MODEL THESIS

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Title: Ramblin’ ‘round: American legends told through the voice of Woody Guthrie

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, more commonly known as “Woody” Guthrie, is one of the most prominent figures in America’s folk movement history. His songs and ballads, as well as his adventurous lifestyle, have inspired his peers as well as the next generations, musically as well as politically.

In my paper, I will concentrate on a small yet rich part of his repertoire, focusing on his retelling of well-known American legends. Apart from the fact that his songwriting helped preserve the American oral tradition, he used this knowledge to try and transform the social, political and moral landscape around him. In fact, his interpretation of legends such as the one of Pretty Boy Floyd, of Jesse James, or of larger groups that are now part of the so-called ‘Americana’, such as the buffalo skinners, provide valuable insight on what helped form his strong presence in the sociopolitical happenings of America in his time. In these songs and many others he tackles subjects such as the abuse of power by the government or the detrimental effects that land property has to the people, and attempts to deconstruct binaries like justice/injustice. Travelling around the United States and associating with the working class, he gathered an immense amount of lore, which he subsequently internalized and interpreted to support these people, effectively popularizing the ‘protest song’.

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