

Roll Columbia

Recording the full Woody Guthrie Columbia River Song Cycle

In May of 1941, a young Woody Guthrie, not quite 30 years old, stood over the Columbia River in Washington State, surveying the newly built Bonneville Dam. He'd been asked to the Pacific Northwest to sing the praises of the kind of public works projects that had transformed a nation under Roosevelt's New Deal. Recommended by Alan Lomax, he was brought out at the behest of Steve Kahn of the Bonneville Power Administration, a bureaucrat with a remarkably artistic bent to his marketing ideas.

Guthrie would travel the length and breadth of the region writing some of his most timeless songs, including "Roll On Columbia" and "Pastures of Plenty." In time, his involvement in this eccentric and visionary project would be nearly forgotten, but the songs would live on. In the mid 1980s, the Bonneville Power Administration tasked their employee Bill Murlin with putting together a songbook that contained all of the songs Woody had turned in to the BPA. The songbook was published to celebrate the BPA's 50th Anniversary—and yet some of the songs included therein have never yet been recorded, even by Guthrie himself.

However, Bill Murlin—a folksinger long before he worked for BPA—travelled throughout the Northwest telling the story and singing many of the songs.

Now, 75 years after Guthrie's trip to the region, Oregon-born folklorist and folk singer Joe Seamons has partnered with Murlin to revisit Guthrie's trail and bring together a host of Northwest roots musicians to cover the 26 songs from Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Collection.



Produced by Jon Neufeld of Portland alt-stringband Black Prairie, the double album [*Woody's 26 Northwest Songs*] will feature members of REM, The Decemberists, Black Prairie, Dolorean, renowned artists like Michael Hurley, Martha Scanlan, Pharis & Jason Romero, Orville Johnson, and more, including Joe Seamons' own duo with Seattle fiddler Ben Hunter.

**On “Columbia Talking Blues,” Woody sings: “Filled up my hat brim,
drunk a little taste / Thought about the river just a’goin to waste /
Thought about the dust, and I thought about the sand /
Thought about the people, and I thought about the land.”**

The goal of the project is to uncover Guthrie’s long-forgotten path through the Northwest and shine a light on his unheralded songwriting gems—only 17 of these 26 songs were ever recorded by the iconic balladeer. The album is due for release in October of 2016, and will mark the 75th anniversary of Guthrie’s original songwriting project.

When he arrived on the BPA’s doorstep in 1941, Woody was a seasoned traveler, experienced performer, and prolific songwriter. In one month in the Pacific Northwest, he created some of his best songs, and fell in love with the region. It was a month of powerful creativity and an unexpected connection between the populist marketing of the Bonneville Power Administration and the labor politics of Guthrie. Of the



Musician Caitlin Romtvedt relaxes at Litho Studios in Seattle with executive producer Joe Seamons and accordionist extraordinaire David Romtvedt after recording two of Guthrie’s Columbia River compositions.

famed songs that came from the Columbia River Sessions, there were other songs that have unjustly been forgotten. These songs are playful, funny, poignant, inspired by the hard labor and everyday men and women that Guthrie saw had thrown their backs into the Bonneville Dam project. On “Columbia Talking Blues,” Woody sings: “Filled up my hat brim, drunk a little taste / Thought about the river just a’goin to waste / Thought about the dust, and I thought about the sand / Thought about the people, and I thought about the land.” After spending the month of June and part of July in Portland, Guthrie headed back east, with only a few of his northwest compositions still in his notebooks.

cider pressing parties along Columbia River Gorge, he was exposed to the local folk music of sawmill workers, loggers and fishermen which reflected the character of the region. As he heard these songs in living rooms, around campfires, and at cider pressing parties, he realized that folk music wasn’t meant to be preserved, but was meant to preserve us. Since then he’s embarked on a career mapping American folkways, from the mighty Mississippi to the Columbia River to the back roads of the US traveling with Ben Hunter or Dom Flemons (of the Carolina Chocolate Drops).

Joe Seamons is a dedicated scholar of Northwest folk cultures. Growing up outside of Rainier, Oregon and going to dances and