

Report From Okemah

by David Amram
July 2005

The past July 16th-18th, I spent four round-the-clock days and nights at the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, held in various venues throughout the community of Okemah Oklahoma, Woody's hometown. Only eight years old, the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival is one of the most enjoyable musical events that I have ever participated in, and as I approach my big 75th this coming Nov 17th, I have had many great times at many great festivals all over the world to look back on. Now, after being at this year's Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, I know that I have a lot more to look forward to, and can hardly wait for July of 2006 for the next one.

The festival embodies the egalitarian spirit, high ideals and celebration of beauty of the simple things of everyday life that Woody Guthrie himself is remembered for. Being there in Okemah, his place of birth, with members of his own family, as well as musicians and devotees from Oklahoma to Australia, made me think back to the first time that I crossed paths with Woody.

It was forty-nine years ago, on a cloudy afternoon in 1956 on the Lower East Side of New York that I first met Woody Guthrie. Ahmed Bashir, a friend of Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins and Charles Mingus, (with whom I was playing at that time) took me over to meet Woody at his friend's apartment a few blocks from mine.

Woody was lean, wiry, and brilliant, with a farmerly way that reminded me of the neighbors I had grown up with in Feasterville Pennsylvania during the late 1930s. In the late afternoons after long hours of work, they would often congregate to chew the fat in the sideroom of Wally Freed's gas station, across the street from our farm. I used to get fifty cents to mow Wally Freed's lawn, and I never got caught while eavesdropping on all the conversations of the local farmers and out of work men who would commune at the gas station for their late afternoon bull sessions after their chores were done.

They always told it like it was, without wasting a word or a gesture, leaving space for you to think about what they were saying, and in spite of the grinding seemingly endless horrors of the Great Depression, they had better jokes and stories than most professional comedians or politicians. Woody had this same quality, and I felt at home with him the minute we met.

As Woody, Ahmed Bashir and I sat swapping tales and drinking coffee at the tiny kitchen table from noon until it was dark outside, Ahmed and I spent most of the time listening to Woody's long descriptions of his experiences, only sharing ours when he would ask "What do you fellas think about that?"

The rest of the time, we sat transfixed as he took us on his journeys with him through his stories. Woody didn't need a guitar to put you under his spell, and you could tell that when he was talking to us, it wasn't an act or a routine. Like his songs, and books and art work, everything came from the heart.

Looking back at these memorable first few hours with Woody, I still remember the excitement in his voice, as if he himself were rediscovering all the events and sharing them for the first time, as he told Ahmed and I his incredible stories of his youth and subsequent travels, as well as marveling at his encyclopedic knowledge of all kinds of music, literature, painting and politics, which he wove into his narratives, all delivered in a poetic country boy style that was all his own. During these descriptions of his travels and adventures around the country, he often included references to events of his early boyhood days in Okemah.

Ever since that day we first met, I have always hoped that someday I would get the chance to go to Okemah, but with my crazy schedule I never had the opportunity to do so. When I was invited to the festival, I realized that I would be finally be able to see his hometown, and be able to meet his sister, her husband and his remaining old friends from long ago who were still living there. By doing that, and by playing music and spending time with people who were also natives of Okemah, I knew that I would be able to understand Woody and his work in a deeper way, just as I have gained a deeper understanding by visiting, performing and spending time talking to people in the hometowns of Beethoven, Mozart, Thomas Wolfe, Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson, Harry S. Truman, Charlie Parker, Bob Dylan, Rembrandt, Duke Ellington, Socrates, Charles Dickens, Billie Holladay, George

Gershwin, Dimitri Mitropolous, and many other men and women from around the world who were defined to a large extent, as all of us are, by their roots. Like Jack Kerouac's home town of Lowell Massachusetts, Okemah Oklahoma was Woody's gyroscope.

Since first meeting Woody a half a century ago, over the years, I have played countless times with his great friend Pete Seeger, who has always kept the flame of Woody's true essence alive, by honoring everything that Woody stood for as an artist as well as a person. Pete's unflagging devotion, as well as his own peerless artistry and idealism, have enabled several generations to have Woody's legacy become part of their own lives.

Over the years, I have also spent nice times with Woody's late wife Marjorie. I have played numerous events with his son Arlo over the past thirty-five years, as well as knowing his sister Nora (for whom I am now composing Symphonic Variations on a Song by Woody Guthrie).

