

# Woody Guthrie: A Better World A Comin'

## Contributions of Influential Oklahomans

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| **Grade Level** | 9th – 12th Grade | **Time Frame** | 100 - 150 minutes |
| **Subject** | Social Studies | **Duration** | 2 -3 class periods |
| **Course** | Oklahoma History | | |

## Essential Question

What purposes can music have? How can music inspire change?

## Summary

What motivated and inspired legendary folk musician Woody Guthrie to create and perform music? Students explore this question throughout the lesson by engaging in a Gallery Walk analysis of Guthrie photos and quotes and then using his lyrics to determine the political and social issues that Guthrie highlighted with his music. To extend their learning, students consider how Guthrie's most popular song, "This Land Is Your Land," has been reinterpreted over time.

## Snapshot

**Engage**

Students consider the purposes music can have and the reasons why people create and perform music.

**Explore**

Students analyze photos and quotes to make inferences about why Woody Guthrie created and performed music.

**Explain**

Students analyze Woody Guthrie's song lyrics to determine some of the political and social issues he highlighted with his music.

**Extend**

Students determine how Woody Guthrie's song "This Land Is Your Land" has been reinterpreted and adapted over time.

**Evaluate**

Students use Woody Guthrie's lyrics to create Blackout Poetry that reflects his political and social commentary.

## Standards

*ACT College and Career Readiness Standards - Reading (6-12)*

**CLR401:** Locate important details in somewhat challenging passages
**IDT401:** Infer a central idea in straightforward paragraphs in somewhat challenging literary narratives
**WME401:** Analyze how the choice of a specific word or phrase shapes meaning or tone in somewhat challenging passages
**WME402:** Interpret most words and phrases as they are used in somewhat challenging passages, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings

*Oklahoma Academic Standards (Social Studies: Oklahoma History (9th through 12th grade))*

**OKH.5.8:** Describe the contributions of Oklahomans including African-American jazz musicians, the political and social commentaries of Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie's, Wiley Post's aviation milestones, and the artwork of the Kiowa Six.

## Attachments

- Blackout-Poetry-Examples-A-Better-World-A-Comin - Spanish.docx
- Blackout-Poetry-Examples-A-Better-World-A-Comin - Spanish.pdf
- Blackout-Poetry-Examples-A-Better-World-A-Comin.docx
- Blackout-Poetry-Examples-A-Better-World-A-Comin.pdf
- Gallery-Walk-Posters-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.docx
- Gallery-Walk-Posters-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.pdf
- Gallery-Walk-Posters-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- Gallery-Walk-Posters-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf
- Lesson-Slides-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pptx
- This-Land-Is-Your-Land-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.docx
- This-Land-Is-Your-Land-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.pdf
- This-Land-Is-Your-Land-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- This-Land-Is-Your-Land-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-with-Teacher-s-Notes-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Lyrics-with-Teacher-s-Notes-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-A-Better-World-a-Comin - Spanish.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-with-Teacher-s-Notes-A-Better-World-a-Comin.docx
- Woody-Guthrie-Organizer-with-Teacher-s-Notes-A-Better-World-a-Comin.pdf

## Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Gallery Walk Posters (attached, one set printed and hung around the room)
- Woody Guthrie Organizer (attached, one per student)
- Woody Guthrie Organizer with Teacher's Notes (attached, one copy)
- Woody Guthrie Lyrics (attached, one song per student)
- Woody Guthrie Lyrics with Teacher's Notes (attached, one copy)
- This Land Is Your Land Lyrics (attached, one per student)
- Blackout Poetry Examples (attached)

- Student devices with internet access
- Portable speakers (optional)
- Dry erase pockets (optional)
- Dry erase markers (optional)
- Highlighters (optional)
- Headphones (optional)

# Engage

### Teacher's Note: Context and Preparation

This lesson is meant to be taught after students are familiar with the historical events that influenced Woody Guthrie's music, such as the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, World War II, the fight for civil rights, and industrialization and the labor movement.

