

**“That Little Bastard”:  
John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and a Modern American Cultural Revolution**

Thesis by

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**Track 1: That Little Bastard**

“My dad says there’s a letter from Steinbeck that after Woody wrote “The Ballad of Tom Joad” he heard it, he said ‘That little bastard’. He said ‘If only he had written that song before. He could have saved me a whole novel’”. –Sarah Lee Guthrie, interview with Martha Powers [Jan 24, 2014]

**Part One: “Inside the Box”****Track 2: Introduction**

This is a study of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and its relationship to and influence on Woody Guthrie, which subsequently inspired a cultural revolution in American folk music during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The thesis is split into two parts. Part One: “Inside the Box,” provides cultural and historical background about Steinbeck and the Dust Bowl, highlighting *The Grapes of Wrath* and acknowledging its beauty, greatness, and genius as a novel. It provides the necessary information to support the theory that while Steinbeck intended to and succeeded in creating a literary masterpiece with *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel spurred an unintentional cultural chain of influence.

Part Two: “Outside the Box” begins by introducing Woody Guthrie, the founder of modern day folk music in America and, alongside Steinbeck, the key individual in this thesis. After this introduction which includes a brief biography, the thesis progresses chronologically, tracking important professional and personal events in Guthrie’s life, which culminate in 1939 when Guthrie meets Steinbeck. This encounter is the gateway to the core of this thesis: Guthrie was so captivated by Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath* that he began composing songs directly inspired by the novel. This thesis argues that while Steinbeck intended the novel to be as

successful and popular as it was, he did not expect Guthrie to take his material and reproduce it in song form. Furthermore, Steinbeck in no way intended for Guthrie's songs, based on his novel, to become the standard for folk music in American culture and serve as the precedent that musicians both looked up to and followed.

Sarah Lee Guthrie, daughter of Arlo Guthrie and granddaughter of Woody Guthrie, in an interview that was conducted by the author in January 2014, stated as much as can be seen in the opening track of the thesis. A talented and successful singer in her own right, Sarah Lee Guthrie sat down after her performance with husband and band mate Johnny Irion in Denver to speak of her knowledge of the relationship between Guthrie and Steinbeck. Even she, the granddaughter of folk legend Woody, knew little of their relationship, with the anecdote quoted in Track 1. Although it is not an exact match, it will be seen that Guthrie's quote loosely matches a similar account in Ed Cray's extensive biography *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* that is discussed at length later in the thesis.

Along with the chronological progression of the thesis, the sections are divided into "tracks" with song titles that specifically pertain to information within that segment. These song titles and track listings correspond to the CD that is included with the thesis and, if desired, can be played concurrently with the thesis. Most of the songs on the CD are Guthrie's and are chosen to specifically represent certain elements of his life, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or relevant cultural events. Similar to Guthrie's concept album *Dust Bowl Ballads* that is analyzed later in the thesis, the track listings provide a framework for the original argument presented herein. Because this thesis is driven by music and its importance, and necessity, in American culture, it is appropriate to include the songs that are the heart supporting this thesis. While the tracks aid in the organization of the thesis, they also provide the overall theme and tone for each section.

While there is some scholarship and previous work on the relationship among Steinbeck, Guthrie and the modern folk music revival, there is a paucity analysis. For example, Leroy Ashby's *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830*, mentions Steinbeck and Guthrie, even in the same paragraph, but fails to pursue their relationship:

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) wrote about "plain people" struggling to survive.

"Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out," says the Oklahoma farm migrant Ma Joad in famous lines from *The Grapes of Wrath* that reappeared in John Ford's 1940 movie version... The folksinger Woody Guthrie also helped memorialize the experience of the "Okie" migrants, who fled to California from the dust storms of the Great Plains... Guthrie's stated goal was "to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your land," songs "that will make you take pride in yourself and your work." (Ashby 233)

This type of passing mention is extremely common among existing scholarship and work done on Steinbeck, Guthrie and the possible relationship between the two, whether personal or artistic. By examining biographies, autobiographies, academic scholarship, and by means of personal interviews with relatives of both Steinbeck and Guthrie, this thesis presents the original proposition that while Steinbeck set out to, and succeeded in creating a literary work of epic proportions in *The Grapes of Wrath*, an unintended effect occurred: Woody Guthrie, merely a common, rambling man in the eyes of Steinbeck, but one who experienced the Dust Bowl first hand, was so creatively inspired by the novel that his songs and message triggered a cultural revolution.

### Track 3: “Battle Hymn of the Republic”

John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. was born at the turn of the twentieth century on February 27, 1902 in the “Salad-Bowl of the Nation”, Salinas, California. His roots in the Salinas Valley greatly influenced his writing throughout his life. Despite his many travels, Steinbeck’s great love of that part of the country defined many of his greatest short stories and novels. He was also deeply moved by the migrant workers that inhabited the Valley. While neither of his parents came from a literary background per se, his mother was a schoolteacher and shared Steinbeck’s passion for reading and writing. To appease his parents, Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University where he stayed for five years and eventually left without a degree. While formal schooling did not interest him, he did regularly attend the English Club meetings. His narrowly focused desire to write was apparent to the president of the club who was quoted as saying, “[he] had no other interests or talents that I could make out. He was a writer, but he was that and nothing else” (Benson).

After leaving Stanford, Steinbeck moved to New York and tried his hand as a newspaper columnist. Unsuccessful, he moved back home and worked as an estate caretaker in Tahoe City, where he met and married his first wife, Carol Henning. Henning served as a great aid to Steinbeck’s writing, editing drafts, thinking up titles, and serving as a sounding board for ideas for her husband. It was also in Tahoe City that Steinbeck penned his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929 (Shillinglaw). The novel was not a huge success, and it was not until he wrote *Tortilla Flat* in 1935 that he gained financial independence as a writer.

Back home in the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck began work on novels that are now famously and retrospectively termed the “California novels” (Shillinglaw). These include *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

When Steinbeck deliberately set out to create the great American novel, the novel that would be *The Grapes of Wrath*, he felt it necessary to construct a title that encompassed epic themes and plot. While it took him nearly two years to complete the novel, the title was chosen very early on in the process and did not undergo much change, despite the laborious writing. It was Steinbeck's first wife who originally suggested the title, and it did not take long for Steinbeck to approve it (Cray 154). The novel takes its name from the American classic, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," written by Julia Ward Howe during the American Civil War in 1862:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.

Howe's song quickly became the anthem of American patriotism and is frequently associated with American grit and determination. Written by after visiting a Union Army camp near Washington D.C., the song possesses a commanding presence, calling for truth and fairness brought by God. The hymn summons God to bring justice to those who have created destruction and chaos over the land. The evil of the people is so great that only God can provide righteousness. The lyrics are inspired by the Book of Revelation (4:19-20): "So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God". By constructing a title that takes its name from both a Biblical passage and one of the quintessential American songs of the past two centuries, Steinbeck set the novel up to be one of epic proportions. The title implies that the novel will cover sprawling, classic themes and raise fundamental questions of good vs. evil and the power

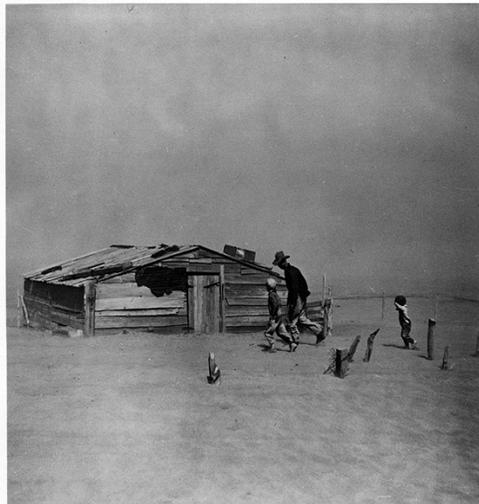
of man vs. God. The title is a small piece of Steinbeck's creation, yet it sets the tone for the rest of the novel and serves as an example of the magnitude Steinbeck set out to achieve. In addition to the title, in 1938, Steinbeck wrote to his agent to request that both the music and lyrics of the song be published at the beginning of the book. Steinbeck explained that, "This is one of the great songs of the world, and as you read the book you will realize that the words have a special meaning in this book. . . . The title, Battle Hymn of the Republic, in itself has a special meaning in the light of this book" (Bullivant 17). In choosing this title and publishing the music and lyrics as part of the novel, Steinbeck deliberately positioned the novel to share the same cultural magnitude and significance as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Steinbeck's characters are of similar scale, embodying Christ-like characteristics and grappling with fundamentally challenging and complex situations and questions, as detailed later.

