

It's all in the family for Arlo Guthrie

H hvy.com/peterjoneswriter/arlo-guthrie-interview

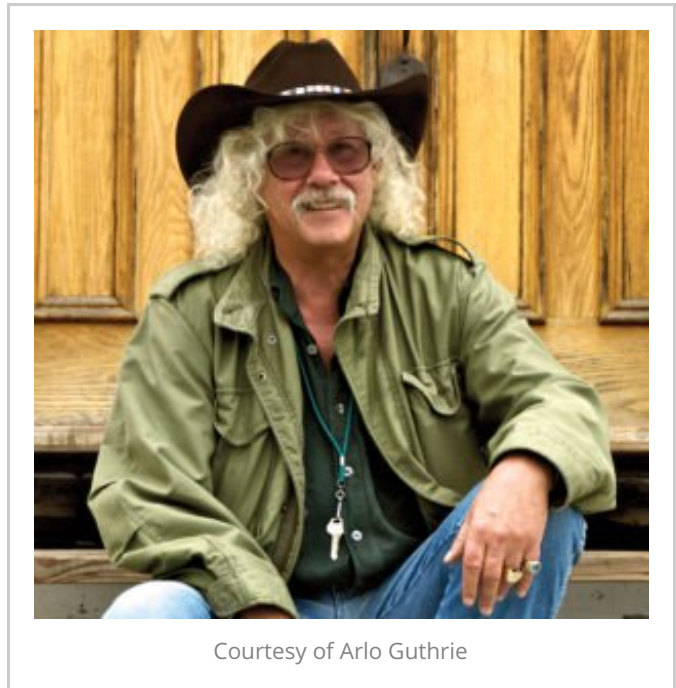
Peter Jones

April 26,
2019

Play “Six Degrees of Arlo Guthrie” and you can connect “Heartbreak Hotel” to “This Land is Your Land” in a couple of steps.

As it turns out, the son of Woody Guthrie has more than the godfather of 20th century American folk music in his family tree. It seems that he and singer-songwriter Hoyt Axton are distant cousins with family roots in rural Oklahoma

“We’d been friends since the late ‘60s since we met at the LA Troubadour, and decades later we found out that one of Hoyt’s mom’s ancestors had married one of my great grandfather’s brothers or something,” Arlo Guthrie recalled.



Music trivia experts know where this is leading. Axton’s mother Mae co-wrote the song that would become Elvis Presley’s first hit for RCA Records in 1956.

Those Guthrie-Axtons know how to write.

“We were very prolific as a family. We got a lot of relatives out there,” said Guthrie, whose children – as well as Axton’s – have carried on the musical tradition.

For Arlo’s part, he filled the family chest with “Coming into Los Angeles” and the epic musical, mostly true, monologue “Alice’s Restaurant” while still living in the shadow of his larger-than-life father.

“I’ve never shied away from being Woody Guthrie’s kid. I’ve kind of enjoyed it. It’s been fun,” the singer-songwriter said. “I had a lot more success than he had, frankly – I mean commercial success. The things he was thinking about philosophically are still important to me.”

Coming into New York

Arlo Guthrie was born in 1947 in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, New York. He was Woody's fifth child, the singer's second child with his second wife.

Not surprisingly, Arlo got an early musical education. Pete Seeger, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Cisco Houston were regular guests at the Guthrie house, where friends would play music much of the day and Woody would ramble on like an old sea captain, according to Elliott.

By the time Arlo was born, his father was already a legend, having defined the American working-class troubadour with such songs as "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)," "Do Re Mi," "I Ain't Got No Home," "Pastures of Plenty" and "Vigilante Man."

A telling picture of the elder Guthrie shows the musician holding a guitar with a sticker pointedly reading, "This guitar kills fascists."

Folk punk?

"It's an iconic picture," Arlo said. "It gives you a little insight into who he was."

He's got Leadbelly eyes

As a kid, Arlo Guthrie was already joining his rebellious dad as a living-room showman. Legend has it that the toddler danced and played harmonica for such Guthrie houseguests as Leadbelly, the towering black folk-blues singer whose hard life full of plantations and chain gangs was a template for American folk.

"When you're 2, those things are like dreams," Guthrie said of his Leadbelly connection. "Memories get caught up with other things. You can't really distinguish sometimes between a fact and a fiction."

Unless, of course, something weird happens years later.

Even as a child, Guthrie could not forget those distinctive eyes on Leadbelly's hard-traveled face. The singer did not think much about them for decades, until some years ago when he met a mysterious stranger after a concert in Oklahoma City.

The man had Leadbelly eyes.

"I knew them instantly. It was like a dream. It didn't make sense," Guthrie said. "Then he comes up to me and says 'I'm Leadbelly's nephew.' I hadn't seen that since I was 2 years old. It was one of those wonderful moments where you're caught like a deer in the headlights. It confirmed my dreams, as it were."

A Thanksgiving dinner that couldn't be beat

Years after Leadbelly died, Arlo Guthrie made his own mark as a houseguest in the Massachusetts home of Alice Brock, whose restaurant and accompanying Thanksgiving dinner [followed by Arlo's infamous post-dinner littering] were immortalized in song.

The 18-minute "Alice's Restaurant Massacre," the title track from Guthrie's first album, detailed the entire episode, including how his littering conviction eventually saved him – along with a roomful of "father rapers" – from a stint in Vietnam.

Although the song would take on a life of its own, even spawning Arthur Penn's acclaimed full-length movie version starring Guthrie as himself, the singer rarely performs the lengthy track live – mostly to save himself from the boredom.

"It would drive me crazy," he said. "It would take up a third of the evening, and for what? I do it every 10 years."

By most reports, Guthrie did not even play "Alice's Restaurant" at the Woodstock festival, a concert event that the musician only vaguely recalls

"Anybody who says they remember being there is lying," he said.

On the other hand, concertgoers are sure to hear "City of New Orleans." In 1972, Guthrie's hit version of Steve Goodman's evocative train ballad helped turn the song into a standard of the American folk-country canon.

Just say no to Huntington's

As Arlo Guthrie continues to tour and record, the 70-plus-year-old musician has rather silently waited out the specter of Huntington's disease, the debilitating degenerative disorder that killed in total his famous father, his grandmother and two of his half-siblings.

"At this point, I'm definitely on the downside of the curve," he said.

Guthrie has steadfastly refused to take the genetic blood test that could determine for sure if he carries the "mutant allele." There is about a 50 percent chance of that.

"There's nothing you can do about it even you're found out," he explained. "If I were to take that test, what other tests would I want to take? Would I take the test that gives you the chance of a brick falling on your head while you're walking through New York on a cloudy day? Where would the testing end?"

Age has given Guthrie still more perspective on life and music. The surviving musician has now outlived his father's lifespan by decades, and growing older has made him a better singer and songwriter, he reasons.

“You begin to distill what you know into what you can do,” he said. “What you can do as a kid is a whole lot of things, but you haven’t distilled anything. Today, I’m a better storyteller and a better guitar player ... although I’m not as fast as I used to be.”

folkrock huntingtons music