

MUSIC AND COAL ACTIVISM: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

Travis D. Stimeling, West Virginia University
Saro Lynch-Thomason, Blair Pathways, Asheville, NC
Nate May, College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati
Andrew Robert Munn, Bard College

Driving through Central Appalachia, it is nearly impossible to avoid the impact of more than a century of coal extraction in the region. Cars with West Virginia and Kentucky license plates are emblazoned with the logo of the Friends of Coal, a coal industry lobbying organization that has garnered extensive grassroots support in the region. Enormous gashes in the sides and through the middles of mountains—sometimes several hundred feet deep—permit the easy transportation of minerals removed through invasive mountaintop removal coal mining practices throughout southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia.

Less visible, but no less potent, is the remarkable legacy of musicians who have stood strong in the face of the coal industry and the economic and environmental devastation that it often leaves in its wake. The scarred hills of southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky recall the powerful voices of Elaine Purkey and Florence Reece, who encouraged miners and their families to stand in solidarity for fair pay and safe working conditions, while Jean Ritchie's "Black Water" imagines the forceful eviction of the coal industry from the region. In a region celebrated for its role in the development of early country music, music has played a significant role in documenting the complexities of living in a region that has been marked as backwards and out-of-touch with modernity but that still bears the wounds of more than a century of industrial colonization (Stimeling 2012).

During the Ecomusics/Ecomusicologies 2014 meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, a panel of musician-activists comprising ballad singer Saro Lynch-Thomason, composer Nate May, singer Andrew Munn, and composer-playwright Molly Sturges discussed their efforts to use music to draw attention to the ongoing challenges that coal extraction poses for the residents of central Appalachia and the fight against global climate change. Utilizing the conventions of traditional Appalachian balladry, art song, and musical theater, these musical activists are using music to raise local, regional, national, and even global awareness of the impacts of coal extraction and consumption. In this brief report, three of the panelists explore their individual approaches to musical environmental activism, discuss the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from their work, and offer some strategies that we might use to deploy music as a tool to engage communities in public and private discourse about significant environmental issues in our own communities. Taken together, they demonstrate the potential that politically- and environmentally-engaged musicians have to cultivate conversations around the ongoing climate crisis, as well as the cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of our continued involvement with fossil fuels.

Saro Lynch-Thomason

My work in musical activism has its roots way back in my childhood. Growing up Unitarian Universalist in Nashville, TN taught me that social justice work was an inherent part of one's spiritual values and that music was a powerful tool to express these values. The Civil Rights anthems, Protestant hymns, and choral compositions I was raised with gave me an understanding of how people—Southerners in particular—had used music to express their struggles and victories. However, I didn't begin to make musical activism a purposeful part of my life until I left the South for school in New York.

In college in the Hudson River Valley, I learned for the first time about mountaintop removal (MTR) coal mining. In addition, I became exposed to Appalachian traditional songs and began to see the relationship between the economic struggles in Appalachia and the music produced there. I turned my gaze back to the region I was raised in and decided to move to North Carolina, where I began to engage in environmental activism. Since then my role as an activist has largely been as a media producer, essentially using art to teach others about Appalachia's history and needs.

In 2011, I became concerned about the fate of Blair Mountain, a site in West Virginia that had been the location of a massive coal miner's uprising in 1921. Beginning in 2010, several coal companies had declared their plans to strip-mine Blair. Blair's natural and historic significance led several regional groups to reenact the miner's march in the summer of 2011. Attending the march made me realize the vital impact that singing could have on the morale of a movement. From the very beginning of the event, unfriendly portions of the local community made march participants feel threatened and unsafe. We responded to this by singing with a volume and power that I had never heard before nor witnessed since. Songs like the traditional "Under My Feet" helped us declare our intentions with relish: "I went down to the coal operator and I took back what he stole from me. / I took back my dignity and I took back my humanity, / and ain't no system gonna walk all over me." We sang when we were tired, nervous, bored, and joyful, and those rhythms and melodies carried us through multiple counties, through 90-degree heat, all the way to the summit of Blair Mountain.

After the march, I decided that I wanted to do a project that helped the general public understand the 1921 miner's uprising and to discuss why that history is worth preserving. I had seen music's impact in moments of struggle, and decided that I wanted to convey the history of the West Virginia coal wars through the songs that mining communities used during strikes and protest. I eventually compiled *Blair Pathways*, a CD featuring more than twenty musicians that used Appalachian musical traditions including hymnody, ballad singing, barbershop quartet styles and black spirituals to tell the story of the West Virginia mine wars. The CD was accompanied by a map and essay series that explained the origin and historical significance of each song. After publishing *Blair Pathways*, I toured with a multi-media presentation called *The Mine Wars Show* that used material and music researched for the CD.

