

**AGNES
“SIS”
CUNNINGHAM
1909-2004**



**FROM
WOODY GUTHRIE
TO
BOB DYLAN**

The history of folk music in America includes legends Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. The connection between the two was Agnes “Sis” Cunningham, founder of *Broadside*, a magazine that promoted young songwriting talent. “A whole generation of songwriters made their first appearances in *Broadside*.”

Sis Cunningham was born in Watonga in February 1909. Her Socialist father taught her piano, guitar and accordion. She trained as a teacher at Weatherford Teachers College. After teaching music for several years, she attended Commonwealth Labor College, an experimental Socialist college in Mena, Arkansas, where her brother William taught.

There she started writing labor songs, and trained in union organizing techniques and labor-farmer union developments. In 1930, she formed The Red Dust Players, a traveling Oklahoma troupe that promoted political agitation. She played accordion and sang protest songs in union halls and migrant camps to educate workers on the importance of unions.

In 1940, Oklahoma-born Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger met Sis in Oklahoma City, whose lasting influence on American protest music would be as profound as their own. The next year, during the trial of the Communist Party’s leadership in Oklahoma City, Sis and her new husband and fellow Oklahoman George Friesen feared their own arrest so they moved to New York City.

Meanwhile Guthrie and Seeger had recently formed the Almanac Singers in Greenwich Village. When Seeger heard Sis was in town, he invited her to visit them. She sang them a few of her songs, and soon thereafter she joined the group. Sis played accordion with Guthrie on guitar and Seeger on banjo. They were the first urban folk-singing group of any stature in America.

By 1943, the Almanac Singers had disbanded so the Friesens moved to Detroit, where George worked as a reporter and Sis in a factory. After the war, they returned to New York but Sis largely fell out of music in the 1950s due to raising two daughters and mounting economic problems.

In the early 1960s, Seeger gave Sis financial support to launch *Broadside* magazine, based on the English tradition of printing songs on paper and selling them. She started the publication to promote and nurture the new generation of folk singers who were migrating to the Village, including 19-year-old Bob Dylan. The first issue in February 1962 featured the first Bob Dylan composition ever published. After that, almost every issue included Dylan’s protest songs. Between 1962 and 1988, *Broadside* published more than 1,000 songs.

Sis Cunningham died in New York at age 95 in 2004. She played and sung with a young Woody Guthrie, established herself as a major musical influence, and helped Bob Dylan establish his songwriting career. Their relationships came full circle when the Woody Guthrie Archive was moved from New York to Tulsa in 2014. Shortly thereafter, many of Cunningham’s papers, including a complete collection of *Broadside*, were donated to the Archive. In 2016, the Bob Dylan Archive was also moved to Tulsa.