#### **Track 4: "Dust Bowl Blues"**

The Dust Bowl was a series of hundreds of dust storms that spanned nearly a decade in the Midwestern region of the United State between 1930-1940. The storms primarily covered Oklahoma, Nebraska, and the Texas panhandle; however, the effects stretched far beyond those borders. The seeds of the Dust Bowl were planted the decade before, shortly after World War I. After the economic recession from the war, many farmers were no longer able to afford the manpower and labor necessary for farming and crop harvesting, and thus were forced to use new mechanized farming techniques, like the tractor-drawn plow, that quickened farming tasks and increased profits. With the assistance of new machines, farmers produced record amounts of crops in 1931 (Jennings 2). However, the severe overproduction of wheat in conjunction with the recent economic depression resulted in a condition where people were too poor to purchase the

crop. This led the farmers into debt because of their inability to gain back the financial investment in both the wheat and the machines. The farmers in the Midwest were thus forced to leave the harvested wheat in their fields, rendering it both useless and worthless. While this did not appear to be problematic at the time, the farmers unknowingly lost the fertile topsoil due to their plow farming, leaving the land extremely vulnerable to drought and inhospitable for crop growing (Jennings 2).

To make matters disastrously worse, the Midwest simultaneously suffered a complete lack of rain during 1930 and 1931, leaving the land utterly desolate as farmers lost their crops. By 1932, dust storms, or “black blizzards,” began to occur throughout Oklahoma and the rest of the region (Jennings 5). As the dust storms increased by size and number, the living conditions drastically worsened. Schools shut down, homes were destroyed, and simple everyday tasks quickly became impossible to accomplish. When the dust in the air accumulated, rendering it nearly impossible to breathe without inhaling mass quantities of dust, the individuals of the Midwest were forced to leave their homes, thus beginning the mass migration westward to California.



A father and his two children seek shelter during a dust storm in Oklahoma, 1936 (Rothstein)

There are several myths surrounding Steinbeck's involvement with the migrants and his inspiration for *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps the most prominent being that he in fact knew a family of Joads and followed their journey from Oklahoma to California, which gave the novel a semi-biographical slant. Despite the rumors, however, "Steinbeck never did travel to Oklahoma and then make the trip to California with a migrant family. Furthermore, the model for Tom Joad appears to have been a young man, a fugitive who was stopping a Hooverville near Baskersfield, that Steinbeck met only briefly" (Benson 152). This is not to say that he did not do extensive research and have first-hand experience with migrants and Okies.

The Dust Bowl migration began in 1930 and exponentially increased every year. By 1936, approximately 200,000 Okies entered California (McWilliams). The public response to this destitution was largely apathetic. While the migration was viewed as a shocking and even unbelievable event, it went largely unattended to for several reasons. At the height of the migration, between 1930-1936, the United States was simultaneously suffering the greatest economic depression the country had ever experienced. Quite simply, "people had their own problems" (Dunlap 158) and could not spare time, money, and effort in assisting others with their woes. In conjunction with the lack of support and attention to the thousands of displaced individuals, the misery was largely unseen by the US population. The Okies mostly traveled by night, stayed off of the main highways, and camped in out-of-the-way places in order to avoid trouble. Prior to the height of the problem, it was extremely rare, and almost unheard of, for large-circulation newspapers to run stories regarding the Dust Bowl and forced migration. The migrants were met with disdain from the native Californians when they were sighted and began to accumulate in large numbers. The Okies were looked down upon, rather, they were treated as second-class citizens, and ones who did not belong in their state. Steinbeck makes excellent note

of this disgust in the novel when a California native states, “These god-damned Okies are thieves... they bring disease, they’re filthy... how would you like to have your sister go out with one of them?” (332). Due to the invisibility of the Dust Bowl to millions of Americans, the Okies appeared in California much to the surprise and repulsion of many West-Coast dwellers. The support or assistance provided for the migrants was dismal at best, which left tens of thousands without sanitary living conditions, adequate food and water, or appropriate shelter; “These families were often forced at last into make-shift camps by the side of irrigation ditches and into the squalor that became characteristic of the conditions under which tens of thousands of Dust Bowl immigrants would live during the next decade” (Benson 157). The conditions for the migrants worsened, and the response of the public and government remained minimal.

Despite the meager public and governmental response to the problem, camps for the migrants were created in California, conceived by the State Director of Rural Rehabilitation, Harry Drobish and California economist Paul Taylor, were put into effect (Dunlap 160). In tandem with several professors specializing in agriculture and economics at the University of California, “a plan evolved to construct a chain of camps which could house all of the approximately 200,000 migrant workers in the state” (Dunlap 160). Despite almost immediate resistance, specifically from growers who felt the camps would become “hotbeds of Red activity” (Dunlap 160), the idea of mass camps designated for the displaced people continued to progress. After months of government debate, Drobish’s plan was approved and construction began in 1935. Each camp site developed differently, some as almost commercialized compounds with tens of thousands of families, and others with numbers barely reaching triple digits, serving more as gypsy camps hidden in the woods of California. One of the largest and well known camps, Weedpatch, appears in *The Grapes of Wrath* as a stopping point for the Joad

family. Steinbeck visited Weedpatch in early 1936 in order to accurately capture everything about the life in the migrant camps. From their daily tasks, to their interactions with one another, to their speech patterns, Steinbeck treated it as field research for his upcoming novel. He closely analyzed all aspects of life and meticulously recorded everything he encountered. Steinbeck overheard countless anecdotes and recorded them the way he heard them. This is a specific short conversation that Steinbeck overheard and transcribed during his time at Weedpatch:

Is yer wukin'?

No.

Why ain't yer?

Who wants so fur ter know?

Yer old wom'n.

How'd you know that?

She tole me.

Where was yer when she told yer?

By yer tent. (Dunlap 180)

Steinbeck brought home hundreds of written anecdotes and notes on the camp life in preparation for his novel. The experience provided a unique perspective and allowed him to see first hand the effects of the Dust Bowl. In the novel, Steinbeck captures the sorrow and dilapidation of the camps. Upon arriving in Hooverville, the Joads experience the low quality of life; "Tom looked about at the grimy tents, the junk equipment, at the old cars, the lumpy mattresses out in the sun, at the blackened cans on fire-blackened holes where the people cooked. He asked quietly, 'Ain't they work?'" (244-245). In order for Steinbeck to produce a novel of the caliber he desired, he felt it essential to accurately portray life in the migrant camp in order to

create a novel with an authentic setting, characters, and voice. A seasoned author and veteran of success, Steinbeck set out to achieve a literary masterpiece, which, largely because of his field research and first hand experience, he achieved.



