



WOODY GUTHRIE & BPA

An unlikely collaboration

The folk singer's 30 days at BPA is considered one of the single most productive bursts in his fruitful songwriting career.

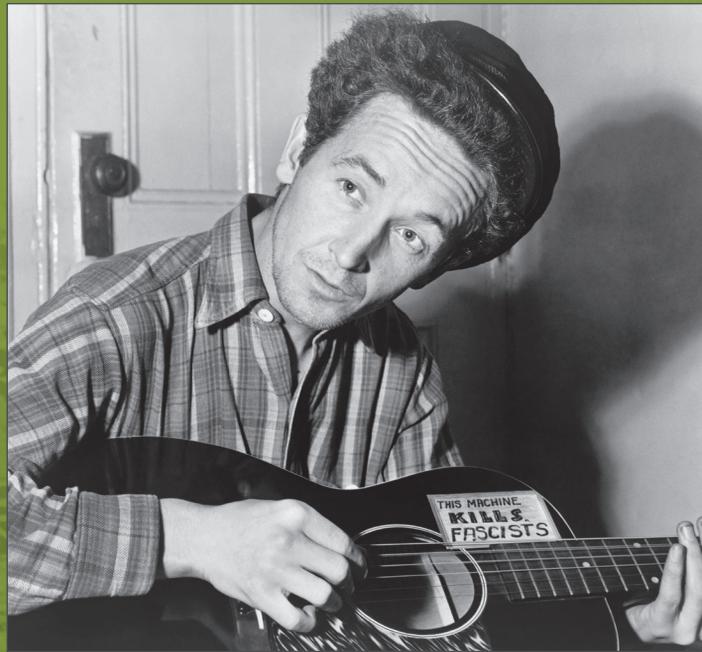
It's an odd professional combination by today's standards: a Dust Bowl-born radical songwriter and a Northwest-bred federal power agency.

But when Woody Guthrie met BPA in 1941, creative sparks flew.

The musical electricity that resulted is still heard, thanks to a former BPA employee named Bill Murlin and his quest in the 1980s to rekindle the embers of a lost legend.

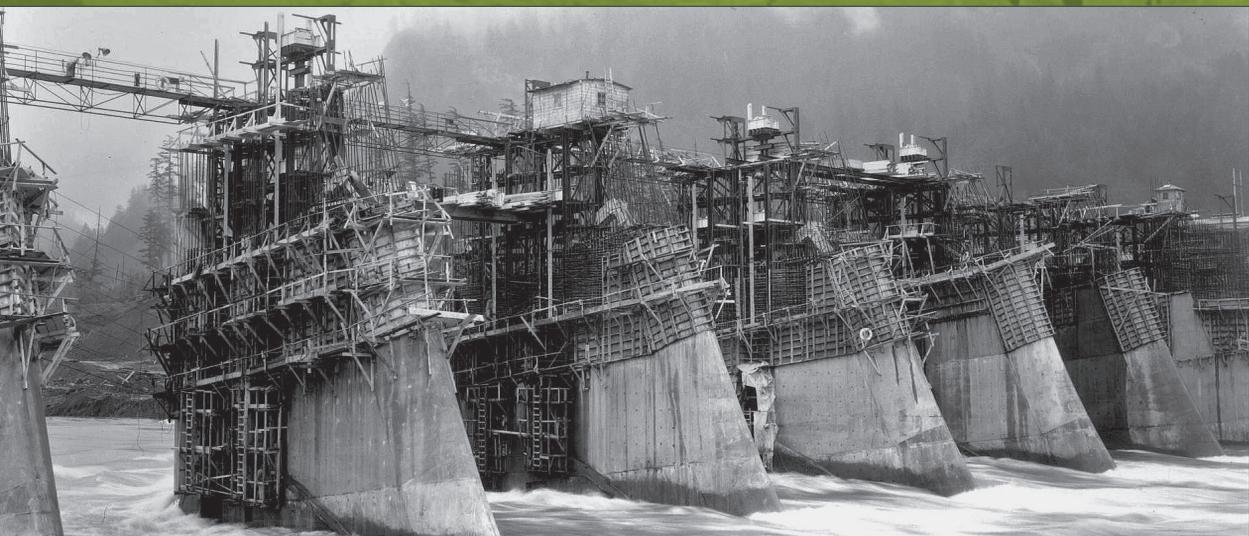
The story began in May 1941, when Guthrie was hired on a one-month contract to speed-write music for a BPA film on the new Columbia River hydroelectric system.

"They couldn't get him on the (permanent) payroll," says Gene Tollefson, BPA retiree and author of "BPA & the Struggle for Power at



Guthrie's well-traveled guitar bore a sticker that famously proclaimed "This Machine Kills Fascists."

Cost." "So they hired him for 30 days. And he wrote a song a day."



