

[Letter from Woody Guthrie to Alan Lomax, September 19, 1940]

Woody 31 E. 21 Street on the Top Floor of New York

Dear Alan

Just thought I'd write you a few more lines tonight on as many different subjects as I can get down in one line. Mainly about a few thoughts that I been thinking about making up songs and stuff like that. A little dog just got run over down below in the streets a taxi hit him. I could make up a song about how it sounded to hear the little dog yelping to the little boy a watching out of the third floor window across the street. I had a big dog once and all of the kids played with him and liked him and he would go and get their base ball when they knocked it too far or he would run in their football games and stand around with his eyes shot over and his ears stuck about half way up and his tongue running in and out of his mouth, his head cocked over sideways like and watching the kids shoot marbles. But an old neighbor lady with something haywire in her head went and poisoned the dog and it killed him and the kids all had a big funeral for old pooch they called him and they dug him a nice grave and painted his name on a flat rock and it was a plumb heartbreaking affair. You could write a song about that and it would contain enough of all of the high and low feelings to put it over if the blame was properly placed on the old lady that poisoned the pooch. I think one mistake some folks make in trying to write songs that will interest folks is to try to cover too much territory or to make it too much of a sermon. A folk song ought to be pretty well satisfied just to tell the facts and let it go at that.

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You hadn't ought to try to be too funny because if you just tell folks the truth they'll laugh at every other word. The best of all funny songs have got a mighty sincere backbone. These are the old deathbed and graveyard and parted lover songs that I sing more than any

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others when I need to cheer myself up. And there is something very funny about almost everything that happens if you do a good job of a telling just exactly what took place like in the song Why do you Stand There in the Rain? or about Pretty Boy Floyd or the little Boll Weevil. People that laugh at songs laugh because it made them think of something and they want you to leave a good bit up to their guesswork and imagination and it takes on a friendly and warm atmosphere like you was thanking them for being good listeners and giving them credit for being able to guess the biggest part of the meaning. Lots of songs I make up when Im laughing and celebrating make folks cry and songs I make up when Im feeling down and out makes people laugh. These two upside down feelings has got to be in any song to make it take a hold and last.

Usually I set down and knock off a song in about 30 minutes or a hour but in most of them Ive been going around humming and whistling it and a trying to get it all straight in my head what I want to say and why I want to say it and usually when I decide just exactly who the song is a going to help out if its the right bunch I can really beat or scribble her down in a hurry. The reason why you want to write songs is what keeps you going. If you got enough reason to write I say that you can knock off two or 3 pretty fair songs a week and 3 a pretty dam good one over the week end. I know just honky tonk geetar thumpers that can whack out a song a day and a good one out of every 30. The main thing is to set your head on some subject you want to harp on and haul off and start and you can write 25 or 30 or 500 songs on the same subject if your subject is a helping people. I took as my subject songs that would make people want to help people, and I am now on my 202th — two oh tooth. I've wrote up songs and tore them up. I bet I tore up more than a orchestra feller could shake a stick at. And lots of folks are making up songs all of the time and they dont know it. I hear so many people coming around me and going on about where you get your words and your tunes. Well I get my words and tunes off of the hungry folks and they get the credit for all I pause to scribble down. I feel a little bit guilty for not taking more time out to jot down more. As you know I aint able to read no music note I just get the time to grinding through my head and jot the music down on my old guitar.

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You know pretty near it everybody is a making up all kinds of tunes all along but they just dont know about it. You see a lady doing your housework and youll be a walking around a humming or whistling and hal fo the time youll mix up about three or four songs that are such a good mixture that you got a brand new song — but the reason you dont know it is because your mind is thinking about all kinds of stuff like dishes and dust pans 4 and kids and husbands and ice men and the traveling salesman or debts you would like to be able to pay off if you could only raise the money — and so the tune fades away and thats the last of it. Everybody makes up music and some folks try to harness it and put it to work just like steam that you caint hold in your hand or vitamens you hear the doctor charge you three dollars to describe or electricity that makes big engines run and great big wheels go around. If it would of been left up to me I'd of been too busy trapseing around over the country and making a guitar sound like a freight train to of stopped long enough to catch electricity and make it help you but of course Mr Edison had some men working for him and tonight I'm a writing this by a light, a floor lamp with three shifts forwards and a radio with 3 backwards and I've got the light and the other folks can have the music. Music is some kind of electricity that makes a radio out of a man and his dial is in his head and he just sings according to how hes a feeling.