Before the lesson, print the **Gallery Walk Posters** and hang them in various locations around the classroom. These four stations will function as individual learning stations students will visit during the Explore phase.

To learn more about Woody Guthrie and his music, consider reviewing the following resources:

- *Woodrow Wilson Guthrie* by Guy Logsdon for *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*
- *Woody Guthrie: The Dust Bowl Balladeer* a Crossroads creation for the Oklahoma Historical Society

Begin the lesson by displaying **slide 3** of the attached **Lesson Slides** and organizing students into groups of 3-4.

Using a version of the Think-Pair-Share strategy, ask students to consider the two questions on the slide:

> *What purposes can music have?*
>
> *Why do people create and perform music?*

Give students one minute to think about these questions individually. After one minute is up, invite students to share their thoughts with their small groups. Then, call on someone in each group to share with the whole class.

### Sample Student Responses

After considering their prior knowledge about music, students might suggest answers similar to the following:

- To express feelings, ideas, and beliefs
- For fun and entertainment
- To make money
- In response to events that happened in the singer's life
- To unite people
- For purposes of worship
- To highlight social and political issues
- To promote change

### Technology Integration Option

Students could submit their answers to these questions electronically on an LMS discussion board, using Mentimeter, or using Padlet.

Display **slide 4**. Share with students that throughout this lesson they should consider the following essential questions as they explore the work of one of America's most influential folk musicians, Woody Guthrie:

*What purposes can music have?*

*How can music inspire change?*

Consider also sharing the lesson objectives on **slide 5**.

# Explore

Display **slide 6** and share some background about Woody Guthrie's life. Tell students that Woody Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma in 1912 and learned about music throughout his childhood from family and friends. He grew up at a time when the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl devastated Oklahoma, Texas, and the surrounding region. By the time Guthrie was a teenager he had moved to Texas, and from there he joined the thousands of people fleeing the Dust Bowl and migrated to California to look for work. This experience profoundly influenced Guthrie's early music.

Tell students that to begin their exploration of Guthrie and his music they are going to engage in a Gallery Walk. Display **slide 7** and distribute copies of the **Woody Guthrie Organizer**. Explain that there are four stations at different points throughout the room that each have a photo of Guthrie paired with a quote. Assign students a number from 1-4, and instruct them to start at the Gallery Walk station that corresponds with their assigned number. Students will rotate to each station to analyze both the photo and the quote with their group in an effort to answer the following question:

> Why did Woody Guthrie create and perform music?

Once groups are at their assigned station, tell them they will have two minutes at the station before rotating to the next. Students should record their inferences, along with relevant evidence from the quote and photo, in the corresponding space on their organizers.

### Teacher's Note: Modeling

If you think it would be beneficial to students, consider doing the first Gallery Walk station as a whole class. Model how you are thinking about your analysis of the photo and quote, explaining to students how you came to your conclusions and what you would write on the handout.

After students have visited all of the Gallery Walk stations, ask them to return to their original groups of 3-4. Give group members a few minutes to compare their findings, and encourage students to add to their notes based on this discussion.

When groups have concluded their conversations, ask a representative to share the group's thinking at this point with the whole class. As group members share their hypotheses about why Woody Guthrie created and performed music, ask them to note specific text evidence from the quotes and the photographs to support their responses. **Slides 8-11** contain the photos and quotes from the Gallery Walk should you want to refer to them during the whole-class discussion. Refer also to the **Woody Guthrie Organizer with Teacher's Notes** for additional information to help facilitate this discussion.

### Teacher's Note: Fascism

Depending on the needs of your students, either before or after the Gallery Walk, or even after the video that follows this Teacher's Note, consider explicitly discussing the term "fascism." Ask students how they would define the term, and from there explain that fascism is generally considered to be a political ideology in which political power is held by one person who promotes the superiority of one group of people over others, often based on race or ethnicity. As a result, many people lack basic freedoms, and any opposition is likely to be violently suppressed.

