DEPORTEE’ STILL HAUNTS AMERICA

Racist radio cast inspires America’s troubadour to call out mistreatment and degradation of Mexican farmworkers in one of history’s greatest protest songs

BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA

Woody Guthrie was pissed. Ravaged by the early stages of the Huntington’s disease that would paralyze and kill him 20 years later, America’s most famous songwriter of the first half of the 20th century could no longer play his famous Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar labeled with the rebel decree “This machine kills fascists.”

But what he heard on the radio fired him to write one last great lyric. Puttering around his Long Island, New York home in January 1948 Guthrie heard a bulletin on the morning news.

“Story out of California,” he recalled the announcer saying. “A plane crash near Los Gatos killed 32 people. It ain’t as bad as it sounds, though, because mostly they were just deportees.”

Infuriated, Guthrie grabbed paper and pen. His hands were shaking from a mix of rage and Huntington’s, but he scratched out a lyric that today is considered one of the most important protest songs ever written and a composition that has been recorded hundreds of times by the likes of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, The Byrds, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell, Odetta, Dolly Parton, Cisco Houston, Hany Axton and Peter, Paul and Mary, among many others, including Woody’s son Arlo Guthrie.

There, on his kitchen table, Guthrie’s rage became a poetic masterpiece.

‘Deportee’ at 75

Special Section

RELENTLESS EFFORT TO LOCATE FAMILIES—Author Tim Z. Hernandez (right) stands with descendants of the Mexican laborers killed in the 1948 plane crash near Los Gatos Canyon. Since 2010, Hernandez has located the families of at least 13 of the 28 Mexican passengers on board the DC-3 plane that crashed in the Diablo Range, 20 miles west of Coalinga, California.

WOODY GUTHRIE’S LAST SONG TRANSCENDS TIME AS A CLARION CALL FOR HUMAN DECENCY

‘DEPORTEE’ STILL HAUNTS AMERICA

This is a large scale ongoing project that involves numerous collaborators and entities, in both the United States and Mexico. Since 2010, I have been dedicated to researching and locating the families of the victims of all 32 passengers killed in the famous 1948 plane wreck at Los Gatos Canyon.

TIM Z. HERNANDEZ

The Plane Crash Project

‘ALL THEY WILL CALL YOU WILL BE DEPORTEES’—(top) A mass funeral at Fresno Holy Cross Cemetery for 26 of the 28 Mexican passengers who died in a January 28, 1948 plane crash in the Los Gatos hills near Coalinga. Many of the coffins were empty because the bodies were obliterated in the crash. (above) This marker at Holy Cross Cemetery was replaced by a monument in 2023 with the names of all the Mexican citizens who died in the plane crash.

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NAMELESS NO MORE—Professor Tim Hernandez (r) has spent decades researching the tragic 1948 crash of a plane returning braceros to Mexico. “The fireball of lightning that shook all our hills” killed 32. Many of the victims names were unknown when the bodies were originally buried in a mass grave near Fresno. Hernandez and Jaime Ramirez, whose grandfather Ramon Gonzalez and great uncle Guadalupe Ramirez Lara died in the crash, lift a serape from a new memorial that includes all the names.
DEPORTEES

Fresno, according to Tim Z. Hernandez’s seminal study “All They Will Call You.” Newspapers in Fresno County did initially return to print names of the victims and locals made makeshift memorials, but the victims of the plane wreck at Los Gatos largely disappeared from the national conversation.

Folk music legend Pete Seeger, Guthrie’s long-time pal and former bandmate in The Almanac Singers, was the first to perform “Deportee: Plane Wreck at Los Gatos.” He did so in a chant accompanied by his banjo plunking out a sad melody in a largely improvised attempt to get Woody’s message out to sympathetic audiences. Guthrie, the master tunesmith, could no long play his guitar and struggled to sing. Even half-finished, “Deportee” started to stir emotions.

Cesar Chavez was paused.

The young U.S. Navy veteran who abandoned his service to farmworkers shortly after World War II, read the lyrics and was further inspired to advocate on behalf of Mexican and Filipino farmworkers, people like himself and his family. He would have a second life-changing encounter with “Deportee” about a decade later.

