

OPINION

LOOKING BACK

We Still Need Music to Fight With

1.

It's hard to believe that someone who professed to love America so much didn't realize there were 50 states. OK, that's my last joke.

2.

As a traveling musician, I've heard people singing at festivals and in clubs, concert halls, rehearsal spaces, etc., but I'm assuming Guthrie is talking about migratory work camps and temporary tent-housing-type situations — places where part of the evening's entertainment would be sitting around and singing with your neighbors instead of isolating in front of a TV or radio.

In my family growing up, working hard was a solid justification for any amount of drinking. On the other hand, idlers don't seem to have any problem justifying a couple of drinks, either. All I'm saying is the drink bone is connected to the work bone, which is connected to the song bone, which is connected to the leave-me-alone bone. I actually don't know exactly what I'm trying to say; I just know my father worked very hard, and he drank very hard.

3.

I see what he's getting at. That music really doesn't work unless you're helping people name something that they aren't able to say themselves. I think he's processing the events of the day and wanting to communicate them back to people who are all seeing the same thing, and making them feel less alone by saying: I see what you see.

He also comes from a troubadour tradition, almost like a town crier, letting people know about things that are going on, as an alternative press would do. I can see that still exists, but it's hard to say that we're lacking information the way that I think most people lacked information in Guthrie's time.

Guthrie could read an article about the 1948 Los Gatos plane crash and be morally offended at the description of the people who had died as being merely "deportees." Channeling that outrage into a song was a service both to the people who died and to the general public, who were not thinking closely enough about what was being presented as the news. He felt compelled to say something, and in doing so preserved his humanity. And ours.

Today, I don't know that many people who can get away from what's happening. The horrors of the world, the sadness. Certainly from my own experience, I feel as if people who come to see me play, and come to see Wilco, are seeing a lot of the same things. Not that there's a uniformity of thought, but I don't ever look out and think, These people need me to tell them about ICE, for example. I assume they're decent people, and they can hardly get away from what is happening. Maybe that's naive on my part, but I don't think so.

I think most of us traveling around playing music today are capable of providing some consolation, a little community, a place to be and feel like a part of a world that makes at least a little sense. I'm hopeful that we can contribute some small sense of wonder or beauty or catharsis. I'm convinced people need that more than a correct way of looking at the news or how to think about something. I see there's a role for artists pointing out injustice, and I do think it's valuable to confirm one another's fears and complaints. I'm happy when I see someone pull that off without being pedantic or putting themselves too high above the problems.

4.

We need more of that. I hear a lot of despair. And I have to wonder if things were better

In 1943, **Woody Guthrie** wrote an article for The Times arguing that we needed music to know one another better. Here, the songwriter **Jeff Tweedy** of the rock band Wilco annotates the original essay.

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A series exploring 175 years of eyewitness journalism from The New York Times.

America Singing (1943)
By Woody Guthrie

BUMMING my way around over forty-five of these here forty-eight States I heard plenty of folks singing.¹ Singing and working and fighting are so close together you can't hardly tell where one quits and the other one begins. Where you find one you'll find the other two, because folks that sing are always our best workers and hardest hitters.²

Music has got to say what we're all trying to say.³

People everywhere across the country are all working on the same big job. You hear them talk in the wheat fields of North Dakota, and it's just about the same words as you'll hear down in the celery patches or along the docks in lower California, and they say, "We got to all get together, and stick together, and work and fight together."⁴

People's songs say this same thing. The migratory workers are trying to turn every grain of good dirt into a green leaf. They have contests to see who can turn out the most of the best quickest. They sing a song called: "Truck Patch Trooper" and another one, "I'm a Pea Pickin' Poppa." Down South you'll hear their work songs made up to fit the work itself. "Me an' my wife can pick a bale of cotton, me an' my wife can pick a bale a day!"⁵

Classics and Folksongs

I ain't out to say that real honest classical music is better or worse than what you'd call folk music. Both are twin brothers and sisters. Both can learn plenty from the other. As far as "modern" music goes, or folksongs either, there's plenty of it that's good and plenty that's worse than useless.⁶

If you've got war workers playing hooky from the job, I ain't a bit surprised. If you want to smell the rat in his neon-lit hole,⁷ take a sniff at this floating, drifting, aimless, pointless, mentally, morally and sexually confusing dope that is drummed into a hundred million cars day and night, day and night, on your pretty nickel phonograph.⁸

I got picked by a man in Washington not so long ago and he asked me: "What's that there label say there on yer music box?"

"This machine kills Fascists," I told him.

"How'dya figger that?" he asked me.

And I says: "Well, you see this guitar makes

me feel like beatin' th' Fascists, an' then that makes me sing how much I hate 'em."

"Yeh?"

