

Title Page

Multicultural Musical Landscapes:

Investigating Musical Influences in Southern West Virginia Company

Towns

Steven Schumann

Marshall University

Abstract:

The region of West Virginia known as the Southern Coalfields experienced a huge population boom in the late 19th century into the mid 20th century due to the discovery and exploitation of coal seams in the area. Modern discourse on the region often highlights the areas predominantly white population, however, this region of the state was built in large part by waves of immigrants who often faced horrific conditions, which resulted in the death or injury of thousands. This paper utilizes a variety of historical and musical sources to present aspects of a multicultural world in the Southern Coalfields which is a contrast to many modern and historical narratives of Appalachia.

Keywords: Appalachia, Identity, Ethnomusicology, West Virginia

The American region of Southern Appalachia is an area which has held a unique position in American society and history. Due to a variety of geographical, economic, and cultural factors, the Southern Appalachians has remained one of the most isolated regions of the United states, both physically and culturally. Because of this cultural distinction from the rest of the country, Appalachians have often been assigned labels which imply they are a homogeneously White, uneducated, or backwards people. The Southern Coalfields of West Virginia remain, to this day, possibly the most remote area of Appalachia. Because of this, the region has historically been either ignored or exploited for their labor, resources, and cultural traditions. This paper aims to outline some of the unique cultural, historical, and ethnic aspects of the Southern Coalfields which stand out in stark contrast to traditional narratives assigned to the region, using musical and historical sources as artifacts.

1. Appalachian identity and portrayal in scholarship and music

Appalachian people have often been portrayed in media, scholarship, and journalism in such a manner which has promoted a caricaturesque representation of a group of people belonging to many different subcultures and regions within the label of “Appalachian.” There are examples of unfair representation found in various mediums, but there are also instances where the problem lies in the underrepresentation of Appalachians in national dialogue, either through means that are nefarious or unintentional. John Fisk published a number of books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which promoted certain views of poor whites living in the United states that have had lasting effects on Appalachian identity to this day. For example, in his book “*Old Virginia and Her Neighbors*” Fisk argues that all of the entrepreneurial and hardworking whites in Virginia congregated around the cities and plantations, while outlaws, unemployed persons,

and culturally backwards whites sought out a life of ease in the wilderness (Fisk, 375). Fisk uses language such as “white trash” (Fisk, 375) to describe the specific social class of poor, lazy whites and he applies the label of “cracker” to this group of people. Fisk theorizes that this class of whites spread throughout the region as so:

It is not supposed that the ancestors of all the persons designated as “crackers” were once white freedmen in Virginia and Maryland; it is more probable that this class furnished a nucleus about which various wrecks of decayed and broken-down humanity from many quarters were gradually gathered. Nor are we bound to suppose that every community of ignorant, semi-civilized white people is descended from those white freedmen. Prolonged isolation from the currents and thought and feeling that sway the great world will account for almost any extend of ignorance and backwardness; and there are few geographical situations east of the Mississippi River more conducive to isolation than the southwestern portion of the great Appalachian Highlands (Fisk, 375).

John C. Campbell published his book “The Southern Highlander and His Homeland” in 1921, in an effort to accurately portray the region and address the needs of the community, as well as to support the idea of the Southern Appalachians as a distinct cultural region. Due to the authentic style of research that Campbell conducted, his account is far more nuanced and evidence-based. This is a contrast to Fisk’s volumes which, while extensive, make sweeping remarks which are often not backed by direct evidence, such as the quote furnished above.

Positive portrayals of Appalachians can be found in Campbell's book, such as in the section titled "*Chapter V: The Present Population*" where this quotation can be found:

One is reminded often by friends of the Highlander that he is the true American...

The pioneer is, indeed, still to be recognized in many of his mountain

descendents- tall, lean, clear-eyed, self-reliant, never taken by surprise, and of

great endurance. (Campbell, 72).