Weedpatch Camp, where Steinbeck visited for his research and a stopping point for the Joads

### **Track 5: “Vigilante Man”**

Alongside Tom Joad, one of Steinbeck’s most complex and captivating characters is Jim Casy, a reverend of sorts who not only embodies Christ, but is responsible for the profound discoveries, morals, and themes throughout the story. The novel first introduces Casy as a preacher in Oklahoma struggling with his profession and his relationship with the church. A close friend of the Joads and a mentor to Tom, Casy decides to relinquish his official title and help guide the family westward to California after dust storms destroy the family farm, rendering impossible living conditions. Casy undergoes the deepest spiritual journey of any of the characters in the novel, becoming a prominent leader and organizer in California for the migrant workers. The character eventually comes to a tragic end, dying at the hands of vigilantes during a labor strike after he stands up to the hired thugs: “The heavy man swung with the pick handle.

Casy dodged down into the swing. The heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of one, and Casy fell sideways out of the light” (286). Casy’s complex character development stands out from the other figures in the novel.

His Christ-like similarities, on a surface level, are blatant. Steinbeck makes no attempt to hide the extremely deliberate parallels to Christ. Ab initio, his initials, Jim Casy, are the same as Jesus Christ. In the text, Casy sets out for California with twelve members of the Joad family, his disciples, and serves as their spiritual guide and leader. A member of the Joad clan, Connie, betrays the group and leaves in pursuit of an equivalent of “thirty pieces of silver” earned daily by the Oklahoma tractor drivers: “‘If I’d of knowed it would be like this I wouldn’ of came. I’d a studied nights ‘bout tractors back home an’ got me a three-dollar job. Fella can live awful nice on three dollars a day’” (252). The temptation of money is too great, and Connie vanishes suddenly, leaving the others to wonder what could have happened to the rogue member of their family. This decision, clearly parallels Judas’ decision to betray Jesus: “‘Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver” (Matthew 26:14-16). Just as Connie is a kind of Judas, Casy embodies Christ later on in the chapter when deputies break up the camp in which the Joads are staying. Casy urges Tom to leave with the family, fearing the authorities will arrest him for breaking parole. He then willingly places himself in danger; “‘Get out,’ he said. ‘Go on, get out-to the tent. You don’t know nothin’.’ ‘Yeah? How ‘bout you?’ Casy grinned at him. ‘Somebody got to take the blame’”(265). It is this selflessness and altruistic nature that gives him a Christ-like presence throughout the text.

Even at the time of his death when he faces the vigilantes, Casy cries, “You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids” (386). Although the vigilantes fail to listen or adhere to the former preacher’s plea, his words bear another direct parallel to Christ’s words; “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). While this parallel is slightly less blatant than the prior example, Steinbeck throughout the text intentionally reiterates the close proximity between Casy and Christ. In doing this, Steinbeck creates a character that is timeless, and in many ways, untouchable. He is a major contributor to the greatness of the novel. In keeping with the title of the book, Steinbeck gives Casy eternal, Biblical battles of good and evil.

Throughout the text, Casy redefines holiness and ultimately suggests that rather than striving for Heaven or a desire for what occurs after life, the most divine possibilities for humanity are on earth. Despite his simplistic and stylized way of speaking, Casy is the voice of moral truth and Christ-like piety. Unlike other characters, Casy explores humanity on a much more significant and deeper scale than Tom or Ma Joad or any of the other characters. Even early on in the text, he tells Tom, “Maybe all men got one big soul every’body’s a part of” (29), directly alluding to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “The Oversoul”: “We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.” This sentiment is reiterated by Casy after he relinquishes his title as Reverend and severs ties with the church in order to be closer to and aid the people:

I ain’t gonna baptize. I’m gonna work in the fiel’s, in the green fiel’s, an’ I’m gonna be near to folks. I ain’t gonna try to teach ‘em nothin’. I’m gonna try to learn. Gonna learn why the folks walks in the grass, gonna hear ‘em talk, gonna hear ‘em sing...All that’s holy, all that’s what I didn’ understan’ (94)

Such a profound and revolutionary way of thought reflects Steinbeck's intention to create a character of epic proportions. Casy undergoes a weighty and moral metamorphosis throughout the novel, making him a fascinating and heroic literary figure who stands the test of time. While Steinbeck intended to create a character that possessed the magnitude and scale of Casy, he did not intend for other artists like Woody Guthrie to be so heavily influenced and inspired by him. As shown later in the thesis, Guthrie makes Casy a pivotal figure in his own, Steinbeck-inspired work.

### **Track 6: "This Train Is Bound For Glory"**

The legacy of *The Grapes of Wrath* can be seen in countless awards, its popularity in American culture, and longevity. In the year of its publication, the novel was awarded both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel not only received critical acclaim, but it reached incredible popular success as well; according to the *New York Times*, it was "the best selling book of 1939." When Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, *The Grapes of Wrath* was cited more than any other novel he wrote. The novel was almost immediately adapted as a film, which won two Academy Awards and was chosen by the Library of Congress as one of the first 25 films to be selected for preservation by the National Film Registry. Noted Steinbeck scholar John Timmerman says that: "*The Grapes of Wrath* may well be the most thoroughly discussed novel—in criticism, reviews, and college classrooms— of 20th century American literature" (Timmerman 348). Like other great authors, Steinbeck's name has become an adjective: there is a Steinbeckian style of writing, just as a piece of literature can be Hemingwayesque or Shakespearean.

With the novel, Steinbeck established an awareness of the poor living conditions and minimal rights of the migrant workers through *The Grapes of Wrath*. The lack of public awareness or action in response to the hundreds of thousands of displaced Americans was counteracted by the popularity of the novel. Steinbeck utilized his celebrity status to host benefits to raise awareness for the migrant workers and their rights, appointing himself as a spokesperson and advocate for migrant and labor rights in California.

The novel provides readers with a compelling, sprawling and epic story, with characters that epitomize American grit and determination while set against one of the most tumultuous, yet authentically American stories of the twentieth century. Ed Cray quotes the *New York Times*' comment that it ranks "very high in the category of the great angry books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that have roused a people to fight against intolerable wrongs" (Cray 154). From his extensive cultural and historical research on the Dust Bowl and the migrant workers, to his character development, motifs, metaphors and themes, to his stylized yet accessible language, attention to detail and a capacity to pinpoint the emotion of any scene, Steinbeck created a masterpiece, unanimously recognized as such by experts and critics.

This is far from newfound knowledge or recent discovery. There is nothing original surrounding the claim that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a great novel. The first section of this thesis demonstrates Steinbeck's intent to create a novel of great literary proportions and his accomplishment of this task; *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the greatest works of American literature. This was Steinbeck's intent. However, what occurred after the novel's publication was something that Steinbeck did not foresee. The second half of this thesis examines the inadvertent effect of the novel: *The Grapes of Wrath* inspired an entirely new group of "folks," rousing an unintended audience and serving a catalyst for an American cultural revolution.

