

Show is a timely nod to Woody Guthrie

Songs and writings of Depression-era singer resonate today.

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Nearly 75 years after Woody Guthrie wrote some of his most culturally defining and significant songs, his words continue to ring true.

Guthrie's music remains ever fitting in an era of recession, job loss and war.

"It's going to be really funny and strange to sing Woody's song about bankers in the lobby of the Bank of America, which is where we'll be," says David Lutken, creator and star of "Woody Sez: The Words, Music and Spirit of Woody Guthrie." The show's three-week run starts Wednesday at Booth Playhouse in the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

"All the songs he wrote about war and poverty and here we are in the midst of the new great recession. In 2007 when I wrote the show we were not in a recession, but in 2007 I wanted to put these songs out there because of other things. Other parts of the world were in terrible financial trouble. It's a wheel that keeps spinning around."

Lutken - who has appeared in Broadway's "Ring of Fire," "The Will Rogers Follies" and "Inherit the Wind" - not only wanted to illustrate the lasting significance of Guthrie's songs, but also wanted audiences to hear those songs within the context of Guthrie's life.

"He was by many accounts an ornery fellow. He was a womanizer. He married three times and had eight children. His life was full of difficulty and also tragedy.

"That is what I wanted to put the songs up against. Having sung his songs and done tributes, that is what fascinated me," Lutken said. "Even beyond poetry and music, political stances and social activism, he was this guy who had an amazingly difficult life, a lot of which he brought on himself. This element makes (his songs) more amazing and completes the picture."

The show incorporates Guthrie's music, writings and life story. Its Charlotte performance marks only its second U.S. run. It debuted at Scotland's Edinburgh Festival where Blumenthal President Tom Gabbard watched it.

"He and his wife saw it and he called me up and asked if we would (bring it to Charlotte)," says Lutken. Lutken, who graduated from Duke University and spent summers near Asheville growing up, was happy to return to the area.

"I was just saying to the cast yesterday that the last time I was in Charlotte for any length of time was... 1971," he recalls. "It's changed."