

## The Power of Song to Unite People in Conflict in the Appalachian Mountains

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*Folk songs of the people of Appalachia reflect on how the people who settled in that region experienced life. This large body of musical literature provides a cultural history from which there is a considerable store of songs about conflict. This paper will focus on some of the most influential songs of the coal miners' rebellion and labor movements of the early twentieth century, and will provide an analysis of the origins of the tunes, as well as discuss the continuing influence of songwriters and singers of the twenty-first century to continue to rouse the people of Appalachia to action to protect themselves from unwanted influence and coercion.*

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### 1. Introduction

When the Appalachian mountain region was settled between 1775 and 1850, what was left was not the best arable land, nor the most accessible property. The Scots-Irish who settled there had traveled far to find a place to settle, and many of them had come to the New World in the first place to work off their indentures. Contrary to the stereotypical depictions of these people, in order to survive they had to be strong, resilient, and resourceful. They also had to rely on each other and work together.

Music was a part of their social gatherings and church services. Their musical traditions were passed along from generation to generation. Traditional music was based on Anglo-Celtic folk ballads and instrumental dance tunes that had been brought from their native lands.

The songs were sung unaccompanied, and were usually sung by women. They were “fulfilling the roles as keepers of the families’ cultural heritages and

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rising above dreary monotonous work through fantasies of escape and revenge.” (McClatchy 2000)

### **1.1. What songs were sung**

This tradition of having the women hold the stories and songs of the people continued into the nineteenth century. The ornamentation and vocal improvisation of Scottish ballad singing is still heard in the voices of women ballad singers of the Appalachian Mountains. It is a strong, slightly nasal tone, quite distinctive to the two regions.

The early settlers knew the Child ballads, and some of them were familiar with the Broadside ballads, but it did not take long for those ballads to become woven into the stories of the mountain people. The melodies were adapted, embellished, and fragmented, as noted by songcatchers Cecil Sharp, Alan Lomax, John Jacob Niles, and later, Jean Ritchie, Jane Hicks Gentry and Sheila Kay Adams.

On the front porches of the homes in the valleys and on the hillsides of the mountains, people gathered to sing songs about their lives. Many of the tunes were in the minor mode, reflecting the troublesome, often hard and difficult times they experienced. Others were songs that made the children laugh, and included repetitive refrains that once heard were never forgotten.

### **1.2. Blending of cultures**

These new songs were influenced by songs from the Anglo-Celtic tradition as well as Germanic and Scandinavian traditions as other cultures began to move into the area. The use of guitar and dulcimer as instruments of accompaniment became more accepted as practice in some areas.

The tradition of group singing was an influence of the African tradition, as was call and response, or lining out, which became an important way of teaching new hymns during the revival movement of the late 1800s. It led to the white spiritual and gospel hymn style of verse/refrain, which in camp meetings and revivals was known to create emotional fervor amongst the participants. The improvisation often heard in Old Regular Baptist hymn singing can also be attributed to the influence of African traditions. One can imagine the increasing fervor if an enthusiastic leader calls out the lines of a song to be sung and the congregation or choir answers with equal enthusiasm that the energy and spirit of the moment will increase exponentially. Adding swaying or slight steps back and

forth while singing and clapping in rhythm was unheard of prior to the influence of African Americans. Adding this element to the performance of music gave additional expression of fervor and enthusiasm to a musical performance, and was a way of getting people more involved in participating.

### **1.3. Church music**

The earliest churches in Appalachia were small, and Puritan in nature. They banned instruments from the church, so all singing was a cappella. With the influence of call and response singing, and the improvisatory style of Scottish ballad singing, the plainsong psalm chanting of earliest times began to become more folk like; however, no instruments were introduced in some of these churches, and a cappella, monophonic singing can be heard in some of these churches today.

Many of the songs in their hymnody are written in Aeolian and Dorian mode and the melodies are pentatonic or hexatonic. They have simple melodic patterns and are written in verse/refrain format. The body of literature is limited, and congregants learn the songs when they are children, so they know most of the church songs as well as they know the songs they sing at family and community gatherings.

## **2. Protest songs evolve**

There are families who live in Appalachia who have lived there for many generations, so the music sung and played in their homes and in their churches dwells deep in their consciousness. When the need arose to unite to stand against aggressive corporate mining and lumber entities in order to preserve the very land their ancestors had owned for a century, songs arose from the body of melodic literature, both sacred and secular, and the lyrics came from the strength and resilience that had been a part of the survival of these people since their arrival in the late 1700s.

