



elizabeth mitchell
little seed

songs for children by
woody guthrie



Smithsonian Folkways

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SFW CD 45072

- 1.** riding in my car 2:46
- 2.** bling blang 1:57
- 3.** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 1:40
- 4.** why, oh why? 3:11
- 5.** sleep eye 2:18
- 6.** who's my pretty baby? 1:53
- 7.** rattle my rattle 1:24
- 8.** this land is your land 4:12
- 9.** merry-go-round 2:01
- 10.** one day old 1:57
- 11.** little sugar 1:55
- 12.** grassy grass grass 0:56
- 13.** little seed 3:26

Tracks 1, 2, 5, 12, and 13 (Woody Guthrie / WGP & TRO-Folkways Music Publishers Inc., BMI); all other tracks (Woody Guthrie / WGP & TRO-Ludlow Music, Inc., BMI)

One Saturday afternoon

when I was 24 years old, I did something that I had done on so many Saturday afternoons before—I wandered into a record store with my boyfriend. We were in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we often visited my boyfriend's sister, who was living there at the time. Sometimes we went to Skippy White's in Central Square for their great soul music collection, but on this day we ended up in Stereo Jacks in Porter Square. As always, I was searching for Folkways vinyl and walked straight to the Folk section. I reached into the record bin and found a ten-inch treasure that would change my life.

The first thing I saw was the cover of the album, a photograph of a mother, kneeling and holding the hands of a baby taking her first steps.* The image was so perfect and tender it stopped my heart. Then I read the title of the album—*Songs to Grow on for Mother and Child, Composed and Sung by Woody Guthrie*. I turned the record over and read the titles of the songs: “Grassy-y Grass Grass,” “Little Sack

** I later learned that the photograph was taken by acclaimed music photographer David Gahr, and that the subjects of the image were his wife and child.*

of Sugar,” “1 Day, 2 Days, 3 Days Old,” and more. I knew I had found something extraordinary. But I never imagined that 20 years later I would be writing my own liner notes for Smithsonian Folkways about it.

I had never considered the idea of recording music for children. Yes, I was a musician, and yes, I had a strong connection with children, even before becoming a teacher and a mother. But the children’s music that I had heard did not inspire me; it seemed too straightforward, I didn’t hear any mystery there. When I put this record on, well, my feelings changed!

The songs literally jumped with joy off the vinyl. The seemingly freely associated words, the drums and tambourines, the natural and effortless melodies—I truly had never heard so much poetry in music before. Woody’s songs were so full of wonder and love and were completely unique in their ability to straddle the worlds and views of both caregiver and child. I was in my first year of teaching at the time and was fully immersed in the world of four- and five-year-olds. I heard my students in these songs, their vast imaginations mirrored by a 34-year-old man from Oklahoma writing songs for his children, many years ago.

Woody wrote most of these songs when he lived on Mermaid Avenue in

Coney Island, New York, with his wife Marjorie Mazia and their first child, daughter Cathy Ann. Marjorie spent her days teaching dance, and Woody was home caring for Cathy Ann. Cathy Ann was the apple of her father's eye, the sunshine through the clouds, the question and the answer. Woody spent his days completely absorbed in experiencing her point of view. Both he and Marjorie kept detailed journals of her development and their adventures.

Tragically, Cathy Ann died in a fire at the age of four in 1947. This was not the first time Woody had lost a loved one to a fire, as his beloved older sister Clara died from severe burns when Woody was very young. Woody's own childhood was marked by great sorrow and confusion, as his mother suffered from undiagnosed Huntington's disease, the same disease that would claim Woody's life at age 55.

Woody recorded these songs with Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records. The sessions were among his most focused, with his wife Marjorie taking part in the process. They took place at Asch's tiny studio on 46th Street in Manhattan, sometime in 1946 and 1947.

Woody Guthrie's songs for children are a gift to all of us. At this point in my life, they are a part of me, part of my family. I sing these lyrics spontaneously,

to my daughter Storey and to myself; they give us energy and inspiration to get through the day. “Tooky, tooky, tooky, tooky, tidalo,” “because, because, because, because, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye”—these fragments of sweetness and mystery touch our souls. These songs have been part of my journey from being a teacher on Roosevelt Island in New York City to singing concerts with children in the redwood forests of California, to Tokyo, Japan, where we visited a kindergarten who had choreographed an entire dance to “Who’s My Pretty Baby”—one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.

I performed “Bling Blang” for the first time this past weekend at the Brooklyn Public Library, and from the first note, the music jumped for joy; children and their families sang along about the sounds we make and the love we feel when we build a home for each other. Thank you Woody, for giving us this beautiful experience and so many others like it. We can feel this profound musical joy anytime, anywhere, with you in our spirits and your songs in our hearts.

— ELIZABETH MITCHELL

April 2012





1. *riding in my car*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar; Athena Miros, vocals; Warren Defever, sound effects editing

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound, Providence, RI, 2002.