Bonneville Dam under construction. "My children won't run away to town / Since Bonneville brung the 'lectric lights around," Guthrie wrote in "Out Past the End of the Line."

The month's work paid only \$266.66, a monumental bargain for hiring a 28-year-old songwriter at the peak of his powers. It was the year after Guthrie had written a song he renamed and released in 1944 as "This Land Is Your Land," America's unofficial anthem.

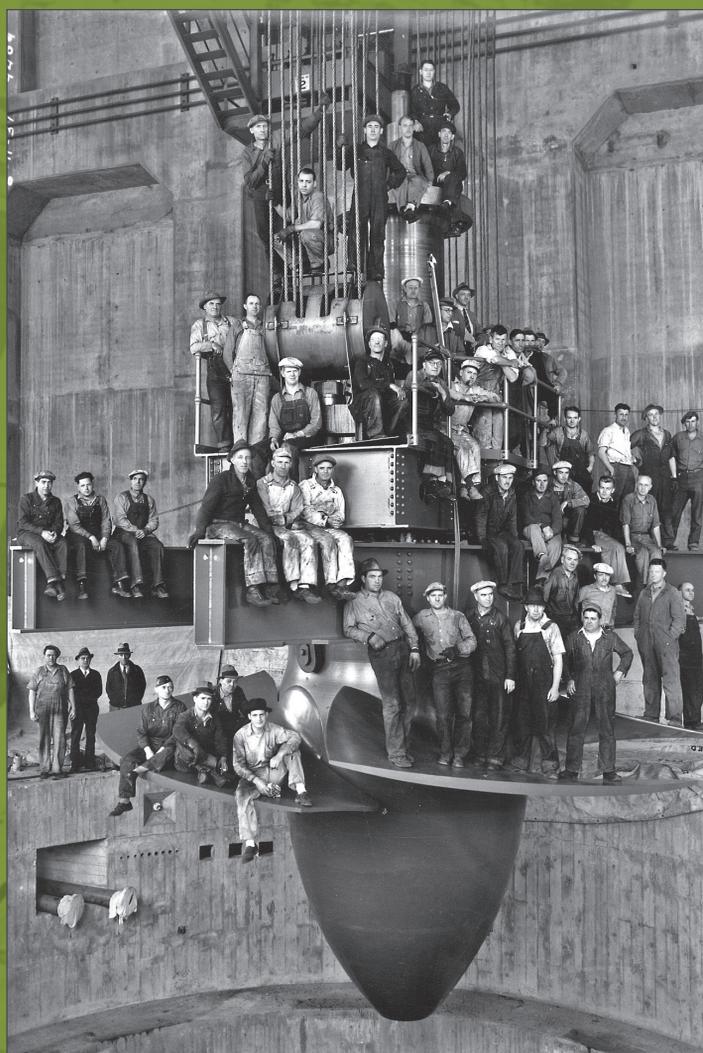
With a BPA driver at the wheel of a black Hudson, the tumbleweed troubadour swept up and down the Columbia Gorge, a dust storm of song ideas billowing behind him. The mind-boggling sight and story of the two new dams — whose gray, elephantine sides crawled with workers in an era of desperate unemployment — set Guthrie's songwriter brain afire.

For 30 days, he sang, he smoked, he toured, he typed. His legendary creative turbines spun at full capacity as he witnessed first hand the ways hydroelectricity would elevate a hard-scrabble life for so many in the Northwest.

The pictures and words from that trip were "faster to come and dance in my ears than I could ever get them wrote down," he said.

Indeed, BPA information officer Steve Kahn said Guthrie almost vibrated as the ideas flowed through him — he'd clasp a metal disc and beat out rhythms on the leg of his desk at the old Northeast Oregon Street headquarters as he wrote. (It's said he got relocated from the second floor to the basement early on for disturbing others.)

When Guthrie was done, he'd fulfilled his contract with 26 sets of song lyrics, including a dozen recordings and new arrangements of old American melodies



In an era of desperate unemployment, Guthrie was inspired by the hive of activity on the new dams. "When I seen that great big Bonneville Dam / Well, I wish't I'd a been workin' makin' somethin' for Uncle Sam," he wrote in "Ramblin' Blues (Portland Town)."

put to colorful original lyrics — "Roll On, Columbia," "Pastures of Plenty," "Grand Coulee Dam." He recorded 11 of the songs in BPA's basement; three songs he recorded in a New York studio eventually appeared in the agency documentary "The Columbia."



Witnessing labor like this at Grand Coulee Dam inspired Guthrie to write “Jackhammer Blues” during his month as an information specialist at BPA.

“The Pacific Northwest is one of my favorite spots in this world,” he declared.

Then he was gone as quickly as he’d come, off to New York, his car repossessed, marriage in shreds, wife and kids going back to Texas without him, his focus turning to using his guitar as a “machine to kill fascists” in a world war.

