

BPA NEWS

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BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION
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Contact: [Joel Scruggs](#), 503-230-5511/5131

BPA celebrates 75th anniversary of Woody Guthrie's Columbia River songs
Folksinger wrote 26 songs promoting the Columbia River, benefits of new hydroelectric dams

Portland, Ore. – Seventy-five years ago, legendary folksinger and songwriter Woody Guthrie wrote 26 songs for the Bonneville Power Administration. During his month of employment in the spring of 1941, Guthrie traveled across Oregon and Washington and visited towns, farms, Native American locales and the construction site of Grand Coulee Dam in northeast Washington. Inspired by the people he met and his own observations and experiences, Guthrie wrote a collection of songs about the Columbia River and the benefits new federal hydroelectric dams would bring to the people of the Northwest.

“He plucked tunes about the people, the mighty Columbia River, the beautiful Northwest landscape, and the promise of prosperity from new hydroelectric dams,” said Libby Burke, archivist in BPA’s library. “The construction of the Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams brought electricity, irrigation for crops and jobs at a time when many folks were desperate for work following the Great Depression.”

The songs Guthrie wrote in his employment at BPA are known collectively as “The Columbia River Songs.” The titles include, “Roll On, Columbia,” “Grand Coulee Dam,” “Pastures of Plenty” and “The Biggest Thing that Man has Ever Done,” and some later became part of Northwest and American musical tradition.

In celebration of this 75th anniversary, [Washington Governor Jay Inslee proclaimed](#) May 28 as “Woody Guthrie Day” in the state of Washington. BPA is one of the community sponsors of the “[Woody Guthrie Day](#)” event at Grand Coulee Dam, Saturday, May 28.

“We’re excited to celebrate the music of this great American songwriter and his 30-day employment with us back in 1941,” Burke added.

The free event includes music all day on the big lawn, film screenings, a booth highlighting the history of Guthrie’s songwriting for BPA, historical presentations, and readings and signings of “26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie’s Columbia River Songs and the Planned



Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest,” a new book by Seattle KEXP radio host Greg Vandy that was researched at BPA’s library in Portland, Ore. This will also be the opening weekend of the Grand Coulee Dam laser show, which will follow the programs.

BPA is also hosting an anniversary celebration of the Columbia River songs on Woody Guthrie’s 104th birthday, July 14, from 2 to 3:30 p.m. at its headquarters in Portland. The [event](#), which is open to the public, will feature a presentation about Guthrie’s songwriting for BPA, screening of film clips, an interview with author Greg Vandy and BPA researcher Libby Burke, as well as a book signing by Vandy. Half of the sales of his “26 Songs in 30 Days” book will benefit the [Northwest Federal Employees Association’s](#) scholarship fund.

The rest of the story

Woody Guthrie was hired to write music for a BPA-produced movie about Columbia River power. The film called, “[The Columbia](#),” was abandoned before completion due to the start of World War II. It was finally finished in 1949, after footage of the Vanport flood offered the writer and producer, BPA’s Stephen B. Kahn, an opportunity to include flood control in the film as a case for continued federal dam building. However, all the film prints that were known – along with the 1939 film, “[Hydro](#),” and many public power promotional pamphlets and materials – were destroyed in 1953 and for the most part forgotten.

Four decades later, employee Bill Murlin, who worked in BPA’s public affairs office, discovered Guthrie’s name in the film credits while looking for material for BPA’s 50th anniversary. Over the next several years, Murlin researched Guthrie’s wildly productive month of songwriting, ultimately leading to BPA’s release of a songbook and the recordings. [Read](#) more about the unearthing of a pop-culture icon in BPA’s history.

BPA recently released two collections of films that include “[The Columbia](#)” and the 1987 film “[River of Power](#),” which features some of Guthrie’s original demo recordings tracked down by Murlin. To view or learn more about BPA’s films, visit: www.bpa.gov/goto/films. Free DVD copies may be ordered from the [BPA Library and Visitor Center](#).

Click [here](#) for a gallery of Guthrie images and [watch](#) a video that showcases his music from the 1949 film “[The Columbia](#).”

About BPA

The Bonneville Power Administration, headquartered in Portland, Ore., is a nonprofit federal power marketer that sells wholesale electricity from 31 federal dams and one nuclear plant to 142 electric utilities, serving millions of consumers and businesses in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, western Montana and parts of California, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming. BPA delivers power via more than 15,000 circuit miles of lines and 261 substations to 475 transmission customers. In all, BPA markets about a third of the electricity consumed in the Northwest and operates three-quarters of the region’s high-voltage transmission grid. BPA also funds one of the largest fish and wildlife programs in the world, and, with its partners, pursues cost-effective energy savings and operational solutions that help maintain affordable, reliable and carbon-free electric power for the Northwest. www.bpa.gov