

SONGS AND STORIES OF STRUGGLE: MUSIC AND VERSE AS ETHICAL DISCOURSE

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THE PITTSTON COAL STRIKE

The Greenwich, Connecticut headquarters of the Pittston Company is far from the southwest Virginia coal miners it employs both in miles and in attitude, from the point of view of organized labor. Citing a need to revamp Pittston's financial structure in the late 1980s, management decided to reduce costs by cutting a number of miners' benefits, including lifetime health care pensions. Since coal miners enter the occupation recognizing its high risk of black lung disease and other mine related ailments, health care benefits have been part of labor contracts for decades. Pittston also wanted mandatory overtime, increased numbers of non-union workers and sub-contracting to non-union companies. Fourteen months into negotiations, members of the United Mine Workers of America voted to strike; it began on April 4, 1989.

A musical dimension of this struggle emerged in the newly composed lyrics sung to traditional gospel and bluegrass music. Mrs. Edna Sauls of the Daughters of Mother Jones emerged as an inspired lyricist, and the Rabbit Ridge Pea Pickers became well-known musical morale boosters. One lyric written in response to repeated encounters with Virginia state troopers and addressed to former Governor Baliles said:

*Going to Richmond,
And when I go,
Tell that old Virginia boy
We ain't gonna haul no coal.*

During the Christmas season, traditional carols were given a new slant with words that expressed the determination of the miners to stand firm.

Hazel Dickens of Mercer County, West Virginia, whose musical talents were featured in the Academy Award winning film "Harlan County, U.S.A." and in "Matewan," has sung what she calls "southern mountain music" for most of her life. Her father mined for a living and made music

for enjoyment in addition to working as a Baptist minister. His eleven children grew up singing and playing instruments. Ms. Dickens' home community experienced lay-offs and strikes, and she lost her oldest brother and two brothers-in-law to black lung disease. Her songs on social issues and coal mining — including one she wrote on black lung — embody the experience and aesthetics of a vital, regional music tradition, interpreted through her own individual perspective and remarkable talent.

Ms. Dickens notes how similar the mine wars of the 1920s were to the Pittston strike. Then as now, "gun thugs" were used to try to intimidate the strik-



Striking coal miners use music as a morale booster on the picket line. (Photo by Richard Barbero, courtesy United Mine Workers of America)

ers. Ms. Dickens observed that the Pittston strikers, like their predecessors 60 years ago, were “extremely spirited” in their resolve to fight. “It was great to see,” said Ms. Dickens, who has given several performances to benefit the Pittston miners.

CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

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SUGGESTED LISTENING

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style can be isolated as “the music of struggle.” Almost any kind of music can be used as a sign of struggle, depending on the meanings given to the performances by participants and their opponents. An instrumental arrangement can be as forceful as a lyric; a rhythm can be as expressive as a phrase. Sometimes an unchanged old folk song is as potent as a new composition. The meaning of a musical performance depends to a large extent on the specific context in which it occurs — the “thousand circumstances” referred to by Rousseau and rarely understood fully except after considerable investigation.

WHY USE MUSIC IN STRUGGLES?

Why do people involved in struggles make music at all? Wouldn't it be more effective to work silently and resolutely to change an unsatisfactory situation rather than sing songs about it? Although it has been argued “the pen is mightier than the sword,” what would happen if everyone put down their pens, stopped making music, and took up swords? What indeed! They might all swing their swords in different directions, at different times, and at different foes. Among other things, music can focus attention, mobilize emotions, and coordinate activities.

To mobilize people toward a goal, you need to make the issues clear, you need to get people to agree with them, and you need to incite them to act. Music can accomplish these quite effectively. Songs can help bring certain issues into focus and specify an approach to

them. Song words can be standardized and passed on without requiring that people read, write, or possess incriminating evidence. Music can focus attention on injustices, create feelings of solidarity, advocate a certain cause, encourage supporters, and frighten opponents. It can create links between the present and the past while helping to create a new and different future.

Music is not unique in its ability to act symbolically in struggle. Although language, dialect, speeches, written documents, dancing, theater, dress, and even food can all mobilize groups, music has several attributes that make it particularly suitable for mobilizing people. Songs often can be performed while doing something else (like working or marching); they don't necessarily require physical objects (props, stoves, plates, etc.), they can be changed quickly, and they can be sufficiently abstract to unify a wide range of support and confuse the opposition.

Although music is widely used in struggles, it is not found everywhere. Protest is sometimes expressed through silence or another expressive mode. Where most public forms of music are dominated by a central state, opposition to the state may take non-musical forms. Where individual opinions are not culturally sanctioned, new songs may not be composed. Where music is considered to be a low status form of activity, performers of higher status may choose other modes of expression. Opposition may be expressed by refusing to participate (silence) or refusing to attend performances (boycotting) rather than through music itself. Silence is probably a fairly common protest in societies where everyone is expected to participate, and where