The story of Guthrie’s wildly productive month along the Columbia was forgotten. After the war and the political tensions of the McCarthy era, his stint at BPA shrank in the rearview mirror to a few grainy words at the end of an old government film in a file cabinet.

Four decades later, that’s where Bill Murlin came across it. His workplace epiphany would raise the agency’s profile around the world and draw two of Guthrie’s children to BPA to honor their father’s work.



While laying the groundwork for the film “The Columbia,” director Gunther von Fritsch snapped this shot of Guthrie; his wife, Mary; and children in Los Angeles before they traveled to Portland for Guthrie’s song-writing stint at BPA in May 1941.

If you were going to order the perfect Woody Guthrie detective, the lanky, laconic Spokane native would be straight from

central casting. Murlin combined the chops of a professional folk singer with the skill set of a broadcaster — an ear for sound coupled with a nose for news. He'd been performing Woody Guthrie songs since college in the 1960s, the perfect preparation for his starring role in uncovering a wealth of missing material.

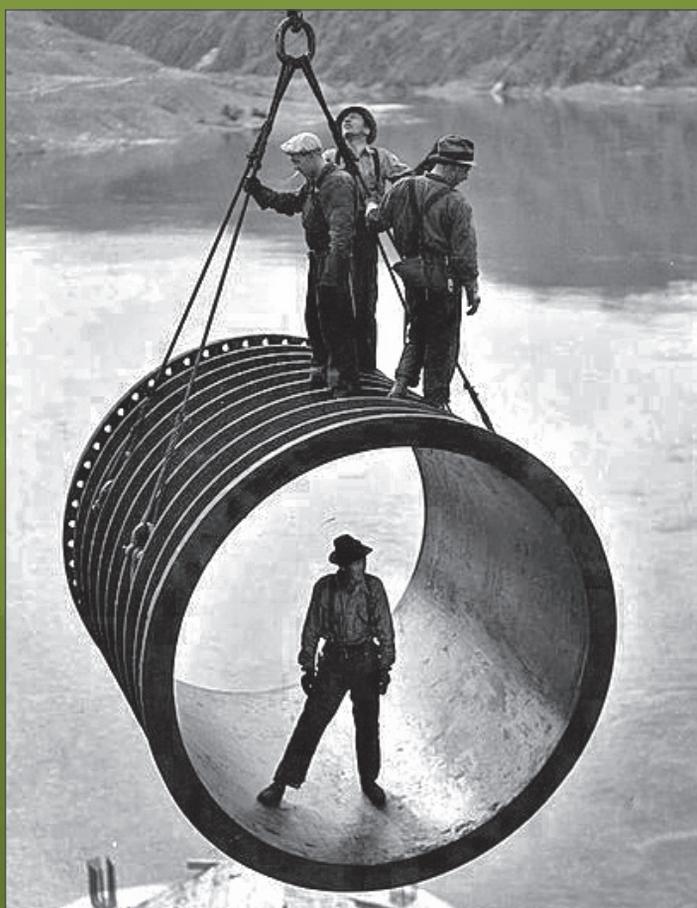
By the time Murlin came to BPA in 1979, he'd already spent half a lifetime with the tools of a traveling storyteller on his shoulder — from radio recorders to film cameras to his oversized folk guitar (“the dreadnought,” he says, “one of the biggest damn guitars out there”).

So if Guthrie's iconic presence slid past everyone at BPA for decades, it wouldn't elude Bill Murlin.

Murlin's first job at BPA was running the “radio boiler room,” a one-man operation to produce, narrate and deliver BPA news by telephone (with the help of 20 volunteers) to 300 radio stations in four Northwest states. He worked with Ann Skalicky, a Public Affairs staffer who kept early BPA films, many depicting construction projects, in her tall metal file cabinet. Murlin liked to open it and “look at the movies every once in a while.”

One day he was screening the 1948 film “The Columbia” as background for his own BPA film work. Professional curiosity made him watch it to the very end, where he encountered one name he never expected to see on a government movie.

He halted the reel for a second look and thought, “Cool! I didn't know that Woody Guthrie had worked for the government — or BPA.”



Workers hitch a ride on a pipe being hoisted by crane at Grand Coulee Dam. “Woody saw the majestic Grand Coulee Dam as the creation of the common man to harness the river for the common good,” wrote folk historian Alan Lomax in the 1987 songbook of Guthrie's BPA work that Murlin produced.





Murlin, a professional folk singer, performed with Arlo Guthrie (left) at BPA headquarters in April 1985. Several hundred employees joined them in “Roll On, Columbia, Roll On,” Washington state’s official folk song.

He rummaged through another cabinet and found a file labeled “The Columbia.” Inside were 40-year-old documents and employment records — “the first solid clues to Guthrie’s BPA employment,” Murlin says.

