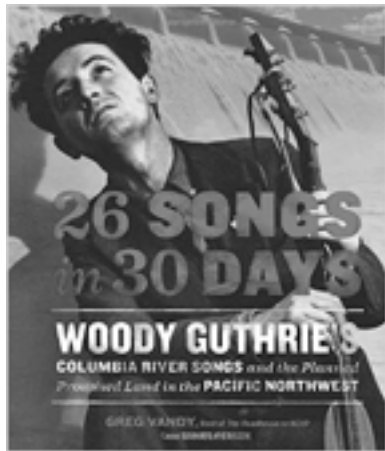


Greg Vandy with Daniel Person, *26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Songs and the Planned Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2016. 208 pp., ISBN 978-1-57-061970-0. Hardcover, \$24.95.



We know about Woody Guthrie's early years in Okemah and Pampa, his formative political and musical development in Los Angeles, and his later years spent in New York City. Much less is known about his remarkably productive one-month stint in the state of Oregon in 1941. Guthrie was hired by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) in Portland, Oregon, where the US Department of the Interior was constructing the massive Grand Coulee Dam project on the Columbia River. The job involved writing a group of songs to be

used in a documentary film to promote hydro-electrical power. Although the job was supposed to last an entire year, Stephen Kahn, the administrator who had written Guthrie about the job (on the recommendation of Alan Lomax), decided that reclassifying the job as an "emergency appointment" for a single month would not require a security check by the Civil Service Commission. Kahn was not wrong: J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI were on Guthrie's trail by the time he completed the job, but Guthrie had moved on before his hiring could be prevented. Kahn gave Guthrie a few books, asked him to tone down his politics, shepherded him through the BPA bureaucracy, and found a committed employee, Elmer Buehler, to drive him around the region. Guthrie recorded twenty-six songs in the basement studio of the BPA and was paid \$266 for his efforts.

Biographies by Joe Klein and Ed Cray devote only a few pages to this exciting, if brief, episode in the Guthrie saga. A lack of archival material, primary documents, and the original recordings limited their research. Guthrie himself, somewhat uncharacteristically, wrote very little about his experiences in Oregon. Later, when he worked with Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax to compile more than 200 songs, including dozens of Guthrie compositions, for *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* in 1947, Guthrie did not include any of the songs from the Columbia Collection.

Greg Vandy, with the help of Daniel Person, fills in the gap with *26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Songs and the Planned*

Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest. Vandy, a radio presenter who hosts a roots music show called *Roadhouse* on KEXP in Seattle, is well equipped to deliver this story because of his knowledge of folk music and the local history of the Pacific Northwest. In this well written and creatively illustrated book, Vandy shows how Guthrie moved beyond his Dust Bowl ballads to embrace a New Deal vision of a bright new future based on technological progress and economic planning by bringing “electric power to the people” and using nature’s abundant water source to provide irrigation that could transform unemployed workers into productive farmers.

The back story of this episode is how a handful of resourceful people uncovered lost documents and undiscovered recordings that allowed Vandy to flesh out the details in finer relief. Working in the public information office of the BPA in 1979, Bill Murlin, who had tinkered with folk music during his college days in the 1960s, did a double take when he stumbled upon an old 16-mm film called *The Columbia*, which listed Woody Guthrie in the credits. Intrigued, Murlin combed through BPA records in Portland and Seattle but found little of value. He wrote to folklorist Richard Reuss, who had compiled the most up-to-date bibliography of Guthrie, to ask about the possible existence of Columbia River recordings. Reuss replied that none were in existence, but he did send a copy of a letter from Bess Lomax, who, along with her brother Alan, had recorded Guthrie in 1940, and attached to the letter were the manuscripts of twenty-four of the twenty-six songs.

