

Musician Halker helps to preserve Guthrie legacy



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

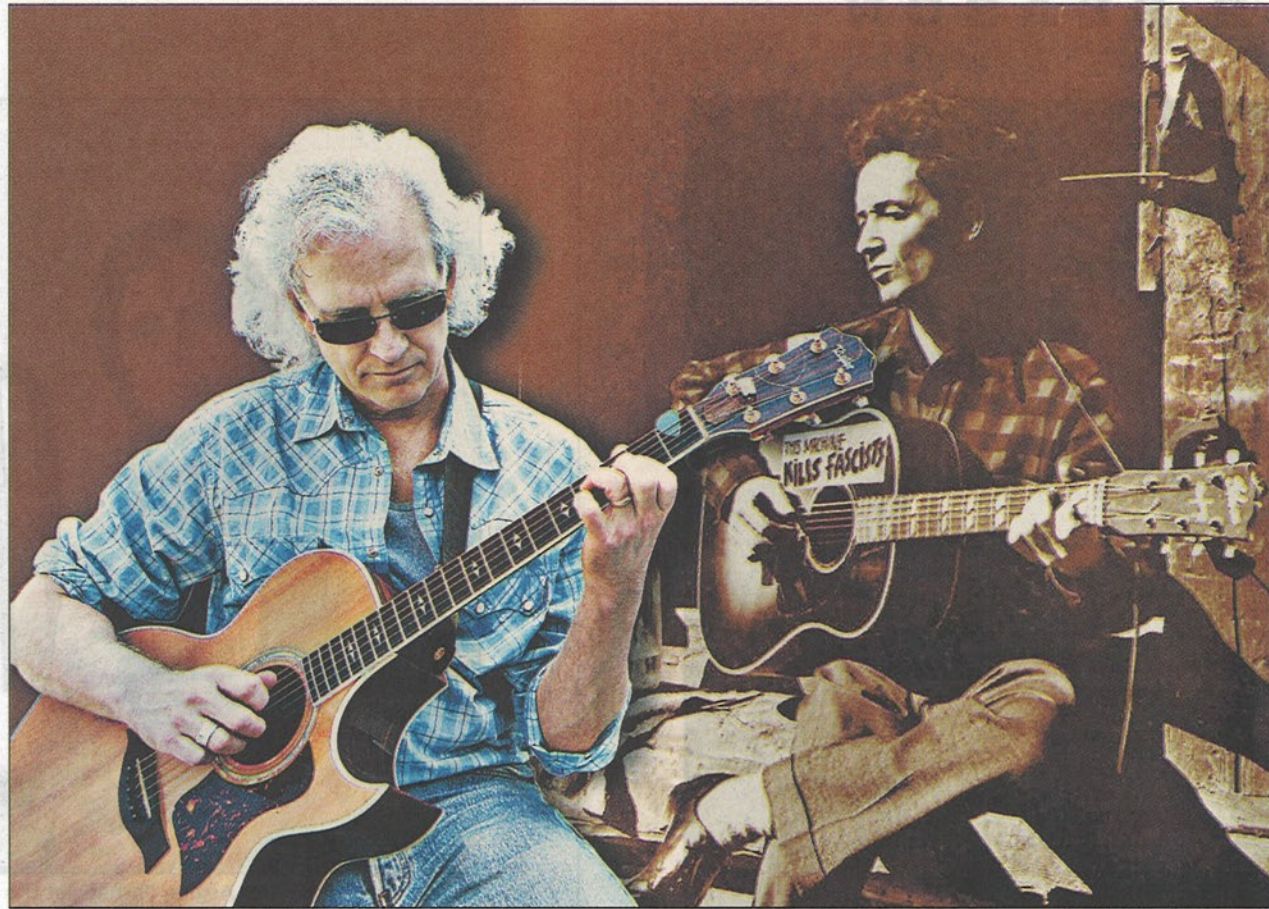
There were many notable births in the year 1912 — there are many notable births every year — and one of them took place in the tiny Oklahoma town of Okemah on July 14 when Nora Belle Tanner and Charles Edward Guthrie had a boy. They named him Woodrow Wilson, after the man who 12 days before had become the Democratic nominee for the presidency of the United States.

By the time Wilson was elected that November everybody was calling the baby “Woody,” and Woody it would be for the rest of

his song-filled life.

Bucky Halker was born in 1954, a Wisconsin boy (his given name is Clark but he was nicknamed Bucky almost immediately, after Bucky Badger, the University of Wisconsin mascot). Woody Guthrie died in 1967, and Halker would go on to become an accomplished musician and performer, passionate historian, ardent voice for labor unions and the working class ... walking in the footsteps of and ever influenced by Guthrie.

Three years ago when Halker was plowing through the Guthrie archives then in New York City, he found a telegram Guthrie had sent to his wife: “Got to Chicago in 20 hours. ... I am at the home of Louis Terkel.” This was, of course, Guthrie’s friend Studs Terkel (also a 1912 baby), radio host-actor-



MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO (LEFT) ; TRIBUNE PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

Three years ago Bucky Halker, left, found a telegram Woody Guthrie, right, had sent to his wife as well as lyrics to a song Guthrie wrote about Chicago.

activist-writer who, after Guthrie’s death, wrote introductions to a couple of his biographies.

Halker also found the lyrics to a song that he had never heard of about Chi-

ago.

“I was stunned,” he says. “I have been working for a long time on a book about Guthrie and Illinois. He spent a considerable amount of time here, even

serving in the military at (Scott Air Force Base) and often coming up to Chicago.”

The Chicago song was a wildly spelled “Old Chy-Car-Go.”

“Guthrie loved to fool around with language, with words,” says Halker, who believes the song was written in 1947. “I wish there was a recording so I could know exactly how he pronounced it.”

But no such thing existed. Indeed, though Halker later learned that such performers as Utah Phillips and Fred Holstein sometimes performed the song live, no one had gone into a studio to record it.

In 2010, Halker did, with a band and the great bluesy singer Cathy Richardson.

“I wanted to give it a different feel, not do it in a typical old folkie way,” says Halker, who arranged the song. “I wanted it to have a late night, Rush Street sort of feel.”

They do the slightly bawdy song and Guthrie proud, playfully delivering lyrics such as:

“I wish I was an evenin’ breeze
So I could tickle ‘round the knees
Of my chick-a-dees
In old Chy-car-go”

The song is one of more than 20 on “Folk Songs of Illinois #4: Chicago Since

“I wish there was a recording so I could know exactly how he pronounced it.”

— Bucky Halker, discussing “Chy-car-go”

1945,” a stunning and free-wheeling collection that also features a “Hoodoo Man Blues” duet by Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, a Jethro Burns/Don Stierberg bash on “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” the Maxwell Street Klezmer Band, and Terkel reading “The Lumberjack’s Prayer,” a poem written by T-Bone Slim (nee Matt Valentine Huhta).

Halker has been involved in the previous “Folk Songs of Illinois” CDs and is putting the finishing touches on the fifth volume. He continues to feel the influence of Guthrie, stronger than ever in this centenary of his birth.

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