I have seen Nora's great kids grow up, and have performed at various festivals over the years which featured the fine family of young musicians that Arlo and his wife Jackie have raised. After being invited to the festival in Okemah, I learned that three of Arlo's daughters would be performing there, as well as the daughters of Willie Nelson and Peter Yarrow. My son Adam was coming with me to play drums. I knew that like Arlo's kids, and those of Willie and Peter Yarrow, Adam would be part of the new generation who were creating new ways of sharing good music and high ideals with their contemporaries.

Adam and I left the farm at 6 a.m. for the airport, and after a crazy day's traveling, with a seven hour plane delay from New York spent sitting in the airport, missed bags, and canceled connecting flights, Adam and I finally arrived in Oklahoma City fourteen hours later, and were met at the baggage claim area by an old Kerrville Music Festival buddy Phil Lancaster. I kept waking up Adam as we drove through the glorious countryside on I-40 towards the town of Okemah, so that he could see the panorama of the Oklahoma countryside, with cattle grazing in rolling fields that seemed untouched by modern times. All the names on the small green signs, Kickapoo, Tecumseh, Shawnee, Pawnee, Okfuskee, Creek Nation, Tthlophlocco Tribal Town, Cherokee and Okemah were a reminder that Oklahoma was a state that still honored its Indian heritage.

After a lifetime of hearing Woody's songs and reading his books, I saw when we pulled into town that Okemah is just what you would imagine it to be. Small, homey and as pristine as the movie set from a classic 1930s Western feature film. Old weathered buildings were gently nestled together, framing the wide main street where you could imagine hearing the sounds of horses still clopping and whinnying as they came into town, hitched up while their owners ran their errands at the library, bank, pharmacy, and dentist's office.

There were no MacDonald's, Starbucks, Wal-Mart's, Sushi bars, Massage Parlors, Head Shops, Tattoo Parlors or Videogame Emporiums.

The town had an unearthly but welcoming quality which made you feel that you were suddenly in a time machine, being gently escorted into another era where everything slowed down, surrounded by a sense of peacefulness and grace, with the spirits of Shawnee and Cherokee Indians, old cowboys, farmers and oil drillers still there, all about to emerge from any of the old buildings to greet you.

The brilliant singer/songwriter and bandleader, Oklahoma-born Jimmy LaFave, whom I have known and admired since 1986 when he won the new songwriter award at the Kerrville Music Festival, became my guru of the regional history of Okemah and old time Oklahoma, During my four days at the festival. when we weren't playing music, Jimmy shared with me the musical and social history of this unique part of the West.

Jimmy was born and raised in Oklahoma, and therefore blessed himself, by the mystical character of this special part of the world, where Indian spirits remain so strong, joined by the heritage of the hardy settlers who were members of the last of the American Frontier.

In between the marathon non-stop round the clock jam sessions, preceding and following concerts, Jimmy took me all around Okemah, with a special visit to Lou's Rocky Road Tavern, an old fashioned bar with a sign outside saying:

**ROCKY ROAD TAVERN
HOME OF WOODY GUTHRIE AND THE COMMON FOLKS**

GOD BLESS AMERICA

Jimmy introduced me to the owner, Lou Johnson, a tall slim woman with deep eyes which reflected her life time of hard work. Even before she said hello, you could feel a glow of confidence, strength and satisfaction that emanated from her, making you know that she was a strong special person who stood tall and proud, because of all she had overcome, in order to have created a place of her own.

She carried herself with that special grace that is pure Oklahoma....a mixture of pioneer-farmer and Indian-warrior. Her voice was full of energy and her down home poetic descriptions of her life in the special accent of old time Oklahoma made you feel that you were suddenly a cast member of some fantastic Okie opera.

During her stories and observations of the old days and the new ways of life in Okemah, Lou explained to me, as so many others did while I was in Oklahoma, that the word Okie was always used with pride, but when John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* became a best seller, Okie suddenly meant something else to people who knew nothing about the history of this amazing place and the people who lived here.

The three of us talked about the similarity of how the word Beat and Okie both lost their true poetic meaning, following the publication of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Kerouac's *On the Road*. Jimmy explained to me how the name Okie was a source of pride to those whose families had settled there, and was used to identify a special group of people in a positive way.

I told Jimmy how Kerouac always told me that he felt Beat was about the search and practice of Beatitude, but eventually Beat became eclipsed by the derogatory word, Beatnik, after *On the Road* was published. With the book's enormous popularity, the word Beatnik, and eventually the word Beat itself, both became pop-culture merchandising terms, used in a derogatory way to stereotype a new generation of artists and visionaries as nothing more than a bunch of untalented, infantile, whining, self-loathing Blameologists and worthless losers, whose only value to society was to spawn sales of berets, bongos, paste-on goatees and dark glasses, even though in all the pictures of us, none of the original "Beats" ever looked like Beatniks, or any other group who all wore matching uniforms.

