

50 Years later, a return to "Alice's Restaurant"

by J. Myrle Fuller - November 9, 2015

A few weeks from now, radio stations all across the United States will eschew their regular music libraries and begin playing a veritable marathon of music that is as sure of a sign of Thanksgiving as the smell of turkey.

No, not Christmas music—these days, that's usually been playing several days before Thanksgiving. I'm talking about "Alice's Restaurant Massacree," the 18-minute monologue, written and performed by Arlo Guthrie that has become an unlikely staple of rock radio every year. For those who have never heard the song, the true story behind it is almost as strange and unlikely as the song's ascent to its current legendary status.

How it all began

In 1964, 23-year-old Alice Brock, a woman of half-Jewish descent and originally from Brooklyn, graduated from Sarah Lawrence College, moved to the Berkshires and took a job as a librarian at a boarding school in Stockbridge. It was here that she met her eventual husband, shop teacher Ray Brock, as well as Arlo Guthrie, the son of ailing folk icon Woody Guthrie; Arlo was a high school senior at the time he met Alice and Ray.

Alice took a loan from her mother to buy a deconsecrated church in nearby Great Barrington. She turned it into a home for her

friends and a hangout/crash pad for various like-minded bohemian types.

In an interview with the *Berkshire Eagle*, Alice noted:

"It was the early '60s and I was one of those beatniks I guess, and I was anti-war, and their kids were dropping out of college, and a bunch of people hated me because I became a symbol of everything they didn't like that was going on in the world. People were just shocked to see me move into the church. It was seen as sacrilegious."

—Alice Brock

After Guthrie graduated, he decided to attend Rocky Mountain College in Montana, studying forestry; Guthrie never explicitly admitted as much, but it was likely a way to avoid being conscripted. When he came back east for Thanksgiving break, he stayed at the Brocks' "house." Alice had earned a reputation as a good cook, and on this occasion Alice prepared for her guests "a Thanksgiving dinner that couldn't be beat." That day, Guthrie and Robbins decided to do Alice a favor: she and Ray had accumulated a large amount of garbage in the sanctuary, so they decided to load up their Volkswagen Microbus and take the Brocks' garbage to the town landfill. There was only one problem with their plan: being a holiday, the landfill was closed, and they

suddenly found themselves with a van full of garbage and no place to return it. So, Guthrie found a ravine off a side road in Stockbridge and dumped it there.

It was not very long before the dumping had drawn the attention of Stockbridge Chief of Police William "Obie" Obanhein. Obanhein was already a D-list, minor celebrity; he was a regular subject of the paintings of Norman Rockwell in the later part of his life. The most famous Rockwell sketch known to include Obanhein was "Policeman with Boys," an advertisement for MassMutual insurance. Some sources, including Guthrie, state that Rockwell's iconic "The Runaway," which he drew for *The Saturday Evening Post*, was of Obanhein; others state that that particular picture was based on another police officer, Richard Clemens. When Obanhein discovered the dumped garbage, he spent two hours digging through the garbage, looking for someone to implicate, finally finding an envelope tracing the garbage back to Ray Brock. Obanhein would later say that if it had only been a bag or two of garbage that he would have simply picked up the bags himself and left the issue alone, but the size of the garbage pile prompted him to make an example of the offenders, and when Guthrie and Robbins admitted the crime, they were both arrested as soon as they showed up at the police station. (In a 1972 interview, Obanhein denied handcuffing Guthrie.) Guthrie was taken to the scene of the incident, where a media circus

descended and a flurry of photographers took "27 8×10 color glossy pictures with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one to be used as evidence against" the two, then sent them to jail. Guthrie noted a curiosity about the jail: the toilet had no seat (in the song, he mused it was to prevent suicide, but Obanhein stated it was because toilet seats were a target of thieves). A furious Alice (whose tirade almost got her arrested and put in jail) bailed them out, they went back to the church, had more of her famous home cooking, and waited until court the next day.

As it would turn out, all of Obanhein's efforts would go for naught: not only did Guthrie and Robbins plead guilty as charged in short order, but the judge assigned to the case, James Hannon, was legally blind and couldn't see the "27 8×10 color glossy pictures" that anchored Obanhein's case. They went out into the harsh 'late November weather, dug the garbage out of the ravine, and found somewhere legal to put it. The show trial of the century had fizzled, and Obanhein was about to be made out as a fool.

Alice's Restaurant is born

The rave reviews Alice received for her cooking, and some encouragement from her mother back in New York City, eventually prompted her to open up a restaurant, the Back Room. It was around this time that Guthrie and Alice Brock started working on the song that became "Alice's Restaurant." The song was originally based

around a joke: the Back Room was located in the back of a row of storefronts, and Guthrie joked that "you can hide from Obanhein at Alice's restaurant." Guthrie and Brock played around and eventually fleshed that line into a full verse. (Guthrie eventually wrote at least three verses of the song, but on the famous rendition of the song, only one is heard, and it does not contain the original line. The other two verses, still without the line referencing Obanhein, were included on a 1969 "rock and roll" single.)

