

Dust Bowl in Song: Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl Ballads

Objective

Students will learn the conditions of the Dust Bowl through song and examine one example of social protest through music.

Historical Background on the Dust Bowl Ballads

Recorded in 1940, Woody Guthrie's first album chronicles the American Dust Bowl. Using only guitar and vocals, the album follows the exodus of Midwesterners headed for California. An original folk hero, Woody Guthrie transformed the folk ballad into a vehicle for social protest. Guthrie wrote hundreds of songs, many of them now classics, including "This Land Is Your Land." He was also a major influence on music superstars such as Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan. Moses Asch, who recorded much of Guthrie's material, thought of Woody as nothing less than a full-blown genius. *Adapted from Smithsonian Folkways.*

Motivation

Ask students to reflect on the song "This Land is Your Land." Ask them if they remember learning it in elementary school and if so, what images and ideas come to mind when they think of the song. If they did not learn it or do not recall it, play the version available through [Smithsonian Folkways](http://www.folkways.si.edu/TrackDetails.aspx?itemid=39032) [<http://www.folkways.si.edu/TrackDetails.aspx?itemid=39032>]. Play through the stanza that begins "there was a big high wall there...". Stop the song and ask if anyone has heard that stanza or if discussing the song only, ask students if "private property" and trespassing are ideas that come to mind when they think of the song. Then share the additional verse and ask if this stanza is familiar. Taken together, ask students what they think is the true the subject or purpose of the song.

Explain that the song was originally a work of social protest against the conditions of Depression-era America. It was written by folk singer Woody Guthrie in 1940, after traveling from Oklahoma to New York. He was inspired by what he saw, and was responding to the simplicity of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," popular in the 1930s; it was originally titled "God Blessed America for Me." It was recorded in 1944 and released in 1951.



To extend the discussion, consider the conditions of the Great Depression and the origin of the song “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie: in these [lessons from ArtsEdge](http://artsedge.kennedycenter.org/students/features/story-behind-the-song/this-land-is-your-land.aspx) [<http://artsedge.kennedycenter.org/students/features/story-behind-the-song/this-land-is-your-land.aspx>].

Procedure

To learn more about Guthrie, have students listen to the Smithsonian Folkways [podcast on Guthrie](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways_ckua/008.mp3): [http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways_ckua/008.mp3] from the lesson *Protest Songs: A Musical Introduction* [http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/docs/lesson_plans/FLP10025_usa_protest_songs.pdf]. Invite students to view the Dust Bowl through Guthrie’s works by examining his Dust Bowl Ballads.

Assign students different songs from the album. Lyrics are available through [Woody Guthrie Publications](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Lyrics.htm) [<http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Lyrics.htm>], and audio is available through [Smithsonian Folkways](http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=939) [<http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=939>]. Provide each student or group of students with a copy of the analysis page.

Suggested songs:

Dust Storm Disaster: http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Dust_Storm_Disaster.htm

Dusty Old Dust (So Long It’s Been Good to Know Yuh):

http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/So_Long_Its_Been_Good.htm

Dust Bowl Refugee: http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Dust_Bowl_Refugee.htm

Talking Dust Bowl Blues:

http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Talking_Dust_Bowl_Blues.htm

I Ain’t Got No Home: http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/I_Aint_Got_No_Home.htm

Summary

Have students share what they learned about the Dust Bowl and discuss what makes Guthrie’s songs compelling, including his use of language, imagery, and personal stories. Compare Guthrie to a more contemporary song about the environment, Marvin Gaye’s “Mercy, Mercy Me” using [ArtsEdge’s lesson on the song](http://www.whatsgoingonnow.org/sites/default/files/pdf/investigation_4_theenvironment.pdf) [http://www.whatsgoingonnow.org/sites/default/files/pdf/investigation_4_theenvironment.pdf]. For additional resources on teaching with Marvin Gaye’s album of social protest, What’s Going On, see ArtsEdge’s



[What's Going On Now program \[http://www.whatsgoingonnow.org/resources-educators\]](http://www.whatsgoingonnow.org/resources-educators).

Next, brainstorm contemporary environmental issues or social concerns. Invite students to create their own song on the issue, using Guthrie's techniques. Note: This activity can be linked to the "Dust Bowl in Images" summary activity.



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**NATIONAL
YOUTH
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DUST BOWL

Lyrics for [This Land is Your Land](#) by Woody Guthrie
Audio available through [Smithsonian Folkways](#)

This land is your land This land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway:
I saw below me that golden valley:
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me;
Sign was painted, it said private property;
But on the back side it didn't say nothing;
This land was made for you and me.

[Additional verse: \[http://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land\]](http://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land)

In the shadow of the steeple, I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Recorded 1944, released 1951, © copyright 1956 (renewed), 1958 (renewed), 1970 and 1972
by Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc. & TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc. (BMI)



Dust Bowl Ballad Analysis

QUICKWRITE

How can songs help to influence an audience's opinion, raise awareness, or express ideas? What kinds of protest songs have you heard before?

You are about to listen to one of Woody Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Ballads," songs he recorded in 1940 in response to his experiences during the Dust Bowl.

BEFORE LISTENING

Song Title:

What do you already know about the artist? About the song in general? How might this information influence your understanding of your listening experience?

WHILE LISTENING

For your first listening, do not follow along with the attached lyrics. Focus on the aural experience of the song. As you listen to the song, note some of your **first impressions** in the bulleted list below:

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-
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Dust Bowl Ballad Analysis, continued

List some **tone words** that come to mind when you listen to this recording:

READING ALONG

Next, follow along with the lyrics of the song. Now that you have looked more closely at the content, what do you think is its **purpose**? Who do you think is Guthrie's intended **audience**?

What **imagery** does the song use? What pictures does the song paint in your mind? What **language** strikes you most?

What aspect of **life during the Dust Bowl** does the song describe? How **accurately does it reflect** this time period? What **persuasive words or elements** does the song use to convey its message?

How effective is the song as **social protest**? Cite specific reasons and examples.



NOW WHAT?

After listening and recording your responses, you can complete one of the following:

- Find a social protest song that reflects contemporary issues, and compare and contrast the viewpoints presented in Guthrie's song versus the song you chose.
- Interview someone you know about how music has changed their thoughts, values, or ideals.
- Explore more songs from Woody Guthrie's catalog of music, and choose one that you think is most effective as social protest.
- Write your own poem, song, or prose piece that addresses an issue about which you are passionate.

