

Oct. 6, 1996—

CLEVELAND Hard-living troubadour Ramblin' Jack Elliott sat backstage before the recent Woody Guthrie benefit concert at Severance Hall, the ornate home of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The old cowboy stood out.

Each time a guest artist spotted the ramblin' man, they stopped to pay homage. You don't cross a restless heart. British busker Billy Bragg smiled warmly and Elliott, whose black shirt and jeans were accented by a black kerchief around his leatherneck, stood up and waved his black cowboy hat. Actor Tim Robbins, whose father was a folkie, said hello. Singer-songwriter John Wesley Harding simply stared in admiration.

Elliott, 66, was a close friend of Guthrie's. He met the Oklahoma-born singer-songwriter in 1950 when Guthrie was in a New York hospital recuperating from a ruptured appendix. In 1951 they took a West Coast road trip together in a '37 Plymouth coupe. Two years later Elliott befriended Beat author Jack Kerouac. Elliott proofread *On the Road* three years before it came out.

"Jack was a big fan of Woody's," Elliott said after rehearsing Guthrie's "1913 Massacre," which he performed solo acoustic at the concert. "When I met Jack, that was one of the reasons he could relate to me. I was singing Woody Guthrie songs. After *On the Road* came out, Alan Ginsberg asked me to do a reading of the book at this tiny bookstore in Paris. I was living in a cheap hotel in the Left Banke. I read parts of Jack's book, Alan recited some of Jack's poetry and I read parts of Woody's (autobiography) *Bound for Glory*.

"It was a generational trip."

Kerouac's work has translated through generations, but during the 10-day gathering "Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie," co-sponsored by Case Western Reserve University and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, one of the recurring questions was how Guthrie's heartfelt work would be perceived by subsequent generations.

"Woody is preserved in his choice of words," Elliott said, choosing words carefully. "His language is rich, colorful, rhythmic and sarcastic. It's so powerful it goes right to your

heart. Anybody in any generation, no matter how far removed they are down the line - even electronically - it's going to mean something to them.

"However they interpret that in whatever life they are in is a mystery. I don't know what kind of air they're going to be breathing or what kind of guns they're going to be hiding from, but they're going to love Woody."

It's been suggested that the typewriter was the instrument that Guthrie played best. He was a mediocre guitarist, and his nasally vocals were as flat as Route 66 through the Texas panhandle. Some of Guthrie's songs lacked melody, while other melodies were borrowed from the likes of Leadbelly (he reprised "Goodnight Irene" several times) and the Carter Family. Guthrie even tried to replicate A.P. Carter's finger-picking style.

"He was fond of the Carter Family," said Elliott, who'll make a rare Chicago appearance in November at the Old Town School of Folk Music. "He was their biggest fan. He once showed me a postcard he got from A.P. (Alvin Pleasant) Carter when he was doing the radio programs (in 1937 on KFVD in Los Angeles and while the Carter Family worked on XERA, the Mexican border station). A.P. wrote, 'You're doin' good.' Woody was proud of that.

"Woody liked to reminisce about adventures when we traveled, the scrapes he and (fellow folkie) Cisco Houston got in and out of. They were in the Merchant Marines during World War II. They got torpedoed twice on ships. Both times, they managed to get their guitar, harmonica, mandolin and fiddle - Woody's fiddle, which is now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame - out."

Guthrie was many things, which is what made "Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie" so compelling. Besides being a singer-songwriter, Guthrie was a sign painter, author, hobo, labor activist, and cartoonist. He's even in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Class of '88.

Guthrie connected these diverse worlds with his freewheeling, childlike nature. Consider his self-penned 1956 liner notes from "Songs to Grow On for Mother and Child" (reissued on CD by Smithsonian/Folkways).

Guthrie wrote, "Please, please, please, don't read nor sing my songs like no lesson book, like no text for today. But, let them be a little key to sort of unlock and let down all of your old bars. . . . Watch the kids. Do like they do. Act like they act. Yell like they yell. Dance the ways you see them dance. Sing like they sing. Work and rest the way

kids do. You'll be healthier. You'll feel wealthier. You'll talk wiser. . . . I don't want the kids to be grown up. I want to see the grown folks be kids."