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The last stuff you can sing about is what you saw and if you look hard enough you can see plenty to sing about.

As you may of already known me & Cisco sung one week up here on 44 Street in a joint called Jimmy Dwyers Sawdust Trail. I didnt see much dust but saw lots of trailing. The big reporters from the newspapers come down and they listened to the songs about the people in the dust bowl and about the ones that are chasing up and down that big 66 highway with empty bowls and the ones that went to California trying to swap a crocked crock bowl for a sugar bowl and the police and big farmers got the whole works — and the papers here, the Sun and others give a pretty good write up or two about the dust bowl and especially P.M. & the Sun Sept 5th 1940 copy — and lots of people wrote in hollering

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that the reporter fell for a lot of fifth colume stuff. They called me a comm-unist and a wild man and everything you could think of but I dont care what they call me. I ain't a member of any earthly organization my trouble is I really ought to go down in the morning and just join everything. I 6 registered in California as a democrat and changet it one day to a progressive just because I was passing the ladys house. I done that on a dare more or less from a girl I was out walking. So I wrote back to the columnist and thanked him and I dont care what number he is. Members is like a slot machine the guy that advertises them wins. He published a double colum then about the letters he got kicking on me and he said he liked the songs no matter if I was sprinkled or babtised by drowning or soused down in a river of dust — and he liked me no matter if I believed what was right. Good columnist. I answered his second colum by a letter and I thanked him for doing some hungry people a good hand. Other fellers ought to write some colums to hep the folks that need help. Im as good of a preacher on hungry bellies as I am to sing on a full stomach ache.

I've always knowed this was what I wanted to talk and sing about and I'm used to running into folks that complain but I dont ever intend to sell out or quit or talk or sing any different because when I do that drug store lemonade stuff I just open up my mouth and nothing comes out.

And now I've got this CBS radio job and a salary that beats owning six farms in Oklahoma and I dont know just 7 what or where or when somebody will raise up and try to put their foot in my good jungle stew because it is mighty apt to happen and it means so much not only to me but to my friends and relatives that I'll be able to help and my wife and three kids are feeling pretty good for the first time in a long time and a long time down in the dust bowl where they've been cooped up is just naturally a mighty long time. If I thought for two minutes that anything I do or say would hurt America and the people in it I would keep my face shut and catch the first freight out of the country. The Library of Congress is good. It has helped me a lot by recording what I had to say and to copy all of my songs and file them away so the senators caint find them. Course they're alwasy there in case they ever get a few snorts under their vest and want to sing. I think real folk stuff scares most of the

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boys around Washington. A folk song is whats wrong and how to fix it, or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is is or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is — — thats folk lore and folks 8 made it up because they seen that the politicians couldnt find nothing to fix or nobody to feed or give a job of work. We dont aim to hurt you or scare you when we get to a feeling sorta folksay and make up some folk lore, we're a doing all we can to make it easy on you. I can sing all day and all night sixty days and sixty nights but of course I aint got enough wind to be in office.

All I know how to do Alan is to just keep a plowing right on down the avenue watching what I can see and listening to what I can hear and trying to learn about everybody I meet every day and try to make one part of the country feel like they know the other part and one end of it help the other end — cause if a horse fly is dealing a horse trouble on the left nose hole, its the tail that swishes and drives the fly off and it sings a little fiddle bow song as it swishes. Horses tails make awful good fiddle bows.

Take it Easy but take it

Seal

Woody Guthrie Sept. 19th 1940 New York town