Although Campbell does a far superior job of attempting to represent the Southern Appalachians in an accurate way, both authors generally portray the region as one that is homogenous, both culturally and ethnically. It is unfortunate when comparing the perspectives of these two authors that the more measured account by Campbell, over time, declined in popularity as the narrative direction put forth by Fisk was continually reinforced by media portrayals which support the idea of a culture of poverty existing in Appalachia.

One of the inherent difficulties of ethnographic research is the ability to unintentionally or willfully distort the presentation of a culture, due to the nature of approaching a group of people as an outsider. Art and music can give people the ability to tell stories using their own language and often preserves information and anecdotes that would have been otherwise lost to time. Because of this, the music of the Appalachians has often served as one of the primary images of what shapes an image of the culture in the mind of an outsider. Although Southern Appalachia has a rich history of traditional music, ethnomusicological study, and has garnered wide-spread popular appeal, certain populations were underrepresented when the idea of

Appalachian music as a style was being solidified. The two primary forces that drove the way Appalachian music became defined were the academic publications of songcatchers in the early 20th century and the music produced by recording labels.

The music of Appalachia which was recorded in the early 20th century led to the later birth of country music and the foundations of the folk revival in the 1960's- two musical genres which remain popular in the United States and throughout the world today. It is unfortunate, then, that certain groups were overlooked during this formative period of one of America's most treasured cultural traditions. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, black and white recorded music was typically separated into a few distinct categories. This was largely due to the fact that record companies did not believe there was a large market of white consumers who would purchase the music of black musicians. Due to this view of the commercial viability of certain musical genres, black musicians typically had to fit into one of the categories of "race music" which consisted of gospel, blues, minstrel, jazz, or spirituals (Thompson, 5).

Despite the separation of races by record labels, one can find influences of Black musicians in bluegrass. The most obvious evidence of Black influence lies in the presence of the banjo as one of Appalachia's most ubiquitous instruments. The banjo is of direct African descent, which was preserved in the American south by slaves who were displaced from their Western African homelands. (Thompson, 6). Additionally, the commercial forms of Appalachian traditional music, namely bluegrass and country, were developed in a cultural incubator of the early 1900's in Central Appalachia, in which people of many different races mingled often in places of work and even leisure. Though this was present throughout Appalachia, this paper will

later address how the Southern Coalfields of West Virginia were especially abnormal in the ethnic divides in work and leisure.

One such example of musical influences crossing racial lines can be found in Bill Monroe. Monroe is often labeled as the “Father of Bluegrass,” (Smith, 172) and was heavily influenced as a youth by a man named Arnold Shultz. Shultz was a coal miner who played in Black string bands throughout his life and also worked with white string bands to perform in front of White audiences (Smith, 23). Monroe has cited Shultz as a direct influence on his style of playing, but unfortunately no recordings of Shultz exist today (Pecknold, 102). How many other missing links have been lost due to the underrepresentation of Black musicians by record labels at this formative time?

One of the other sources which defined the history of Appalachian music is the ethnomusicological field recordings and writings of songcatchers of the early 20th century. Songcatchers were ethnomusicologists who sought to understand a culture by creating field recordings of a people's music and analyzing it to glean information about their culture through the lens of music. This ideal is quite noble in and of itself, however, notions of Appalachian whiteness were largely sedimented by the selection of primarily white musicians for study.

Cecil Sharp, an English ethnomusicologist and writer, wrote a variety of books and published “*English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*” in 1917. Sharp was specifically looking for examples of English and Scottish folk songs that had been preserved and were still performed in the United States. Although Sharp was meticulous in his record keeping and quite committed to the scholarly pursuit of ethnomusicology, he was searching for examples of songs that would fit specifically with his existing theories rather than trying to paint an accurate portrait

of a culture. For example, the following passages are from Sharp's and his secretary Maud Karpeles' diaries: "*We tramped - mainly uphill. When we reached the cove we found it peopled by niggers ... All our troubles and spent energy for nought.* (Karpeles Diary). Sharp described the same encounter in slightly greater detail:

We arrived at a cove and got sight of log cabins that seemed just what we wanted.

