

*Story is shaped by sound and it structures what we know.*

Maggie Anderson (West Virginia poet)

# Music

## Mountain

I am an “out-migrant,” the product of the mass exodus of West Virginians after World War II when millions of people took Hillbilly Highway (Route 29) north to Ohio, among other destinations. They were looking for work after their native land had been raped of its natural resources by mining and logging. Appalachia became the place to leave, particularly West Virginia. People went where work could be found. Some became immersed in other places yet more often felt foreign to their new homes, and to appease the longing they felt, they would go home on the weekends to the familiarity of the mountains.

These “out-migrants” were never comfortable anywhere else. They kept one foot in the mountains that anchored them to a place and a time that they could not shake. I am descended from these people who

crossed the borders many times looking for a better life. I am one of the three and one-half million displaced people of Appalachia—rootless and searching. After my children were older I came back to the place I once called home, seeking what I had lost.

We out-migrants are pulled back to the mists of Appalachia where the mountains have nurtured us and isolated us, protected us and angered us, but still belong to us. In the summers, we venture back for a taste of what we miss, when the high mountain vapors obscure the dark green forests and beckon us home. Festivals are a great draw, particularly string band festivals, because they are a haven for the storytellers and the singers, and I go there to listen to the stories and songs of my people—so I will know how to continue the tradition.

These festivals are magical and as close to the feel of living in the mountains as we out-migrants can get. It is where we disaffected appear once a year—the displaced of home and soul. During the summers when the heat penetrates the mountains despite their sheltering forests, people stand in lines for showers only to find that there is no hot water. They smile, make a joke about it, and shower in the cold, grateful there is any water at all. Most attendees feel the same way—appreciative for the

reunion of soul to place. It is rare that there are dissenters, because after being smitten by the sounds of music echoing off the mountains and wafting down the valleys, you will never be the same.

My first experience in a festival-like atmosphere was at a writers' workshop called Allegheny Echoes in Pocahontas County, West Virginia. I met many poets, writers, and musicians. I found out about Allegheny Echoes while I was program director at a regional traditional music and arts organization in Raleigh, North Carolina. Once I learned of the workshop, as soon as I could I went. After being gone for 25 years, I finally saw my home from new eyes. I suppose the mountains make it hard to see unless you are standing at a distance. I was ashamed of my roots. I tried to refine my speech, hide my heritage, and run away from what I was. I had left that person in the mountains. But in the process of running from what I was, I found that I shared many similarities with the writers of North Carolina, like Lee Smith, Clyde Edgerton, and Sam Ragan, who told me I should write about my family and my life. They told me to write for my family, because I did not think anyone else would want to hear the stories I could tell.

At Alleghany Echoes, I was immersed in the culture I had thrown



**Babcock State Park Grist Mill, Clifftop, West Virginia.**

off, forgotten, and left for dead, like so many family members who died in its grip. I was welcomed with opened arms. When West Virginians find out that it is your home, they greet you as if you have never left. You are where you should be. Nothing has changed since you have been gone. Time has stood still. You are family. And so that summer of 2001, after attending the Allegany Echoes workshop in June and hearing about the Appalachian String Band Festival at Clifftop, West Virginia, I had to go, still searching for the person I had been.

Camp Washington-Carver, which hosts the Appalachian String Band Festival, is named for Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. I find this distinctive since most folks think racism is part of being a hillbilly. The camp historically served black youths in vocational agriculture and survives today as a well-preserved example of one of West Virginia's most ambitious Works Project Administration ventures in the form of a cultural site. It is about six hours from I live—no matter where I am living—and it is at the top of a mountain near Babcock State Park, where I still stop for corn meal. It is not far from New River Gorge, which has the largest single-span bridge in the country. It sits amidst mountains nearly four hundred thousand years old that West Virginia



