

We Need Woody Guthrie and Jimmy LaFave

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Friday, May 05, 2017

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Last weekend Robin and I made a pilgrimage to the [Woody Guthrie Center](#) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The reason for this pilgrimage was because [Jimmy LaFave](#) was going to be playing there. Jimmy is at the top of my list of favorite musicians. I have been listening to him for 20 years, and if I do not have all of his CDs, I have the vast majority. His music speaks to me on so many levels. The fact that he is not more famous than he is, says more about the music industry than it does about Jimmy. Perhaps one reason is that he does not conveniently fit into one of the predefined categories, and that his music bounces around genres. It generally has a bluesy, rocking, country vibe to it. He is considered one of the founding fathers of an Oklahoma born music genre, red dirt music. He has been called one of the premier interpreters of Bob Dylan's music. He has long history with the music of Woody Guthrie, and a strong connection with the Guthrie family and the [Woody Guthrie Festival](#) that happens every July in Okemah, OK. If you love Woody Guthrie music, check out the CD [Ribbon of Highway](#). Jimmy and many more musicians are playing tribute to Woody.

Think about how you feel during and after really good sex. If you are like me, it puts you into an altered state, and afterwards you feel like you fallen into another dimension. If you ever catch Jimmy in a small venue, especially when [John Inmon](#) is playing with him, this is how you may end up. We saw them a few years back at the [Blue Door](#) in Oklahoma City. After the concert I just wanted to lie down and die. I did not want to come back from the place the music had carried me to. It was the most incredible music experience of my life.

However, our pilgrimage had a sad note to it. Jimmy has been [diagnosed with terminal cancer](#) and is not expected to survive until the end of the year. When we first saw him at the Woody Guthrie Center he was in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank. He is still performing and has what seems like an ambitious schedule, but this concert at Woody Guthrie Center was to be a celebration. Many red dirt, folk and roots musicians were there to perform before and with him. It was all scheduled to happen outside on the Woody Guthrie Green by the Center, but the weather drove it indoors to the back room of a café. I am not sure this was not a blessing in disguise as it added an intimacy to the night that might not have been there if it had stayed outside.

Jimmy walked on stage, leaving his wheelchair and oxygen behind him. I had been apprehensive about how he would sound. Apparently, the lady standing next to me had been too. She turned to me and said, “he still sounds so good.” I did not know it at the time, but it was [Nora Guthrie](#), the daughter of Woody Guthrie, sister of Arlo Guthrie and a celebrity in her own right. And he did. He still has it, in spite of the cancer. He played for nearly two hours which I found remarkable for the man I saw a few hours earlier in a wheelchair. The concert did not leave me on the high of the Blue Door experience, but it was still special. Even with the pallor of cancer on the night, with his performance and the other musicians it felt like a wonderful celebration.

Towards the end of the night all the musicians came on stage to sing with Jimmy and the audience. I found myself doing something I rarely do...sing in public. They did several songs, but ended with the Woody Guthrie song, *This Land is Your Land*.



This started me ruminating on how badly we need someone like Woody Guthrie today, or at least we need the Woody Guthrie spirit. It seems we have entered a cycle where the rich and the corporations are running roughshod over the common folk. Nationalism and racism are cropping up like I have not seen since the 60s. Perhaps it is because I am an old fart, but I am truly worried about the future of our country.

It always amazes how Okies embrace Woody Guthrie, but do not embrace his ideals. Woody Guthrie had a message on his guitar, “This Machine Kills Fascists”. Somehow we need to remember that we are all in this together. Somehow we have got stop letting the greedy and cynical win. When all the musicians and the audience were singing this song together, I started to have some hope again. We just need to remind those in power that *this land was made for you and me*.

All together now –

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
This land was made for you and me

And I went walking that ribbon of highway
And saw above me that endless skyway
I saw below me the golden valley
This land was made for you and me

I roamed and rambled and followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
And all around me, a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property
But on the back side it didn't say nothing
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
In wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made for you and me

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf stream waters
This land was made for you and me

Songwriters: Woody Guthrie

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And so it goes.

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