The next breakthrough came when Murlin located a music scholar in Michigan, who provided a copy of a 1945 letter from BPA to Guthrie’s family that contained the lyrics to 22 of the lost songs. In 1983, Murlin



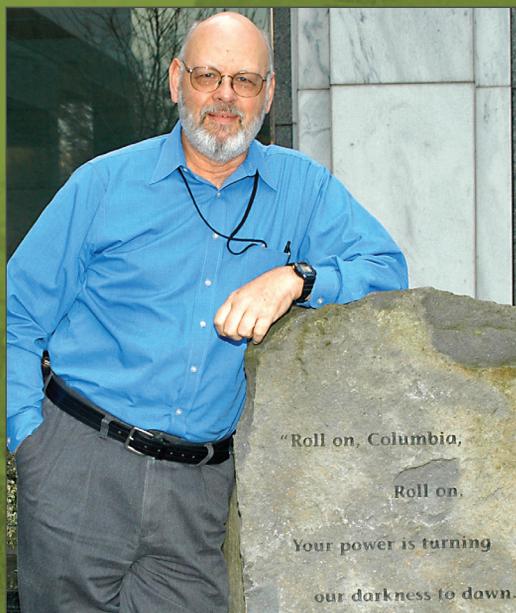
Nora Guthrie greets Elmer Buehler, the BPA driver who toured her father around the region in 1941, during her 2004 visit to BPA.

wrote an article on his find for BPA’s Circuit newspaper, and the news suddenly leapt far beyond the agency.

“On a Monday morning, the story turned up on the cover of *The Oregonian* above the fold,” Murlin says. From there, it swept across the country, and to Europe via the BBC.

The quest for any trace of Guthrie singing his BPA songs became a labor of love, which Murlin kept alive via snail mail and landline. Although it proved painfully slow going, with many false leads and dead ends, he picked up the assistance of folk legend and Guthrie friend Pete Seeger along the way.

Eventually, their persistence paid off — Murlin hit pay dirt, turning up recordings of Guthrie’s voice from his BPA sessions at opposite ends of the West Coast. One



Bill Murlin, in the Woody Guthrie Circle at BPA headquarters on his 2005 retirement day, says, “If we hired Woody Guthrie today, we’d have him singing about saving salmon and conserving energy, instead of using him to sell power.”

came from a San Diego newspaper editor who had worked at BPA a few years after Guthrie (and nearly lost his Guthrie collection in the 1948 Vanport flood that hit the Portland area). The other key discoveries came from a fan on Washington's Olympic Peninsula and an Associated Press reporter in Portland. Each of the three had the rarest of the rare, a vinyl or acetate disk bearing a different assortment of the missing cuts — among them, the only recording of Guthrie singing "Roll On, Columbia."

"I said, 'Manna from heaven, a gold mine,'" Murlin says. "I never anticipated that I would find unpublished recordings of Woody Guthrie singing his own Columbia River songs."

In spite of media attention, those three records — none commercially made, but each like a mix tape of its time — were the only copies that ever surfaced of Guthrie performing selections from his BPA songbook.

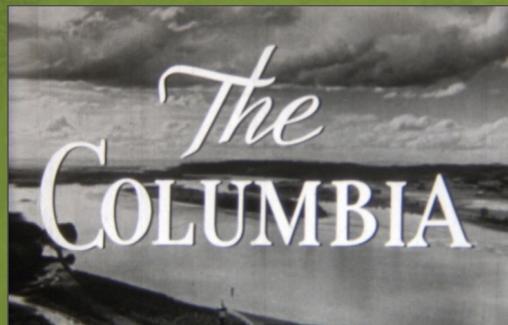
Murlin achieved his goal, and the recovered music was widely shared for BPA's 50th anniversary in 1987. A commemorative album of Guthrie performing 17 of the songs was released, later accompanied by a songbook containing a lovingly written forward by folk historian Alan Lomax, Guthrie's dear friend and admirer who had recommended him for the job at BPA.

The unearthing of a pop-culture icon in BPA history gave people inside and out new cause for pride.

"That's one of my favorite stories of my life at Bonneville," says former acting



After leaving Portland, Guthrie moved on to New York, where this photo was taken in 1943. Born July 14, 1912, he died in New York at age 55 in 1967.



BPA's most famous film, which was not completed until 1949, includes three of Guthrie's songs.

Administrator Jack Robertson, who in 1987 accompanied Murlin to present the six fragile copies of Guthrie's BPA recordings to the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

"I don't think the government has ever gotten a better investment for its money," BPA's Kahn told *The New York Times*.



www.bpa.gov

BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION
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Excerpted from "The Power of the River: The continuing legacy of the Bonneville Power Administration in the Pacific Northwest" (2012)

(Image of Woody Guthrie with family © Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Archive/Woody Guthrie Center)