

# THE VANAVER CARAVAN

Dance & Music All People.

## *Pastures of Plenty*

WOODY GUTHRIE IN DANCE & MUSIC

Middle & High School Teachers' Guide

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# The Vanaver Caravan

The Vanaver Caravan has been teaching dance and music to students (K-12, and college age) for more than 30 years. We bring movement right into the classroom. We do not simply teach the steps of a dance, we teach the stories behind the dances—linking to history, folklore, social movements, and cultural traditions.

Caravan directors, Bill and Livia Vanaver, have researched and compiled one of the most extensive collections of international and American dance and music in the world. Our international collective of highly professional Teaching Artists are trained with an extensive repertoire of world dances. Many of our dancers are world renowned virtuoso specialists in their own field as well.

Recognizing that the arts often communicate what words fail to express, the mission of The Vanaver Caravan is to inspire, through dance and music, the harmonious co-existence of world cultures and traditions, to promote peace and celebrate our humanity. We envision a world where people understand and respect one another – where our differences unite rather than divide us.

## **PRODCUTION:**

**Nora Guthrie, producer** (Woody's daughter), is director of The Woody Guthrie Archives, and president of Woody Guthrie Productions, Inc. For the past 45 years, she has collaborated with Bill and Livia Vanaver on numerous music and dance productions.

**Bill Vanaver, music arranger/director**, is a musician and symphonic composer, who has been playing to audiences throughout the world for the past 50 years. He is well known for his stellar instrumental work on 5 string banjo, as well as a myriad of other folk instruments, along with his vast knowledge of traditional songs and musical styles. Bill has taught World Dance and Music at Bard and Skidmore Colleges, and since 1985, has brought his American and World Music and Dance into the classroom as a lead Teaching Artist. He has worked closely with students as well as classroom and music teachers to broaden their multi-cultural music, song and movement repertoire. Bill's work on the album "Pastures of Plenty", (a composition of Woody Guthrie's American folk songs) won WKZE's Best Independently Produced Folk Album of the Year Award.

**Livia Vanaver, choreographer/dancer**, For the past 50 years Livia has been traveling throughout the US and abroad with her musician/composer husband and Company of extraordinary dancers and musicians, collecting and performing traditional dance and music from many cultures. Her commitment to creating community through the vehicle of dance lead her to work with Friendship Ambassadors Foundation. She has been on the cutting edge of Arts Education programs throughout New York State and abroad. A leading authority on dance education, she has pioneered the teaching of world dance styles and Global Citizenry in schools. She is on the faculty of the Academy for the Love of Learning, working closely with Aaron Stern in their Teacher Renewal Project. Livia has taught dance at

Columbia University in the Graduate Theater Program and Hofstra University. Ms. Vanaver holds a BFA in Dance from NYU School of the Arts (Tisch).

## Woody Guthrie \*\*

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma. Describing the small frontier town in Okfuskee County, Woody writes:

***“Okemah was one of the singinest, square dancigest, drinkigest, yelligest, preachigest, walkigest, talkigest, laughigest, cryigest, shootigest, fist fightigest, bleedigest, gambigest, gun, club, and razor carrying of our ranch towns and farm towns, because it was blossomed out into one of our first Oil Boom Towns.”***

Woody was the second-born son to Charles and Nora Guthrie. His father was a cowboy, land speculator, and local politician. His Kansas-born mother profoundly influenced Woody in ways which would become apparent as he grew older. Slightly built, with an extremely full and curly head of hair, Woody was both a precocious and unconventional boy from the start. A keen observer of the world around him, during his early years in Oklahoma, Woody experienced the first in a series of tragic personal losses – the death of his older sister, Clara – would haunt him throughout his life. This followed by the financial and physical ruin, and the institutionalization of his mother would devastate Woody’s family and home, forming a uniquely wry and rambling outlook on life.

In 1931, when Okemah’s boomtown period went bust, Woody left for Texas. In the panhandle town of Pampa, he fell in love and married Mary Jennings in 1933, the younger sister of a friend and musician named Matt Jennings. Together, Woody and Mary had three children, Gwen, Sue and Bill. It was with Matt Jennings and Cluster Baker that Woody made his first attempt at a career, forming *The Corn Cob Trio*. However, if the Great Depression made it hard to support his family, the Great Dust Storm, which hit the Great Plains in 1935, made it impossible. Due to the lack of work, and driven by a search for a better life, Woody headed West along with the mass migration of “dust bowl refugees: known as “Okies.” These farmers and unemployed workers from Oklahoma, Kansas, Tennessee, and Georgia had also lost their homes and land, and so set out with their families in search of opportunities elsewhere. Moneyless and hungry, Woody hitchhiked, rode freight trains, and even walked to California, developing a love for traveling on the open road – a practice he would repeat often.