**Left: Becky's daughter jamming at Clifftop, West Virginia. Right: "Pothead" Becky sings to me every year at Clifftop, usually without the plant.**

poet Maggie Anderson calls “ancestral and related to the sky.” It is at the point of murgence of sky and air, old and new, history and family—all of the things that make West Virginia what it is and this festival so appealing. Former West Virginia Poet Laureate Louise McNeill says it is “a place called solid.” I find both observations astute because I look for my solid ground in my ancestors among the mountains. I find them when I return to hear the music: My home has a tone, and I have to hear it every summer so that I can make it through the winter before I have to be retuned. I hear the merging of sounds from different cultures: the Celtic fiddle, the African banjo, the Spanish guitar, the German dulcimer, and the Italian mandolin.

It is not uncommon to find a zither, uilleann pipes, bohdrans, Native American flutes, didgeridoos, concertinas, psalteries, or ukuleles, and I know for a fact that the Calhoun County Contingency uses a washtub bass. This mixing and mingling is part of Appalachia—it is what makes us tick, what gives us the incentive to return to that mountain top, or that riverside, or that camp each and every year. And it is in fact what draws us back. Without this momentary reconnection to what makes us who we are, I am not sure most of us could survive. I used to have a summer

camp that was a part of me; in the spring of the year I turned sixteen, the river took it, and I did not return until twenty years later—Camp Washington-Carver is its replacement, only it has the festival associated with it. For me, the gathering of people and stories is the festival.

It is a festival like most festivals: The crafters have muslin dresses, jewelry, musical instruments, craft arts, tie-dyed T-shirts, and other festival gear. Yet unlike other festivals, food is cheap and home cooked. There are food vendors that serve the best fried green tomato sandwiches I have ever eaten. They charge enough to make money but not enough to break the customers—because that is the way of the mountains. However, if the food is being prepared in the dining hall, waiting is in order, especially if the power goes out or the water runs out. The unique thing is that you can go there hungry and get fed because people are always offering food. Down in Hobo Holler, a man makes hobo sandwiches for free with one of those infomercial sandwich makers running off a generator for those who are in need. Sometimes they are for drunken teenagers who forgot to bring anything to eat, and sometimes they are for little old couples from North Carolina who are on a fixed income and can only afford the barest of supplies. But be assured, you will be taken care of. I imagine

it is similar to the old camp meetings that began in the early 1800s—a place where white and black and Methodist and Baptist came to share ballads and hymns and stories before churches were established, where African rhythms blended with Gospel and Bluegrass, where no lines were drawn based on any social institutions. That is the nature of the mountains, and this is what I longed for. My search feels complete when I am here and, once again, among family.

Hobo Holler is only one of the many regions of the String Band Festival at Clifftop that are given names by the attendees who camp there year after year; the names usually have to do with where the people come from or what kind of music they play (sometimes one simply means another). I don't know them all, and I think only those who have been going for many years do, but some of the names are Charlottesville, for obvious reasons; Sodom and Gomorrah, referring to the wide range of non-old-time music and singing that goes on there, called neo-trad; Carterville, for the area of Virginia near Hiltons and the Carter family fold; the Badlands, because of the Cajun affiliation; and South Hills, near the water tower for the snobby neighborhood around Charleston, West Virginia (as if Charleston could ever have snobs!). Every festival has its

regular crowd, as do all areas of West Virginia where summer draws folks—by rivers and by lakes. Camps are made into a second home. This is tradition.

At many festivals or at many camps, I sample the latest home brew. Last year it was Damson Plum; the year before it was some Pachin (peach) smuggled in from Ireland. I cannot remember what came before that, but that is the nature of home brews. There is usually a sign at the front entrance of any festival that says no alcoholic beverages, but we all know it's only for show. We are full of contradictions.

