

Songs of the Great Depression

Breadline Blues

By Slim Smith

The latest news has struck me funny
Says you have no friends if you haven't got money
And all of us good folks in distress
But I'm gonna get something off my chest
Nineteen thirty-two won't be long
And when you place your vote please don't vote wrong
Vote away those blues, those breadline blues

It's a rich man's job to make some rules
In order to rid our breadline blues
Now listen here folks and it ain't no joke
We've got to do something or we're all going to croak
We can't get a job, we've all been robbed
We've got no money and the corn's all cob
We've got nothing but blues, breadline blues

If we had state rights, I'll leave it to you
We could all have fun and better home brew
Says the long-eared mule standing over his box
To the big-mouthed elephant: 'You drink like an ox
'You had twelve years, proved nothing but a curse
'Instead of making it better, it's getting worse and worse'
Says the long-eared mule, 'I ain't no fool'

The elephant said, 'You long-eared mule
Well, you shut your mouth, you never been to school'
The mule said, 'Elephant, it ain't no joke
'We've got to do something or we're all gonna croak
'We ain't got nothing but a carload of tax
'And the doggone load is just a-breaking our backs
'We've got the blues, the breadline blues'

Breadline Blues Questions

1. How did the title of the song reflect what is going on in America at the time?
2. Why might the entertainment industry remain strong even during the Great Depression?
3. What do the mule and the elephant represent?
4. How does the singer suggest people can end the Great Depression?



Talking Dust Bowl Blues

By Woody Guthrie

Back in Nineteen Twenty-Seven,
I had a little farm and I called that heaven.
Well, the prices up and the rain come down,
And I hauled my crops all into town --
I got the money, bought clothes and groceries,
Fed the kids, and raised a family.

Rain quit and the wind got high,
And the black ol' dust storm filled the sky.
And I swapped my farm for a Ford machine,
And I poured it full of this gas-i-line --
And I started, rockin' an' a-rollin',
Over the mountains, out towards the old Peach Bowl.

Way up yonder on a mountain road,
I had a hot motor and a heavy load,
I's a-goin' pretty fast, there wasn't even stoppin',
A-bouncin' up and down, like popcorn poppin' --
Had a breakdown, sort of a nervous bustdown some kind
There was a feller there, a mechanic feller,
Said it was en-gine trouble.

Way up yonder on a mountain curve,
It's way up yonder in the piney wood,
An' I give that rollin' Ford a shove,
An' I's a-gonna coast as far as I could --
Commence coastin', pickin' up speed,
Was a hairpin turn, I didn't make it.

Man alive, I'm a-tellin' you,
The fiddles and the guitars really flew.
That Ford took off like a flying squirrel
An' it flew halfway around the world --
Scattered wives and childrens
All over the side of that mountain.

We got out to the West Coast broke,
So dad-gum hungry I thought I'd croak,
An' I bummed up a spud or two,
An' my wife fixed up a tater stew --
We poured the kids full of it,
Mighty thin stew, though,
You could read a magazine right through it.
Always have figured
That if it'd been just a little bit thinner,
Some of these here politicians
Coulda seen through it.

Talking Dust Bowl Blues Questions

1. What was the Dust Bowl and what states was it located?
2. What early hardships did Guthrie's family face in the song?
3. Why did he leave Texas?
4. How does the song's title reflect how the song is performed?
5. How does the song combine humor and hardship?