To put the term into the context of this lesson, explain that Woody Guthrie first put the message "this machine kills fascists" on his guitar in 1941, during WWII, as the United States was fighting fascist Nazi Germany. He kept the message on his guitar after the war ended as he saw elements of fascism playing out in the United States in the form of economic exploitation and racial oppression. He saw his guitar, and more broadly his music, as a weapon he could wield to fight for a more just society. This message spoke to his belief in the power of music to counter inequality and fascist ideology.

Display **slide 12** and show students the Road to Now promo video about Woody Guthrie. As students watch the video, ask them to add information from the video to their chart that helps answer the question, "Why did Woody Guthrie create and perform music?"

**Embedded video**
https://youtube.com/watch?v=X7Jt_Nd96AY

After viewing the video, ask several students to share any additional thoughts or evidence with the whole class.

Have students return to their small groups and work together to summarize their findings by completing the sentence in the bottom section of their chart:

*Woody Guthrie created and performed music...*

Ask someone from each group to share the group's response with the whole class. During this discussion, add any missing information or clarify any misconceptions that students might have. Encourage students to modify their responses based on the whole-class discussion.

### Sample Student Responses

Woody Guthrie created and performed music...

- To speak out against political, social, and economic injustice with the hope of inspiring change.
- To give a voice to the voiceless and disenfranchised.
- To bring attention to the problems facing American society.
- To unite people to advocate for change.
- As an agent for social, political, and economic change.

Display **slide 13** and summarize the discussion by noting that after Guthrie moved to California, he co-hosted a radio show. The show provided Guthrie with a platform from which he developed his ability to use music as a form of social and political commentary. He used his songs to comment, and in many cases critique, what he saw happening in American society with the hope of promoting change by informing the public about a problem or issue and appealing to their sense of justice. Therefore, to Guthrie, his songs were not purely entertainment but a tool for speaking out against social, economic, and political wrongs. Guthrie loved the possibility of America and spent the rest of his life as an artist and activist helping to create a more just America with the songs that he wrote and performed.

# Explain

Now that students know that Woody Guthrie wanted to create music to fight against the injustices he saw happening, explain to them that they are going to analyze the lyrics of various Woody Guthrie songs to determine the types of issues and causes that he felt compelled to highlight with his music.

Have students continue working with their small groups. Assign each group a different song from the attached, curated **Woody Guthrie Lyrics**, providing a copy of the lyrics for each student in the group.

### Teacher's Note: Song List

Because Woody Guthrie's songs address social, economic, and political issues from his time that continue to be relevant today, students might find some of the themes and lyrics to be challenging. Make sure to preview the songs to determine which ones you think will work best for your students.

There are seven songs included on the handout. If you have a larger number of groups, or if you are interested in exploring Guthrie's other music, visit the Woody Guthrie Lyrics web page to find other songs suitable to the purpose of this lesson.

For any song that you feel might be particularly difficult for students, you might also consider analyzing the song as a whole class so that you can more fully engage in the conversation.

Remember also to check in with students to see how they are feeling after they have analyzed their songs.

Once each group has a song, display **slide 14**. Tell students that before they read the lyrics they should consider the title of the song and read the brief description below the title that provides some important historical context for their song analysis. Tell students to read the lyrics two times with their group, the first time reading them straight through and the second time using the Why-Lighting strategy to note any lyrics that address the following question:

> *What political or social issue or issues is Woody Guthrie addressing in this song?*

As they Why-Light, students should highlight any words or phrases that help them answer the question and make notes in the margins to explain their reasoning.

### Teacher's Note: Clarifying Misconceptions

While students are working with their groups, walk around to each group to answer any questions and to clarify any misconceptions. Refer to the **Woody Guthrie Lyrics with Teacher's Notes** for Why-Lighting examples.