Brock would reflect on the restaurant's opening as the start of strained relations between her and her husband; according to her, the fact that she was making her own money was something Ray found threatening. She was forced to close the restaurant after only a year, and she and Ray temporarily broke up.

Meanwhile, Guthrie returned to New York City to be closer to his father. It was here that Guthrie, according to the song, was called up for the draft. Guthrie reported to the draft office, a building on Whitehall Street, for examinations—hung over from drinking the night before. He showed up to the psychiatrist's office with a plan: portray himself as homicidal, so that the psychiatrist would see him as insane and reject him; that failed. Eventually, near the end, Guthrie received his escape: the moral waiver clause. Officer Obie's decision to make a show trial and conviction out of Guthrie's littering gave Guthrie a criminal record, something that could disqualify him from military service. To Guthrie, this proved to be a major source of

irony: there Guthrie stood, holding a criminal record for littering that made him ineligible to be drafted into a violent war because he was not supposedly moral enough to be in the armed services. The draft officer did not find it so amusing; Guthrie stated that his fingerprints were sent to Washington to be monitored as a potential dissident, something that would later be proven true when COINTELPRO, the FBI's domestic spying and infiltration program, was unmasked in 1971.

An unlikely hit emerges

"In those days, we made test pressings out of acetate. And my manager, who was my dad's manager also, took the acetates to the hospital where my dad was and played him the record. And, of course, the family joke is he heard the record and died."

—Arlo Guthrie, in a 2005 interview with NPR

Guthrie soon tied all of these anecdotes together into one long, rambling but mostly cohesive monologue, which he backed with a single verse of the song he had been working on, something that (due to the revisions) now resembled a bit of a *non sequitur*.

In the mid-1960s, there were three types of radio stations in most of America. The first, and most common, was the top 40 station, which played stuff on the pop charts and were mostly on AM;

then there were the easy listening stations, who avoided the rock and roll and could be on either AM or FM; and finally, there were the freeform stations. Mostly on FM, the freeform stations basically played whatever the disc jockeys wanted to play. One of the best-known freeform stations of 1960s New York was WBAI, an outlet that had only a few years prior ended up in the hands of the Pacifica Foundation, an anti-war, generally left-wing outlet that still owns the station to this day. WBAI's overnight host was a guy named Bob Fass. Fass was a bit of an eccentric: if he liked a song, he might decide to replay the song over and over again throughout his shift (something that, being an overnight host on a nonprofit station, he could get away with), but Fass's show had enough of a clout that the recording industry's "artists & repertoire" people would listen to Fass's show to find future hits. One day in late 1966, Guthrie decided to come to WBAI and play "Alice's Restaurant" over the air, something he would do several times over the subsequent months. Fass loved it, put it into rotation and, some time later, put a recording of the song on repeat.

Sure enough, Warner Bros. Records had an A&R man listening to WBAI and soon offered Guthrie a record contract. In September 1967 they released *Alice's Restaurant: The Album*, which included a live recording of "Alice's Restaurant Massacre" on the A-side and a collection of six shorter Guthrie compositions on the B-side. It sold well, reaching the top 20 of the *Billboard 200* albums chart; at the time, *Billboard* determined that the song did not qualify for the

Hot 100, which dictated pop music hits, because the song wouldn't fit on a single record. (Guthrie is thus classified as a one-hit wonder for another song, a cover of Steve Goodman's "City of New Orleans," on *Billboard's* list.) Guthrie was taken aback at the song's success, not expecting an 18-minute epic to become so popular in an era when singles were typically about 2½ minutes long.

As for how it became a radio tradition outside WBAI, that's not explicitly clear, but there is a likely path. Eventually the radio station ownership companies came to realize that there was a market for the kind of album-length songs that weren't getting released as singles and thus weren't being heard on commercial radio. Thus was born "progressive" radio, a more commercially friendly format where albums (typically rock albums) formed the basis of the playlist. Eventually, in the late 1970s, this narrowed to "album-oriented rock," then in the late 1980s to "classic rock." Yet each successive format kept playing "Alice's Restaurant" on Thanksgiving.

By the time the song was released, the restaurant was no longer open, and in 1968, Alice and Ray Brock formally divorced. Ray returned to his home state of Virginia, where he eventually died of a heart attack in 1979.