By the time he arrived in California, in 1937, Woody had experienced the intense scorn, hatred, and antagonism of resident Californians who were opposed to the influx of outsiders. Woody’s identification with outsider status would become part and parcel of his political and social positioning, one which gradually worked its way into his songwriting, as evident in his Dust Bowl Ballads such as *I Ain’t Got No Home, Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad, Talking Dust Bowl Blues, Tom Joad, and Hard Travelin’*. His 1937 radio broadcasts on KFVD, Los Angeles, and XELO (just over the border in Mexico) brought Woody and his new

singing partner, Maxine Crissman or *Lefty Lou*, wide public attention, while providing him with a forum from which he could develop his talent for controversial social commentary and criticism on topics ranging from corrupt politicians, lawyers, and businessmen to praising the humanist principles of Jesus Christ, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Union organizers.

Never one to become comfortable with success, or being in one place for too long, in 1939 Woody headed east for New York City, where he was embraced for his Steinbeckian homespun wisdom and musical “authenticity” by leftist organizations, artists, writers, musicians, and other intellectuals.

***“..I sang at a hundred IWO [International Workers’ Order] lodges and met every color and kind of human being you can imagine.”***

Lead Belly, Cisco Houston, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Will Geer, Sony Terryk, Brownie McGhee, Josh White, Millard Lampell, Bess Hawes, Sis Cunningham, among others, became Woody’s friends and collaborators, taking up such social causes as Union organizing, anti-Fascism, strengthening the Communist Party, and generally fighting for the things they believed in the only way they knew how: through political songs of protest.

In 1940, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Woody in a series of conversations and songs for the Library of Congress. Also during the 1940’s, Woody recorded extensively for Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records. The recordings from this period, which have been reissued under the Smithsonian Folkways label, continue to be touchstones for young folk music singers/songwriters everywhere.

Woody Guthrie continued to write songs and perform with the Almanac Singers, the politically radical singing group of the late 1940’s, some of whose members would later re-form as the Weavers, the most commercially successful and influential folk music group of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s.

Becoming increasingly restless and disillusioned with New York’s radio and entertainment industry, Woody writes:

***“I got disgusted with the whole sissified and nervous rules of censorship on all my songs and ballads, and drove off down the road across the southern states again.”***

Leaving New York and traveling in his large new-bought Plymouth, Woody received an invitation to go to Oregon, where a documentary film project about the building of the Grand Coulee Dam sought to use his songwriting talent. The Bonneville Power Authority placed Woody on the Federal payroll for a month and there he composed yet another remarkable collection of songs: The Columbia River Songs, which include *Roll on Columbia* and *Grand Coulee Dan*.

Despite Woody’s constant traveling and performing during the 1940’s, and with the final dissolution of his marriage, Woody strenuously courted an already married young Martha Graham dancer named Marjorie Mazia. Woody and Marjorie were married in 1946. This relationship provided Woody a level of domestic stability and encouragement which he had previously not known, enabling him to complete and publish his first novel, *Bound for Glory*, in 1943. A semi-autobiographical account of his Dust Bowl years, *Bound for Glory*

generally received critical acclaim. Together, Woody and Marjorie had four children: Cathy, who died at age four in a tragic home accident, Arlo, Joady, and Nora.

Moved by his passion against fascism, during World War II, Woody served in both the Merchant Marine and the Army, shipping out to sea on several occasions with his buddies Cisco Houston and Jimmy Longhi. In one of many anti-Fascist songs written during the war, Woody tells us:

***“We were seamen three,  
Cisco, Jimmy and me:  
Shipped out to beat the fascists  
Across the land and sea”.***

*Seamen Three*

Throughout his tours of duty, as in civilian life, Woody’s penchant for writing and drawing continued unabated. His capacity for creative self-expression seemed inexhaustible, whether on land or sea.

In 1946, Woody Guthrie returned to settle in Coney Island, New York, with his wife and children. The peace he had fought so hard for seemed finally within his reach. It was during this time that Woody composed *Songs to Grown on*, a collection of children’s songs which gained him a great deal of success, yet again. However, soon thereafter, Woody’s behavior and health began to deteriorate, becoming increasingly erratic and creating tensions in his personal and professional life. He left his family once again, this time for California with his traveling protégé, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot. In California, Woody remarried a third time, to a young woman named Anneke Van Kirk and had a daughter, Lorina Lynn.