Most of us who had an artistic association and personal friendship with Kerouac, (who was supposed to be the King of the Beats) were suddenly told that we should now call ourselves Beats. Of course we thought that this was ridiculous, and those of us still alive explain to all who are interested that what we were about was much more than the total misrepresentation of what Beat meant when John Clellon Holmes and Kerouac first used that word long ago.

Jimmy LaFave told me that the word Okie was used for years with loving pride by some of the hardest and most humane people in American history, as a way of defining themselves and celebrating their identity. Suddenly Okie became, like Beat and Beatnik, another stereotype, similar to the crude stereotypes of rural Southerners in the hit TV shows, *The Beverly Hillbillies* or *Heehaw*.

In spite of Steinbeck's moving portrayal of the tragic days of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, where extraordinary and courageous people were honored, it wasn't long before their heroism was turned into the opposite by people who probably never even read Steinbeck's book, into the stereotyped version of the Okie, which then became a way of defining hundreds of thousands of people who dealt with the tragedy of losing all they had and somehow persevered and flourished, but were now depicted as shiftless illiterate morons, incapable of dealing with the modern world, dependent on the charity of others.

Because of Woody Guthrie, and other Oklahoma geniuses like Will Rogers, there is a different picture painted that has endured beyond all this, and like Kerouac, Woody's message touches the hearts of young people in 2005 who are now discovering what both Beat and Okie really mean. This can only make people of all backgrounds feel more optimistic and proud of themselves and their forbearers who survived the Great Depression, regardless of where they came from.

When Lou Johnson and Jimmy LaFave, both native-born Oklahomans', spoke affectionately of someone as being "pure Okie," it indicated to me that this was the highest compliment you could receive.

Lou shared her joy of now being able to plan a celebration this coming October for having paid off every debt and payment due for her bar, which also serves Okemah as a kind of community center.

Lou told Jimmy and I the story of all her struggles in creating Lou's Rocky Road Tavern, making a place that was now such a valuable asset to the community as well as to the festival, and told us how much she loved to be around the Tavern herself, because she enjoyed communing with the customers and making them happy year round, in the same way that neighborhood bars were once gathering places, serving as an oasis in earlier days throughout the country.

"It makes me feel good when I see people happy when they come in here. My customers are like my family. When folks sit out side and pick guitars on the terrace, and sing songs they wrote, just for the enjoyment of it, it makes me feel like this place is worthwhile. It's nice when you all come in each year to visit us for the Festival.

Some folks in town were against the festival at first, because they thought Woody was some kind of Communist, but that's changed now. The festival brings in people from all over the world, and it makes us all proud to find out how much Woody gave the world and that no matter how big he got, he never forgot Okemah. And he puts a lot about Okemah and Oklahoma in a whole bunch of his songs. Well, some customers here want some attention, so I've got to get back to work. You boys both have a good time and I'll come out and give a listen to you when I get a break."

Lou went behind the bar, and I went out on the terrace, which was now packed with a standing room only crowd of early morning diners, patiently waiting in line for the annual presentation of Mary Jo's Pancake Breakfast, a fundraiser for the Huntington's Disease Society of America.

As the small army of early morning diners chowed down piles of scrumptious aromatic overflowing plates of fresh cooked pancakes and bacon, Jimmy and a group of incredible songwriter/singer/players all squeezed up on a tiny stage, and we played for two hours without a break, while seeing the joyous faces of people from four months old to those in their late eighties and beyond, all smiling, laughing, clapping and singing along, while still eating even more pancakes. It was like a picnic/revival meeting/early morning family outing that you could not imagine would ever still be happening in 2005.

When we were done playing, and the crowd as well as the supply of pancakes and bacon thinned out, I sat down at a table with a man in a black cowboy hat tilted at a rakish angle (as if he were a combination of a country boy and a rapper from 1875) who was drinking from a bottle of beer with one hand, and seemed to be swatting an imaginary fly with the other. When he talked, he punctuated his monologues with a downward swat, as if he were chopping cornstalks for silage..

Motioning to my long double "D" whistle, he spoke to me in a boozy gargling voice, highlighting each sentence with his fly-swatting gesture.

"What the hell's that thing you playin'? Some kinda oboe or sumpin'?"

"No sir, it's an Irish double "D' pennywhistle, similar to the kind that the great Irish flautist Sir James Galway often plays." I said.