Called at one. A musical 'Good Morning', turned round and behold he was a negro. We had struck a negro settlement. Nothing for it but to toil back again.

(Sharp Diary).

An entry in Karpeles' diary the next day stated that Sharp was, "glad to leave Sylva. Do not like town. Too many negroes." (Karpeles diary).

As we have seen by examining the musical style in Appalachia, the traditions of Black musicians had already made their way into the white population and it is not outrageous to suggest that English folk songs were being sung in the settlement mentioned above. Sharp, however, chose to ignore studying this opportunity out of a racial bias. In addition to the overt bias shown in the above quotes, it is also possible that songcatchers unintentionally underrepresented Black musicians simply because the gatekeepers of the communities were white. Appalachian roads were often quite inaccessible in the early 20th century and so ethnographers relied on community gatekeepers to connect them with informants or musicians in the areas they studied. Cecil Sharp, for example, often utilized protestant ministers as gatekeepers. Due to segregation of churches at the time, this would lead to an overrepresentation of white musicians and has potential ramifications for our record of Eastern European immigrant musicians, who often belonged to an Orthodox or Catholic community.

2. The Ballad of John Henry

“The Ballad of John Henry” is a very popular hammer song which takes place in southern West Virginia. Though the lyrics have changed over time and between performance, which is in fact intrinsic to the nature of folk music, there is a lot which can be discovered from the song about the legendary character. The general narrative of the story is as follows: John Henry is a “steel driving man,” which means that it was his job to drive stakes into rock in which blasting charges would be placed while building a railroad (John Henry: A West Virginian Hero). Henry is endowed with nearly supernatural abilities which makes him incredibly skilled at the job. John Henry’s name is known far and wide due to his prowess as a steel driver. Eventually, however, someone invents a steam drill which threatens to put Henry out of work. In order to combat this, John Henry suggests that a race is set up between the steam drill and himself on the principle that he can prove himself superior to the steam drill. Eventually the two race and John Henry wins by a small margin, ending in his death due to exhaustion in most versions of the lyrics.

By examining the lyrics closely, however, one can extract information about the people who sang and wrote this song. Experts believe that John Henry was indeed a real person (Burchard) who was a steel driver at Big Bend Tunnel, and most likely did indeed participate in some sort of race with a steam drill. The fact that the story has elements of truth to it becomes more interesting when one realizes that the protagonist of the song is a Black man. Folk songs sometimes contain references to Black individuals during this time, however, they typically occupy a villainous or caricaturesque role in the story, such as “John Hardy” (Cox, 505). A version collected by Guy Johnson in 1907 contains these lyrics:

John Henry's cap'n Tommy,--

V'ginny gave him birth;
Loved John Henry like his only son,
And Cap' Tommy was the whitest man on earth,--
Lawd, -- Lawd, --
Cap' Tommy was th' whitest man on earth
(Johnson, 102)

In some versions of the ballad, after John Henry dies his hammer is passed on to his female companion “Polly Ann” who “drove steel like a man.” This points to the possibility of a gender dynamic abnormal to the time period related to labor in the society of the Southern Coalfields which should be further investigated.

“Lucy came to see him;
Bucket in huh han';
All th' time John Henry ate his snack,
O Lucy she'd drive steel lak-a man,--
Lawd, -- Lawd, --
O Lucy she'd drive steel lak-a man.” (Johnson, 103).

The ballad of John Henry also exposes dynamics involved with views of labor and social class. John Henry was likely either a freed slave or the son of a freed slave who immigrated north to West Virginia in pursuit of work. At the beginning of the ballad, most versions contain a child prophecy in which John Henry claims he's going to be a “steel driving man” as an infant.

At the conclusion of the song most versions have John Henry beating the steam driver, but dying from exhaustion.

“When John Henry was a little bitty baby
No bigger than the palm of your hand
His daddy looked down at Johnnie and said
Johnnie’s going to be a steel driving man
Lawd, Lawdy” (Johnson, 103)

“John Henry was hammering on the right side,
The big steam drill on the left,
Before that steam drill could beat him down,
He hammered his fool self to death.” (Johnson, 102).