Murlin’s request to make a documentary film on the Guthrie songs was rejected by the BPA, but several years later he was granted permission to compile a songbook to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the BPA. Unable to find anything about Guthrie in the BPA archives, Murlin sent a letter to retired employees of the agency asking for information about the Guthrie recordings. He struck pay dirt when Ralph Bennett, a former BPA official who in 1947 had invited Guthrie to come to Spokane as his guest at the convention of the National Rural Electrical Cooperative Association, reported that he had acetate copies of the original songs recorded in the basement of the BPA headquarters. A final important document was uncovered when Murlin, aware of a government regulation that employee records were to be kept for fifty years before being destroyed, traveled to the central depository of the National Archives in St. Louis in 1991 to ask if Guthrie’s employment file still existed. According to Murlin, the file was nearly on the conveyor belt of the shredding machine when he retrieved it. Guthrie’s Application for Employment, reproduced by Vandy, is eye-opening. We learn that Guthrie weighed 125 pounds, had completed the tenth grade, and for the last decade had worked as a night clerk, porter, sign

painter, truck delivery driver, guitar player in a cowboy band, and radio host.

Despite Murlin's success in uncovering these lost materials, some documents relating to Guthrie — including the original basement recordings, the raw footage of *The Columbia*, and original recordings that Kahn made in New York for the film soundtrack — had been destroyed in the 1950s. Elmer Buehler, who had driven Guthrie around the region, was later ordered by BPA management to burn all twenty-five copies of *The Columbia*. But he hid two copies in his basement and brought them out in the 1970s to give to an Oklahoma film historian, Harry Menig, who wanted to screen the film.

The Columbia River songs reveal Guthrie's excitement with the beauty of the landscape, the huge scope of the electrification project, and its promise to improve the lives of working people of the valley. Fourteen of the songs were originally written and recorded in Oregon in 1941. Five more were written in Oregon but never recorded. The remainder were older songs submitted by Guthrie (and slightly revised in some cases) to meet his quota of twenty-six songs. As with most Guthrie compositions, all the songs relied on traditional or otherwise borrowed melodies. Several songs later became Guthrie favorites, including "Grand Coulee Dam," "Hard Travelin'", and "Roll on, Columbia," eventually adopted as the Washington state folksong. "Grand Coulee Dam" includes wonderfully poetic and nearly tongue-twisting phrases: "In the misty crystal glitter of the wild and windward spray" and "Like a prancing, dancing stallion down her stairway to the sea." Another well known Guthrie song, "Pastures of Plenty," describes the difficulties faced by migratory workers who moved further up the Pacific coast in search of agricultural work ("We travel with the wind and the rain in our face, / Our families migrating from place to place") and a brighter new future enhanced by the massive hydro-electric project ("One turn of the wheel and the waters will flow / 'Cross the green growing field, down the hot thirsty row.... / The Grand Coulee showers her blessings on me, the lights for the city, for factory, and mill"). By contrasting the struggles of a Dust Bowl past with an electrically-charged future amidst "Pastures of Plenty," Guthrie's Columbia River collection offers an element of optimism not apparent in his first commercial album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

Vandy suggests that the Oregon experience, if brief, marked an important transition in Guthrie's musical development as he moved beyond his staple of Dust Bowl songs from the Los Angeles years. Through his involvement with Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers, the CIO organizing activities, and playing with African American musicians, Guthrie soon began to broaden his focus. Even as he penned the lyrics to "Hooversville," a scathing critique of unemployment and homelessness, a few days before leaving Los Angeles for Portland, he must have been aware that the "rickety

shacks” and “rusty tin” shanties of California’s Hoovervilles were already emptying, as thousands of the Dust Bowl refugees found new jobs in rapidly growing defense industries that were springing up in the industrial suburbs of Los Angeles. Guthrie also experienced an important transition in his personal life, as his marriage with Mary Guthrie finally collapsed after years of difficulties. When Guthrie left Oregon to return to New York, Mary stayed behind with the three children and later returned to Los Angeles.

Thus, with *26 Songs in 30 Days*, Greg Vandy fills a gap in our knowledge of Guthrie’s development and contributes to our understanding of his influence on American music and culture. Particular mention should be made of the large number of powerful and rare images that are presented in black and white and color: photos, flyers, WPA posters, hand-written letters, typed song lyrics, cartoons, and album covers. The result is a beautiful book that deserves to be read, observed, and left on your coffee table for friends to see.

DARRYL HOLTER

Ronald D. Cohen, *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 201 pp., ISBN 978-1-4696-2881-3. Paperback, \$27.95.



