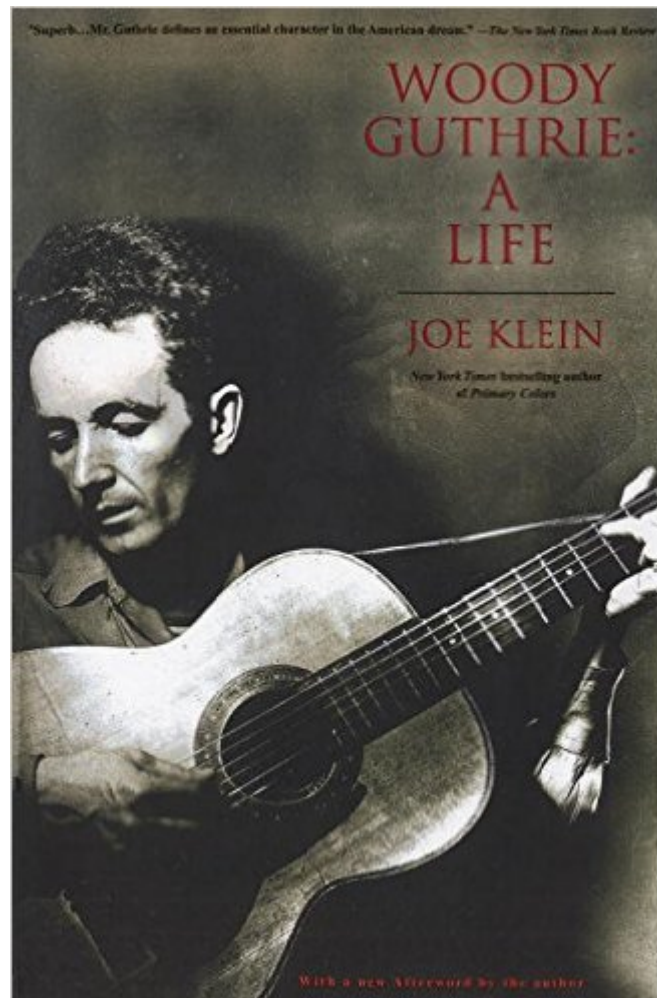


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# Woody Guthrie: A Life



## Synopsis

A biography of the influential American folk singer, Woody Guthrie, who lived a life on the edge of tragedy but inspired a generation of songwriters, including Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (37 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

It's hard for a book that comes so highly recommended to avoid ultimately being a bit of a disappointment, but Joe Klein's fine biography of Woody Guthrie does just that. Full-bodied and balanced, "Woody Guthrie: A Life" gives a very complete picture of an amazing life. The only disappointment here is reaching the end, both of Klein's book and of Guthrie's fascinating life. Klein's extensive research is the first key to this book's success; he is able to show so many different sides of one of America's greatest songwriters that Guthrie becomes ever more complex even as he becomes ever more human. Equally as important, though, is the manner in which Klein unblinkingly and impartially tells the bad along with the good. So what comes out in the long run is exactly how brilliant, industrious, flighty, difficult to live with, insufferable, and ingenious Woody Guthrie was. Klein's prose and its conversational ease spin out this long yarn, detours included, in a fluent and friendly tone that reflect well the topic at hand. Readers expecting mere annotations to Guthrie's music will be surprised to find much more in this book--I know I was. I was shocked to be allowed a glimpse into familial and erotic life. None of this interested me at first, and even seemed like an unwanted accompaniment to the real story of the music, but Klein quickly makes it clear that this corner of Guthrie's life had its own impact on his creative energies in every other area, and the gaps

get filled in. This completeness contributes to a portrait that quickly overgrows the confines of a single American life, for Guthrie's story is in many ways the complex story of America in the last century. Klein's telling of this story allows us a glimpse into histories we've forgotten or have been allowed to forget. How many of us knew, for example, that there were 3 million communists in the USA before WWII? Their history has been muted for a long time, but their role and the role of labor unions in the formation of America--and their quick and precipitous decline--play continually in the background of this biography. I highly recommend this book not just as a biography of Woody Guthrie but as a mapping of the American 20th century, as an explanation of how we became what we are and how we're still becoming, of how far we've come and how far we still have to go.

This was one of those books I bought on a whim-- I was at a used-book-store near me, looking thru the Music section, trying to find a biography on Bob Dylan when I saw this, an old hardcover library edition with "DISCARD" stamped into the front (such a sin!), and I picked it up. I haven't put it down since. Klein does an incredible job, relating Woody's life story in a way that can only be described as the absolute furthest thing from a textbook possible. Once you finish, you cannot help but go around to your friends, relating some parable from Woody's life, like, "Hey guys, you gotta hear this... Woody's on a freight, right, and...." Klein went through hundreds of sources to get the information for this book, making sure everything fit and talking to everyone Woody ever met or said hello to, it seems. He also was careful to cross-check all of Woody's stories on his life (Woody would often exaggerate his own life, changing parts and including others, lying about the more touchy subjects). It is incredibly well-written, and very comprehensive. Klein even will give extensive back-ground information so that when you get to the last page, you are practically an expert on the American culture from the turn of the century to the late 1960s. An amazing book, and a must-read for just about everyone-- no, not for just about everyone. It is a must read for ABSOLUTELY everyone.

I first picked up a copy of this book after Bruce Springsteen mentioned during a concert that he had read it and loved it. It inspired him to sing a very sad and mournful rendition of This Land is Your Land and to explain why it was really an angry song and not at all the happy little ditty we remembered from childhood. That was a fitting introduction to this book of his life which was also not a happy little ditty. Woody Guthrie's life and music speak to more than just Folk Music fans and I hope more younger folks pick this book up, read it and as a result give his music a listen. If you want to hear Bruce's comments on this book, they precede his performance of This Land is Your Land on his Live performance Boxed Set. I highly recommend listening to NEBRASKA and THE

GHOST OF TOM JOAD while reading this book!!

As a child of the 60's and 70's, I held the rather myopic view that my generation invented rebellion, cynicism and their voice in music. Not so! Joe Klein's masterful telling of Woody Guthrie's story reveals the musical tradition of the folk song as a means of political activism long before Bob Dylan and the rest. Woody Guthrie's wonderful, painful life is detailed with careful attention and astute observation. Mr. Klein does not spare us the unsavory irresponsibility of this hobo, nor does he turn us away from the tragedy of his illness and death. Instead, through the words, letters, and memories of Woody, his friends, and detractors, Joe Klein gives us a portrait of a flawed, resolute singer of our songs and in the process, presents a bit of our history that was never covered in my textbooks! Not an easy read, but a mesmerizing story. My next stop is the record store (or is it CD store?)!

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