

Americana

THIS MUSIC IS YOUR MUSIC

NORA GUTHRIE RESURRECTS HER FOLK-LEGEND FATHER FOR A NEW GENERATION OF LISTENERS

by David McKay Wilson

On Sundays as a child, Nora Guthrie (TSOA '71) would often sit in the corner of her parents' bedroom and marvel at the likes of Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger standing just a few feet away. Such stars would regularly trek to her family's modest Howard Beach, Queens, home to visit with her dad, Woody, the father of American folk music. By then, Huntington's disease—a progressive neurological disorder—had sapped his body and mind, but the well-wishers still gushed to him about their latest works and played his songs. "Dylan was the greatest," recalls Nora, now 62. "He became the Woody jukebox. He wanted to go out into the world to serve him."

More than three decades later, in 1994, Nora would also serve her father's legacy by co-founding the Woody Guthrie Archives. And this year, she is helping to orchestrate the 2012 centennial of his birth, for which the archives has partnered with the Grammy Museum to put on festivals in both Berlin and Woody's hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma, as well as a Kennedy Center gala in Washington, D.C. The anniversary will also herald the release of seven books and five CDs, including *Note of Hope: A Celebration of Woody Guthrie*, co-produced by Nora and bassist Rob Wasserman, and featuring Jackson Browne, Ani DiFranco, Lou Reed, and Studs Terkel, among others, who perform Woody's lyrics in spoken prose, hip-hop, traditional

acoustic folk, and rock 'n' roll. The album illuminates Woody's thoughts from New York during his final decades, offering views of the harsh life led by those on society's margins, and the many joys of falling in love.

Dubbed the "Dust Bowl Troubadour" for his baleful paens to the Oklahoma migrants of the 1930s, Woody Guthrie, who died in 1967, composed more than 3,000 songs—including the anthem "This Land Is Your Land." His oeuvre ranges from traditional folk tunes to political ballads, from rambling blues to children's ditties, and many are now archived in the Library of Congress. His spirit emboldened the music and activism of the early beatniks and youth in the 1950s and '60s, and continues to inspire today's artists, including the bands Wilco and the Indigo Girls, and rock legend Bruce Springsteen. Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello sang "This Land" at an Occupy Wall Street rally last October, and a year earlier, he recorded Woody's "Deportee" as a protest against Arizona's anti-immigrant law.

But to Nora, he was always, simply, "Dad." She never actually knew the *legendary* Woody—the ever-vigilant artist with a passion for justice. His health and mental state continued to deteriorate throughout her childhood. And once the family could no longer care for him at home, Nora's mother, Marjorie, would drive her and her brothers, Arlo and Joady, to vis-

it their father at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in Morristown, New Jersey. "Growing up with my dad was the hardest thing in my life," says Nora, who also serves as president of Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc. "We'd visit him at the hospital, which was like a scene out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. His clothes were dirty. He couldn't control his bladder. He couldn't walk. He could barely get a fork to his mouth."

It was, in part, through founding the Guthrie Archives and be-



coming the curator of his words and music that Nora was finally able to grow closer to him. "Every aspect of his creative legacy evoked something different in me," explains Nora, who this May will release *My Name Is New York: Ramblin' Around Woody Guthrie's Town—A Walking Guide*, authored by her and with archival material about the 27 years Woody lived in the Big Apple. It will include an audio CD of song clips, lyrics, and original interviews

PHOTOS: LEFT © TINA TSEHRICH; RIGHT: COURTESY THE WOODY GUTHRIE ARCHIVES

to accompany those who take the suggested walking tour. The Guthrie Archives will also soon relocate from her home in Mount Kisco, New York, to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to a facility created by the George Kaiser Family Foundation, which purchased the collection from Guthrie Publications for \$3 million in December 2011. Nora, who had long sought a permanent home for the archives, will continue to license her father's songs and recruit artists to record them.