Ronald D. Cohen’s most recent study, coming so quickly on the heels of a rapid-fire series of co-authored and co-edited works in the past two years — *Singing for Peace: Antiwar Songs in American History* (2015), *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (2015), *The Pete Seeger Reader* (2014), and *Roots of the Revival: American and British Folk Music in the 1950s* (2014) — as well as his solo edited collection *Alan Lomax, Assistant in Charge: The Library of Congress Letters, 1935-1945* (2014),

indicates that the scholar whom Ed Cray calls “Folk Music Central” remains at the forefront of American folk studies. Cohen’s short biography, *Woody Guthrie: Writing America’s Songs*, in Routledge’s “Historical Americans” series (2012), is his only work devoted exclusively to Guthrie. In *Depression Folk*, it is Guthrie alone who has a chapter named for him:

the fifth chapter, “Woody Guthrie Emerges.” Thus, while the book is not focused solely on Guthrie, it quite usefully situates him — and highlights him — in the broader history of American folk music between 1929 and 1940.

Cohen’s “agenda,” as he straightforwardly declares, is to focus directly upon “the role of left-wing political groups and individuals” in the development of the American folk music culture of the 1930s (1). His introduction establishes the context of the “labor and cultural renaissance” promoted by the New Deal government via “the ‘alphabet stew’ of federal programs beginning in 1935” (2) — NLRA, FSA, WPA etc. Cohen is unflinching in identifying the dark side of the much-vaunted progressive activism of the New Deal, notably the fact that the bulk of Roosevelt’s domestic initiatives came at a price exacted by the Southern Democrats in Congress: turning a blind eye to the South’s “rigid racial lines and policies, reinforced by both legislation and violence” (3). Add to this the other conservative and reactionary forces counterbalancing New Deal progressivism — the Motion Picture Production Code, the battles against labor organizing, both North and South, and “Red-hunting” Congressional committees backed by various anti-communist organizations such as the American Legion — and the stage is set for the construction of folk music as a combative political force in the Depression decade.

Cohen’s opening chapter, “On the Trail of Folk Songs,” looks back to the previous decade, a time of laying the “groundwork ... for folk music’s subsequent role in promoting a nationalist agenda, particularly on the left” (7). The collecting activities of Carl Sandburg, Louise Pound, Robert Gordon, Lawrence Gellert, Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson (among others), as well as the field recording missions of Ralph Peer, are outlined alongside the development of the phonograph, the recording and distribution of African American (“race”) and white southern (“hillbilly”) records, and the mushrooming of radio broadcasting. The scattered publication of Socialist songbooks notwithstanding, the 1920s are presented as “generally a prosperous time” marked by enough “pockets of poverty” to enable the emergence of an oppositional folk music culture in the next decade (21).

Chapter Two, “Depression’s Beginnings and Labor Songs,” introduces the musical expressions of “Bloody Harlan” in Kentucky (with extensive attention devoted to Aunt Molly Jackson and Jim Garland) and the Gastonia textile mills (Dave McCarn and, inevitably, Ella May Wiggins). Lesser known activities, such as Alan Calmer’s work on Pennsylvania labor songs, are also noted, as are the efforts of the Communist Party of the USA (*Song Book for Workers*), the Workers Music League (*Red Song Book*), and individual composers such as Maurice Sugar. Cohen situates what might be called proletarian music alongside Hollywood, Broadway, and Tin Pan

Alley offerings that also engaged with the economic and social realities of the Depression, demonstrating how “folk songs, broadly defined, had joined with a smattering of Tin Pan Alley tunes in expressing the sour mood of these difficult times” — in essence “an artistic renaissance ... bolstered by the coming era of the common man” (36-37). “The Early Roosevelt Years,” Cohen’s third chapter, focuses on the New Deal’s patronage of American folk music, which opens the door to a narrative on the collecting activities of John and Alan Lomax and their “discovery” of Lead Belly. Alan Lomax himself takes center stage in Chapter Four, “The Heart of the Depression,” which also sees the introduction of Pete Seeger and other musicians “in the communist orbit” (62) in which vernacular music found belated but enthusiastic championing. It is in this orbit, too, that Woody Guthrie emerges as “the country’s rural bard” (74). Guthrie’s emergence is situated in a discussion of the role of music in the curricula of labor schools such as Brookwood Labor College in New York State, Commonwealth College in Arkansas, and the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee — all of which were instrumental in bringing proletarian music to the attention of New York City activists. Guthrie thus earns his notice, to some extent, on the shoulders of not only Alan Lomax but also those labor school activists who had done their own part in preparing the “groundwork” for him (Agnes “Sis” Cunningham, John Handcox, Zilphia Horton, Claude Williams, and Lee Hays among them). Guthrie’s arrival in New York in 1940 sees him entering a musical-political milieu already peopled by the likes of Lomax, Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Garland, and Aunt Molly Jackson along with classical devotees of folk, the most important — in terms of his personal and creative engagement with Guthrie — being Earl Robinson.

