

# Roll On Columbia *continued from front page*

songs about loggers, fisherman and living in the Northwest. Kytr became a mentor and major musical influence for Seamons. Later Seamons, recorded some of Kytr's music, along with the music of John and Kim Cunnick, songs written in and about the Vernonia area. Seamons recorded and performs some of those songs with his band "Timberbound."

Those explorations of regional music led Seamons to wonder, "What else is out there that constitutes Northwest folk music? And Woody Guthrie's songs are what people point to when you ask that question," says Seamons.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma in 1912. He grew up in Oklahoma and Texas during the dustbowl years and the Great Depression. He traveled the country, seeing firsthand the devastation, and writing songs about the people, social events, and politics of this difficult time.

The Bonneville Power Project, as it was originally called, was set up in

1937 to distribute electricity produced by the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams on the Columbia River. It was renamed the Bonneville Power Administration in 1940. BPA public information officer Stephan Kahn wanted to produce a film to help sell the idea of publicly produced electric power to the local population. He felt having a folk singer involved might make the story more accessible to the common folks.

Kahn contacted Allen Lomax, head of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, who recommended his friend Guthrie.

"The goal was to tell the story of the work being done to create jobs, irrigate land, and deliver cheap, public electricity to people across the Northwest," explains Seamons.

Guthrie, who had recently left his job in New York City as a radio personality, had moved with his wife Mary and three small children to California.

In late March of 1941, the BPA sent photographer Gunther Von Fritsch

to meet with Guthrie, who was unemployed at the time. They discussed the project and took some photos, but apparently no promises were made. Excited about the prospects, Guthrie immediately packed up his family and headed for Portland.

In a 2007 NPR interview, Elmer Buehler, who was Guthrie's driver and guide for the month, remembers Guthrie's audition for Paul Raver at the BPA. "He sat there on the administrator's desk," Buehler recalls, "and strummed on his 'gee-tar,' as he always said. I don't think he was there over half an hour and Dr. Raver said, 'Well, you're hired.'"

Guthrie got right to work and was paid \$266.66 for the 26 songs he completed.

"It's very significant that one of America's greatest folk balladeers wrote some of his best material in this very short and very productive month of his life here in Oregon," says Seamons. "If you look at his body of work and when he wrote things, this was kind of the apex of his creative life. He had done a lot of song writing up to that point and all the skills he had been honing as a writer and as a storyteller came together to allow him to write this fantastic batch of music."

In 2009 Seamons was awarded a "Woody Guthrie Fellowship" by the BMI Foundation, which made it possible for him to travel to New York City and spend two weeks exploring the Woody Guthrie Archives.

Since then Seamons, a graduate of Lewis and Clark College, has been interpreting Guthrie's work, along with the music of Kytr and the Cunnicks, and has engaged in several other music projects with collaborator Ben Hunter. Timberbound has performed several times in Vernonia, most notably at the Vernonia Friendship Jamboree, and also at the Vernonia Grange.

Seamons and Hunter perform an eclectic mix of bluegrass, old time, folk and blues tunes. Among his many musical projects, Seamons and Hunter recently traveled along the Mississippi River, performing music and documenting the blues songs of the deep south and the stories of the people they met along the way. In January of 2016 Seamons and Hunter won first place in the solo/duo category at the prestigious 33rd International Blues Challenge in Memphis, Tennessee.

Murlin has a special interest in seeing this new project of Guthrie mu-

sic reach fruition. He is the one who found, collected and published, incidentally with the help of Hobe Kytr, all of Guthrie's Columbia River songs in the *Columbia River Songbook*, when he worked for the BPA in the 1980s. 17 songs had been recorded by Guthrie, but nine others have never before been recorded. "It's time all 26 songs had a voice," says Murlin.

Seamons and Murlin have teamed with Portland-based musician and producer Jon Neufeld and have gathered a host of other Northwest based musicians to record the songs. Neufeld is best known for his work with the band Black Prairie, which includes several members of The Decemberists, and is also an original member of Portland bluegrass stalwarts Jackstraw.

Among the incredibly talented performers invited to help Seamons and Murlin bring all of Guthrie's songs back to life are Michael Hurley, Tony Furtado, Kate Power and Steve Einhorn, John Moen of the Decemberists, Black Prairie's Annalisa Tornfelt, and Martha Scanlon. Hunter and Seamons, Timberbound and Murlin will also perform.

"It's been interesting to see all the different musical connections and collaborations that are happening," says Seamons.

Acclaimed Pacific Northwest artist Erik Sandgren will provide original artwork for the album. Recording sessions were held in Portland and Seattle during March of 2016, with an album release planned for October, the 75th anniversary of Guthrie's work for the BPA.

Also of interest, Greg Vandy has published a new book, *26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie's Columbia River Songs and the Planned Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest*, which takes readers inside the unusual partnership between one of America's great folk artists and the federal government.

Guthrie's famous Columbia River songs look to be making quite a revival and will hopefully find a new audience in the process.

"There are some very obscure lyrics and songs included here that we're very excited to be playing," says Seamons. "They are being performed in the recording studio for the first time ever. That makes it pretty special."

For more information on the Woody's 26 Northwest Songs Project go to [www.benjoemusic.com](http://www.benjoemusic.com) or "Roll Columbia" on Facebook.

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