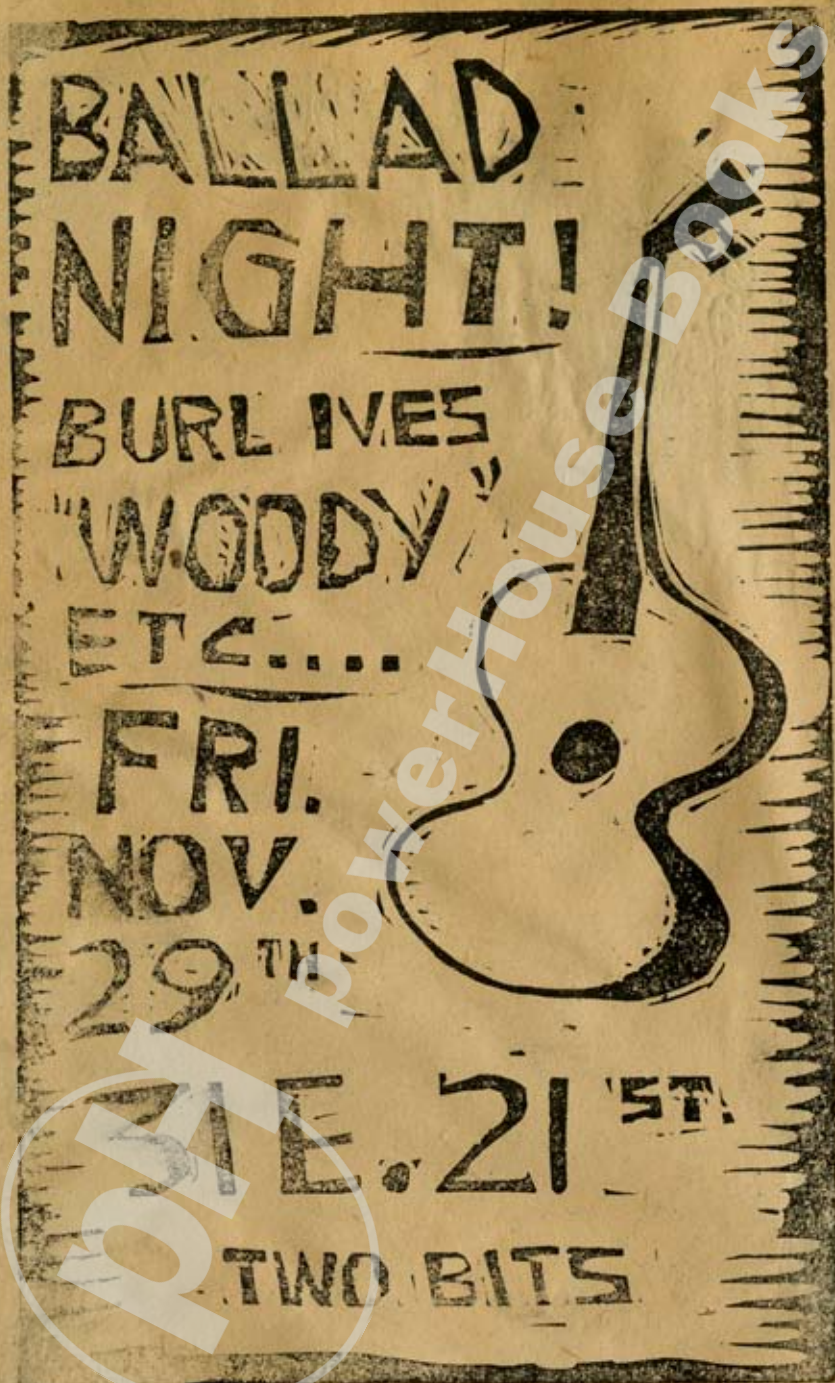
I got disgusted and wrota this song
I may be right, and I may be wrong;
But since I seen the difference 'tween the Rich & Poor;
I dont feel at home on the Bowery no more.

Woody Guthrie's 2-18-40

Written February 18th, 1940
In Will Geer's house,
In the charge of his wine,
And the shadow of his kindness;
Woody Guthrie, A.D. 1912

* Dedicated to the bum situation.
Which is a hell of a big situation.

With a good thought for
Herta Geer and Katie -
Katie's about 7 months old -
red headed, husky, pretty as a picture,
Herta is older than that. She's the mama.