### Teacher's Note: Listening to the Songs

Consider allowing students to bring headphones to class and listen to the songs as they complete their analysis. Using portable speakers, the songs could also be played to the entire class.

In the digital version of the Woody Guthrie Lyrics attachment, all but one of the song titles links to a YouTube video recording of the song. The exception, "The Blinding of Isaac Woodard," is one of several songs that Guthrie performed but never recorded.

After students have finished Why-Lighting their lyrics, display **slide 15**. Bring the whole class back together and ask them to use the sentence stem on the Woody Guthrie Organizer to summarize their findings. Clarify to students that they should write multiple sentences to explain their evidence and reasoning.

When groups have completed their sentence stem summaries, display **slide 16** and ask members of each group to share their analysis with the whole class. As groups share their responses, compile a class list of the major issues Guthrie highlighted with his music. You can either add student responses to slide 16 or write responses on the board.

Ask students to record the list in the appropriate section of their Woody Guthrie Organizer. **Slide 17** includes possible responses.

### Sample Student Responses

- Social inequality
- Economic inequality
- Political inequality
- Abuse of policing power
- Racial oppression and injustice
- Workers' rights
- Exploitation of labor
- Civil rights
- Union organizing
- Redistribution of wealth and land
- Equality
- Fascism
- Poverty/unemployment

Conclude the discussion by summarizing the common themes and issues that Guthrie addresses with his music.

# Extend

### Teacher's Note: Preparation

The following resources provide context and additional information to help you support the next activity:

- *The Misguided Attacks on 'This Land Is Your Land'* by Will Kaufman
- *The Blind Spot in the Great American Protest Song* by Sam Kesler
- *This Land is* Whose *Land? Indian Country and the Shortcomings of Settler Protest* by Mali Obomsawin
- *'Your Land'? Some Native Americans Question Inaugural Song* by Felicia Fonseca

While many of the themes and issues Woody Guthrie highlighted in his music are still relevant today, giving his songs a sense of timelessness, his songs also continue to be critiqued and adapted within today's context, perhaps none more so than Guthrie's most popular song, "This Land Is Your Land."

Pass out copies of the **This Land Is Your Land Lyrics**. Display **slide 18** and have students listen to a recording of Guthrie performing the song as they follow along with the lyrics printed on the handout. As they listen, ask students to consider the following questions and make any relevant notes on their handouts:

> *What is Guthrie's purpose for writing this song?*
>
> *What political or social issue does he address with this song?*

After they have listened to the song, ask students to share their responses to the questions above with the whole class. Ask them to identify the words and phrases that support their answer. Wrap up the conversation by summarizing students' thoughts.

### Sample Student Responses

Students should be using the lyrics to draw conclusions about the purpose of the song as well as the issues it addresses. For example, students might note that Guthrie wrote this song to detail the beauty of the American landscape or to honor America's possibility, but also to critique the economic inequality he saw during the Depression Era. This includes economic inequality due to loss of land and jobs as well as to the unfair labor practices of large farming corporations.

This song protests inequality more generally by suggesting that America was not just "made" for the few wealthy and powerful, but for "you and me," for all of us. We are all equally entitled to the same freedoms and opportunities, including the land we live on.

Display **slide 19**. Explain to students that they are going to listen to a more recent recording of the same song made by Pete Seeger (one of Woody Guthrie's friends and a champion of his music) in 1976, almost 10 years after Guthrie's death. As students listen to this version of the song, have them use the lyrics on the This Land is Your Land Handout to follow along, and ask them to consider the following question and make relevant notes on their handout:

> *What do you notice about Seeger's version of the song when compared to the original lyrics?*

After listening to the song, ask students to share their responses to the question with the whole class.

### Sample Student Responses

Students will likely point out that Seeger included two different verses in his performance of "This Land Is Your Land," one acknowledging Native American land loss and the other considering our relationship with the environment.