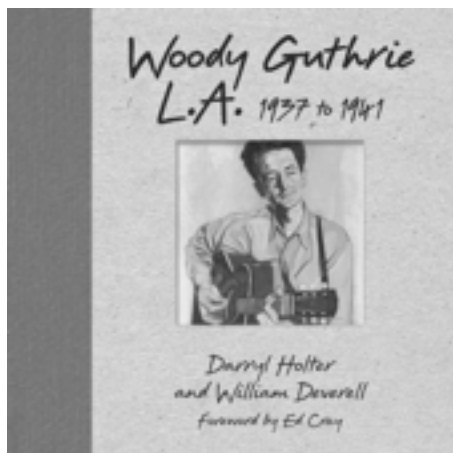
Chapter Six, “The New Deal Survives,” concentrates on the Depression’s waning years, 1938 and 1939, which saw the popularization of folk music, but also the fracturing of the American Left under such pressures as the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Here, Alan Lomax plays “an increasing, and vital, role in the country’s musical as well as political life” (96), dominating the chapter in “spreading the folk music gospel” (112). It is perhaps ironic, for our purposes, that the book closes just at the point where Guthrie comes into the broadest public view — in 1940, with his arrival in New York, his appearance at the “Grapes of Wrath” benefit where he first encountered Lomax, Seeger, and Lead Belly, and Lomax’s radio broadcasting activities (from which Guthrie greatly benefitted).

While *Depression Folk* is, rightly, much more than a vehicle meant simply to highlight the arrival of Woody Guthrie, it provides in fact a crucial background to his biography, revealing in detail the broader milieu without which he might never have “emerged” at all — a milieu only briefly touched upon in the two cradle-to-grave biographies by Joe Klein and Ed Cray. Cohen has a strong record in examining sweeping periods of musical

history — his *Rainbow Quest* (2002) is the definitive study of the folk music revival between 1940 and 1970. (*Depression Folk* might thus be considered a prequel.) Cohen's *Work and Sing* (2010) is a history of American occupational and labor songs from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. Both are highly valuable studies; but something is inevitably lost when dealing with such broad historical sweeps as these. As in *Roots of the Revival*, Cohen does a great service with *Depression Folk* by turning his magnifying glass onto the works of a particular decade. His devotion to detail (as well as the unparalleled collection of folk music ephemera that he has gathered over the years) allows a relatively microscopic examination that few other scholars of twentieth-century American folk music have been equipped to provide.

WILL KAUFMAN

Darryl Holter and William Deverell, eds., *Woody Guthrie L.A. 1937 to 1941*. Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2015. 208 pp., ISBN 978-1-62640-030-6. Hardcover, \$40.00.



This collection of twelve essays grows out of the 2012 centennial conference on Guthrie's Los Angeles years hosted by the University of Southern California. It is an attractive and richly illustrated collection, with many of the images rarely seen before, and with essays by some of the chief contemporary Guthrie scholars. As Darryl Holter argues in the opening essay bearing the same title as the book, "The few years Woody spent in Los Angeles were years of rapid professional, musical, and political development" (13). Linking a discussion of Guthrie's early musical influences in Oklahoma and Texas to the outpouring of his KFVD radio songs from 1937 to 1939, Holter rightly situates Los Angeles as a crucial site of Guthrie's creative unlocking. It was in Los Angeles where Guthrie first developed a sense of belonging to an oppressed group — "my people" as he famously called them — while at the same time being offered a platform that most of that group had been denied: a radio station with a microphone, a sizeable audience, and a committed New Dealer as the station's manager. Holter charts Guthrie's artistic and

political growth “from populist to radical” through a mixture of biographical narrative and attention to indicative songs, both popular, such as “Do Re Mi,” and the lesser-known, such as “Fifth St. Blues,” “Downtown Traffic Blues,” “Stay Away from Home Brew,” “California California,” and “A Watchin’ the World Go By.” Clearly the focus in Holter’s introductory essay, as in the collection as a whole, is on the phenomena of Guthrie’s transformation — a concept that crops up repeatedly throughout the book.

