Roll on Columbia

Woody Guthrie &
the Bonneville Power Administration

This documentary is a production of
the University of Oregon’s Knight Library Media Services and
the School of Journalism and Communication.

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“All you can write is what you see.”
—Woody Guthrie

In early May of 1941, an unemployed Woody Guthrie and his wife, Mary, packed their three children in a battered Pontiac and left southern California for Portland, Oregon. All he had waiting for him in the Northwest was a vague possibility of writing songs for a documentary film about the dams being built on the Columbia River. When Guthrie arrived with his guitar and family, the BPA took pity and gave him a thirty-day contract as a temporary employee, paid at the rate of $266.66 per month. Guthrie was expected to write a song a day—which he nearly did, producing 26 songs in 30 days. The story is told by those who were there—Guthrie’s BPA boss, Stephen Kahn; his first wife, Mary; and Elmer Buehler, the BPA staffer who drove Guthrie through the Columbia river country to see the dams, the workers and the farmers. We also hear from his fellow songster, Pete Seeger, who waited for Woody back in NYC; his friend Studs Turkel, who recognized Woody’s genius; and his children, Arlo and Nora Guthrie.

The beauty and majesty of Guthrie’s songwriting is visualized through the grandeur of the Columbia River, the Grand Coulee, and the Bonneville Dams. Archival footage includes scenes from both Hydro and The Columbia, documentaries made by the BPA’s public information department in the late ‘30s and ‘40s. Images of the forty-six-story Grand Coulee Dam, the wild and windward Columbia River, the jagged cliffs of the Columbia Gorge—green pastures of plenty—all combine with Guthrie’s music to create that place and time.
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*Roll on Columbia: Woody Guthrie and The Bonneville Power Administration* reveals the fortunate convergence of this left-wing, American poetic genius and the Department of the Interior’s great public works project, the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams—built to provide cheap electricity to a people gripped by hard times.

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