Cultural Daily

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# American Songbook

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, April 19th, 2012

Some artists go right to the edge, attracting attention by the extremity of their work. Others say what people are already feeling but can't find the words or courage to express themselves.

Woody Guthrie was the second kind of artist, as Sarah Lee Guthrie reminded the audience at the recent sold-out Woody Guthrie Centennial Concert (Club Nokia, Los Angeles). "I just want to be remembered as the guy who told you what you already knew," she quoted her grandfather.

The three-and-a-half hour evening spanned songs and generations. Following an opening set by John Doe ("We don't wanna take this too slow…we wanna have fun!"), the energy kicked higher with a short, rousing set by Dawes, the reinvented faces of American rock, harking back to roots music and deeply poetic lyricism.

After an oddly-placed Van Dyke Parks interlude, Tom Morello soloed onto the stage. Reading lyrics from the TelePrompTer, he was a bit mechanical singing "Tom Joad." Then he let all hell break loose, shredding it (and his guitar, with his teeth) as he was joined by his band The Freedom Fighters and they burst out with Bruce Springsteen's contempo version, "Ghost of Tom Joad."

Wisely, the Guthrie estate has asked contemporary songwriters to write music for the hundreds of lyrics Guthrie left behind. Jackson Browne took the opportunity to set one of Guthrie's love letters to music; with some editing, it could become a haunting ballad. Graham Nash offered a new song in Guthrie's spirit, dedicated to Bradley Manning, the US Army intelligence analyst and WikiLeaker. The stately Kris Kristofferson, who seems to get better and stronger with age, performed a song inspired by Guthrie about Americans' autochthonous generosity, then dueted with Joe Henry on "Ramblin' Round."

Penultimate was Ramblin' Jack Elliott, who played with Guthrie himself. Festooned in red satin shirt, dark glasses and wide brimmed hat, he represented the real deal – the voice imperfect but true, knowing in its experience and years. When he growled at the stage managers to turn off the TelePrompTer ("I've been singin' this song for 60 years, I don't need the words in front of me!"), one felt that Woody had stepped onstage.

Guthrie's songs linger; we might wonder where is the "99%'s troubadour" of today. As I've observed before, sadly, his songs still make perfect sense: banks still foreclose on people's homes, immigrants struggle for their rights, vigilantes stand their ground. "Some will rob you with a gun, some with a fountain pen…. You won't see no outlaw driving a family from their home," Guthrie wrote in his song about Pretty Boy Floyd.

It was up to Joe Morello, coming back to close the evening with the other performers, to get the audience on its feet finally, singing the censored verses to Guthrie's well-known alternate American national anthem:

*In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple,*
*By the relief office, I'd seen my people.*
*As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,*
*Is this land made for you and me?*

One wishes they'd have been on their feet before, and singing all the songs by heart. Woody's songs are part of our American heritage and need to be sung again and again.

As Steve Earle, another of Guthrie's spiritual protégés (and not on the concert bill) sings,

*Come back Woody Guthrie*
*Come back to us now*
*Tear your eyes from paradise*
*And rise again somehow.*

*For information on other Woody Guthrie Centennial concerts across America this year, go here.*
*Watch Tom Morello perform a'This Land Is Your Land' with all the verses intact on this week's Liquid Architecture, and a Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion sing a new song about the giant boulder moving to LACMA on the Watchlist.*

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