

“Deportee” Rediscovered

The Woodie Guthrie Archives shed new light on artist intent

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Nobody survived the crash. A total of 32 people died on January 28, 1948 when a US Immigration Service plane went down in an agricultural field in Northern California. All but four of the 32 victims were Mexican farm workers participating in the US Bracero Program, which permitted Mexicans to work in the US during harvest seasons. Folk musician Woody Guthrie was appalled that news reports of the crash named only four of the victims (the pilot, co-pilot, flight attendant, and guard), referring to the 28 Mexicans as simply “deportees.”¹ In the days that followed, Guthrie’s outrage resulted in a long-lost kitchen recording of “Deportee,” an initially obscure song whose sheet music rose to prominence more than decade later during the United Farmworkers Movement. The kitchen tape is the only known recording of Guthrie actually performing his now-famous song but— incredibly—the tape remained undiscovered until the summer of 2025. The gritty, low-quality recording entered the public domain in sharp contrast to the polished renditions that actually made the song famous (performed by musicians like Joan Baez², Pete Seeger³, and Bruce Springsteen⁴). A fresh look at this archival object reveals not only the artist’s original intent but also the timelessness of Guthrie’s searing critique of American attitudes toward immigrants.

¹ Zinn Education Project. “January 28, 1948 — Plane Wreck at Los Gatos.” Zinn Education Project. Accessed November 1, 2025. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/plane-wreck-at-los-gatos/>

² Baez, Joan. “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos) — Joan Baez.” YouTube video, 4:52. Posted November 29, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmN2nodeHuk>

³ Pete Seeger. “Deportees (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos).” YouTube video, 4:23. https://youtu.be/OW6H_9K2jug?si=x5yF4vTwoVx9esok

⁴ Springsteen, Bruce. “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos) — Bruce Springsteen.” YouTube video, 5:12. Posted August 28, 1981. <https://youtu.be/Av4AEpEvnuc>



Figure 1. Folk legend Woodie Guthrie plays his guitar inside his Brooklyn, New York family apartment, *circa* 1946. *Source: Wikipedia*

Guthrie's estate released the kitchen recording of "A Plane Wreck At Los Gatos (Deportee)" on what would have been Guthrie's 113th birthday (July 18, 2025).⁵ It was part of a two-volume set titled, *Woody at Home*, a collection of 22 previously unreleased tracks recorded by Guthrie in his family apartment in Brooklyn, New York. After Guthrie's premature death to Huntington's disease in 1967 his recordings, lyrics, and correspondence were archived by his wife, Marjorie Mazia Guthrie, and later curated by his daughter, Nora Guthrie, who established the Woody Guthrie Archives in 1996. The collection was published by Shamus Records, a subsidiary of his longtime publisher TRO Essex Music Group.⁶ Engineers Steve Rosenthal and Jessica Thompson used vintage equipment and audio restoration techniques to digitize the recordings.⁷ Guthrie created the recordings using a single microphone connected to a reel-to-reel analog tape recorder at 3 ¾ inches per second (IPS), the most economical tape speed of

⁵ Folk Alley. "Song Premiere: Woody Guthrie, 'Deportee (Woody's Home Tape).'" July 14, 2025. <https://folkalley.com/song-premiere-woody-guthrie-deportee-woodys-home-tape/>

⁶ Ostien, Kathy. "TRO Essex Music Group's Kathy Ostien on Publisher at 75 Years, Launch of Shamus Records." Billboard, June 25, 2024. <https://www.billboard.com/pro/tro-essex-music-group-anniversary-kathy-ostien-shamus-records-interview/>

⁷ Corcoran, Nina. "New Woody Guthrie Compilation Includes Only Known Recording of 'Deportee': Listen." Pitchfork, July 14 2025. <https://pitchfork.com/news/new-woody-guthrie-compilation-includes-only-known-recording-of-deportee-listen/>

his era which conserved his precious magnetic media but produced a relatively low quality recording.⁸

The lyrics for “Deportee” originated on pencil and paper as a poem critiquing systemic inequality and the way US immigration policies in the 1940s stripped people of identity and worth.



Figure 2. Woodie Guthrie’s home recording equipment included this reel-to-reel tape recorder and microphone. *Source: Woodie Guthrie Archives*

Compared to the recordings that made the song popular decades after Guthrie wrote it, the 80-year old kitchen recording of “Deportee” gives insight into his mindset and intent. Unlike the popular covers of “Deportee,” Guthrie’s recording gives listeners a painfully raw and intimate connection to his deep voice, speech-like delivery, and dissonant guitar. Unlike the soaring, anthem-like performances from Baez and Seeger that established the song as part of the Farmworker Movement, Guthrie’s kitchen recording is more of a heartfelt act of mourning than a melodic tune. Hearing Guthrie in his own home

⁸ Woody Guthrie Publications. “Woody at Home – Home.” Accessed November 2, 2025. <https://woodyathome.com/home>

with his children in the background gives the recording a level of sincerity and further cements his status as the godfather of folk music. Hearing the song in such an unprocessed—and arguably unfinished—state also imparts a sense of emotional urgency lost in more famous covers from later decades. But the timing release also raises problematic questions related to the artist's intent. On one hand, the 2025 release points to the identity and worth of underrepresented people, a timely statement during such political and social turmoil in America. On the other hand, the decision to pre-release this single on Guthrie's birthday raises the question of whether we should be remembering Guthrie or the victims of the plane crash? With the artist's intent in mind we might ask, "what would Woody have wanted?" Does the specific timing of the release advance or diminish Guthrie's intent?



Figure 3. Joan Baez performs "Deportee" at her 2017 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. *Source: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*

The archival journey of Woody's home recordings spans decades, from an analog tape recorder in Brooklyn to the Guthrie family's private storage and finally into the Woody Guthrie Archives. The digitization of *Woody at Home* — including "Deportee" — gives listeners and musicologists rare insight

into Guthrie's process and original intent. In the case of "Deportee" the archive's biggest gift is the opportunity to hear Guthrie sing his own song for the first and only time. Certainly hearing the voice of the creator deepens our understanding of the song, but the archive also issues a renewed and timely critique of American attitudes toward immigration. This remarkable archive demonstrates how sound, memory, and history are intertwined; how an artist's private act of mourning can —80 years later — become an embodiment of national conscience. Through its preservation and release, the archive doesn't just store the past, it lets history speak again.