"Then, well, I sing fer a bunch of folks, folks workin', er soldiers, sailors, seamen, an' that sort of makes all of us whip it up a little - then we all get ta feelin' a little more like beatin' 'em, an' 'course if a Fascist then just sort of happens to git in our way, he just naturally comes out loser, by God!"⁹

To me these war days, any tool, any sort of a gadget, trigger, spring or what, any kind of a horn is a war horn, any kind of a wheel is a war wheel, any kind of a smoke is war smoke and any kind of talk is war talk, any kind of singing is war singing, any music had ought to be war music.¹⁰



BEN HICKEY

Music We Need

People need work music. People need music to march by and to fight with, and if you composers don't dish it out right on the split second, you'll find folks passing you up and making up their own and playing and singing it.¹¹

An apple is just like a song, no matter if a ditch digger, a jeep-jumper or a college professor or a rich dame eats it - it's for your belly and for your war. The best love and kissing songs in the whole world had ought to be on the jukeboxes right this minute. But where are they? Maybe the juke-box don't know there's a war going on.¹²

Well, the people know.

The people always know.

And rather than me to keep on scribbling here, it would be a whole lot better if we both always keep our eye peeled and our ear cocked to what all of us are trying to say - because all any kind of music is good for anyway is to make you and me know each other a little better. That's the most modern thing in the world.¹³

and you can't criticize people for wanting to escape.

I can't even criticize people for using narcotics, as a recovering addict. (I wouldn't recommend it.) People are doing their best, and if they find some comfort in it, I don't think I can make a judgment. But I see that I'm from a different time, and I'm not living through a period when there is a uniformity to the country's one great collaborative task at hand, defeating fascism.

What's interesting here is Guthrie's being a part of a monoculture working in tandem with a war machine and a morally justified view of war-making. It's been a long time since we've had any kind of shared cultural belief like that. Our post-World War II experience as American citizens, being repeatedly lied to, especially about how and where we use our military, has made it very hard to sustain any rallying around the flag. Which is maybe good when we're being told that we need to fight a war and send people somewhere far away to die, or, more important, to kill. Let's just say that for most of us, trust is a ship that sailed a long time ago.

9.

Art in itself, to me, communicates a belief in the idea of a better future or at least the idea that there is a future. When you share imaginative works of art, when you share your imagination, you create a world or an environment where imagination is valued. That's dangerous to

the powers that be, because they would rather you not have an imagination. They'd prefer you not think, or more specifically, they'd prefer to be able to guarantee that you're going to think a certain way. Art, if it's being done right, punches holes in the status quo.

10.

It's hard to imagine somebody saying something like that today. It's a window into a time when the mind-set was: There's something very serious happening, and we all need to work together to make sure that the outcome isn't that we're all being ruled by fascists globally. Not having to learn how to speak German or Italian. That was a legitimate fear, a sobering and unifying concept worth fighting against. It was easy to have this shared mission because you could so clearly define the stakes.

I think we need to get better at defining the stakes we face today. Because, while the people who are systematically dismantling our institutions and violating Americans' rights don't wear the uniforms of the Fascist Party, the consequences of their actions are similar to the ones Guthrie feared. So the stakes are just muddier, not necessarily smaller, and the lack of clarity is why so many of us are at one another's throats, arguing over what's going on in the first place.

11.

This sounds like punk rock to me. This sounds like a period in which the popular music of the day seemed very out of touch with the concerns of, specifically, the youth. The youth had a vacuum to fill of catharsis and anger, and punk rock shared this belief that you shouldn't be consuming music; you should be making it. You should be starting your own band. And we'd all be better off if we had our own bands and were saying the things that we needed to say. I'm all for it. We should all be making bands with our neighbors, and we shouldn't be waiting for "composers" to dish it out right on the split second. We should be making the music we need to march by and fight with.

12.

That's a little bit confusing, I have to admit. "The best love and kissing songs in the whole world" seems frivolous in the context of war. But, again, he's getting back at that same belief that music is fortifying, or promotes resiliency, in the population, which is needed to survive and build a world worth fighting for.

13.

Yes. We need to know one another a little bit better. Free ourselves from our self-imposed cages of outrage and sadness and pessimism and sing to one another. I always believe that it's our saving grace, when people sing together. The fact that we can harmonize. We can even do something I would classify as being beyond harmony. You hear it at giant sporting events: the sound of thousands and thousands of people reaching a common pitch, good singers and bad singers, all amassed as a monolithic choir — it's one of the most miraculous sounds on Earth. It's what I would advocate as a defense for humanity if we were ever being charged at an intergalactic court, having to fight or argue for our existence.

This piece is almost written in character. You don't see people write with that much of an individual voice anymore. I believe Guthrie to be an authentic character, but I also believe that he was aware of his persona and how palatable he was making some of these words to a working class, or an underclass, by speaking this way. He knew the language of the people he was trying to reach. We should all learn one another's languages a little better.