Display **slide 20** and ask students the following question:

*Why do you think Seeger would include these new verses in his performance of "This Land Is Your Land"?*

Give students a few minutes to discuss this question with their small groups. When they have finished their discussion, bring the whole class back together and ask groups to each share their thoughts with the whole class.

### Sample Student Responses

This answer is open to students' interpretation and hypotheses, but ideally, they will begin to articulate the following ideas:

The song could be critiqued for failing to account for the fact that "this land" that makes up what is now the United States previously belonged to Native peoples and became the United States only after it was taken away from them. Some Native Americans argue that the song can be interpreted as colonialist and as an expression of American expansionism, which then reinforces the United States' continual erasure of Indigenous people and culture.Therefore, Pete Seeger added the verse about Native American land loss to account for that truth and acknowledge the blind spot of the original lyrics, hoping to make the song more inclusive of all peoples.

Additionally, students might note that the song could be critiqued from an environmental perspective.For example, if the line "this land was made for you and me" is interpreted in a way that "you and me" means humans only, the song gives the impression that the land and its resources are meant to be owned, dominated, and used by humans with little or no regard for the natural world. Therefore, Pete Seeger added this verse about the environment to broaden how we define "you and me" to include plants, animals, and our natural environment as a whole, suggesting that "this land was made" not only for humans but for all living things, and as humans we need to acknowledge that idea and treat the land accordingly.

### Teacher's Note: Scaffolding the Discussion

If students struggle to come up with possible answers to the discussion question, consider asking them one or more of the following questions:

- How might Native peoples interpret this song?
- In the context of American expansion, how could the phrase "this land was made for you and me" be interpreted?
- Why is it problematic to fail to acknowledge that Native peoples were the original stewards of the land that is now the United States?
- What do you think the line "fin, fur, and feather, we're all in this together" means?
- Based on your interpretation of the song, who does "you and me" mean?
- Who and what else do we share our land with? What are the implications of acknowledging that the land is not just for human beings?

consciousness with what seems like a simple and important message—we are all equally entitled to rights in this country, including access to and use of the land. At the same time, some have highlighted our need to consider the song within new contexts, especially as it is sung at significant events like presidential inaugurations and modern-day protests. Guthrie himself often created new iterations of his own songs to fit current circumstances, so it is likely that he would appreciate seeing his song continue to foster important dialogue about how to make the world a better place for all.

# Evaluate

### Teacher's Note

Using dry erase pockets and markers would allow students to make changes to their Blackout Poetry to later create a more permanent piece.

The Woody Guthrie Organizer and Why-Lighted lyrics can be collected to serve as assessments for this lesson.

If time permits, display **slide 21** and consider assessing students' understanding further by having them create Blackout Poetry. Starting with the lyrics to one of the songs that they analyzed earlier, ask students to black out portions of the text to create a poem that reflects Guthrie's social and political commentary. Once students have created their poems, they should write a short 3-5 sentence response to explain how their poem reflects the social and political commentary that Guthrie shared through his songs.

### Blackout Poetry Examples

Refer to the **Blackout Poetry Examples** handout, which includes two sample blackout poems and explanations, as a guide.

If you think students would benefit from seeing a completed poem and explanation, feel free to share one or both examples with them.

### Technology Integration Option

These blackout poems could be done traditionally by giving students a printout of the song they want to use and providing them with black markers to use to black out all the words in the song except those they want to include in their poem. Alternatively, the lyrics could be shared in a Google or Word document and students could use the highlight tool, selecting the color black, to highlight or black out the words in a digital format.

Consider asking students to share their poems and explanations with small groups or with the whole class before turning them in.

Conclude the lesson by noting that, as we reflect on Woody Guthrie's legacy, we should consider our own talents and how we can use those to fight for a society that is more just and equal, where we do a better job of taking care of one another.

## Resources


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