Dan Cady and Douglas Flamming offer an insight into the importance of Guthrie’s “rambling” — not only in geographical terms but also in terms of his political and social consciousness. As he rambled to and through California, he also rambled away from some previously entrenched positions, notably his early racism: hence the authors’ choice of a title, “Ramblin’ in Black and White.” Some of the markers along Guthrie’s journey of racial awakening are by now familiar: his retrospective, and largely fictional, fashioning of race-mixing in the boxcars of *Bound for Glory*; the impact of the 1911 Nelson lynching in Okemah; Guthrie’s racist doggerel in his unpublished “Santa Monica Social Register Examine ‘Er,”” and the metaphorical slap in the face he received from an outraged African American audience member following Guthrie’s performance of “Run, Nigger, Run” on his radio show. (And here is an opportunity to correct an historical error perpetuated by a number of Guthrie scholars, including myself. Quite understandably building upon prior published research, Cady and Flamming name the author of that influential letter as Howell Terrence. As I discovered during my last visit to the Woody Guthrie Archives, that letter was in fact written anonymously upon stationery boasting an address, Howell Terrace.) Cady and Flamming situate Guthrie’s racial awakening into a number of further milestones: the composition of the song “Slipknot,” his anti-lynching artwork, and, most significantly, the impact of his friendship with Lead Belly.

A particularly delicious find is James Forester’s review, in the *Hollywood Tribune* of July 3 1939, of Guthrie’s self-published booklet, *On a Slow Train Through California* (“By Woody, th’ Dustiest of th’ Dustbowl Refugees”). Guthrie typed and mimeographed the copies himself, and as Forester wrote, “Now Woody sells it to his listeners every day over KFVD at 2:15 p.m. when he sings with his ‘geetar.’ He gets two bits for the book If Steinbeck ever needs a witness in a court of law to prove that history about the Joads is true, I think he should take Woody” (69). Clearly Forester was one of the earliest and most willing subscribers to the mythic persona that Guthrie so carefully and deliberately constructed during his two-year tenure at KFVD.

Even more revealing and compulsive as an historical detective story is Peter La Chapelle’s essay, “The Guthrie Prestos: What Woody’s Los

Angeles Recordings Tell Us About Art and Politics.” La Chapelle is the pioneering historian of Guthrie’s KFVD years; his *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (2007) remains in the vanguard of California music studies. It was La Chapelle who first unearthed what have been described as Guthrie’s air-check recordings for KFVD, pressings of “Big City Ways,” “Skid Row (Serenade),” “Do Re Mi,” and “Ain’t Got No Home” on “two lacquer-covered aluminum discs, both adorned with bright orange labels emblazoned with the words ‘Presto U.S.A.’” (75). One senses the historian’s exhilaration upon finding these treasures, as La Chapelle recounts his encounter with Harry Hay, veteran gay activist and sometime partner of Will Geer, who gave him the discs (which, as La Chapelle points out, are not exactly air-check recordings, but are more likely demos made by Guthrie on KFVD recording equipment “in an effort to launch a commercial hillbilly career” [83]). In between some sustained textual analysis of Guthrie’s song lyrics, La Chapelle proposes, quite persuasively, that the Presto recordings “suggest that Woody harbored a complicated attitude about the role of commercialization in his music while in Los Angeles” (82).

Tiffany Colannino’s essay, “Woody’s Los Angeles Editorial Cartoons,” offers a cogent introduction, with an extensive sample of high quality, full-size, full-color reproductions, of Guthrie’s artwork covering the Los Angeles mayoral elections of 1938. Colannino is the former archivist of the Woody Guthrie Archives, and thus in an authoritative position to declare that these cartoons comprise “Woody’s earliest known series of artwork, a collection that has quite surprisingly survived in pristine condition” — the survival of which indicates “that they were personally important to Woody, and may have acted as his portfolio, showing a variety of examples of editorial cartooning styles” (86).