At any festival, no matter what time of the day or night you might wander down into the different neighborhoods, you will find music. At Clifftop, if you camp there, you will fall asleep to “Big Scioto,” “Diggy Liggy Lo,” or “John Henry,” depending on where you camp. Besides the traditional forms obvious to Appalachia, you will hear calypso, Zydeco, Klezmer, and folk, because contrary to popular opinion, we accept and embrace all things cultural. The traditional songs are played differently if they come from Kentucky, Cape Breton, or Acadia, and they may have many names, but part of the fun is finding them out or how to play the same song fifteen different ways. The musicians gather around a fiddler

or bass player or sometimes both. The music is often called fiddle music because it centers on at least one fiddler and sometimes three. The people listening are not just those who come to reconnect, but also those who come from all states and many foreign countries just to see where their music has gone and how it has evolved.

Amidst the crowd are the flat-footers, who carry their own wooden boards because flat-footing on grass or gravel or anything else is difficult. Flat-footing is a percussive form of mountain dance that comes from a form of Irish step dancing called Sean Nos and looks a little like tap dancing and clogging combined. The flat-footers pull out their boards when they hear a tune they like, wherever they may be, and start providing percussion to a set of fiddle tunes.

The campers have uniquely constructed campsites: Sometimes, they build teepees, or have vans with tarps tied to trees, or campers with generators. They post signs announcing their names or locations and if there is a CD release party happening. They string lights that twinkle through the thick covering of the trees, and the moss smell covers all the camp construction no matter what the building material may be.

Each campsite has a musical forte and a steady stream of visitors

who bring along any instruments they play. They join in with whatever song is being played, and like an unknown language, all communicate, secretly. The only time I know what they are saying is when they are almost finished and the fiddler lifts his left foot to indicate they are on the last stanza. Then, a few people might move away but another few join. The songs change, the people move on to the next circle of players—the murgence is one fluid movement that extends for the entire festival and grows exponentially.

My most memorable experience is when I wandered aimlessly into the Badlands. The folks were deep-frying turkeys under the trees where their camp was set up. Crystals of all colors hung from the trees, catching the light of the moon and glints of lights from neighboring camps, flickering as the music was making the people move whether they wanted to or not. There was a communal hookah on a picnic table next to the camp. The dirt floor beneath their feet became smooth by the weight—a brown linoleum covering the earth. These folks didn't know me but had me eating their food and dancing on their earthen floor in a matter of minutes.

Each year, I go back and I know that my friends will be there. Many

have stayed in West Virginia, having to fight against adversity to do so, sacrificing of themselves in order to stay in the hills. Colleen Anderson's song "West Virginia Chose Me" touches on this very issue: "But a few of us are staying and it's not a point of choice / It's not we who do the choosing, we are chosen by the place." And so they stay to fight for their home while we out-migrants flirt with the borders, sometimes getting close enough to live just barely inside of them until something encroaches upon that space and we must move on once again, no matter how solid it may be. And so we gather upon Clifftop, making hillbilly jokes, laughing, and "in that self-mocking yet prideful defiance lies several generations of struggle," says poet Maggie Anderson.

Then, after a few drinks have been consumed with my West Virginia family, we make hats out of tin foil and tell people we are blocking out the aliens and no one thinks us strange. I will spend the next four hours looking for my friend Becky, who I will assuredly miss by a few minutes—sometimes for the whole weekend. And then along about 4 a.m., many of us will be holding each other up in the middle of the field singing hymns. I will wake with a head full of music after about four hours of sleep to Becky who has found me, singing an a cappella song,



Clifftop friends who made metal hats for “protection” (hanging on the tree).

my favorite, the state song:

Is it any wonder then,  
That my heart with rapture thrills,  
As I stand once more with loved ones  
On those West Virginia hills?  
Many changes I can see,  
Which my heart with sadness fills;  
But no changes can be noticed  
In those West Virginia hills,  
Oh, the West Virginia hills!  
I must bid you now adieu.  
In my home beyond the mountains  
I shall ever dream of you.

Now that I have found what I left among those hills, no matter where I am, I can still hear the music in the distance, alive with the accent of my people.