In “The Ballad of John Henry”, we see an example of an African-American hammer song making its way into the mainstream style of old-time and bluegrass music. By examining the conditions of the Southern Coalfields of West Virginia, one can have a better understanding of why this transmission was possible.

3. The Southern Coalfields of West Virginia

The Southern Coalfields of West Virginia is understood to be the region of the state which lies below the Kanawha River in the Allegheny Plateau. This region consists of rugged terrain which made large-scale extraction of resources, other than timber, not economically

viable before the late 1800's. Due to this lack of infrastructure, the population remained quite small until railroads were driven into the area, which allowed for quicker transportation and movement of resources. John Henry would have been a part of the group of people who built the railroads into this area. Because there was not a sufficient existing population to supply coal companies with a workforce in the Southern Coalfields, companies such as U.S. Coal and Coke were forced to settle new workers in the region and create manufactured towns, commonly referred to as company towns or coal towns (Fain, 42).

Because U.S. Coal and Coke owned vast swaths of land in places like McDowell county, they were able to operate with almost total autonomy in regards to mine safety laws, police use of force, and environmental destruction. For example, the Baldwin Felts Agency was a private police and espionage force which enforced the will of mining companies in company towns (Savage). This agency used brutal and repressive actions to prevent the movement of mine employees and restrict the area's ability to unionize. The agency's unlawful actions eventually culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain, which remains the largest armed insurrection in American history since the Civil War, when 10,000 armed miners marched against their employers (Boissoneault).

The Hawks Nest Tunnel was built in Summers County, and resulted in the death of up to 764 men (Cherniack). This disaster ended up with an out of court settlement of a meager \$200,000 in 1934, which is equivalent to just over \$3.8 million in 2020.. Despite the incredible danger that these workers faced, coal miners and other employees in this region were often paid in what is called scrip, which was a form of currency only redeemable at the company store. Involved with the payment of scrip was a system colloquially called "Esau," which involved

paying scrip to a female when their male family members were injured due to work. When a male family member was injured, as often happened due to obscene work conditions, their wives would be paid an amount which would be forgiven if the employee returned to work in the next thirty days. If, for example, a limb was blown off in a mine explosion, and an employee could not return in thirty days, the “Esau” was converted to debt which was nearly impossible to pay off. The commonly accepted method of paying off Esau debt came from forced sexual acts of these women at the company store. Further investigations into the specifics of Esau in the coalfields are still needed, as many of the women who were exploited by the system at the time were encouraged to remain silent, and evidence was not collected (Moore).

Part of the reason that coal companies were able to enact these unfair and typically illegal practices came from the total monopolies that these companies held in Southern West Virginia. Many of these practices also took place during the Great Depression, a time in which people sought out work that would normally be deemed as too dangerous or low-paying. An additional reason, however, comes from the vulnerable population which was recruited and exploited by energy companies.

A document created in 1911 and presented to Congress on the state of coal mining offers some insights into the world of the Southern Coalfields at this time. The Southern Coalfields were of special interest in this period, as European powers were gearing up for war and the specific “clean burning” bituminous coal found in McDowell county would later go on to become a primary source of fuel for the U.S. Navy’s warships (Garay, 28). An example labeled “mine community no. 1” from this document can be found which details the ethnic breakdown of the community.

Per cent distribution

Native white.....	25.0
Negro.....	31.0
Magyar.....	20.0
Slovak.....	9.0
Russian.....	1.4
Polish.....	3.6
Italian.....	8.8
Roumanian.....	.1
Greek.....	.4
Swedish.....	.1
Other races.....	.6
Total.....	100.0

Race	McDowell County Number	Per cent distribution
American, White	3,165	27.5
American, Negro	4,950	43.1
Magyar	1,144	10.0
Italian	1,080	9.4
Slovak	470	4.1
Polish	350	3.0
Russian	168	1.5
Lithuanian	40	.3
German	43	.4
Other races	77	.7
Total	11,487	100.0

In both of these figures, “Native white” or “American, White” exists as a minority, rather than as the great majority. This breakdown is quite at odds with the traditional notion of Appalachia as a monolithically white culture. It is, of course, significant that black workers outnumber the “native white” workers, but another population of interest is the surprisingly high number of Magyar- or Hungarian- immigrants. It would be reasonable to suppose that, due to the great number of unique circumstances found in the region, the racial dynamics found in these communities may differ from what is normal in the larger region and what it expected.