## Part 2: “Outside the Box”

“Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit.” –John Steinbeck, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*

### Track 7: “Oklahoma Hills”

Despite Steinbeck’s successful quest in creating the quintessential American novel and changing the scope of American literature, *The Grapes of Wrath* inspired an unintended population: the folks. Following the publication of the novel in 1939, an onslaught of musical and cultural material erupted from the influence of Steinbeck’s strikingly real and biting words about the Dust Bowl and the migration westward. *The Grapes of Wrath* not only touched a population of politically charged folk singers, but also created a cultural chain of influence that rippled throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No other individual better represents, epitomizes, and embodies the unintended folk influence of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* than Woody Guthrie.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, born on July 12, 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma, defined the rambling man existence and the life of a wandering folksinger in America during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Growing up in a tumultuous time in Oklahoma during the great oil boom and subsequent Great Dust Storm in 1935, Guthrie experienced the hardships of lower class and Midwest life from and early age. A combination of severe economic depression and the elimination of a livable climate in Oklahoma directed Guthrie towards California. Like

thousands of other “Okies,” Oklahoma natives fleeing westward from the Dust Storm (Cray 68), Guthrie sought work, financial stability, and a better life in California. This mass migration, however, was met with disdain and unwelcoming Californians. The website maintained by Woody Guthrie Publications says that when Guthrie arrived in California in 1937, he “experienced severe scorn, hatred, and even physical antagonism from resident Californians, who opposed the massive migration of the so-called ‘Okie’ outsiders” (Canoni).

Guthrie picked up odd jobs while in California, eventually landing a position at a local radio station, KFVD in Los Angeles, where he sang traditional songs as well as his original compositions. The radio station provided Guthrie a platform to discuss controversial topics that ranged from politics and religion to the inequalities in California experienced by the migrant workers. Despite his temporary residence in Los Angeles, Guthrie’s soul and mind remained in Oklahoma and situation in the Midwest. In Ed Cray’s detailed biography of Guthrie, he writes about a night at a colleague’s house where he was asked where he was from. Cray recounts Guthrie’s response and subsequent actions: “‘Those Oklahoma hills.’ Moments later, he got up, came into the house for paper and pencil, and returned to the back porch. Fifteen or twenty minutes passed before Guthrie was back with a song. The song, promptly sung that night on KFVD, was to become one of Guthrie’s most popular: “‘Oklahoma Hills’” (Cray 111). Despite Guthrie’s radio success, in 1939 his rambling tendencies led him away from southern California. For many months, he traveled through across the US, working hand to mouth and playing his songs for both fellow travelers and willing passersby.

In his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie candidly illustrates his experiences as a rambling man, traveling the country by boxcar, foot, and thumb. His words and cadence echo his harsh and wandering lifestyle, providing the reader with an authentic sense of his journeys across

the American landscape. In the opening chapter, he describes his experiences in a boxcar alongside dozens of other hobos, fighting for warmth and a dry space in the boxcar alongside other weary travelers. Guthrie's words are revealing ones of harsh living and constant self-questioning. He reflects:

“My eyes closed tight quivering til they exploded like the rain when the lightning dumped a truckload of thunder down along the train... Who's all these crazy men down there howling out at each other like hyenas? Are these men? Who am I? How come them here? How the hell come me here? What am I supposed to do here?” (35)

This deep self-reflection continues throughout the autobiography. Guthrie's words epitomize a rambling man, scraping by from day to day.

Guthrie's autobiography also reveals his affinity for the working man, a key trait that appears throughout Guthrie's personal and professional choices, especially in his relationship with Steinbeck and Steinbeck's work. Towards the conclusion of the autobiography, Guthrie recounted his time in the prestigious Rainbow Room atop of Rockefeller Center in 1942 singing with The Almanac Singers, a heavily political folk group. After the show, Guthrie swore to the other members of the group that he would never perform in such a corporate, staged venue again. Rather, he claimed that he preferred singing for union workers and common men across the country, “cause singing with them made me friends with them, an' I felt like somehow I was in on their work” (388). This statement in Guthrie's autobiography not only reveals his preferred audience and company, but provides insight to the people he promoted, supported, and fought for through his songs.

As an integral part of the autobiography, Guthrie intersperses his anecdotes with the music and lyrics of his songs. The narrative serves as a bridge between the lyrics, the true heart of the autobiography, as Guthrie provides brief snippets of a chorus or verse throughout the text. At the conclusion of the first chapter, he continues his description of the storm, this time introducing lyrics that complement the scenario: “My ear flat against the tin roof soaked up some music and singing coming from down inside of the car: ‘This train don’t carry no rustlers/Whores, pimps, or side-street hustlers/This train is bound for glory/This train’” (36). This section of a verse from “This Train Is Bound For Glory” not only represents the lifestyle of a rambling songster, but also serves as a metaphor for Guthrie’s autobiography and story at large. The images of the struggling, nomadic folk singer provide the reader with a sense of harsh living, but also with the notion that music is the sole driving, compelling force in Guthrie’s life.

In addition to the words and music, *Bound For Glory* includes Guthrie’s illustrations, which provide visual representations of his experiences. While they are simplistic in style and even abstract in nature, the sketches enhance the text and lyrics, providing the reader with Guthrie’s complete artistic experience. This particular illustration of the boxcar described in Chapter One captures the frustration of Guthrie and the frenzied, dirty nature of boxcar travel.



Guthrie’s drawing of men on top of a boxcar that appears in his autobiography (Guthrie)

**Track 8: “Pretty Boy Floyd”**

In 1939, Guthrie spent the majority of the summer in Los Angeles with friend and actor Will Geer. Geer, who was filming the 1940 film *The Flight for Life* by documentary film director Pare Lorentz, frequently invited Guthrie to the set. Without any set commitments or agenda in California, Guthrie spent much of his time mulling around the film set and playing at leftist benefits or performing sets in Skid Row bars at night (Cray 153). During a break from shooting, Geer introduced Guthrie to Steinbeck. Steinbeck was in Los Angeles for the summer learning about filmmaking from Lorentz after the unprecedented success of *The Grapes of Wrath*. While Steinbeck was immensely pleased with the record-breaking sales and the intended commercial success of the novel, he lacked any knowledge of the film industry. Under the tutelage of Lorentz, Steinbeck was not only able to study filmmaking, but also familiarize himself with the Los Angeles social and cultural circle. Steinbeck immediately fascinated Guthrie, who was rarely influenced or impressed with celebrities. Ed Robbin, who ran a broadcast news program at KFVD, the Los Angeles radio station at which Guthrie played, stressed that “Once [Guthrie] heard about Steinbeck, he *had* to read *The Grapes of Wrath*” (Cray 154). In Guthrie’s own summary of the novel, he wrote:

It is about pullin’ out of Oklahoma and Arkansas and down south and driftin’ around over the state of California, busted, disgusted, down and out and lookin’ for work. Shows you how come us got to be that way. Shows the damn bankers, men that broke us and the dust that choked us, and it comes right out in plain English and says what to do about it. (Cray 154)

Guthrie's instant personal connection to the novel paved the way for his passionate and zealous appreciation for Steinbeck and his work. Guthrie saw Steinbeck's words as ones that not only accurately described his upbringing in Oklahoma, but also gave an authentic representation of the hundreds of thousands of individuals like Guthrie who suffered through the Dust Bowl, subsequent displacement, and forced migration to California. While Steinbeck was not intent on influencing other artists who experienced the events in the novel, Guthrie instantly formed a close bond with the text and its ideals. Guthrie associated himself with Steinbeck's simple, straightforward approach to writing. Captivated by both Steinbeck's novel and his position on workers' rights, Guthrie, alongside Geer, spent the majority of the summer working with a newly organized John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Farm Workers. Steinbeck himself remained primarily in Los Angeles learning about the process of filmmaking for the forthcoming screen adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Guthrie wrote later that:

We went around to forum halls, rallies, picnics, meeting and all kind of public places, back and forth over the mountains in old junk heap jalopies, playing, singing, making speeches, to the cotton strikers around Brawley, and around Indio, over the hump to Bakersfield, and we organized caravans of Hollywood people, Los Angeles people, to come and visit the feet walking barefooted with a picket sign. (Cray 155)

That summer, Guthrie served as living proof of the effects of the Dust Bowl to the social elite, writers, and filmmakers with whom Steinbeck kept company. He was the token figure for benefits, charities, and galas. He not only embodied the rambling, Dust Bowl man in an almost caricature-like fashion, but he could sing exceptionally well about the sorrows and hardships of the life of a wandering soul displaced by the tragedies of the Dust Bowl. Furthermore, Guthrie

embodied the physique of the rambling man; wispy, spry, and slightly built, he perfectly fit the stereotype. However, in the eyes of Steinbeck and his peers, Guthrie was just that: a character. At a benefit late that summer of 1939, Guthrie overheard an attendee of the benefit remark that the only aspect of Guthrie's "getup" that was missing were overalls, a costuming faux pas that was sure to be remedied at the next gathering (Kagan).