Originally released on *You Are My Sunshine* Little Bird Records.

Our adorable niece Athena sang on this recording with us when she was three years old. She had practiced and practiced before coming over to sing

with us, but I love how spontaneously she interprets the song as we go along. I am not quite as adept as Woody at making car sounds with my mouth, so we added some fun sound effects. And we were all surprised when the frog jumped into the car!

*Trees and houses walk along
Trees and houses walk along
Truck and a car and a garbage can,
Take you riding in my car.*

2. *bling blang*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; David Levine, banjo; Dean Jones, wood blocks and chest thumps; Daniel Littleton, *zzoe ngon*; Clem Waldmann, knee slaps; Storey and Penny Littleton, vocals

Recorded by Dean Jones, No Parking Studios, Rosendale, NY; additional recording by Justin Guip, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

In this song, Woody embraces and embodies both the perspective of a loving, protective parent and the voice of a freewheeling child.

*I'll grab some mud and you grab some
clay*

So when it rains it won't wash away.

We'll build a house that'll be so strong,

The winds will sing my baby a song.

3. **1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8**

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and guitar; Daniel Littleton, guitar and percussion; Clem Waldmann, drums; Storey and Penny Littleton, vocals

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

The lyrics for this song are not included in the liner notes to *Songs*

to *Grow on for Mother and Child*, so I had to listen to the recording over and over again to try and discern what the heck Woody is singing! After doing this for several days, and asking others to listen and verify that my transcription was accurate enough, I recorded the song. Then a few days ago, as I was working on these liner notes, I discovered the actual lyrics to this song on the official Woody Guthrie website. Well, I got pretty close!

*Blackbird, blue jay, one, two, three, four,
Trash-stack, jump back, E, F, G.*

*Big man, little man, fat man, skinny man,
Grasshopper, green snake, hold my hand.*



4. *why, oh why?*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and guitar; Daniel Littleton, vocals and guitar; Molly Mason, upright bass; Justin Guip, drums

Recorded by Justin Guip, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

Children have so many wonderful and often funny questions, and their questions can always lead to a song. Woody shows us how it's done with "Why, Oh Why?"

Why, oh why, oh why, oh why?

Why, oh why, oh why?

Because because because because,

Goodbye goodbye goodbye.

5. *sleep eye*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Dean Jones, *balafon*; Kirsten Jacobson, flute; Daniel Littleton, guitar

Recorded by Dean Jones, No Parking Studios, Rosendale, NY, 2012.

My friend Dean Jones from the band Dog On Fleas is one of the most creative music-makers I know. Here he plays a *balafon*—a wooden African instrument that is similar to a xylophone. The rhythm of this song is perfect for bouncing a baby on your shoulder and lulling them to sleep. Thank you, Woody!

*Eyes-y close, eyes-y close, eyes-y close
my little sugar*

*One hand asleep, two hands asleep, go
to sleepy-y little sleep eye.*



6. *who's my pretty baby?*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, vocals, guitar, and percussion

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound, Mount Tremper, NY, 2005.

Originally released on *You Are My Little Bird* Smithsonian Folkways 40563.

Oh, the joy this song has brought to our family through the years! We have sung it with so many different lyrics, changing the words to reflect whatever terms of endearment we are using for one another. For a long time it was “funny little bunny”!

Who'll be my big man?

Who'll be my nice lady?

Who'll be my apple dumpling?

Hey, hey, pretty babe.

7. *rattle my rattle*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Clem Waldmann, percussion; Kirsten Jacobson, flute; Daniel Littleton, melodica

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

Woody's percussion playing on the original recording of “Rattle My Rattle” is such a beautiful and inspired accompaniment. I thought it would be fun to interpret this song with someone who really loves to improvise on the drums. I invited my friend Clem Waldmann to join me. Clem is an incredible drummer; you might have heard him play if you ever saw the Blue Man Group. We are very lucky that he is also an old friend of ours and the dad of one of Storey's best friends! Clem



and I had such a good time making this recording happen. Daniel thought our arrangement was reminiscent of some of Moondog's percussively based music, so he and Kirsten played a little tribute on flute and melodica. It's fun to imagine that Woody heard Moondog playing in various parks and street corners in New York City around the time he wrote these songs. In this recording we tried to create what it might have sounded like if they had played music together.

Rattle rattle riddle

Rattle rattle riddle

Rattle rattle rattle

Skiddle my skiddle.

8. *this land is your land*

Elizabeth Mitchell, voice and harmonium;
Daniel Littleton, guitar, piano, and vocals;
Storey Littleton, vocals

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound,
Woodstock, NY, 2011.