Becoming more and more unpredictable during a final series of road trips, Woody eventually returned to New York, where he was mistakenly diagnosed several times as suffering with everything from alcoholism to schizophrenia. In fact, Woody suffered from Huntington’s Chorea, the degenerative disease which would gradually and eventually rob him of all his health, talents and abilities. This was the same disease which had forced his mother’s institutionalization thirty years earlier.

In 1954, Woody admitted himself into Greystone Hospital in New Jersey, one of several that he would go in and out of for the next thirteen years. While at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens, New York, Woody Guthrie died on October 3, 1967.

***“Well, it’s always we ramble that river and I  
Along your green valley, I’ll work till I die  
My land I’ll defend with my life, if it be  
‘Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free”***

*Pastures of Plenty*

Having lived through some of the most significant historic movements and events of the Twentieth-Century – the Great Depression, the Great Dustorm, World War II, the social and the political upheavals resulting from Unionism, the Communist Party and the Cold War – Woody absorbed it all to become a prolific writer whose songs, ballads, prose and poetry captured the plight of every man. While traveling throughout the American landscape during the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s, Woody’s observations of what he saw and experienced has left for us a lasting and sometimes haunting legacy of images, sounds, and voices of the

marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed people with whom he struggled to survive despite all odds.

Although the *corpus* of original Woody Guthrie songs, or as Woody preferred “people’s songs” are, perhaps, his most recognized contribution to American culture, the stinging honesty, humor and wit found even in his most vernacular prose writings exhibit Woody’s fervent belief in social, political, and spiritual justice.

Recognition of Woody Guthrie’s work lives on. He has been inducted into *The Songwriter’s Hall of Fame* (1971), the *Nashville Songwriter’s Hall of Fame* (1977), and *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum* (1988). He has received numerous awards, including the U.S. *Department of the Interior’s Conservation Award* (1966), *The Folk Alliance Lifetime Achievement Award* (1996), and a Grammy from the *National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences* (1999). In 1996, *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum* and *Case Western University* presented a ten day celebration honoring Woody Guthrie, entitled *Hard Travelin’*. It was the first major conference on the legacy of Woody Guthrie complete with a photo exhibition, lectures, films, and two benefit concerts, which were held in support of the Woody Guthrie Archives.

Popular folk musicians such as *Bruce Springsteen*, *Billy Bragg*, *Wilco*, *Ani DiFranco*, and countless others, continue to draw inspiration from Woody Guthrie, re-interpreting and re-invigorating his songs for new audiences. *Pete Seeger*, *Bob Dylan*, *Arlo Guthrie*, and *Ramblin’ Jack Elliot*, are among the legions of folk musicians of every age-group, who are carrying the tradition of the harmonic and guitar-playing singer/songwriter into the future. New books and publications of Woody’s words and drawings, and even a children’s book, *This Land is Your Land* by folk artist Kathy Jakobsen, have brought Woody Guthrie back into the mainstream of popular culture. The Smithsonian Institution and the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives have collaborated on a major traveling exhibition about Woody’s life and legacy allowing thousands of people to view for themselves Woody’s artwork, writings, and songs.

Clearly, Woody Guthrie’s songs continue to speak to us all about thoughts, ideas, and feelings which are as relevant and meaningful today as when he lived them.

-Jorge Arevalo

Chief Archivist, Woody Guthrie Archives

**\*\*This is an outstanding short biography, written for adults.**

**Also strongly recommended as foundational reading for the students, is the concise and inspiring book by Bonnie Christensen, “Woody Guthrie, Poet of the People.” (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001)**

### Questions:

What was Woody Guthrie fighting for?

Why was he so dedicated to his ideals?

Are there oppressed people today? Where?

What personal qualities and attitudes did Woody have that made him so great?

Woody had a hard life. Can good things come from hardship?

Can making music and dancing make your life better?

Can music and dance help us to make a better world?

# The Performance:

***Hard Travelin'***: This song is Woody's "anthem for the common person," praising the nobility and struggle of workers, an appeal for recognition of the many contributions workers make to our everyday lives.

**The Dance**: uses many dance styles including modern, percussive, jazz, and 1940's urban African American dance, to portray various occupations.

**The Music**: based on a mixture of blues and rock styles.

## Questions:

1. Think of a simple object in your home, such as a chair, a plate, a shirt, etc., then make a list of as many people as possible who participated in that item's history, (from surveying, mining and farming to production, advertising, packaging, selling etc.) as well as those who helped in getting this object to your home.

