

NEW YORK TOWN (1940-1941)

New York City, New York

Never comfortable with success, or being in one place for too long, Woody headed east for New York City, arriving in 1940. He was quickly embraced for his Steinbeckian homespun wisdom and musical "authenticity" by leftist organizations, artists, writers, musicians, and progressive intellectuals. That same year, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Woody in a series of conversations and songs for the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Woody also recorded "Dust Bowl Ballads" for RCA Victor, his first album of original songs, and throughout the 1940s he continued to record hundreds of discs for Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records. The recordings from this early period continue to be touchstones for folk music singer-songwriters everywhere.

In New York City, Lead Belly, Cisco Houston, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, Will Geer, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Josh White, Millard Lampell, Bess Hawes, Sis Cunningham, among others, all became Woody's close friends and musical collaborators. Forming a loosely knit folk group called The Almanac Singers, they took up social causes such as union organizing, anti-Fascism, strengthening the Communist Party, peace, and generally fighting for the things they believed in the best way they could: through songs of political protest and activism. Woody became one of the prominent songwriters for the Almanac Singers.

The Almanacs helped to establish folk music as a viable commercial genre within the popular music industry. A decade later, original members of the Almanacs would re-form as the Weavers, the most commercially successful and influential folk music group of the early 1950s. It was through their tremendous popularity that Woody's songs would become known to the larger public.

With increasing popularity, prosperity and critical success from public performances, recordings, and even his own radio show, Woody could afford to bring his struggling family to New York to enjoy his new found success.