There is so much to say about this song, I could fill a book! Fortunately, others have done this beautifully, and these books are listed at the bottom of these notes. I will say that when Woody Guthrie first wrote this song in 1940, it was not intended to be a children's song. He titled it "God Blessed America," and it was his response to the Irving Berlin song of a similar name. When Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Records, recorded it in 1944, he saw its

potential as a children's song and included it on the 1951 Folkways release *Songs to Grow On: This Land Is My Land*—the first time it was ever released as a recording. Here we sing the three moving verses that have often been left out.

As I went walking, I saw a sign there

And on the sign it said "No

Trespassing"

But on the other side, it didn't say

nothing.

That side was made for you and me.

*In the shadow of the steeple I saw my
people.*

By the relief office, I've seen my people.

*As they stood there hungry, I stood
there asking,*

Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me

As I go walking that freedom highway.

*Nobody living can ever make me turn
back.*

This land was made for you and me.

9. *merry-go- round*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and guitar; Daniel Littleton, guitar

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

I love to imagine Woody and his daughter Cathy Ann on a carousel at Coney Island.

It's faster now my pony runs

Up to the moon and down to the sun;

My pony runs to the music and drums,

Round and round and round.



10. *one day old*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar; Warren Defever, wood flute

Recorded by Warren Defever, Time Stereo, Livonia, MI, 1998.

Originally released on *You Are My Flower* Little Bird Records.

This song was recorded in Livonia, Michigan, at the home studio of our friend Warren Defever. It was part of our first children's music album, *You Are My Flower*, which we recorded in one afternoon in 1998. You don't have to listen very closely to hear that I had a bad cold at the time! Unlike many of the other songs we recorded that day, this one I had never sung before; I had only listened to Woody's recording. These are some of my favorite lyrics by

Woody, and I had a blast trying to sing them as fast and clear as I could!

*I'm a little baby a few days old,
I'm a little snick-snack some days old,
I'm a little jabber-talker lotta days old,
And I'm a little butterfly one minute
old.*



11. *little sugar*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals, guitar, and shakers;
Daniel Littleton, guitar

Recorded by Warren Defever, Time Stereo,
Livonia, MI, 1998.

Originally released on *You Are My Flower* Little
Bird Records.

There is so much sweetness and freedom in this song, and so much love. It is one of my husband Daniel's all-time favorites, and he had the idea to try it make it sound like an early recording by Johnny Cash, a fellow with whom Woody had many things in common. Sometimes when we sing this song now, we add a refrain of "I feel, I feel, I feel like a morning star!"

*Hey, hey, hey, my little honey bunny,
Ho, ho, ho, my little turtle dove,
Hee, hee, hee, my little sack of 'taters,
So pretty, pretty, pretty, I could eat your
toes.*

12. *grassy grass grass*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals and knee slaps

Recorded by Warren Defever, On Me Sound,
Mount Tremper, NY, 2005.

Originally released on *You Are My Little Bird*
Smithsonian Folkways 45063.

I think this is my favorite Woody Guthrie song of all; for me it is a perfect bedtime mantra. In his writing about children's music, Woody expressed his wish that people not follow his songs like a static text and

sing them word for word. He wanted people to make up their own versions, to cultivate their own sense of creative freedom by listening to and learning from the children in their lives, something I strive to do every day. But Woody's poetry is too powerful to simply listen to, and sometimes I need to sing it just the way he wrote it.

*Dancy dance dance,
Singy sing sing,
Grow grow grow,
Biggy big big.*

13. *little seed*

Elizabeth Mitchell, vocals; Jay Ungar, fiddle; Molly Mason, upright bass; Ruthy Ungar, fiddle and vocals; Daniel Littleton, guitar, piano, and vocals; David Levine, mandolin; Clem

Waldmann, drums; Amy Helm, vocals; Storey Littleton and Sophia Reynolds, vocals

Recorded by Justin Guip, On Me Sound, Woodstock, NY, 2012.

I always thought that this song sounded like a treasure from Bob Dylan and the Band's basement tapes, so it was fun to sing and play it with our beloved Woodstock friends and neighbors Amy Helm, Ruthy and Jay Ungar, Molly Mason, David Levine, and Clem Waldmann. When Storey and her friend Sophia came home from school, they sang along, and the album was done!

*Tooky, tooky, tooky, tooky, tidalo,
We'll all dance around and see my little
seed grow.*

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Woodyguthrie.org

For Storey Lee

In loving memory of
Madeline Elizabeth Musto

credits

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In *Little Seed*, Elizabeth Mitchell embraces the gentle genius of America's musical bard, Woody Guthrie. The simple yet profound songs he wrote for his young children remind us of how the loving bonds between parent and child endure and are strengthened through music. Joined by family and friends, Elizabeth Mitchell offers us re-imagined renditions of classic Guthrie favorites. Her thoughtful versions pay tribute to Guthrie's uncanny ability to inhabit both the perspective of a loving, protective parent and the voice of a freewheeling child. **13 tracks, 29 minutes, 20 page booklet.**

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