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Music Assignment: The Late 1940s-1950s

<u>Title</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Year Introduced</u>	<u>Genre</u>	<u>Synopsis</u>
<i>It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels</i>	Kitty Wells	1952	Country Western	As a rebuttal to Hank Thompson's <i>The Wild Side of Life</i> , which was about how women are cheaters, Wells' song completely rebukes this idea. In the song, she blames unfaithful men for creating unfaithful women. Wells sings about how she realized her extramarital affairs were due to the husband acting as if he was a bachelor. She proceeds to denounce the culture of blaming everything on women during the 1950s.
<i>This Land is Your Land</i>	Woody Guthrie	1951	Folk	As a response to Irving Berlin's <i>God Bless America</i> , which Guthrie found to be complacent and farfetched, <i>This Land is Your Land</i> speaks about a communally shared America. Guthrie sings about the citizens of the US coming together in both work and song. The irony in this song being an iconic piece of music during this time was Guthrie's political association with communist groups.
<i>Confession Blues</i>	The Maxin Trio (mostly Ray Charles)	1949	R&B (Motown)	Ray Charles' first national hit, a joint effort with the Maxin Trio, relays a story about a materialistic woman does not possess enough depth to love. Sung from the perspective of a heartbroken man, the lyrics do show signs of a little bitterness, but ultimately shows that the singer has reluctantly accepted his fate with the woman he loves.

<i>Make Em' Laugh</i>	Donald O'Connor	1952	Movie/Stage Play	Written for the 1952 film <i>Singin' in the Rain</i> , the song is a lighthearted and uplifting performance. The lyrics of the song (though a little twisted at times) persuade the audience of the film to simply laugh and find humor in all things, despite how dreadful those things may be.
<i>Only You</i>	The Platters	1955	Rock & Roll	An upbeat love song from The Platters, <i>Only You (And You Alone)</i> , relays lyrics to a loved one about how she is the epitome of affection. As love was a popular subject for Rock & Roll songs at the time, <i>Only You</i> reached No. 5 in the charts, as people fell in love with the way that The Platters could simplify the meaning of love into one song.
<i>I'll Be Home</i>	The Flamingos	1955	Cutting Edge Funk	The Flamingos' first national hit, <i>I'll Be Home</i> , croons to a lover. The singer writes to the object of his affection and pleads with her/him to wait for him to return home. Very soothing in tone, the music is calming and incorporates a speaking portion where the singer narrates about his desire to serve his love.
<i>All Too Soon</i>	Ella Fitzgerald/Duke Ellington	1940/reintroduced in 1958	Ballad	Penned by Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald sings a simple love ballad about having to part with a significant other. Following a simple rhyming pattern, Fitzgerald narrates a story about romancing a lover and then having to bid farewell to them too soon for her liking. The song's slow pace and simple subject achieved great success with the American audience, who fell in love Fitzgerald's interpretation of a traditionally lyric-less composition.
<i>God Bless the Child</i>	Billie Holiday	1942	Jazz	After a rather intense argument with her mother in regards to

				financial matters, Holiday penned the song and titled it after an unspecified Biblical verse. Holiday relents about the selfishness and greediness that is intrinsically tied to money. She also sings about how ultimately, being financially independent will always attract people.
<i>Yakety Yak</i>	The Coasters	1958	Rock & Roll	A glimpse into the world of a middle-class 1950s suburban teenager, <i>Yakety Yak</i> lists a bunch of chores that the average child had to perform every day. Further, included in the lyrics is a conflict between adult and child, ultimately ending in the child talking back to his father/mother. Interestingly, the songwriters penned the song as “a white kid’s view of a black person’s conception of white society.”
<i>Heartbreak Hotel</i>	Elvis Presley	1955	Rock & Roll	Inspired by the suicide of a man who jumped out of a hotel, leaving a note that said “I walk a lonely street,” <i>Heartbreak Hotel</i> was Elvis Presley’s first #1 hit. The song is, essentially, about how a man wishes for death after his significant other leaves him. Though love was a common theme in music during this time, the rather morbid tone of the song was unusual for popular music – as it was talking about love leading to inevitable death.

This Land Is Your Land

Woody Guthrie's peaceful rebuttal towards Irving Berlin's *God Bless America* is one of the most iconic and influential pieces of music in American history (so influential that it was considered to be the national anthem at one point in time). On the surface, the reprisal of an old church hymn seem to portray an innocent message of "America is wonderful and its land is to be shared peacefully with all of its inhabitants. However, the piece is often misinterpreted as a patriotic anthem, but Guthrie intended for it to be a protest anthem for the American people. Considering his involvement with the United States Communist Party, Guthrie was not a favorite of the United States government at the time. This leads to the conclusion that the message of *This Land Is Your Land* is that, ultimately, communism is in the better interest of the American people.

Full of double and triple entendres ("This land is your land/This land is my land), *This Land Is Your Land* led many people of the American public to believe that Guthrie was singing about patriotic sentiments. However, the principle behind the song promotes communal usage of land and that working together finds its roots in communism. The lyrics of the song were sung innocently by thousands and thousands of Americans, landing it a seat in the Grammy Hall of Fame. Some recognized the song for what it was – a communist sympathizer's contempt for American patriotism. The song garnered an extremely contentious debate about its actual meaning and hidden messages at the time, and still continues to be debated by historians. Some viewed the song as unhinged radicalism that disrupted the beliefs that are rooted in the United States foundation.

In regards to American culture and the Dream, Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land* implicitly contradicts the blind patriotism that resided in American societal sentiment during the 1950s. Releasing such a song during this time was sure to make Guthrie a target. He wrote this song as he was traveling and hitch-hiking around the United States, causing Guthrie to recognize the numerous social issues that plagued American society. The song promoted the one hated ideology in America, which indirectly criticized its foundations, including big business, private and public ownership of land, and challenged the idea that not all people were equal in the United States. The Marxist tune originally had a blasphemous phrase, "God blessed America for me" before being rewritten. This line was also a direct parody of Berlin's *God Bless America*. The Second Red Scare and McCarthyism promoted anti-communist sentiments, but Guthrie was able to (discreetly) challenge this through masking communist sentiments as an American patriotic tune.

Lyrics like "As I was walking a ribbon of highway" depicts an important cultural development. Though today, the "ribbon" of roads and highways are ingrained into the American psyche, the highway system was just about to become an everyday concept in the 1940s. It wasn't until this time period that cars became a commonplace fixture and Roosevelt created legislation to create the high system that exists today.

In the original manuscript of the song, Guthrie challenged aspects of society such as class inequality, stating,

“In the squares of the city, In the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?”

This verse stemmed from *The Little Red Songbook*, which was a collection of workers' songs with Communist and Socialist propaganda. It was verses like these that were sometime omitted from recordings, sometimes by Guthrie himself. However, these were the verses that showed America for what it truly was at the time. Instead of the picture-perfect, picket-fenced, suburban middle-class family, the lyrics of omitted verses showed how dire the situation in the country could be.