Philip Goff’s “In the Shadow of the Steeple I Saw My People” examines the impact of religious culture — the “public performance of religion” (100) — upon Guthrie, from his Pampa days as a faith-healing “trouble buster” (described with embellishment in *Bound for Glory*) to his immersion into the Los Angeles radio scene. There, he faced particular competition from two popular programs, “part religious and part entertainment”: William B. Hogg’s *Little Country Church* and Charles E. Fuller’s *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*, both of which forced Guthrie to up his game in what Goff calls “his intersection with Los Angeles religious radio from 1937 to 1939” (106).

The late Ed Robbin’s “Woody and Will” is the second of the collection’s reprinting from a previously published source. Extracted from Robbin’s memoir, *Woody Guthrie and Me* (1979), the chapter is a first-hand account of Robbin’s role in introducing Guthrie to arguably his most influential

friend and mentor in Los Angeles, Will Geer. Readers of Robbin's memoir will recall in particular the transcript of Robbin's final conversation with Geer, a sustained reflection on their mutual friendship with Guthrie, which is included in this reprinting.

Ronald Briley offers "Woody Sez: The *People's Daily World* and Indigenous Radicalism," devoted to a close reading of selected "Woody Sez" columns appearing in the *People's Daily World* between May 1939 and January 1940. Briley examines Guthrie's rhetorical strategies in engaging with (among a variety of topics) living standards, Wall Street speculators and "grafters," housing, health care, and, of course, the struggles of the Dust Bowl migrants in California. Briley has gone directly to the newspaper source material, thereby introducing columns that would be unfamiliar to those who have relied only on the selections of 1975 compendium, *Woody Sez*.

Darryl Holter's short essay on "Woody and Skid Row in Los Angeles" focuses on the few nuggets of Guthrie's writing inspired by that location and its associations — "Skid Row Blues," "Fifth Street Blues," and extracts from "Woody Sez" and *Bound for Glory*. As Holter argues, the Skid Row experiences of Los Angeles, Stockton, Redding, and San Francisco had indisputably "left [their] mark on Woody Guthrie" (151) before his departure for New York, where he continued to delve into the bowels of urban degradation for some of his most potent imagery.

In "The Ghost of Tom Joad," Bryant Simon and William Deverell chart the reimagining of Steinbeck's seminal hero by the likes of Guthrie, Studs Terkel, Bruce Springsteen, and, most recently, "Bowery hipsters ... going to Depression parties in loft apartments and showing up in wool hats like the one Joad — aka Henry Fonda — wore in John Ford's film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*" (154). It is a chilling descent that Simon and Deverell describe, from Joad as awakened union activist to Joad as simply "a visual ... the image of Depression chic" (164).

Josh Kun's "Woody at the Border" is a fascinating discussion by one of the leading cultural historians of not only Los Angeles (*Songs in the Key of Los Angeles* and *To Live and Dine in L.A.*, 2013 and 2015 respectively) but also popular music at large, most notably through his influential *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (2005). Going well beyond the expected exploration of Guthrie's brief broadcasting stint on XELO radio in Tijuana, Kun introduces an eye-opening correspondence between Guthrie's "Deportee" of 1948 and the *corrido* "El Deportado" ("Deportee") by Los Hermanos Bañuelos, recorded in 1930 and prefiguring Guthrie's own rhetorical craft: "Goodbye, beloved countrymen, they are going to deport us. But we are not bandits — we came to work hard" (170). Guthrie is here situated in the great arc of "the music of migrancy" (172) from the early 1930s to today, when you can "tune in to L.A. stations like 105.5 La Que

Buena and you'll hear Tom Joad's Mexican cousins, but also the ghost of Woody Guthrie himself" (173).

The concluding essay by Holter, a survey of Guthrie's recordings from 1939 to 1949, drifts away from the central location of Los Angeles in order to give a whistle-stop tour of Guthrie's entire recorded output as well as his recording legacy. Interested readers and listeners who wish to maintain the L.A. focus would do well to go to Holter's own CD and DVD package, *Radio Songs: Woody Guthrie in Los Angeles, 1937-1939* (2015), reviewed in the first issue of the *Woody Guthrie Annual*.

WILL KAUFMAN