In the songs of protest, you hear modal melodies, hymn tunes, and Anglo-Celtic ballad references. Songs for groups are often lined out so that all can sing along and become involved in the movement. Tragedies are told in ballad form.

By the early 1900s, recorded music had made it possible to document the voices of the women, men, and the groups whose voices made the greatest impact on the people of the mountains during the labor movement. Those are the voices and their songs are the songs that motivated men and women across the mountains to stand up against those that would oppress them.

## 2.1. The singers and their songs

Given the history of women being the keepers of history and the tellers of the story of the lives of the mountain people, it is significant that some of the most important figures in the protest song movement were women. Their voices rang true to all that was Appalachian folk song. Their tunes were known by all, either as direct quotes from ballads or hymns, or new songs composed from a bank of rhythmic and melodic patterns so well known that they resided in the collective minds of all that heard them.

Prior to, but predictive of what might be ahead for the people of Appalachia were the songs of Ola Belle Reed. Ola Belle Reed (nee Ola Wave Campbell) 1916-2002 was a singer and banjo player from Lansing, NC, in Ashe County. Her songs are exemplary of the determination of the mountain people. Ola Belle was known to readily spread the word about the strength of her people. One of her most popular songs was "I've Endured."(Reed)

"Born in the mountains,  
Fifty years ago,  
I traveled the hills and valleys  
Through the rain and snow.  
Seen the lightning flashing,  
I've heard the thunder roll.  
I've endured.  
I've endured.  
How long can one endure?"

I've worked for the rich,  
I've lived with the poor,  
I've seen many a heartache,  
There'll be many more  
I've lived luck and sorrow,  
Been to success and stone.  
I've endured.  
I've endured.  
How long can one endure?"

Between 1880 and 1930 logging and coal mining developers began to go in and approach individual farmers about obtaining the rights to log land and get farmers to sell mineral rights. These undertakings were originally small and unobtrusive;

however, by 1930, Harlan County, Kentucky had become a “boon town” with large coal mines encroaching on the land in most of the county. Rather than have the workers go home to their farms, the mine owners built mining villages where the families lived in cramped quarters. Men went to the mines at 4 in the morning and worked until 5 in the afternoon. The women were expected to do all of the housework, raise the children, buy the groceries from the company store, cook the food, and make the clothes. (Romalis 1999, 39) Women like Molly Jackson watched their neighbors' hardships, and when their lives became unbearable, the women sang of their dilemmas. Molly later became known as “Pistol Packin’ Mama’ as her fame grew. She used the blues, a form of music created by African Americans, to express her feelings about life in a coal camp after her husband and others had gone on strike against the mine owners.

“Hungry Ragged Blues” (Jackson)  
Music and lyrics by Molly Jackson

I’m sad and I’m weary.  
I’ve got the hungry ragged blues.  
I’m sad and I’m weary.  
I’ve got the hungry ragged blues.  
Not one penny in the pocket to buy one penny I need to use.

I woke up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life.  
I woke up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life.  
Not a bite to cook for breakfast, poor coal miner’s wife.

When my husband works in the coal mine he loads in the coal mine he loads a car  
most every trip

When my husband works in the coal mine he loads in the coal mine he loads a car  
most every trip

Then he goes to the office in the evening and gets denied his scrip.

Just because it took all he made that day to pay his mine expense  
Just because it took all he made that day to pay his mine expense  
A man who works for the coal mine ain’t got a lick of sense.

In the early 1930s men began to organize mining strikes more frequently. One strike was organized by Sam Reece. One evening representatives of the mine owners came to Mr. Reece’s home, but he had fled, knowing that they were on

their way. They harassed his wife and children, and his wife Florence was so upset when they left she sat down and wrote the lyrics to the song "Which Side Are You On" as she sang it to the tune of the hymn "Lay the Lily Low." Florence sang it at gatherings of the coal mine workers and it quickly became the anthem for labor movements around the country.

"Which Side Are You On?"(Reece)  
Lyrics by Florence Reece

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

They say in Harlan County  
There are no neutrals there  
You'll either be a Union man  
Or a thug for J.H. Blair

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner,  
And I'm a miner's son,  
He'll be with you fellow workers  
Until this battles' won.

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Oh workers can you stand it?  
Oh tell me how you can.  
Will you be a lousy scab  
Or will you be a man?

