

APPALACHIAN OCCUPATIONAL MUSIC

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From the earliest days of settlement to recent times, Appalachian people have created music that has overtly evoked their everyday lives. Today, traditional as well as commercial songs and tunes from Appalachia reflect the various ways that the region's people have made a living—depicting such older trades as hunting, foraging, farming, herding, blacksmithing, and moonshining, and such modern occupations as railroading, coal mining, timbering, and truck driving.

Eighteenth-century British immigrants to Appalachia brought with them some songs about work. For example, "Old Bangum," a ballad about hunting, evolved from the traditional Scottish ballad "Sir Lionel."

*Old Bangum, he did hunt and ride,
Sword and pistol by his side.*

Most of the occupation-themed songs that circulated in Appalachia through the end of the 19th century, though, were composed by people residing in the region. After the Civil War, as industrialization expanded across Appalachia, emerging occupations yielded new songs and tunes. Railroads were built into the region to facilitate industrial development, a fact reflected in such traditional Appalachian songs as "Workin' on the New Railroad":

*I'm workin' on the new railroad
With mud up to my knees.*

African Americans began to migrate into Appalachia to find work, and with them they brought their musical traditions and aesthetic sensibilities, which soon intermingled with those of white Appalachians, expanding the

region's collective musical repertoire. African-American songs and tunes composed elsewhere became popular in Appalachia, and blacks working there crafted some enduring songs, including the traditional blues ballad "John Henry," based on an actual 1872 incident in West Virginia.

*Before I let that steam-drill beat me
down,
I'll die with this hammer in my
hand.*

White musicians not only borrowed these songs from African-American musicians but also composed songs and tunes that reflected their own experiences of working on the railroad. In addition, they learned from blacks innovative ways to play the banjo, the guitar, and the harmonica.

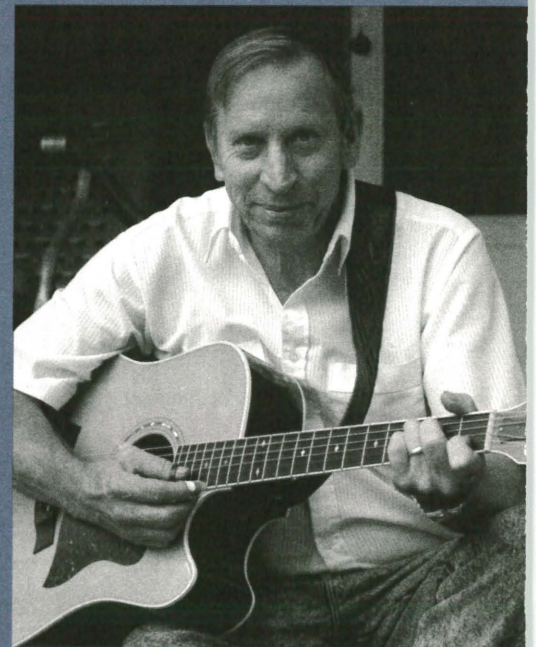
As railroads rendered Appalachia more easily accessible to outsiders, other industries—specifically, companies seeking to harvest timber, coal, or minerals—entered the region to extract natural resources. People employed by those industries—both Appalachian natives and newcomers of various ethnicities—endured considerable hardship, and companies often offered meager compensation for workers' life-endangering labor. People living temporarily in "company towns" made music to entertain themselves, but they also utilized music for mobilizing their communities to achieve positive social change. Whereas few songs or tunes were composed in the short-lived timber camps of Appalachia, coal camps fostered diverse occupation-related musical traditions, a result of the relative stability of the coal industry's work communities.

The best-known category of coal mining music from Appalachia is the coal mining protest song; such songs criticize (often stridently) the injustices of the capitalist system

as well as the coal mine companies' sometimes blatant disregard for human life and the natural environment. Songwriters from Appalachia who composed classic coal mining protest songs include Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Jim Garland, Jean Ritchie, Billy Edd Wheeler, and Hazel Dickens.

*These mighty company bosses,
They dress in jewels and silk.
But my darling blue-eyed baby,
She starved to death for milk.
—"I Hate the Capitalist System"
by Sarah Ogan Gunning*

Images of Appalachian occupations, communicated through certain songs, have exerted a strong imaginative hold on audiences and musicians outside the region. For example, coal mining, farming, moonshining, and railroading songs, composed or reinterpreted by Appalachian and non-native musicians, continue to influence mainstream America's view of life in Appalachia. ■



West Virginia songwriter Carl Rutherford writes about life in the coal mines. Photo by Michael Keller, courtesy *Goldenseal Magazine*