Unbeknownst to his audience, Guthrie's work on behalf of Steinbeck's organization not only fueled his own advocacy for migrant workers and speaking out against the injustice in California, but also spurred his personal creativity and songwriting. While a studio album was not on Guthrie's radar and would not for be nearly a year, "Steinbeck's characters were to make their way into Guthrie's songs as early as this summer of 1939" (Cray 154). Guthrie remained in California for the duration of 1939 and the early months of 1940, writing songs inspired by Steinbeck and continuing his late night performances throughout the southern California region. It was not until a Steinbeck benefit organized by Alan Lomax in the spring of 1940 that Guthrie's career and life radically changed.

### **Track 9: "Tom Joad"**

Alan Lomax was not only an enthusiastic promoter and fan of American folk music, but also had a keen knack for finding mostly undiscovered talent throughout the country. The son of John Avery Lomax, a pioneering collector of folk songs primarily in the West and Southeast, Alan had accompanied his father in his travels from a young age. At twenty-four, Lomax had become a respected discoverer and collector of folk music in his own right. By March 1940, he was a driving force in the burgeoning revival of American folk music and was given the title of "Assistant in Charge of the Archive of Folk Song" at the Library of Congress in Washington. In

the spring of 1940, Lomax arranged the lineup of performers at the Steinbeck Committee fundraiser in California:

Beyond official Washington, the younger Lomax had promoted a succession of folk music programs broadcast nationally on the Columbia Broadcasting System. He had persuaded RCA, Columbia, and Decca Records to donate for the Steinbeck Committee fund raiser— all but Will Geer’s friend from California, this bushy-haired Okie with exaggerated drawl. (Cray 169)

While this was not Lomax’s initial encounter with Guthrie’s name or his music, it was the first time that he experienced Guthrie’s live performance; Lomax was immediately fascinated and impressed by the spry yet emotionally captivating folkster. Years later, Lomax was quoted recalling his initial impression of Guthrie: “Here was Will Rogers returned, without the rope tricks... but carrying a guitar” (Cray 168). Guthrie’s sheer elation from his invitation to perform at Steinbeck’s benefit radiated from the stage throughout his performance. Lomax, ecstatic over his newfound talent in Guthrie, invited him immediately following the Steinbeck benefit to the Library of Congress to record a selection of songs for the archives. With his sights set on the east coast, Guthrie agreed to Lomax’s request and set out for New York City.

Once in New York City, Guthrie signed with RCA Records with Lomax’s assistance and immediately began recording an album of folk songs. The label, hesitant to sign a relatively unknown singer, was reassured by Lomax of Guthrie’s authenticity, and perhaps more importantly, his relation to Steinbeck and the Dust Bowl. Lomax spoke highly of the singer, citing him as an authentic chronicler of the Dust Bowl who flawlessly spoke the folk idiom. RCA, much like Guthrie, was “tantalized by the success of both the book and then the motion picture *The Grapes of Wrath*” (Cray 180) and agreed to record the singer, in part because of his

connection to Steinbeck. In late April and May 1940, Guthrie recorded *Dust Bowl Ballads*, his first studio and commercial album. Considered one of the first concept albums, it loosely traces Guthrie's journey through the tumultuous Dust Bowl and chronicles his experience as an "Okie" during the migration westward to California.

Guthrie's fourteen-track album encapsulates the socioeconomic and emotional hardships that millions experienced during the 1930s. Structurally, the album begins by addressing of the most severe dust storms the Midwest experienced in "The Great Dust Storm (Dust Storm Disaster)". Approximately a third of the way through the album, the listener encounters "Pretty Boy Floyd," one of the most famous songs from *Dust Bowl Ballads*, that details and romanticizes the life of Charles Arthur Floyd, a notorious bank robber in the Midwest during the 1930s. While his life is not directly related to the Dust Bowl or the migration west, the song has famously been covered and rerecorded by musicians in the decades following the release of Guthrie's album. The tenth track of the album entitled "Tom Joad," is directly derived from Steinbeck's protagonist and the plot of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The song, with a total of seventeen verses, is significantly lengthier than the other tracks and immediately garnered the attention of the press and general population. While Guthrie's melodies are beautifully constructed, his lyrics are the true masterpiece, steeped in the stark reality of the Dust Bowl while showing the continuous influence of Steinbeck's novel throughout the album. To demonstrate this, the most important song from the album will be broken down and analyzed.

#### "Vigilante Man"

In Guthrie's song "Vigilante Man," he angrily highlights the vigilantes and hired thugs who were notorious for violently infiltrating migrant worker strikes in California. The song frequently repeats the questions "Have you seen that vigilante man?" and "Was that the vigilante

men?” signifying the perpetual watch for and fear of these groups of men. Alongside Guthrie’s extreme disgust for vigilante men is the inclusion of the Reverend Casy. In Cray’s biography of Guthrie, he states that “Steinbeck’s characters were to make their way into Guthrie’s songs as early as the summer of 1939. His angry ‘Vigilante Man’ recalled *The Grapes of Wrath* without explanation, as if he were certain the reference would be understood” (Cray 154). While Casy is not the protagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he is the spiritual compass of the Joad family and one of the most significant moral figures, embodying many of the overarching themes, and also serving as a Christ figure and martyr. In the fifth verse, Guthrie outlines Casy’s journey in relinquishing his role as a preacher in order to pursue his talents as a speaker and leader, eventually serving as an organizer of the migrant workers in California:

Preacher Casey was just a workin' man,  
 And he said, "Unite all you working men."  
 Killed him in the river some strange man.  
 Was that a vigilante man?

While Guthrie obviously references Steinbeck’s character, he also misspells his name by adding an ‘e’. The reason for this is unknown, although perhaps it was to make the character appear as more of an everyday, common man, since “Casey” is a more typical spelling and most likely would have been more familiar to Guthrie. Casy eventually loses his life in California in a fight with a vigilante man during a strike outside of a peach farm, protesting the ruthlessly low wages of the migrant workers. In the novel, Casy attempts to justify and reason with the men who come to break up the strike by explaining, “Listen... You fellas don’ know what you’re doin’. You’re helpin’ to starve kids” (386). Casy serves the greater good in the novel, fighting for the displaced workers while on a constant search for a higher power. Guthrie’s song not only

serves as an anti-vigilante ballad, but also as a representation of the importance of Casy as a literary and cultural figure.