**(Teachers – Try to encourage your students to come up with the above categories themselves.)**

2. In viewing the performance, be prepared to identify some of the occupations shown in the dance.
3. This dance is percussive. What does "percussive" mean?

***Pretty Boy Floyd***: America has had many "Robin Hood heroes," such as Jesse James, John Hardy, and Pretty Boy Floyd, all of whose legends share the same story: the hero is unjustly accused, then by necessity and also for revenge on the powerful, turns to the life of a bandit, with the capacity for awe inspiring generosity to the poor.

**The Dance**: is a theatrical rendering of the story mixed with, and constantly returning to, the movements of Southern style "ring dance."

## Questions:

1. Do you think that these outlaw/hero stories are true, partly true, or false? Why?
2. Whether outlaw/hero stories are true or not, why do you think they are so popular? (Remember, the "Robin Hood" legend is hundreds of years old.)
3. This is a dance that tells a story. What are the differences in "dancing a story" and telling a story? Are there other ways in which stories are shared? (Films, comics, books, etc.) How do they all differ?

## ***The Dust Bowl Trilogy:***

**1. *The Great Dust Storm Disaster:*** In the American Midwest and Southwest of the 1930's, (**look at map**) adding to the economic misery created by the Great Depression, huge dust storms arose and blanketed vast sections of land, making the land useless and unlivable. This natural catastrophe was caused by drought conditions, along with the farmers' failure to rotate crops properly. The Dust Storm on April 14, 1935, was the worst and farthest ranging and was dubbed "Black Sunday" by the press. The event, portrayed in John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the movie rendition, which was seen by Woody Guthrie, created a social class of newly impoverished Americans.

**The Dance:** In this dance, the dancers switch back and forth from being the people living during the dust-bowl storm, and the storm itself. Dancers act and move together as both characters and as the wind, dust, and elements.

### **Questions:**

1. What was the "Great Depression?"
2. How would poor farming practices contribute to causing dust storms?
3. Why couldn't the farmers sell their property?

**2. *I'm Blowin' Down that Old Dusty Road:*** Woody based this simple tune on the older country hoe-down song, "Blowin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad." It's the kind of song that's never done the same way twice, even in our show. The lead singer is free to "slip in" any number of verses, and call on the improvising instrumentalists at will.

**The Dance:** The dancer is also improvising in the style of Appalachian clogging, which is an American fusion from British and Irish step dancing, African and Native American dances.

### **Questions:**

1. What does the word "improvise" mean?
2. Where else do people improvise?
3. Have you ever improvised in making something up "on the spot?"

**3. *If You Ain't Got that "Do Re Mi":*** Tens of thousands of the hardest hit victims of the dust storms were farmers who were forced to move West to California, where they hoped to survive as day laborers. Many of these unfortunates, commonly labeled "Oakies," (dir. "Oklahoma") were turned back at the California border, and were forced to live in "jungle camps." The song is a complaint about lack of necessary funds ("Do Re Mi") needed to enter the "Garden of Eden" (California.)

**The Dance:** Here the dancers are also using the Appalachian Clogging style, but this time the dance is choreographed into a narrative (storytelling) performance.



**The Music:** is executed in the high powered and flashy southern “Bluegrass” style, as pioneered by Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs.

**Questions:**

1. Why couldn’t the migrant farmers enter California? Isn’t it always legal for Americans to travel from state to state?
2. Although the subject matter is about difficulty, the song and the dance are fast and happy. Discuss why “happy art” can express and even help us in sad situations.

**Deportee (Plane Wreck and Los Gatos):** Woody wrote this beautiful poem (the melody was written by his friend Martin Hoffman) when he read **The New York Times of January 29, 1948**, which reported the wreck of a charter plane carrying 28 Mexican farm workers from Oakland to the El Centro, CA. The plane crashed over California’s Los Gatos Canyon Deportation Center. In the news report, the deaths were dismissed as unimportant because they were all (excepting the pilot) “deportees.” What enraged Woody the most was that none of the victims’ names were included in the report. “...and all they will call you will be... “Deportee.”

**The Dance:** This is a lyrical dance, often performed as a duet or solo. The dancer(s) depict the story of the “deportees” by following the lyrics of the song.

**The Music:** Martin Hoffman wrote the melody in a Mexican style, and music director Bill Vanaver went another step in arranging and harmonizing the song in a full blown Mexican “Mariachi” style.

**Questions:**

1. Why were the Mexican migrant workers’ names left out of the article?
2. Was racism a part of the reason? What is racism?
3. Does it help the owners of the farms to be able to hire poor people from other countries? How?
4. Is what’s good for business always fair?