4. Ethnic Dynamics in the Coalfields

The example of “The Ballad of John Henry” has already provided some clues that racial divides traveled along different lines in the Coalfields. It is already atypical to have a black protagonist in a folk song sung by white musicians at this time, and additionally John Henry’s relationship with his white boss is described as being “like his only son” (Johnson, 102). Three additional examples of abnormal ethnic interactions follow; one musical and two non-musical.

Jazz was seen as a black art form in the early 1900's, however, it eventually crossed racial lines in a manner that few genres had done before. Although the conditions were often quite poor, in the Southern Coalfields, there was often no discrimination in pay between Black and White workers (Wilkinson, 37). This meant that jazz bands were able to find a degree of financial success by traveling to various coal towns in the early 20th century. This demand for a black musical genre in the Coalfields provides an image of Appalachia which is quite contrary to the idea of a homogenous people group that only plays old-time, or bluegrass music. In fact, Jazz bands were successful enough that Joe King Oliver lived in Huntington, West Virginia in 1935 and toured throughout the area (Wilkinson, 37). The fact that Black and White people were able to participate in leisure activities together in the Coalfields is significant. For Example, in the town of Keystone, leisure activities could be enjoyed across ethnic lines as well, albeit in a less savory manner.

The town of Keystone became well known for its seedy district nicknamed "Cinder Bottom" (Spindler). Cinder Bottom was considered the "Wild West of Appalachia" due to its high number of saloons, gambling halls, and brothels which catered to transient workers. An interesting aspect to note, however, is that an anecdotal trait of Cinder Bottom is that prostitution was available across racial lines. This was quite unusual at the time and points toward a degree of racial interaction that was not common outside of the area being studied.

An additional instance which illustrates the unique racial dynamics of the region is found in the town of Pocahontas, Virginia. Pocahontas sits right on the border between Virginia and West Virginia and was home to a profitable coal mine in the late 1800's. In 1884, an explosion occurred in the town's mine, killing 114 coal miners. Following this event, the town's cemetery

was built around the burial site of these miners, and it continued to be an important part of the cultural fabric of the community. Because of this, the cemetery at Pocahontas has been designated as a historical landmark and preserved.

The cemetery at Pocahontas offers us a glimpse into the lives of those living in the Southern Coalfields around the turn of the century. Headstones bearing the name of a Hatfield or McCoy sit alongside those written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Roman Catholicism symbology can be found on many headstones inscribed in Italian. The town of pocahontas houses a synagogue, Roman Catholic church, Carpathian Orthodox church, Methodist church, and Baptist church. Found in the cemetery in Pocahontas is a physical example of the cosmopolitan nature of the Coalfields at the turn of the century.



Further research needs to be conducted on the music and art of diverse communities such as Pocahontas, as well as numerous other settlements in the Southern Coalfields. Unfortunately, the immigrant status of many Eastern European and Italian workers prevented them from being recorded among the other cultural groups of the region despite their living, working, and dying alongside Whites and Blacks alike. Because these populations were not researched, their narratives are in danger of dying out, as the generations which contain the children and grandchildren of the original immigrants continue to shrink in number. As many aspects of the United States' past are scrutinized under new lenses of social justice and equity, West Virginia stands out as a state which contains valuable history and lessons which have often been discounted due to general misunderstandings about rural Appalachians. When examined with a critical eye, the Southern Coalfields of West Virginia in the 1900's are exposed as a surprisingly cosmopolitan and multicultural world, which continues to be fleshed out through new scholarship and investigation.