### “Tom Joad”

Perhaps Guthrie’s most famous track from his debut album, “Tom Joad” retells the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*, highlighting the life of protagonist Tom Joad. In the author’s interview with Sarah Lee Guthrie, Woody Guthrie expert, archivist, and friend of the Guthrie family Barry Ollman also provided key insights to Guthrie’s work. In regards to “Tom Joad”, Ollman notes that the song: “was written overnight.... Pete was there and when they woke up in the morning there was just paper all over the floor, in the trash can, and a pile of five or six pages with eighteen verses that was all of ‘Tom Joad.’ And it’s perfect. It just tells the whole story.” Guthrie begins as does the novel: with Joad’s recent parole from the penitentiary after being charged with homicide, and his reintegration into his Oklahoma homestead with his family:

Tom Joad got out of the old McAlester Pen  
 There he got his parole  
 After four long years on a man killing charge  
 Tom Joad come a walking down the road, poor boy  
 Tom Joad come a walking down the road

Guthrie manages to touch on the major tragedies of the novel, including the stubborn yet heart-wrenching plea of Joad’s grandpa to die with his farm: “He picked up a handful of land in his hand/Said: I’m stayin’ with the farm til I die.” The song continues to describe the Joad’s forced migration from the family farm westward. Like Steinbeck, Guthrie portrays California a daunting, yet hopeful land. Guthrie captures the progress into an unfamiliar and foreign land, mentioning the jungle camps created by the displaced Okies. While “Tom Joad” outlines the

plotline of the novel, it places heavy emphasis on the relationship between Tom Joad and Jim Casy. He not only tracks their relocation California, but also their progress in becoming organizers and leaders in the migrant movement. In seventeen verses, Guthrie summarizes *The Grapes of Wrath's* plotline, highlights the social and economic hardships, and captures the emotionally intricate relationships between characters. This is an incredible feat considering the minimalistic style of the song; the lyrics are the genius and key to the longevity of "Tom Joad." James Dunlap discusses this in his article, "Through the Eyes of Tom Joad: Patterns of American Idealism, Bob Dylan, and the Folk Protest Movement": "Since there is little remarkable musically about Guthrie's song, its sympathetic portrayal of Depression-era itinerant workers would seem to be the basis of its appeal" (Dunlap 556). As with Steinbeck's straightforward and no-frills style of writing, Guthrie puts forth his point in a convincingly candid manner. In the final lines of the song, Guthrie emphasizes one of the main themes of the novel:

Wherever little children are hungry and cry

Wherever people ain't free.

Wherever men are fightin' for their rights

That's where I'm gonna be, Ma.

That's where I'm a gonna be (Guthrie)

The final lines epitomize the image of the common, working man that both Joad and Casy exude in his novel. Despite the economic and social hardships suffered by the characters, there is a constant drive and a desire, largely influenced by Casy, to help the fellow man. Guthrie captures an overall tone of robustness and durability that Steinbeck portrays in his novel. In these four lines, Guthrie encapsulates the powerful connection with Steinbeck that stretches far beyond a shared plotline.

“Pretty Boy Floyd”

While much of the hype of the album centered Steinbeck-inspired songs such as “The Ballad of Tom Joad” and “Vigilante Man,” Guthrie also included songs relevant to the Dust Bowl and the cultural figures of the Midwest. Around the time of the album, Guthrie formed a firm antipathy to banks, an ironic and slightly unusual opinion for the son of a real estate salesman. Guthrie’s obsession was transposed into a song when he “draped the Robin Hood myth about the unworthy shoulders of bank robber Charles ‘Pretty Boy’ Floyd, hounded into a fugitive’s life and sheltered by neighbors along Oklahoma’s Canadian River” (Cray 148-149). In the opening verse, Guthrie employs classic ballad style lyrics that signify to the listener the song is a narrative:

If you'll gather 'round me, children,  
A story I will tell  
'Bout Pretty Boy Floyd, an outlaw,  
Oklahoma knew him well.

These opening lines set a unique tone for this particular song. The song follows a traditional ballad rhyme-scheme (a, b, c, b) and depicts a structured storyline within the lyrics. Even from the four opening lines in the first verse, Guthrie employs a classic ballad technique of calling his audience in order to tell his story. He continues by sharing the story of Charles Floyd. In the song, Guthrie stresses his dishonorable reputation:

Yes, he took to the trees and timber  
To live a life of shame;  
Every crime in Oklahoma  
Was added to his name

Similar to songs like the album's opening track "The Great Dust Storm," Guthrie constructs a straightforward song with simple verbs and very few adjectives. The rest of the song continues to describe Floyd's misdeeds and concludes with a slightly sarcastic and ironic quip regarding the dust storm's displacements: "You won't ever see an outlaw/Drive a family from their home." This clever ending most likely references the image presented in "The Great Dust Storm" of the thousands of individuals forced out of Oklahoma after the destruction of the dust storm. While "Pretty Boy Floyd" is not otherwise directly related to either the Dust Bowl or *The Grapes of Wrath*, the track is extremely significant within the context of American folk music revival, spurred in large part by Guthrie. Since its original release in 1940, the song has garnered a following within the music community. The song has been covered by a vast array of musical artists ranging from The Byrds, Jack Elliott, to Bob Dylan. Similar to "Tom Joad", the incredible longevity of "Pretty Boy Floyd" is a testament to Guthrie's intelligent song composition as well as his genius in creating songs derived from individuals and events exceptionally authentic to the Dust Bowl. Thus, even when Guthrie is not directly referencing *The Grapes of Wrath*, he is still in tune with its spirit and basic message.

It is important and interesting to note that Steinbeck's response to the release of *Dust Bowl Ballads* was not positive. Although there is very little literature in existence that discusses the relationship between Steinbeck and Guthrie, and even less about their opinions of each other, there are accounts of Steinbeck's reaction and response to Guthrie's "Tom Joad". The first appears in a footnote in Ed Cray's biography of Guthrie titled *Ramblin' Man*. In the footnote, Cray explains Steinbeck's reaction to *Dust Bowl Ballads*: "In an interview on February 26, 1978, [Will] Geer told Los Angeles writer Dick Russell that Steinbeck later grouched, "That fuckin' little bastard! In 17 verses he got the entire story of a thing that took me two years to

write!”(Cray 181). This is essentially the same point made by Sarah Lee Guthrie. She echoed this sentiment during an interview conducted by the author in January 2014, referencing a story that Arlo Guthrie frequently tells the family: “My dad says there’s a letter from Steinbeck that after Woody wrote “The Ballad of Tom Joad” he heard it, he said ‘That little bastard.’ He said ‘If only he had written that song before. He could have saved me a whole novel.” Although Sarah Lee Guthrie recounts the story with humor and lightheartedness, she mentioned in the interview that Arlo never told the story using any other word than ‘bastard.’ This word also appears in Cray’s account, which reinforces the acute irritation mixed with grudging admiration that Steinbeck felt in regards to Guthrie’s song. “Tom Joad” shifted the spotlight from Steinbeck to a common, rambling man, who had much more in common with Tom Joad than the celebrated author. Steinbeck set out to create an epic, intricate American novel, and succeeded. Guthrie was influenced, almost exclusively, by *The Grapes of Wrath*, not only by recounting the plot in a seventeen-verse songs, but also by echoing similar accounts of the Dust Bowl, subsequent migration, and the struggles and inequalities of those affected.