Through these experiences, I've debated the impact that music can have in social and environmental movements. Music has an important place in the fight to end MTR. However, the way that the music is practiced determines its level of impact. The *Blair Pathways* project, for example, is designed for passive listening, whereas singing songs on a protest or a march begs emotional engagement from the participants. Though *Blair Pathways* is an important informative tool, it does not necessarily demand the emotional presence that makes a movement successful. Understanding the tenacity, sorrow, anger, and hope of coalfield communities comes from participation with those communities. It comes from seeing a strip mine site for the first time, hearing a person with black lung struggle to breathe, or sitting in a lush, diverse forest and knowing how easy it is for a dragline to take it all away. When a person comes to feel something deeply about such things, they begin to understand what that music from a century ago was about. Then when those songs are led in meetings, at protests, or in jail they carry the singer and affirm the singer's experience. A musical production like *Blair Pathways* lets the listener hear the feelings of a generation of people, but it can't replace that vital sense of confirmation that comes when someone uses their own body, their own voice to sing through their own struggles.

Andrew Robert Munn

I am reluctant to call my activism musical or my music activism, though both are expressions of passion, born of conviction and echoes of hope for an egalitarian and ecologically sensible society. In 2007, while a music student at the University of Michigan, where Nate [May] and I met, I became involved in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on campus and linked with like-minded students across the state to leverage our claim to the future as advocates for sustainable state and federal climate and energy policies. As I learned of the present material economic processes that drove climate change, and their historic and ideological roots, I came to question the value of music and the western art tradition. It seemed to me that it was an obfuscating ornate veneer on history that painted over the legacy of violence and imperialism that European-Americans inherit. We spend more time learning of eighteenth-century European philosophy as the catalyst for the foundation of the American republic and the French Revolution than we do grappling with the concurrent genocide of indigenous people across this continent. Bring up the injustices of history, and art is pointed to as history's redeemer. With an axe to grind with history and a hope for the future, I abandoned music and threw myself into resisting fossil fuel extraction, finding camaraderie and in communities of locals and uprooted activists (like me) fighting MTR in West Virginia.

From 2009 to 2014, I worked with communities impacted by MTR to oppose the practice on the local to national level. The effort in which music had the most visible role was the 2011 March on Blair Mountain. We organized 500 activists to march 50 miles through the coalfields of Boone and Logan Counties, retracing the route of the rebelling miners in 1921. Campsite after campsite was pulled out from under us, and since we were not in all-out rebellion, we respected property law and ran a headache-inducing, patched-together shuttle system of volunteered cars and buses to move the march from its daily route back to a rented warehouse in the Kanawha Valley near Charleston. Heat, threats of violence, and exhaustion threatened the viability of the march, and as the central organizing team stitched together one logistical

contingency plan after another, Saro stepped in at crucial points and used group singing to bolster march morale, and connect it to the history of Appalachian movements that our march continued and the music came from. Here, where marchers were making the choice to face real danger, I saw music's, and a musician's, power to forge and direct collective will through adversity.

Though the fight to save Blair Mountain and end MTR is winnable within our current economic and political framework, the larger struggle for an equitable and ecological society is ultimately incompatible with the material and ideological foundations of our culture. As I rediscovered my love for the physical act of singing—the vibration of these little membranes in my neck—I came to think on the question of cultural change, a long or swift unpredictable process by which the boundary of what is and is not possible shifts: this is what animates my musical life.

I reached out to Nate in 2012 about writing a song cycle that dealt with some of these questions, initially imagining a more abstract work, not necessarily narrative or grounded in Appalachia. I err on the side of the long view in looking back at history and the generations ahead—instability and new unrecognizable equilibriums—the liquidity of capital in the present where a mine shuttered in West Virginia is transmuted into an expanded mine in Columbia's coalfields. But through that, I hold an unparalleled love for place in Appalachia that was, is, and will be, so I am thankful to Nate for having the insight and courage to tether this work to the present moment in Appalachia.

In these times of swift change, as the nature of our ecological and social relationships are transformed in the global economy—most often without our consent or clear intention—and we hurtle into a new climate, depleted biosphere, an increasingly digitally navigated and manifested world, a robust cultural apparatus is needed to make sense of the world and our experiences, and if I am to be optimistic, guide desirable changes. I absolutely believe in music and narrative's ability to do this, and music that deals with the complexity of 21st century life, whether from the vantage point of a hollow in West Virginia or making climate data into an aural experience, fills a void in a culture dominated by escapism and a stunted lexicon.