"Well les hear you play that sucker" he said, taking an enormous swallow and draining his remaining half bottle of beer in one gigantic chugalug, letting out a sonorous belch, and after punctuating the belch with a fly swat to the table, he picked up another full bottle and held it up like a coach about to fire off a pistol to begin a track meet, and swatting again, cued a guitarist who had wandered in and was sitting at the table next to him, to play some songs. Like a natural born impresario, he let us both know that it was show time for the command performance for his enjoyment.

"Awright boys. you pick me sumpin' nice" he said, taking a swig from his fresh bottle.

I played my flutes and pennywhistles and dumbek, accompanying the guitarist, who was singing a wonderful song. When he finished it, I asked him who had written such a great song.

"I did" he responded. That's mine"

"Could you play some more of yours?" I asked. "That was terrific."

"Sure can." he said "I seldom get asked to do that"

He played three more of his songs, all about his life in rural Oklahoma, and they were beautifully

constructed, telling soulful stories about the old ways and bygone days and the bittersweet price that we pay for what we call progress.

I finally got up to leave, because I had to go to play on an old baby grand piano next store for a two hour session accompanying 23 Oklahoma poets, all brilliantly organized by poet George Wallace, who came all the way from New York for the Festival's first-ever poetry/music/spoken word event.

As I was leaving Lou's Rocky Road Tavern with Jimmy, the man in the black cowboy hat drained his bottle and with a swat that had now had an added lateral motion (like an Italian gesture of approbation) he saluted me with a toast from his empty beer bottle.

"Ah don't know what you were doin'" he said.

"But Goddam.....Ah LOVED it!!!!!"

"David" said Jimmy, when we walked out onto the street. "Did you hear what he said? You've got to use that in your brochure."

"I already wrote it down Jimmy" I said. "I'm using it in my next book."

The poetry readings were all delivered by outstanding poets from Oklahoma, and many introduced themselves as being proud of being Okies, often prefacing their poems with touching stories of their families before and after the Dust Bowl.

Somehow I was able to make the piano, whose soft pedal didn't work, quiet enough not to drown out one word of the poets recitations. I also figured out a system of which notes to leave out entirely, because of the keys which were stuck and made some of the notes keep ringing. I also found which keys not to play at all, because some only produced a clunk since the parts inside were broken. I also had to avoid using other keys which produced notes which were so out of tune that they sounded like a Micronesian folk orchestra or an avant-guard quartertone festival.

Still, as we used to say in the 1950's when most jazz club's pianos were old wrecks which were seldom if ever tuned, half a piano is better than none. I played my ocharinas, flutes, french horn and percussion instruments as well, and the two and a half hours of readings seemed like a few minutes, as each poet read their works beautifully.

All the poets, while different from one another, shared the musicality and the unique sounds of Oklahoma speaking styles, different from the regional accents from Texas, Arkansas, Colorado or Nevada. I was sorry when the last poet finished. I could have listened to them for hours. Many of the poets were professors at universities, and none of them sported fake English accents, but spoke in the special way that Oklahomans speak, rather than sounding like poetry slam dropouts from the Old Vic Theater or British Royal Academy of Bad Acting. None presented their fine work with histrionics and screaming. It was a challenge and a treat to accompany them all.

After the two and a half hour session was over, I went to the table to talk to Woody's sister and her husband, both of whom were at almost every event of the festival, speaking to everyone and encouraging all the artists and visitors to feel at home in Okemah

"I stay around to see everybody" said Woody's sister. "I don't want to miss any one person. It's good to meet somebody who knew Woody as you did. I'm sure having fun. Let me tell you some stories about our family."

In the next hour, she told enough stories for someone to create a novel or history book. Now in her eighties, her memory was like that of the master story tellers and oral historians in Africa known as Griots. She recalled and recited minute details of her family's life and how they dealt with tragedy as well as the good times, and the community's ups and downs, As she spoke, with love and enthusiasm, she painted a picture of a time gone by, all done with a delivery and turn of phrases that were pure poetry, Her eyes sparkled as she regaled me with the detailed history of Woody's early days, and the Okemah of her parents generation during the last years of the 19th century.

Finally she and I and her husband were the only people left in the room. Throughout her irresistible monologues, her husband counterpointed her stories and observations, laughing delightedly and interjecting stories and jokes of his own, as if he were hearing them for the first time. Almost everyone

at the festival referred to them as national treasures, and I second the motion,

I said good-bye because I had to back to the OK Motor Lodge where all the musicians were staying, make a quick change of clothes, pick up Adam to go out to the industrial park where the outdoor concerts were being held on the main stage.