Steinbeck felt upstaged and stolen from by a commoner. While Steinbeck’s reaction is worthy of note, it is also important to recognize that it does not change Guthrie’s inspiration and composition of *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Artistic influence and inspiration is a convoluted world of borrowing, recycling, interpreting and stealing, and it raises questions of ownership and originality. Guthrie created an artistic work that proved as popular, if not more so, than Steinbeck’s ambitious novel. This is the beginning of a chain of influence that continues throughout the twentieth century within the Folk Music Revival. Artistic influence and the borrowing of ideas is far from a novel concept. As demonstrated later in the thesis, this specific chain of influence begins with *The Grapes of Wrath*, continues through Guthrie’s Dust Bowl

Steinbeckian songs, and has a vast scope of influence on musical legends like Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Neil Young.

### “Jesus Christ”

Perhaps one of the most significant songs and examples of Guthrie composing in a Steinbeckian tradition does not appear in *Dust Bowl Blues*. Rather, it is a song written in 1940 entitled “Jesus Christ,” where Guthrie’s affinity with and inspiration from *The Grapes of Wrath* is demonstrated once again. Guthrie set the lyrics of his song to the traditional tune and outlaw ballad “Jesse James,” which is interesting in itself due to Guthrie’s fascination with outlaws as seen with “Pretty Boy Floyd.” Through this song, Guthrie utilizes Christ as a figure that bears striking similarities to Steinbeck’s character Casy. As detailed in Track 5, Steinbeck projects Casy as a Christ like figure who walks among the common, underprivileged men. In “Jesus Christ,” Guthrie immediately accentuates Christ’s humanity:

Jesus Christ was a man who traveled the land  
 A hard working man and brave.  
 He said to the rich “Give your goods to the poor.”  
 But they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

Rather than praise him for his holiness, Guthrie describes him as a good person and as a hard worker who helped others in his time on earth. Guthrie’s deliberate choice in description parallels Steinbeck’s of Casy; “The opening words emphasize the humanity of Christ, and the subsequent ones in turn cast him as an industrious migrant worker, a preacher of economic equality, and a martyr at the hands of a shadowy ‘they.’ A more Casylike Christ it would be hard to imagine” (Bullivant 24-25). In his song, Guthrie creates a complex relationship between Christ, Casy, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Though the song does not directly reference the

characters as “Tom Joad” or “Vigilante Man” both do, Guthrie demonstrates his genius in mirroring Steinbeck; just as Steinbeck parallels Casy with Christ, here, Guthrie parallels Christ with Casy. This is seen throughout the song as well: “The bankers and the preachers they nailed him on a cross” and the “Cops and soldiers, they nailed him in the air.” In the song, instead of creating a battle between God and man, Guthrie depicts a war between good and evil men, exactly as Steinbeck does. Rather than praising Christ for his piety, Guthrie deliberately places Christ in the heart of a flawed humanity. In this light, “It is interesting to compare these groups with those groups in *The Grapes of Wrath* who conspire against the migrant workers- i.e. precisely those doing to the Okies now what was done to Jesus two thousand years before” (Bullivant 26). Guthrie uses Steinbeck’s character, unapologetically modeled after Christ, as inspiration for his Christ figure in the ballad. Whether Guthrie recounts the plotline of the novel, retells the heart-wrenching story of the vigilante men, or uses Casy as an image for Jesus Christ, the representation and influence of Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath* throughout Guthrie’s work is undeniable. An unintended effect of the novel, Guthrie’s Steinbeck-infused songs created a ripple in American music and culture in a way Steinbeck could never have predicted.

### **Track 10: “All You Fascists”**

As Guthrie traveled the country performing his folk songs while simultaneously experiencing the various conditions of life, he expanded his political foundation and projected his opinionated voice. Guthrie’s personal experiences of poverty and prejudice as an Okie seeking work and security in California, combined with his observations of social unrest, paved the way for newly found, politically charged songs. In his autobiography, Guthrie recounts an encounter with a fellow migrant worker on a train down the California coast in search of work.

The pair discuss the difficulty of obtaining money despite an abundant amount of work and the poor treatment the migrants experience. When parting, Guthrie bids the man called Brown farewell and tells him, “Good luck, boy, take it easy, but take it” (222), a sentiment that becomes imperative to Guthrie and his fellow folk singers. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression, the lingering remnants of the Great War and the imminent involvement in World War II, the latter years of the 1930s brought great political unrest and created political hotbeds throughout the country. One of the most prominent and influential groups was The Almanac Singers. The group consisted of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, and Lee Hays. It was formed between 1939-1941 in Greenwich Village and immediately began producing and performing labor-movement songs. Over the course of their four-year collaboration, The Almanac Singers had two main focal points: the rights of American workers, and their strong opinions regarding World War II. While it is important to note their contributions to the political and cultural conversations about war, it is essential to note The Almanac Singers’ relationship with the labor movement and worker rights.

Once the reality and unavoidable involvement in World War II became apparent, politically motivated groups like the Singers took it upon themselves to impose their opinions, both of support and disagreement, on the country. In Serge Denisoff’s article on the Singers entitled “Take It Easy, but Take It,” he explains “The Almanacs supported the nonintervention campaign of the Communists and its front, the American Peace Mobilization” (Denisoff 25). After their brief opposition to the war prior to 1941, the group expressed their intense hatred of the Nazi regime and Communism. The Singers released an album entitled *Songs for John Doe* in the spring of 1941 in which they voiced their stark and unwavering feelings towards the events in Europe. Guthrie’s own words in *Bound for Glory* repeat the same sentiments that appear in songs

such as *Songs for John Doe*. Guthrie writes that “Hitler an’ Mussolini is out ta make a chaingang slave outta you, outta me, an’ outta ever’body else!” (188). The Singer’s songs of protest highlight similar feelings of pro-Communist, anti-Fascist leanings. One member of the group was famously quoted as saying “We made up songs against Hilterism and Fascism, homemade and imported” (Denisoff 26-27). The Singers did not continue their musically political statements, and the group fell apart shortly after the release of the album.

While The Almanac Singers expressed their disdain for the war, they focused much of their attention and artistic energy on providing a voice for the labor movement and the rights of workers. Just six months after the group formed in New York, “they went on a cross-country tour singing for thousands of union members and ‘workers’ groups, exhorting them to ‘take it easy, but take it’” (Denisoff 24). All members of The Almanac Singers maintained a great investment and concern regarding labor rights, especially Guthrie, who had experienced the unfairness and extreme lack of rights in California. In Seeger’s foreword to Guthrie’s autobiography, he writes that, “[Guthrie] broadened his feeling to include the working people of all the world...and you can be quite sure that today he would have poured his fiercest scorn on the criminal fools who sucked America into the Vietnam mess” (viii). The Almanac Singers gave Guthrie a perfect platform to express both his support for labor workers, a cause about which he cared deeply, and his fiery opinions regarding the political turmoil abroad. The major contribution made by The Almanac Singers to the labor movement was their album *Talking Union* in 1941. The album became an anthem for the labor movement and worker rights across the country.

While Steinbeck was not a member of The Almanac Signers or this particular artistic scene in Greenwich, many of his opinions and beliefs are echoed in their musical compositions. Just as Guthrie’s inspiration for *Dust Bowl Ballads* resided in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck

also served as the muse for many of The Almanac Singers' songs. In a recent article published shortly after Seeger's passing in January 2014, it is noted that "Seeger himself likened his musical career to a Steinbeck quote, having repeatedly referenced Tom Joad's emotional frustration in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (Muscolino). The quote Seeger references, spoken by Joad, "Wherever children are hungry and cry, wherever people ain't free, wherever men are fightin' for their rights, that's where I'm gonna be" (Steinbeck PAGE 3), is the epitome of the gritty perseverance that is the concurrent theme throughout all of these artistic works. Just as Steinbeck did with his writings, specifically *The Grapes of Wrath*, artists such as Seeger and Guthrie exposed their inequality of labor rights through prose and music alike. While their creative mediums differ, the concerns and beliefs of Steinbeck and members of The Almanac Singers exist in the same realm of working class rights and the support of the labor movement.