Hollywood comes calling

In 1968, Hollywood director Arthur Penn pitched Guthrie on a film adaptation. Guthrie was able to convince Penn to cast himself, Officer Obie and

Judge Hannon as themselves, and was also able to get the others to go to California to do so. Even Alice Brock agreed to make cameo appearances in the movie, although another actress, Patricia Quinn, filled the role of Alice in the movie.

The end result was 1969's *Alice's Restaurant: The Movie*, which became a hit and pushed the story of Alice's Restaurant fully into the mainstream. As much of a commercial success as it was, many members of the cast complained, particularly on the embellishments Penn and Venable Herndon had made in the screenplay, in which Guthrie had no direct hand. Obanhein, who only appeared because he felt that using himself for self-deprecating humor would have been far better than letting someone else satirize him, felt that the film had accused him of police brutality, which he denied. Guthrie lamented that Montana received a bad reputation after Penn inserted a scene in which Montanans threw Guthrie through a window. No one was more angered than Alice; she was particularly upset that Penn had portrayed her as promiscuous, claimed she had slept with Guthrie, and inserted a completely fictional supporting character with a heroin addiction into the cast. As Brock later said to *The Boston Globe*:

"[That movie] misrepresented me, embarrassed me, and made me into an object. I wasn't sleeping with everybody in the world, for example - and not Arlo Guthrie! And I didn't know anybody who shot heroin."

—Alice Brock

She also complained of not receiving a lot of money; she was able to make additional funds by authoring her first book, *The Alice's Restaurant Cookbook*, where she shared some of her recipes and thoughts. Published by Random House, the cookbook is still widely respected and has gone through four printings.

Aftermath

Alice Brock received a large amount of unwanted publicity from the *Alice's Restaurant* song and film, which prompted her to sell off the old church. In 1971, she returned to the foodservice business and launched Take-Out Alice, a food stand in Housatonic. Take-Out Alice was considered a high-water mark in Brock's restaurant career. After a fight with local municipal officials in 1973, she expanded to a fully-seated restaurant, and again in the mid-1970s, decided to move to a much bigger location in Lenox, complete with its own discotheque. Unfortunately for her, the new location, Alice's at Avaloch, proved to have major infrastructure problems and be far bigger than her ability to handle. In 1979, Brock decided to exit the restaurant business and move east to Provincetown, where she set up an art studio on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean and occasionally worked foodservice for other people's restaurants to make ends meet. Although, for a long time, she bristled at the attention that "Alice's Restaurant" had brought her, she now looks back on the events with respect. As of 2015, she remains in Provincetown and briefly returned to her

restaurateur roots in May 2014 for a presentation of her old recipes at the Dream Away Lodge in Becket.

Obanhein remained the chief of police of Stockbridge until retiring in 1985. He died in 1994.

The site of Alice's original restaurant was last known to be Theresa's Stockbridge Cafe, marked with a sign that still states "formerly Alice's restaurant."

Guthrie continued his musical career. While in California, Guthrie met the woman who would become his wife, the former Jackie Hyde. The two remained married from 1969 until her death in 2012. The two had a son and three daughters, all four of whom have become musicians. He went on to have numerous songs become popular (including "Coming into Los Angeles," which Guthrie performed at Woodstock; "Massachusetts," which became the official state folk song of the Bay State; and the aforementioned "City of New Orleans") but Alice's Restaurant remained his *magnum opus*. As Guthrie felt that much of the humor came from surprise, he decided to scrap the original monologue and wrote a new one, this one fictional, for performances from 1969 into the early 1970s: Red Chinese, Soviet and American operatives would find "multicolored rainbow roaches" (leftovers from marijuana cigarettes) at Alice's restaurant and engage in an arms race to weaponize their new findings. By the late 1970s, Guthrie decided not to play the song in any form at concerts, except every ten years; the Vietnam

War that had prompted Guthrie's drafting had ended, Guthrie was getting bored with the song and feared getting sick of it, and perhaps most unexpectedly, as Guthrie was getting older, he was becoming more conservative (he still maintains a strong libertarian streak) and distant from the folk scene. He then decided to only play the song every ten years, commemorating the anniversary of the incident. True to form, Guthrie tweaks the monologue according to the occasion, mentioning Richard Nixon in the 30th anniversary recording and the Iraq war in the 40th. This year marks the 50th anniversary of that fateful Thanksgiving, an anniversary Guthrie, now 68 years old, never expected to reach.

In 1991, Guthrie bought Alice's old church after it had changed hands several times. He turned the building back into a functioning church (don't expect ideological purity, though; it has a stated policy of "bring your own God") and performance venue, where Guthrie and other folk musicians perform regularly.

Meanwhile, every Thanksgiving, radio stations will continue to play a song that would never get played on most commercial formats. Guthrie and his family won't be listening—he has far better things to do with his time, so he says—but many of the rest of us will be singing along:

"You can get anything you want, at Alice's restaurant."