Cultivating Woody's legacy, however, wasn't always Nora's priority. With her DNA, it seemed inevitable that she would become an artist. Like her mother, who performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company, Nora fell in love with dance and studied it in the late '60s at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Those were heady days in New York, as modern dance blossomed around Greenwich Village, and she collaborated with director Robert Wilson, interned with lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, and performed with Meredith Monk in political street theater. She and classmate Ted Rotante (TSOA '71) formed Guthrie-Rotante Dance Company, which flourished. They soon married and toured nationally with the company.

In the early 1980s, Nora put performing aside to raise her children, Cole, 25, and Anna, 33, who works as director of events and programs for Guthrie Publications, which does outreach in schools, and has conferences planned at four universities, including Brooklyn College and Penn State, in 2012. But by 1992, Nora had found her way back into show business, helping Harold Leventhal manage her father's catalog of songs. In 1998, she was executive producer of Billy Bragg and Wilco's *Mermaid Avenue* (named for the street Woody lived on in Coney Island). The punk rock interpretation of his music was not welcomed by all quarters. "It was considered blasphemy by some be-

cause it wasn't folk," Nora recalls, "but we got a Grammy nomination and great reviews. It gave me the courage to keep going." A decade later she won a Grammy, as producer of *The Live Wire: Woody Guthrie in Performance 1949*.

Following this success, Nora has continued stretching her father's appeal. Her maternal grandmother, the well-known Yiddish poet Aliza Greenblatt, lived across the street from the Guthries in the

1940s and became close with her son-in-law, as the two would often discuss each other's work while sharing their common interests in culture and social justice. Woody was taken with Greenblatt's heritage, which prompted him to write a number of Jewish-themed lyrics at the time. Upon discovering these songs, Nora asked the Klezmatics, a Jewish Klezmer band, to set them to music, and they soon recorded the critically acclaimed *Woody*

Guthrie's Happy Joyous Hanukkah, as well as *Wonder Wheel: Lyrics by Woody Guthrie*, which won a Grammy for Best Contemporary World Music Album in 2006. But the latest CD, *Note of Hope*, is perhaps the most personal for Nora because it offers insight into Woody's last lucid and productive years. "His ideas from the heart never get old," she says. "And his philosophy, his truths, are made accessible through music." ■



MUSIC LEGEND WOODY GUTHRIE WAS ALWAYS JUST "DAD" TO DAUGHTER NORA, SEEN HERE IN 1950, AND TODAY (AT LEFT).

comedy

The Tweet Life

WRITER JEN STATSKY FINDS LAUGHS IN A NEW MEDIUM

by Jason Hollander / GAL '07

In March 2011, Jen Statsky (TSOA '08) woke up to two missed calls from her manager, and one e-mail that read: "Call me!!" Still half asleep, Statsky—who was working as an SAT practice proctor in Los Angeles at the time—dialed her phone to discover she'd been offered a job writing for Jimmy Fallon on his NBC show, *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*. In that instant, years of hard work and perseverance came to a head. "I always thought that the second I got this kind of news I would be so happy...and I was super happy," Statsky says. "But I was also like...oh, my God, I have to do this now."

That initial fear subsided once Statsky found herself right inside the tornado of working on a daily TV show—and having to be funny full-time. Now more than a year into the game, she's grown accustomed to receiving a batch of topics each night and transforming them into punchy monologue jokes by morning. It's an art form she calls "a marathon, not a sprint." When you write a good joke, she says, "you don't stop and celebrate," just like "you don't dwell on the terrible jokes you write either."

While the former intern for *Saturday Night Live*, *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, and *The Onion* can certainly see her success as the result of years of networking and

honing her craft, a good chunk of credit must also go to a six-year-old microblog, otherwise known as Twitter. Though skeptical, Statsky started "tweeting" in September 2010 because she'd heard it was a good way to practice joke writing in front of an audience—even if it was mostly family and friends at first. But as her maximum 140-character quips quickly gained traction, getting retweeted and viewed by others in the industry, she watched her "followers" steadily climb. Within six months, she got a message from *Late Night* head writer A.D. Miles, who said he admired her work and invited her to apply for an open writing position.