4. HAROLD AMBELLAN AND ELISABETH HIGGINS 31 East 21st Street, 3B Flatiron District, Manhattan

APRIL, MAY, & OCTOBER 1940

Woody returned to New York in April 1940, following his visit to Washington, D.C., where he recorded his songs and stories for the Library of Congress with Alan Lomax. While in Washington, he struck up an easy friendship with Pete Seeger who was then also working for the Library.

Seeger returned to NYC with Woody and the two men took up residence with Harold Ambellan and his wife Elisabeth Higgins, here in their top floor loft. Both Ambellan and Higgins were artists and political activists, creating sculptures and ceramic tiles, as well as musical and literary works. They were among a new generation of young NYC artists who began combining their working studio with their living space.

This loft-style living scene was becoming popular with musicians and artists of all fields in the 1940s. They opened their lofts for informal public performances and exhibits, drawing audiences from family and friends. Through these venues, they were able to gather and share their work with the public, creating a template for the next generation of NYC artists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Woody and Pete often performed here at so-called "Ballad Nights" where they



were able to raise a few bucks to help pay the rent. One of the frequent voices often heard at these "Nights" was an up-and-coming folksinger named Burl Ives, who became a popular film and recording star in the 1950s ("A Holly Jolly Christmas").

While living here, Woody and Pete collaborated on a new songbook of protest songs in the folk tradition. After five weeks of work, the first draft of **Hard Hitting Songs For Hard Hit People** was completed. It was published in 1967.

Woody wrote some important songs at this location: **Vigilante Man** and **Hard Travelin'** have become two of his most enduring and often recorded. **The Ballad of Wild Bill Hickok**, written for a broadcast on DuPont's *Cavalcade of America* radio show, aired on November 6th, 1940.

It was also here, among this vibrant and energizing group of artists and writers, that Woody began the first draft of his autobiographical novel, **Bound for Glory**. His visits to the Ambellans' loft became so frequent that they eventually built a wall around the small cot he used in the back, creating a little bedroom where he was always welcome.



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143
HOBO

TALKIN' SUBWAY BLUES
~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

... Woody

I left California for old New York
Thought I'd find me a job of work,
One leg up and the other one down,
I come in through a hole in the ground ...
Holland Tunnel, three mile tube,
Skippin' through th' Hudson River dew.

When I blowed into New York Town
I looked up and I looked down,
Everybody I seen on the streets,
They all run down in a hole in the ground.
I follered 'em. See where they's a goin',
Newsboy told me they's tryin' to smoke a train out
of a hole.

I run down 38 flights of stairs,
Boy howdy, I declare,
Rode the elevator twenty two,
Spent my last lone nickel, too,
Feller in a little cage got it,
Herded me through a shoot-the-shoot,
Run me through 3 clothes wringers,
So many people down in there you couldn't even fall down.

I swung on to my old guitar,
Train come a ramblin' down the track,
I made a run for the subway car
With three grass hoppers on my back,
Two of 'em a lookin' for some relief,
The other ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ one was just investigatin'.

New York aces a hole is all right -
here's one that was borned right there
in Arlington Va., you know the
old white house where we burnt the
funeral wreath in your furnace and
shid ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ me + pete. Got a
letter from him today.



5. WOODY AND MARY GUTHRIE'S APARTMENT

5 West 101st Street, 4th Floor, Upper West Side, Manhattan
Tel#: ACademy 4-9571

NOVEMBER–JANUARY 1941

Following the release of **Dust Bowl Ballads** in the summer of 1940, Woody received offers to appear on numerous NYC radio shows: CBS's Model Tobacco Company's *Back Where I Come From*; Sanka's *We, The People* and *Pipe Smoking Time*; NBC's *Cavalcade of America*; and appearances on WNYC, New York's public radio. He wrote to Alan Lomax, "They're giving me money so fast, I'm using it to sleep under." In the short time since his arrival, Woody Guthrie had become a New York City success story. With money and critical acclaim pouring in, and his popularity growing, he sent for his wife Mary and their three young children, Gwen, Sue, and Bill, who were living in Pampa, TX.

Mary was thrilled to be reunited with Woody at this four-room furnished apartment, complete with refrigerator and piano. Welcoming Mary to their new life, Woody composed **The New York Trains**, which described the confused arrival of his Texas family into Grand Central Station. As Mary remembers, "We didn't know you had to have a meet-up point. We figured it was a small depot with a light bulb, like we had in Pampa."

Their apartment became the social hub for Woody's new friends. Alan Lomax, Lead Belly, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee continuously streamed in and out, bringing friends, and *their* friends, playing music throughout the days and nights.

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