My father’s own father, he needed that roof. They took all the money he made in his life. My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees. They rode on the trains till they took down and died

Martin Hoffmann was intrigued. As a Colorado university student he had attended a performance by Seeger that included his chant version of “Deportee.” He decided such a stirring melody needed a melody. Years later, in 1958, while he was working as a high school teacher in California, Hoffmann came up with a simple yet beautiful melody in rancher waltz time that gave wings to Guthrie’s angry poem. Seeger loved it. So did Guthrie. Hoffmann and the folk and rock musicians came to love “Deportee,” too.

Some of us are illegal and some are not seen at all. Our work continues on and we have more on.

We’re told to Mexican border they chase us like olives, like lemons, like thieves

Guthrie grew up in Oklahoma during the disastrous Dust Bowl years and, like the deportees in his poem, led a ragged life looking for work and trying to survive. He played piano and guitar in bars and clubs when he could and also harvested wheat in Texas and the Midwest as well as fruit in California’s Central Valley. He learned passable Spanish and grew fond of the hardworking migrants who selflessly labored to provide for their families.

“Just about the most noble folks I’ve ever seen,” Guthrie wrote in his intentionally Oklahoman lexicon.

He soon got his first real break performing his songs on the radio in Los Angeles and recording deals followed. Guthrie’s train-hopping traveling informed his lexicon like “This Land’s Yer Land,” “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You,” “Do–Re–Mi,” “Billy the Kid,” “Stones Chest,” “Pretty Boy Floyd,” “Philadelphia Lawyers” and many others. Bob Dylan has been called America’s greatest songporter, but he declines the title and insists Woody Guthrie was “a God–given gift to everyone.”

Guthrie whisperer Cisco Houston took the first crack at recording a radio version of “Deportee” in 1945 and in 1963 the song began to get airplay in pockets across the nation.

The radio said they are just deportees

Houston’s recording launched a thousand ships—more accurately, a thousand versions of “Deportee: Plane Wreck at Los Gatos.” Folk, country and rock stars from each generation have kept the song and its message alive for 75 years. Human rights leader Enrique Morones said it is one of the greatest and most important songs ever written.

“There are a lot of great protest songs, but none more stirring than ‘Deportee,’” he said. “This is the 75th anniversary of a song that is still recorded and performed by renowned musicians. That is a testament to its value and its stirring power.”

Southwestern College Professor of Mexican-American Studies Dr. Garando Rios said the song “hits home” for him because he has family members who have been mistreated laborers.

“My father’s own father, he waded through the fruit trees and died in the strawberry and lettuce fields into the middle class and had a home in San Jose. Like many revolutionaries, Chavez had his moments of doubt and bouts of exhaustion. His grandchild— including granddaughter Christina who attended Southwestern College— said “Deportee” changed the course of his life.

Christina Chavez said her grandmother did what so many Mexican-Americans do: when they hear a compelling new song on their car radio—he stopped in his driveway with the matter running and the radio playing Cisco Houston’s recording of “Deportee.” It was a seminal moment that led to his decision to double down on his work on behalf of migrants and farm workers of the United Farm Workers union.

“They rode on the trucks till they took down and died,” she said. “Right to his core.”

The song brought the experience of my family to others in very concrete terms,” he said. “It says ‘we’re flying you back to the border.’ Now we need you, now we don’t.”

“Deportees” has enlightened listeners for three quarters of a century. Rios said:

“Exposes the horrific treatment of Mexican and migrant workers that is still the situation today.”

He said, “The song keeps the song and its message alive for 75 years. Human rights leader Enrique Morones said Woody Guthrie and Martin Hoffmann are still working their artistic magic from their perches in Heaven.”

Rios said “Freeport” in “La Bamba” is the Guthrie Songwriter of the Century and a worthy candidate for the award.

“Deportee” is notable for its timeless quality. It spoke to the young U.S. Navy veteran who abandoned his service to farmworkers shortly after World War II. The song has been recorded and performed by renowned artists from each generation. It has been the backbone of many revolutionaries, including granddaughter Christina who attended Southwestern College.

Deportees were tired.

In 1961 he worked as a labor organizer who encouraged Mexican-Americans (Los Latinos were most commonly referred to in that time) to vote. He had scratched his way out of the strawberry and lettuce fields into the middle class and had a home in San Jose. Like many revolutionaries, Chavez had his moments of doubt and bouts of exhaustion. His grandchildren— including granddaughter Christina who attended Southwestern College— said “Deportee” changed the course of his life.

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