

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

The Verses Woody Guthrie Hoped You Would Hear

HOMESCHOOL STUDY GUIDE

Written by	Woody Guthrie
Date written	February 1940
First recorded	1944 (not released until 1951)
Written in response to	"God Bless America" by Irving Berlin
Known verses taught in school	3 (the cheerful geography verses)
Total verses Guthrie wrote	6 (3 additional rarely taught)
Copyright status	Under copyright until 2038

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Who Was Woody Guthrie?

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie (1912–1967) was born in Okemah, Oklahoma. He grew up watching the Dust Bowl devastate the Great Plains, driving hundreds of thousands of families off their land in the 1930s. Guthrie became one of those migrants himself, traveling across the country by boxcar and hitchhiking, playing guitar and writing songs about what he saw. He wrote more than 1,000 songs over his lifetime. On his guitar he painted the words: *This Machine Kills Fascists*.

He died in 1967 from Huntington's disease, which had also taken his mother. His son Arlo Guthrie continued his musical legacy, and Woody's influence on American folk music — including on Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Bruce Springsteen — is immeasurable.

The Song: Why Guthrie Wrote It

In the winter of 1940, Guthrie was hitchhiking across the country and kept hearing "God Bless America" by Irving Berlin playing on the radio. He found it saccharine and out of touch with the poverty and inequality he was seeing every day. In a cheap hotel room in New York City, he wrote "This Land Is Your Land" as a direct, pointed response.

Guthrie's original working title was "God Blessed America For Me" — a deliberately ironic echo of Berlin's song. The final title dropped the irony but the message remained in the hidden verses.

The Six Verses: What Got Left Out and Why

The three verses taught in most schools describe the California coastline, golden valleys, wheat fields, and endless skyways. They are genuinely beautiful and worth knowing. But Guthrie also wrote three additional verses that are almost never included in school performances:

The Private Property Verse	Guthrie describes walking down a highway and seeing a sign that says the land is private property. He asks whether that sign was made for you and me — implying that land ownership laws serve the wealthy, not ordinary people.
The Relief Office Verse	Guthrie describes standing outside a relief office (a Depression-era government welfare office) watching hungry people standing in line. He describes them as "my people" — claiming ownership of and solidarity with the poor.
The Freedom Highway Verse	In this verse, Guthrie describes walking a "freedom highway" and asks whether this land was truly made for everyone. This verse is sometimes included but often softened or omitted in school settings.

Why were these verses left out? Scholars point to the Cold War era (1950s) when songs with socialist themes were viewed with suspicion. Schools and publishers quietly adopted the sanitized three-verse version, and it became the standard. Most Americans today have never heard all six verses.

Key Dates in the Song's History

1912	Woody Guthrie born in Okemah, Oklahoma
1930s	Dust Bowl devastates the Great Plains; Guthrie becomes a migrant and begins writing songs
Feb 1940	Guthrie writes "This Land Is Your Land" in a New York City hotel room
1944	First recording made, but not released commercially
1951	Song officially released on the album Songs to Grow On for Mother and Child
1956	Pete Seeger popularizes the song; the 3-verse school version spreads nationwide
1967	Woody Guthrie dies from Huntington's disease
1984	Full 6-verse version gains wider attention through folk revival recordings
2009	Bruce Springsteen performs the song — including the hidden verses — at Barack Obama's inaugural celebration
2038	Song enters the public domain under current U.S. copyright law

Discussion Questions

Grades 3–5

Why do you think Woody Guthrie wrote this song? What was happening in America at the time?

Grades 3–5

What do you think "This land was made for you and me" means? Does it include everyone?

Grades 6–8

Why do you think the extra verses were left out of the version taught in schools? Who made that decision, and why does it matter?

Grades 6–8

What is the difference between a patriotic song that celebrates the country as it is, and one that challenges the country to live up to its ideals? Which is this song?

Grades 9–12

Guthrie wrote the song in response to "God Bless America." Compare the two songs. What does each one say about who America is for?

Grades 9–12

Research the history of songs and art that have been censored or softened during the Cold War era. What other works had their meaning changed by selective editing?

All ages

If you were going to write a song about America today, what would you put in it? What would you want people to still be singing 80 years from now?

Note: The full lyrics to "This Land Is Your Land" are under copyright until 2038. This study guide discusses the song's history and meaning without reproducing the full text. To read or listen to all six verses, search for Woody Guthrie's original 1944 recording or visit the official Woody Guthrie Archives at woodyguthrie.org.