Adam got the drums set up while I rounded up a makeshift band I had solicited during each of the 2 a.m.-6a.m. nighttime jam sessions which were held every night after the concerts, on the black asphalt parking lot in front of the rooms where we all stayed, at the OK Motor Lodge.

For my concert, I played and sang the traditional Lakota round dance melody Mastinchele Wachipi, to open up my forty minute set. Then I invited Jimmy LaFave and Marie Burns of the Burns sisters, both of whom gave magnificent readings from *On the Road* which I accompanied, as I used to do with Kerouac. Afterwards, many people came up to me, saying that they felt that Jack's lyrical homage to the American landscape was in the same spirit as Woody's celebration of an America that seemed to be vanishing but whose spirit would always endure.

Then we did my song Pull my Daisy, with lyrics by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Jack's Road buddy, Denverite Neal Cassady,

The closing number was Meanderin' in Mandarin, It is a talking blues sing-along about my adventures last summer at the first Beat Meets East Festival in Chengdu China, in which the audience sings along with a phrase in Mandarin. I invited out Karen Mal to play mandolin, Terry Leonino to play her harmonica, Darcey Deaville to play her violin, and Jimmy LaFave to scat sing on cue, in the middle of the song.

I told Jimmy just to sing whatever came into his head at the moment, and since it was in the twelve bar blues structure, he couldn't go wrong. As he always does, Jimmy blew everyone away, and his improvised lyrics brought down the house, as did the instrumental solos from Terry, Karen, Darcie, Adam and bassist William Landin.

Arlo Guthrie's daughters Sarah Lee, Annie and Cathyaliza all performed that night, as did Willie Nelson's daughter Amy, and Peter Yarrow's daughter Bethany, so Adam realized that he now part of a new generation of young artists with a link to the past and a role in the future of American music. During the rest of the evening, I was invited to sit in and play with other groups.

Afterwards, we all returned to the OK Motor Lodge to participate in the 2 a.m. jam session at the OK Motor Lodge parking lot until the sun came up. Adam stayed up even longer than I did, and I never saw him have a nicer time, meeting and playing with people his own age, as well performing with us old timers.

Every musician I spoke to at the Festival said that there was no other event quite like this, and many old friends from the Kerrville Festival in Texas, whom I ran into at the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, all felt that this younger festival was a continuation of the pioneering efforts of Kerrville's own memorable thirty five years of ground-breaking music made in the Hill Country of Texas, for which I have appeared twenty seven times since 1976. Now a world class internationally renowned festival, the Kerrville Music Festival started out in the same way as the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, and retains the same purity thirty five years later.

Since the concerts for the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival are free, and all the musicians come each year just for travel and lodging expenses only, with no salary, everyone felt unified with an egalitarian spirit that filled the air day and night. All the staff who work as volunteers throughout the year were not only perfectly organized but were unflinchingly gracious to all the musicians and made us all feel so at home that none of us wanted to leave Okemah. If our government were run as well as the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival is, we would never have a problem.

The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival is a perfect tribute to the spirit of Woody Guthrie and his beloved hometown of Okemah, and an important cultural event for all of America, setting an example of how to do things right, and celebrate the arts in a joyous way where the community and the artists all join hands to give our young people standards of excellence to aspire to for whatever they do in life.

Just as all of us who play with Willie Nelson every year for Farm Aid feel, being part of The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival makes us proud to be musicians,

Adam and I can hardly wait until July 12-16 of 2006,

During my week in London, I will have time every day to continue working on my Symphonic Variations on a Song By Woody Guthrie, inspired by the energy that the festival gave all of us. I'll also

be interviewed in London for my appearance in October in Cork Ireland at the Guineas Jazz Festival, and tell the reporter in London about the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival. I am also seeing some colleges in England who want me to appear there for concerts of my classical works as well as my jazz and world music presentations, which will include my giving readings from my two books Vibrations and Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac.

In August, I'll have time at home at the farm to continue composing Symphonic Variations on a Song by Woody Guthrie. I will also be conducting a symphony concert in Long Island, featuring traditional musicians from India who will be joining the symphony orchestra. The concert will be both a celebration of the Beatles' music and a gateway for young people to learn about the symphony orchestra's instruments and scratch the surface of learning something about the music of India.

August 20th I will be going to Woody Creek Colorado to play special music I have created for the memory of old friend Hunter S. Thompson, which will be played before his ashes are fired from a cannon into the hills of Colorado. Hunter's family, historian Doug Brinkley and Johnny Depp have invited me to be there. Like Woody, Hunter was an artist of high ideals and great talent who always stood up for what he believed in and whose work will be remembered.