**Peace Pin Boogie:** Here is one of the few blues based songs written by Woody. The song shows that you don’t have to always be serious to work for peace.

**The Dance:** This is a good example of Harlem’s “Lindy Hop,” as done at the Savoy Ballroom in the 1930’s.

**The Music:** Bill Vanaver arranged this in the style of swing music of the 1930’s.

**Questions:**

1. (After the show-) What makes this kind of dancing (“lindy hop,” or “jitterbug”) different from the other dance styles in the program?
2. Do you think your parents or grandparents danced like this?
3. “Swing” music and dance are part of “Jazz.” What is “Jazz?”

***Hangman’s Reel:*** This opens with the concluding sections of “Talking Dust Bowl,” which describes an “out of control jalopy” heading West.

**The Dance:** To mimic the comical car trip, The French Canadian style percussive steps are first done seated, and then the dancers rise to complete the dance.

**The Music:** Hangman’s Reel is a challenging French Canadian fiddle tune.

**Questions:**

1. (After the show - ) What makes this dance different? Hint – (if they don’t come up with the answer) What positions were the dancers in when they did the first part of the dance?

***Union Maid:*** The American labor movement, in spite of its rocky history, is responsible for many benefits we take for granted, such as the eight hour work day, workers’ ability to strike and negotiate with their employers, and on-the-job safety regulations. Those who fought for these rights often put their lives on the line, as the companies frequently tried to break up strikes by hiring violent “thugs” and even getting “protection” from local law enforcement. Many women, like Mother Jones and Aunt Molly Jackson were oftentimes the true heroes of these struggles. Labor songs, like “Union Maid,” were important instruments in promoting solidarity and reinforcing the values of the workers during these hard times.

**The Dance:** Livia Vanaver uses the Southern clog dancing style as a base, over which she has choreographed actions which express the feistiness, bravery, and humor of the “Union Maid.”

**The Music:** Woody often used folk and popular tunes of his day as the melodies for his songs. “Union Maid” was written to the tune of the pop song “Red Wing.”

**Questions:**

1. This song is from the 1930’s. What kinds of jobs did women have, who worked in factories in those day?
2. What is a “Union?”
3. What was the “Union Maid” trying to accomplish? How?
4. Why did she have to be brave?

***Vigilante Man:*** Discuss with students what a vigilante is and what their impact on union organizing and strikes were.

**The Dance:** This intense ensemble piece mixes percussive dance rhythms and tap, with modern dance and theater. The dancers switch between the people hiding from the vigilantes and the vigilantes themselves. They dance rhythmically, using sticks to emulate strife between each other and create a jail cell.

***Pastures of Plenty:*** This is Woody's finest expression of the struggles and the hopes of America's migrant workers. Their humility and dignity is characterized in the line, "We come with the dust, and we go with the wind."

**The Dance:** A solo danced by a principal female dancer, often depicting the strife and beauty of the downtrodden figures in Woody Guthrie's America.

**The Music:** This song is performed by Bill Vanaver on guitar, accompanied with the bass.

**Questions:**

1. From what you know about the migrant workers, what does the phrase, "We come with the dust, and we go with the wind," mean?
2. Have you seen migrant workers? What do you think their lives are like?

***This Land is Your Land:*** Woody's most famous song, sung by the whole Company, is really a statement of the American ideal of participation, and a hope that all of America's citizens will increasingly have an even greater voice in the nation's future.

**Questions:**

1. Why do you think this song is so famous?
2. Woody says, "This Land was made for you and me." Who, exactly are "you and me?"
3. To whom does America belong?
4. Are other countries just as important to their people as America is to ours?
5. Are we taking care of our country and its people? How?

**Projects:**

1. Even though this is a professional dance and music show, all of the dances are based on the kinds of dancing that everyday people do on their own. The same can be said for the music. Why do people dance and make music? How are these dances and songs different from each other?

\* For the teacher – Here is a partial list of possible responses to the above questions, but see if you can inspire the students to come up with most of it.

1. To celebrate
  2. To meet and socialize (couple dancing)
  3. To show strengths and abilities of warriors
  4. In religion as part of rituals, ceremonies, or to evoke states of ecstasy, or “centering”
  5. For exercise
  6. To tell stories
2. Learn to sing the song, “This Land is Your Land,” and discuss the verses.
    - At the finale of our show, this will enable the children to sing along on the verses as well as the chorus.

## Vocabulary List

Dust Storm

Union

Boom Town

Migrant Worker

Folk Music

From *This Land is Your Land*:

Valley

All locations – i.e., “Redwood Forest,” “Gulf Stream waters,” etc.

Relief office

“No Trespassing”