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Tami Marston

By Evalyn Hansen

For the Tidings

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The Camelot Theatre Company's current production of "Woody Guthrie's American Song" is a profound evening of music and theater. Tami Marston, along with the rest of the outstanding cast, makes the delivery of Peter Glazer's exuberant and complex script and score seem effortless. Marston and I met for lunch at The Grotto in Talent to talk about Woody Guthrie's legacy.

EH: What makes Woody Guthrie unique among folk singers?

TM: Woody never wrote about himself. He was a voice for the disenfranchised. When he made music, it was either to make them feel better or to give voice to what they were feeling and were too angry, or too sad, or too scared to say. He wanted to write songs that made people feel empowered and that they were worth something, that their lives had meaning. His perceptions were so acute. They were simple songs, they were honest, and he captured people's emotions. Woody charted a new course as a troubadour.

He used familiar melodies, folk songs of the oral tradition and of unknown authorships. The oral tradition of music in America came from the Pilgrims, from old English ballads and work songs from the days of slavery. They were easy to sing and they captured people's emotions. He wrote his own words. They are simple songs but the words are honest and real. He was a very modest man. He really did feel that he was just being a mirror to other people. That seemed to be his function in life.

There's a passage that Woody wrote, "There's a feeling in music, and it takes you back down the road you have traveled, and it makes you travel it again."

If it had not been for Woody Guthrie, there would not have been the folk music revival of the 1960s. He was chronicling his times as he was traveling with his instrument among the people. He ended up in New York, in the place where there was a bohemian presence. And people became aware of his music even though it was not prevalent yet. What happened with the folk boom was people were picking up songs of Woody's and the groups he played with. Those were the roots of the folk music revival. He was a unique man in a unique time. He was a true troubadour, a balladeer. He was a real man of the rails who managed to end up in an urban center and have an influence.

EH: Why is Woody Guthrie great?

TM: I think what makes him great is his honesty and what his function was at the time. His music was of the people, about the people, and for the people. Folk music's power is social statement, social protest, social celebration and social justice; that is what folk music is for. Woody, being that voice, gave it the human slant.

There's a John Steinbeck quote that I memorized: "Woody's just Woody. He's just a voice and a guitar. He sings the songs of the people, and I suspect he is, in a way, that people, harsh voiced and nasal, his voice banging like a tire iron on a rusty rim. There is nothing sweet about Woody. And there is nothing sweet about the songs that he sings, but there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of the people to endure and to fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit."

"Woody Guthrie's American Song," directed by Livia Genise, plays at 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays and 2 p.m. Sundays through Sept. 9 at Camelot in Talent. For tickets and information, call 541-535-5250 or visit [camelottheatre.org](#).

Evalyn Hansen is a writer and director living in Ashland. She trained as an actor at the American Conservatory Theatre and is a founding member of San Francisco's Magic Theatre. Reach her at

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