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Come all you good workers,  
Good news to you I'll tell  
Of how the good ole union  
Has come in here to dwell.

Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on boys?  
Which side are you on?

Other musicians who had witnessed the tragedies associated with coal mining made their stories known in ballad-like songs. Hazel Dickens, who was originally from West Virginia, witnessed the death of her brother from black lung disease. When she was older and living in Washington, D.C., she wrote a song, "Black Lung," about her brother's death. As she rose to the ranks of a popular bluegrass performer she supported and defended other underrepresented groups of people and she became a feminist in the 1960s. As a unionist she wrote "They'll Never Keep Us Down." (Smithsonian Folkways 2011)

Jean Ritchie grew up very near Harlan County in a family that valued music and education. She sang and accompanied herself on a lap dulcimer. When Jean finished college she moved to New York and lived in Greenwich Village. There she met Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, and her love of the dulcimer made it popular in the folk movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Jean never really left the mountains, though, and when she heard about mountaintop removal taking place near her home in Viper, KY, she felt compelled to write songs and take action. She did not want to embarrass her family, so she wrote these songs under an alias, Than Hall (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 276). She felt, like many in the area, that the people in the mountains had been called by God to protect them from devastation. One of her most powerful songs follows:

“Now Is the Cool of the Day” (Ritchie)  
Music and Lyrics by Jean Ritchie

My Lord he said unto me  
Do you like my garden so fair?  
You may live in this garden if you keep the grasses green  
And I'll return in the cool of the day.

Now is the cool of the day.  
Now is the cool of the day.  
Oh this earth is a garden  
The garden of my Lord,  
And he walks in his garden  
In the cool of the day.

Then my Lord he said unto me  
Do you like my pastures of green  
You live in this garden if you will feed my lambs  
And I'll return in the cool of the day.

Now is the cool of the day.  
Now is the cool of the day.  
Oh this earth is a garden  
The garden of my Lord,  
And he walks in his garden  
In the cool of the day.

Then my Lord he said unto me  
Do you like my garden so free?  
You may live in my garden if you keep the people free  
And I'll return in the cool of the day.

Now is the cool of the day.  
Now is the cool of the day.  
Oh this earth is a garden  
The garden of my Lord,  
And he walks in his garden  
In the cool of the day.



## **2.2. Commonality**

In each of the above featured songs there are elements of the folk music which evolved and is peculiarly Appalachian folk music. There are modal melodies. There are repetitive, easily sung sections that can be done as call and response. And there are ballad-like songs that tell a story that stirs emotions. These are but a few examples of the many songs which prompted the men and the women of Appalachia to take action when it was needed, and take a stand for change for the good of the people.

## **3. The present and future of songs of protest in Appalachia**

The issues of the early twentieth century birthed songs and singers who have had a powerful influence on the people of Appalachia. The resilience of the people of Appalachia have kept communities strong, and the causes for which they fought have in some cases been successful. Each generation produces more strong musicians of protest, and musicians who hold fast to the traditional music of the mountains.

Travis Stimeling wrote an extensive article in which he connects musicians to the central Appalachian mountaintop removal mining debate, one of the most recent reasons for conflict in Appalachia. Stimeling says “song frequently deploys musical practice from the region’s rich musical heritage, including bluegrass, gospel and country, as well as such lesser known but protest-oriented musics as punk, allowing musical sounds to invoke local and regional understandings of place, history, or regional identity” (Stimeling 2001). He mentions musicians such as Todd Burge, Darrell Scott, Natalie Merchant, Captain Catfeesh, Pierce Pettis and Tim O’Brien as voices of the present who have the power to sway opinion (Stemling 2001). Another such group is Rising Appalachia, a duo of sisters who sing their truth, using old time and bluegrass traditional styles, while at the same time they promote causes at each of their concerts to support the people of Appalachia.

To support the future of music in Appalachia, a camp has been established in Whitesburg, Kentucky for young female, gender-fluid, non-binary, and trans youth. Campers learn an electric instrument, form a band, and write songs. They perform at the end of the week for a live audience. During the week they learn how music is tied to social justice. The common thread is dissent.

Songs of the people have and will continue to have a strong impact on the future well-being of the people who identify as Appalachians. This will be in large part because of the hundreds of excellent musicians who hail from the area and

love the land and its people and strive to protect it by singing words of wisdom and power in defense of their home region.

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