Nate May

I remember flying in a small plane toward Charleston, West Virginia in the summer of 2009, twenty-one years old and profoundly changed by the year I had just spent studying music in South Africa. I had left the country feeling untethered, having grown up a misfit in West Virginia and having left it gladly for college in Michigan. But living in South Africa had revealed the sense of home that lived in me, and when the plane dipped below the clouds and I could see the waves of mesophytic green veined by blue-black waterways, I felt deeply thankful for the blessing of return. The couple next to me were vacationers from California, and I was happy to give them an insider's perspective on the state. I also felt it was my responsibility, when we flew over vast scabs of Martian terrain, to explain mountaintop removal mining. Every time I explain the practice to those who haven't heard of it, I'm met with disbelief that such ecological violence could happen on American soil. Yet, safely ensconced in an economically desperate state with a tradition of sacrifice, the practice continues.

The son of an ecologist, I had heard about mountaintop removal mining, and the scientific consensus against it, for most of my life. The first time I saw it from the ground was in 2008, with my friend Andrew Munn, on the property of one of the great local resisters, Larry Gibson. Andrew and I had just spent several days backpacking in the Cranberry backcountry, and the freshness of the experience of diverse and thriving wilderness, along with Larry's passionate accounts of the mine's impact on his family, made the sight of a stripped mountaintop that much more heart wrenching. When I learned a few years later that Andrew had moved to this very region to work against this very practice, I was happy and somewhat jealous. Meanwhile, I had been toying with the idea of writing a piece of music that would honor my connection with my home and bring to light the dramatic effects of life in proximity to mountaintop removal mining. When Andrew wrote in 2012 to share his vision for a piece that came from similar feelings of rage and love, I immediately felt the magical potential for collaboration. That same year, while clearing brush on what was left of his beloved mountain, Larry Gibson died of a heart attack. During an emotional memorial service held for him, the audience was given wristbands and told to wear them as a reminder of Larry, and to work in his honor. I left mine on my wrist for months while researching and writing *Dust in the Bottomland*.

Despite Andrew's experience with coordinated and focused community action, we determined early on that we were not setting out to write protest songs. Appalachia has a powerful tradition of protest songs, such as those sung by Andrew and Saro during the Blair Mountain march, but this project had a different goal—to engage on a psychological level with experiences common to residents of coal country. Some of these experiences—displacement by mining and prescription drug abuse in particular—are tragedies, and some, such as the deep connection to land and community, are to be envied by many outside the region. Out of these experiences we developed a narrative—a man who has grown up in southern West Virginia leaves it behind for professional opportunities and never looks back until his sister falls into a coma induced by an opiate overdose. The narrative functions only as a framework—no real events unfold during the course of the songs or spoken text. Instead, we begin to get a glimpse into the psychological underpinnings of these events. We learn that the overdose was precipitated by their family's displacement by a mountaintop removal mine. We learn that the ambitions of the protagonist and his sister have led them to different lives—his to college in Iowa and a white-collar job in Detroit, and hers to self-employment as the owner of a flower shop in their hometown. We learn of his relative apathy toward his homeplace, and we watch it break down and turn to rage when he sees the scars that the mining has left.

In touring this piece, we've found the spaces of our performances to be ecotones—meetings of those who came to support a cause and those who came to for an evening of music. A significant portion of our New York City audience had never heard of mountaintop removal mining, while many at our Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia performances had never seen live art song. While our piece can't claim responsibility for revoking permits or changing legislation, I feel that we have set the stage for more empathetic awareness of the life in the coalfields, and we have given people fodder for socially relevant thought and conversation in a place where it's not often sought: Appalachian art song.

Conclusion

The fight against MTR in central Appalachia is a remarkably musical one. Songwriters express the region's complicated relationship with coal and try to bring attention to the voices of the people who live in these rural industrial landscapes. Marchers are taking up banjos, guitars, fiddles, and voices and bringing new life to perennial protest songs. Composers are writing scores for documentary films and concert performances, carrying news of coal's regional and global impacts to audiences that may have difficulty picturing an Appalachia that is not filled with caricatured hillbillies and poverty. And still other creative people—such as composer-playwright Molly Sturges, whose *Coal: The Musical* creates opportunities for community theater groups to curate conversations about the impacts of coal usage—are finding new ways to use music to engage public discourse. Although music's power in social and political movements is limited, the reflections presented here indicate that music can be an extremely effective tool to build solidarity, raise consciousness, and release one's personal anxieties. As the debate around MTR—and fossil fuel consumption, more generally—continues to unfold, musical activists such as Saro Lynch-Thomason, Andrew Munn, and Nate May serve a very important purpose: to remind us of the human costs of fossil fuel extraction and consumption and rural industrial colonization.

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