

Happy birthday, Woody Guthrie

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I'm prone to the occasional rant about how much I dislike the movement folk music of the 1960s—its lack of subtlety, its odd mix of the earnestly humorless and the cornball, its endless verses of repetition. But I love Woody Guthrie, who was born 100 years ago today.

Guthrie was a generation older than the 60s troubadours and a singular influence on many of them, none of whom shared his gifts and sensibilities. Along with being a stylistic innovator and a fierce advocate for the powerless, Guthrie was a terrific and versatile songwriter. And he was hilarious, at turns dryly witty and wickedly silly.

I [posted some time ago](#) about one of my favorite Guthrie songs, his rewrite of the old gospel song "This World is Not My Home." I hope to expand that thought into a proper article at some point. It's a powerful witness: Guthrie took up a beautiful old song with an escapist lyric he had no use for. But instead of just borrowing the tune for an unrelated lyric, or ignoring the dissonance and just singing the original, he flipped the line "I ain't got no home in this world anymore" squarely on its head:

Guthrie had socialist sympathies; he also had a palpable love for America and its cultures and people (a combination that naturally made some people sputter with disbelieving rage, as it would now). I imagine it would anger him to see where we've come in the 45 years since his death: unions have been systematically dismantled; inequality is on the rise; homelessness continues. While I might not buy 100 percent of his analysis of the situation, the situation angers me too.

Happy birthday to a great American.