



A spread from a 1946 Woody Guthrie notebook, written as a letter to a friend, in which Guthrie comically applied Darwinian theory to love and marriage.

# PAINTBRUSH TROUBADOUR

When Woody Guthrie set out for California at the height of the Depression, it wasn't a guitar strapped over his shoulder. It was paintbrushes. | BY JENNIFER NEW



A 1944 self-portrait.



A hand-painted notebook cover from the 1940s.



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**W**E REDUCE OUR artists in death to a shorthand list of images and accomplishments, quickly forgetting more complicated traits. Grant Wood becomes synonymous with the bald farmer in overalls, Martha Graham with her hand-to-head pose and sweeping dress. Woody Guthrie, a bohemian populist, is tolerated because he is also our preeminent folksinger. "This Land Is Your Land" is a perennial favorite with American schoolchildren who can belt out its chorus without ever learning the radical verses that follow.

Nora Guthrie, Guthrie's daughter, has worked hard to keep her father's Depression-era radicalism from being erased or simplified, most notably through two CDs of his previously unrecorded songs that she produced with Billy Bragg and Wilco. Her new book, "Woody Guthrie: Artworks" (Rizzoli)—a collection, coauthored with writer and designer Steven Brower, of some 300 paintings, drawings, and sketches from Guthrie's diaries, journals, and letters, among other sources—provides a more striking portrait of her father's complex nature and multiple talents than any biography or recording could.

What we're given is a man who maintained a childlike curiosity and freshness of perspective throughout his life. The father of eight, Guthrie was enthralled with children, whose frank, playful ways resonated with his own style. Writing about his daughter Cathy, he recounted: "And it flew across my mind when I watched the seat of your britches dance into the front room that I would do right well... if I could put down on paper, film, clay, canvas, wax, metal, or on some windier material, the song you sang for me, and the way you sang it." Guthrie mined such moments in his art, which is utterly lacking in self-consciousness.

Guthrie was on fire with ideas, images, and words. These emerged not only as lyrics, but in the form of cartoons, watercolors, and pen-and-ink drawings. He also dabbled in sculpture, dance, and architecture. The medium didn't matter much as long as he was able to articulate his ideas: As he wrote in "Bound for Glory," his 1943 semi-autobiographical novel, "I just felt like I was going out of my wits if I didn't find some way of saying what I was thinking. The world didn't mean any more than a smear to me if I couldn't find ways of putting it down on something."

Nora contends that her father might just as likely have become a notable visual artist as a singer/songwriter. In fact, she reports that the image of Guthrie setting out for California at the height of the Depression with a guitar strapped over his shoulder—an image Woody extended through some of the illustrations he did for "Bound for Glory"—was a myth. He in fact carried paintbrushes while on the road and found occasional employment as a sign painter; the guitar had been hocked before he even set off.

Guthrie took up painting earlier than he did

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music and continued to draw in his later years when Huntington's disease had robbed him of his songwriting abilities. The images, which are often married with text, range from the humorous and political, such as posters he designed in the late 1930s to organize voter registration for progressive candidates, to the obviously erotic. Taken as a whole, the collected artworks replace the notion of Guthrie as a folksy, simple man with that of a Walt Whitman-like figure who was at once a workingman's spokesman, unapologetic lover, and poet.

Guthrie's exploration of artistic styles was fearless. Flip through the new book, and you might think you had opened an unlikely anthology of somber Franz Kline paintings, violet and violent Frida Kahlo diary entries, primitive Keith Haring graffiti, and impudent James Thurber cartoons. The illustrations he did for "Bound for Glory" have a keen Depression-era feel, both in form and content: A drawing of a faceless woman and child gazing on a wrecked house shares the desolation and rounded lines of Thomas Hart Benton's work. Although figures he employed in early political cartoons reappear in his later children's work, his work grew less overtly political. A series of brush paintings he did to accompany the Yiddish poetry of his mother-in-law, for example, simply celebrate the world of Judaica he discovered while living on Coney Island in the 1940s.

Brower, who designed the book and provided concise text that situates the pictures chronologically and stylistically, does great service to Guthrie by reproducing the work as objects: This results in an immediacy not found in many art books. Scraps of paper are shown tattered edges and all, for example, and Guthrie's many journals are photographed as books, so that we see their bindings and edges; we also see some of his journals' decorated and titled covers.

Guthrie's journals are unusual because many of them had an intended audience; he often made books for friends in lieu of traditional letters. He also created books for his children, his greatest muse having been Cathy, killed in an electrical fire when she was 4 years old. Guthrie penned letters to her prior to her birth and sketched her during her short life, noting her toddler phrases: "Twice I fell down once." After her death, he poured his abstract, bruise-colored grief into an entire sketchbook executed on a single day.

By the early 1950s, Guthrie's artwork slowed and his behavior grew more erratic. What remains of his later work does not reflect childlike joy, but rather a man hemmed in by anger and frustration, both with himself and with a society that struck him as racist and small-minded. He died in 1967 at age 55 following more than a decade of hospitalization.

The monumental outpouring of Guthrie's art could lead to yet another myth: that he knew death was imminent. The way he bled himself onto every free scrap of paper, however, proves he would gladly have burnt through another few decades with equal exuberance.

This world it's hit me in my face  
It's hit me over my head.  
It's beat me black and blue and green  
But still tho' I ain't dead.



An illustration for Guthrie's 1943 novel "Bound for Glory."



A page from "Woody's 20 Grow Big Songs," a 1948 book of Guthrie's songs for children.



A 1939 poster created to organize voters to support progressive candidates.

IMAGES FROM "WOODY GUTHRIE: ARTWORKS" (RIZZOLI, 2005)