Twitter magic struck again when Statsky became the centerpiece of a *New York Times* article last fall on comedians using the social networking site to further their careers. That story tripled her followers from about 7,000 to more than 23,000 as of this April. Equal parts Steven Wright, Louis C.K., and Sarah Silverman, Statsky still posts tweets almost every day. And although the pressure to be funny has never been higher, she says that putting new twists on old ideas feels "like a discovery" each time, which helps fuel her next joke. "I think, oh, there's more out there," she explains. "It hasn't all been done." ■

A Sampling of Statsky's Top Tweets



It's so nice out today, I decided to go to the park and have my panic attack there.

"If it's Margaret, I'm not here." —God

Think my cat might be depressed. She just told me she's thinking about getting a cat.

That last syllable of "techno" is exactly how I feel about it.

Infuriates me that all dogs go to heaven when I think about that maltese that murdered my grandpa.

So crazy that even in 2012, for every dollar a man makes, a woman makes a delicious apple pie.

My seasonal depression is entering its 10th straight season!

Remember that time I had a headache but didn't let anyone know about it? Me either.

"Alright, alright, HI already." —Kitty

No sadder sound than a human being repositioning themselves on an air mattress.

CREDITS

THREE CHEERS FOR THIS SEASON'S MANY AWARD-WINNING ALUMNI

Legendary funnyman **BILLY CRYSTAL** (TSOA '70) hosted this year's Academy Awards, where **MARK BRIDGES** (TSOA '87) took home an Oscar for Best Achievement in Costume Design for *The Artist*... **BRUCE SINOFSKY** (TSOA '78) co-directed the wrongful-imprisonment saga *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory*, which was nominated for Best Documentary Feature... *The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom*, directed by **LUCY WALKER** (TSOA '98), was up for Best Documentary Short Subject... **ANDREW BOWLER** (TSOA '96) wrote and directed the sci-fi comedy *Time Freak*, which scored a nod for Best Live

Action Short Film... *The Help*, produced by **CHRIS COLUMBUS** (TSOA '80) and **MICHAEL BARNATHAN** (TSOA '80), won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Motion Picture... At the Film Independent's Spirit Awards, **SOPHIA LIN** (TSOA '97) was given the Piaget Producers Award for the apocalyptic thriller *Take Shelter*, while writer-director **DEE REES**'s (TSOA '07) coming-of-age drama *Pariah*, executive-produced by **SPIKE LEE** (TSOA '82, HON '98), earned the John Cassavetes Award, given to the best feature made for less than \$500,000... **MARTIN SCORSESE** (WSC '64, STEIN-

HARDT '68, HON '92) was named Best Director at the Golden Globe Awards for *Hugo*. Scorsese also won an Emmy for Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series for HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*. The show's cast, including **HEATHER LIND** (TSOA '10) and **PAUL SPARKS** (TSOA '95), won the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Drama Series... At the Sundance Film Festival, **DEREK CONNOLLY** (TSOA '98) received the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award for *Safety Not Guaranteed*, directed by **COLIN TREVORROW** (TSOA '99)... **MUSA SYEED** (TSOA '06) won the dramatic World Cinema Audience Award for writing and directing *Valley of Saints*, which also shared the Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize with *Robot & Frank*, written by **CHRISTOPHER FORD** (TSOA '04)... **GLEN J. MAZZARA** (WSUC '89, GSAS '93) has taken over as showrunner for AMC's hit zombie drama *The Walking Dead*... In Wes Anderson's latest film, *Moonrise Kingdom*, **BOB BALABAN** (WSUC '77) stars alongside Bill Murray and Frances McDormand... The MacArthur Foundation named 22 new "genius" fellows, including conductor/pianist **FRANCISCO J. NUÑEZ** (STEINHARDT '88), who founded the Young People's Chorus of New York City, and composer/percussionist **DAFNIS PRIETO**, who teaches jazz studies at Steinhardt.

—Renée Alfuso

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