Despite the short-lived existence of The Almanac Singers, the group not only paved the way for outspoken and political artistic groups, but remains one of the key ingredients for the creation of today's folk music revival. As Denisoff notes in his article, "A handful of chronicles have noted, without elaboration, that the formation of the Almanacs was a milestone in the history of the urban folk music movement" (Denisoff 21-22). Through their simplistic, yet extremely effective, lyrics and harmonies, The Almanac Singers inspired a culture and genre of folk music that, at its core, became an extremely outspoken and political movement throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Denisoff states, "the singing unit comprised the basis for the formation of the Weavers, who in turn provided the prototype for many revival groups such as the Kingston Trio and the Limelighters" (Denisoff 22). This chain of musical and cultural influence is traced back to the shared foundational values that artists such as Steinbeck, Guthrie, and Seeger all embrace and advance.

**Track 11: “The Ghost of Tom Joad”**

The cultural and artistic influence of Steinbeck and Guthrie reaches far beyond their thoughts, opinions, and interactions with one another. One of the greatest examples of this is folk legend Bob Dylan. Relating to Guthrie and Steinbeck from an early age, Dylan wrote a high school paper entitled “Does Steinbeck Sympathize With His Characters?” in which he analyzed Steinbeck’s relationship, as an author, to his characters and the novel as a whole. Dylan’s affinity for Steinbeckian-like work exponentially grew when he discovered Guthrie in college. Similar to Guthrie, Dylan associated him with the lifestyle of a commoner, and the idea of a traveling folkster greatly appealed to the young singer. While there are countless examples that liken Dylan to Guthrie, perhaps the most deliberate is Dylan’s 1962 song “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”. In the song, he sings of a “highway of diamonds with nobody on it” and other dilapidated conditions in the country, similar to both Steinbeck and Guthrie. While Dylan’s song in itself is extremely complex and open to vast interpretation, the main point to note is that, “After hearing and seeing too much injustice, Dylan [sought] to identify with the common man in the same way that Reverend Casy did” (Dunlap 557). A vast majority of Dylan’s songs, like Guthrie’s, involve downtrodden characters, a rambling lifestyle, and questioning government policies and decisions. Just as Guthrie’s outspokenness voice against Fascism rang out in the 1930s and 40s, Dylan’s became the voice for the next generation, serving as the American voice against the backdrop of the tumultuous 1960s. During a Time Magazine interview in 1963, the interviewer asked Dylan about seeing Guthrie person live, to which he responded, “I was at the high point of my life from seein’ Woody. He ain’t a folk singer—he’s a genius genius genius genius” (Dylan).

Just as Guthrie’s “Tom Joad” profiled Steinbeck’s protagonist, Bruce Springsteen adapted the character in his own way, and in 1995, released the album “The Ghost of Tom Joad.”

The song, which infuses Springsteen's rock persona with the Steinbeckian folk themes of Guthrie's original version, follows a modern day character resembling Tom Joad along railroad tracks, underneath bridges, and other browbeaten locations. Springsteen has also famously covered other songs of Guthrie's including "Vigilante Man." While his style and presentation is much more modern than the traditional folk style of Guthrie or even Dylan, Springsteen maintains the spirit of the original compositions.

In 1988, Woody Guthrie was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Folk singer and American music legend Neil Young was asked to present the award to Guthrie's son, Arlo at the ceremony in Cleveland, Ohio. In his speech, Young discusses his musical and artistic inspiration:

In the early days for me, when I was in high-school, I was trying to figure out what I was doing, you know. I thought maybe I'd like to be one of those rockers that could bend the strings and get down on my knees, and kind of make everybody go crazy. Then I wanted to be that other guy, too, that had a little acoustic guitar, and sing a few songs - sing about things that I really felt inside myself, and things I saw going on around me. Then I saw Bob Dylan, then I saw so many others, Phil Ochs, Tim Hardin, Pete Seeger, and it all started to come together kind of for me...So you know, I don't know which one of those guys I tried to be, but any way, these guys, they all came from the same place, these singer-songwriters, and it all seems to go back and start with Woody Guthrie. His songs are gonna last forever, and some of the songs of his descendants are gonna last forever. (Young)

Within a few sentences, Young captures the essence of the direct chain of influence that occurs between Steinbeck and these musical artists. Young acknowledges multiple styles and genres of music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that ultimately funnel back to Woody Guthrie, regardless of style or genre, and from Guthrie to Steinbeck. His music, like Steinbeck, possesses a minimalistic yet extremely emotional writing style is effective, timeless, and in many ways, replicated by dozens of artists that followed decades after Guthrie. The idea of classic, simple American folk songs continues to extend to the present day with Young's recent release of *Americana* in June 2012. The eleven-track album consists of recordings of iconic folk songs, including Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." Young, despite his Canadian heritage, embodies the same American spirit that Steinbeck alludes to when discussing Guthrie.

Steinbeck's presence is never far from Guthrie, if only by subtle influence. One critic of Young's album even likens the music video of "Oh Susannah" to Steinbeck: "Neil Young and Crazy Horse just released their first video from *Americana*, a modernized version of the classic minstrel song 'Oh Susannah.' Plus, the video itself looks like a scene out of the 1940 film adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*" (Saunders). Young claims in his speech that musical artists of the twentieth century, despite their style or genre, can be traced back to Guthrie. Yet, as this thesis shows, the backdrop and of Guthrie's music and style is heavily reliant on Steinbeck, and specifically *The Grapes of Wrath*. This chain of influence, beginning with Guthrie and extending through Dylan, to Springsteen, Young and beyond, begins with Steinbeck.

### **Track 12: "Go Waggaloo"**

Artists influencing, borrowing, and even stealing from one another is a common, and arguably necessary, element in creativity. And while all of the artists mentioned above have been creatively linked to one another before, never has this chain of influence been traced back to Guthrie, Steinbeck and this particular novel. The spark of an idea created a monumental novel and a chain of artistic and cultural influence that has since stretched through the present day. It is also interesting to note that Sarah Lee Guthrie's husband and band mate is Johnny Irion, who is Steinbeck's grandnephew. The two lineages are now married to one another and continue to produce music in the folk tradition. Yet as heard in the audio track of the author's interview with Guthrie, there are many uncertainties, even among his direct ancestors, regarding the exact details of the events that unfolded. However, this thesis displays the concrete research, evidence, and analysis that allows for the true personal and artistic relationship between Guthrie and Steinbeck to be unveiled.

There is an element to *The Grapes of Wrath*, to Guthrie's songs, and the lives and interactions of these men that is so quintessentially and profoundly American, that it strikes deeply and resonates within us. The purpose of this thesis, while showing the intended and unintended affects of a novel, is to piece together and put forth the incredible, and until now, largely unrecognized, relationship between artists that sparked a cultural revolution. Though their words after often poignantly written, this thesis is a story that captures the way that Guthrie and Steinbeck's words, lyrics and music are not only a part of culture and history, but an imperative part of American identity. It is exceptional and it is intricate and it is fascinating. The more this chain of influence is examined, the more it appears to grow and sustain itself. And that is the uniqueness and brilliance of it. Sarah Lee Guthrie articulates it best:

“Beware. You step into this world, and it’s never ending.”

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