Woodrow "Woody" Guthrie was born in 1912, the year Woodrow Wilson was elected president. He died in 1967 of Huntington's Disease, a degenerative nerve disorder. The disease also claimed Guthrie's mother.

Joe Klein, the Primary Colors author, wrote the brilliant 1980 biography Woody Guthrie: A Life. In an innocent, romantic notion that Guthrie would have appreciated, Klein was tempted to view Guthrie's journey from his Okemah, Okla., birthplace to his death bed in Queens, N.Y., as a "perverse metaphor for America's progress through the 20th century," as he states in the forward of his book.

"But it really isn't," he writes. "It is only one life, sad and triumphant and utterly unique."

But Bragg picked up on Klein's theme in a panel discussion called "Woody Now," which included fellow singer-songwriters Alejandro Escovedo, Jimmy LaFave, Paul Metsa and John Wesley Harding.

"Around the time Woody was starting to write, America finally gelled," said Bragg, who was born in Barking Essex, England. "As a geographic but also (as) a social idea. Woody was probably the first person to come along and see what it meant to be in this huge country where you could move back and forth. Woody was the first singer-songwriter in the true sense of a balladeer.

"Had he come from England, he would have been marginalized, singing in pubs and nobody would have ever heard of him. But in this country, with the vibrancy of your culture and the emerging technological aspect of your culture - the recording industry, the film industry - Woody was able to become the first singer-songwriter to be widely known."

Bragg's complete understanding of Guthrie so impressed Nora Guthrie, Woody's daughter, than she asked him to write music for some recently discovered Guthrie prose and poems. Nora Guthrie is president of the Woody Guthrie Archives in New York, which just opened to the public last week. The Severance Hall concert was held as a benefit for the archives. After working with Guthrie's words for six months, Bragg debuted the pop-tinged "Against the Law" and the cowboy ballad "The Unwelcome Guest" at the benefit concert. Bragg also wrote new words to Guthrie's

"This Land Is Your Land" to adapt to England.

The cultural diversity of the "Woody Now" panel was a tribute to the adaptable nature of Guthrie's work. Besides Bragg, who has founded Red Wedge, a socialist musicians' group in Britain, the panel included fellow Brit Harding; LaFave, who was born in rural Texas but finished high school in Oklahoma; Metsa, from Minnesota, and Escovedo, a native of San Antonio whose 89-year-old father was a Mexican immigrant.

The only missing component was an African-American folk-blues singer in the style of Ben Harper to reflect the profound influence that Leadbelly had on Guthrie.

Escovedo mesmerized the panel audience when he performed "The Rain Won't Keep You When It's Over," playing acoustic guitar and accompanied by a mournful violin. Embracing Guthrie's sense of character and landscape, "The Rain Won't Keep You When It's Over" was the first song Escovedo ever wrote, when he was a member of the Austin, Texas, band Rank and File.

"My father just had his 89th birthday last week," Escovedo said, his voice barely above a whisper. "We moved to California in 1958 and I didn't write songs until I was 30. I'm 45 now."

Just like the Dust Bowl refugees, the Escovedo family piled into an old sedan and headed west for a better life. His father was a plumber and he wanted to live in a state that was more pro-union than Texas. The Escovedos left behind their house, their dog and their cat. They never looked back.

Escovedo said he wrote the ballad after an argument he had with a Rank and File band member about border issues. Escovedo added, "I always sensed there was something very personal with Woody Guthrie's songs."

Harding added, "I'm particularly interested in how Woody wrote so effortlessly about situations that people are forced into for financial reasons and reasons of survival. I don't know anybody else who can do that. Maybe John Prine. I think John Prine has done that really well."

It's dangerous for a songwriter to stray from the heart of the matter and generally, the conference participants did a good job of staying close to Guthrie's basic soul.

A passage from *Grapes of Wrath* author John Steinbeck that appeared in the benefit

concert program summed up Guthrie better than critics and scholars. Steinbeck wrote, in part, ". . . Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression.

"I think we call this the American spirit."