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They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J. H. Blair

Come all you coal miners wherever you may be
And listen to a story that I'll relate to thee

My name is nothing extra, but the truth to you I'll tell
I am a coal miner's wife, I'm sure I wish you well

We've been shot and we've been jailed Lord, it's a sin
Women and little children stood right by the men
But we got that union contract that keeps the worker free
And they'll never shoot that union out of me.

1. Introduction

1 In order to obtain better benefits, portal-to-portal pay, and the right to unionise with the organisation of their choice, in the summer of 1973 the coal-miners of the Eastover Mining Company’s Brookside mine in Harlan County, Kentucky voted to join the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Doing so put the miners in opposition to the Southern Labor Union (SLU), the union with which Eastover signed a contract (without conferring with the miners) through its parent organisation Duke Power Company (Portelli 2011: 311). Though Eastover’s chief executive officer Norman Yarborough recognised the UMWA as a bargaining agent, he ultimately refused to sign a contract with them. In response, the miners went on strike. The strike would last until the end of August 1974. The tragic turning point in the strike was the killing of twenty-three-year-old striking miner Lawrence Jones by mine supervisor Billy C. Bruner. Soon after, Eastover offered a contract, which the miners signed, thus ending the strike.

2 This article explores the soundscape of testimony and spontaneous lived experience, as expressed in song by the Harlan County coal-mining communities on strike in Barbara Kopple’s debut documentary film, *Harlan County USA* (1976). In covering the 1973-1974 Brookside Strike among coal miners and their families in rural eastern Kentucky against the Eastover Mining Company, Kopple captures and

continues an oral history tradition specific to a particular geography, one expressed in song. As performance and soundtrack, songs account for an integral component of the documentary, vocalising not only the dissent of the unfolding present of the strike but also the community’s collective identity, including its history of union solidarity and protest songwriting/performance native to Harlan County. I examine how song in the film, rather than serving merely as background music overwhelmed by and secondary to the images, expresses the collective spirit and psyche of the miners and their families and constitutes a core mode of testimony mobilised in the documentary, as performed on screen and played on the soundtrack. Kopple’s conscious decision to use songs specific to this community, both geographically and sociopolitically, could be read as her way of honouring and furthering the multilayered role of song among miners, unions, their families, and their personal and professional associates. Just as important, however, is how such a decision for the film explicitly situates song as an invaluable form of collective as well as individual testimony and witnessing.

3 Directly shaping my analysis of the documentary’s soundscape is Jane M. Gaines’ notion of “political mimesis,” which works through the question of documentary films inciting actual social change in the world and the connection between activism and aesthetics. More specifically, “political mimesis” seeks to account for how certain films and their screen bodies (in protest, in struggle, in suffering, in solidarity) can incite spectatorial bodies to similar action. Though Gaines briefly discusses the use of popular music as one element of political mimesis, I explicitly apply a more sound- and song-based interpretation of it to examine *Harlan County USA* and the aesthetics of its sound design through a formulation of “song back.” For the documentary situates song as a mode of witnessing and protest in the present tense and an archive of collective identity and experience of struggle, one that is also closely tied to as well as shaped by a particular geography, thereby infusing song with great testimonial richness. Also part of my analysis of the documentary’s use of songs of mining communities is delving into the history of protest songwriting and performance by women in the Appalachian region.[1] In this way, song stands for not just the simple act of singing but is always already enfolded in acts of remembering, witnessing, community-building, and

protesting, wherein the past is not a temporal moment removed from the present but in constant dialogue with the latter.

2. Archiving Sonic Histories and Labour Activism in Harlan County

4 *Harlan County USA*’s structured audiovisual approach documents and presents in tandem the “dialogic oral performance” (Portelli 2011: 10) of the strike and the dynamic role of song within the mining communities, in all its visceral and present tense immediacy. And it is this two-pronged audiovisual approach that makes it a unique, invaluable archive and expression of labour activism and protest on its own in relation to other sources at the same time.

5 In fact, Kopple’s *Harlan County USA* was and has always been already grounded in an archival, musical context. In 2006, thirty years after its release, the American home video distributor The Criterion Collection released a special edition DVD of the documentary. Also in 2006, Rounder Records released the *Harlan County USA: Songs of the Coal Miner’s Struggle* CD. Rounder Records, a bluegrass/folk label specialist founded in 1970, had earlier released the collections *Come All You Coal Miners* in 1972 and *They’ll Never Keep Us Down: Women’s Coal Mining Songs* in 1984, both of which elaborate the importance and history of music in the Appalachian region in general and within mining communities more specifically, not to mention women’s roles in songwriting. The aforementioned 2006 release stems in part from these two previous collections, while understood as a soundtrack to Kopple’s documentary. Most notably, the back sleeve of the CD describes the collection as “a chilling musical reflection of the danger, determination, turbulence, and triumph that mark the Appalachian coal mining experience,” within which women’s voices such as Hazel Dickens, Phyllis Boyens, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece are prominent. Notably, Kopple discovered West Virginia-born bluegrass singer-songwriter Dickens through the *Come All You Coal Miners* record. Kopple then invited Dickens to compose songs for her documentary. As a miner’s daughter whose songs also articulate pro-union and feminist anthems, Dickens accepted the invitation (2006).

With Dickens' participation as well as the appearance of the likes of Boyens, Gunning, and Reece in the film and/or its soundtrack, carefully compiled by Kopple herself, *Harlan County USA* could be regarded not only as a documentary but also as a musical/audiovisual collection among the aforementioned albums.

6 Learning about Harlan County's mining communities and political activism is, by force of circumstances, synonymous with discovering its intense (oral) history of protest songwriting and performance. Not surprisingly, professor, historian, and musicologist of American literature and culture Alessandro Portelli was "being educated through music to the history of the American working class" (Portelli 2011: 3) even before he set foot in Harlan County to research the mining communities and their histories of labour activism. He even writes that he "first heard about Harlan County in…1963, from an Almanac Singers recording of 'Which Side Are You On?' written by Florence Reece during the dramatic miners' strike of 1931-32." Subsequently, "In 1964, I bought the New Lost City Ramblers album *Songs from the Depression*, and I heard Aunt Molly Jackson's 'Join the CIO'" and "in Brooklyn I taped Barbara Dane singing another Harlan county song, Sarah Ogan Gunning's 'I Hate the Capitalist System'" (Portelli 2011: 3). But most tellingly, watching Kopple's documentary in a theatre in Rome in 1977 prompted Portelli to return to Harlan County and begin his oral history project of the area. As he recounts in his mammoth collection of interviews with Harlan County mining communities, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, "When I watched the pickets sing 'We Shall Not Be Moved' and Florence Reece sing 'We Shall Overcome' at the Evarts Multi-Purpose Center [in the documentary], I sensed that using music to educate myself about American struggles was not entirely a fantasy' (Portelli 2011: 5). In his book, Portelli charts the ancestral, social, economic, and political history of the titular county through interviews with nearly one hundred seventy Harlan Countians, both native and otherwise. He devotes substantial attention to the 1931-1932 strikes that earned the county the moniker "Bloody Harlan" and received national coverage at the time and to the 1973-1974 Brookside strike. Though as an oral history Portelli's book consists of "transferring…spoken performance to a written text" (Portelli 2011: 10), as in Kopple's documentary, his interviews with former miners, family members, and other community figures in the

mining towns and surrounding areas frequently betray the significance and prevalence of music and song as a component of their testimonies. In certain interviews, dialogue breaks into song or references lyrics to communicate issues pertinent to the speaker’s experiences, be it black lung disease, strikes and protests, poverty, or corporate power, which can also be seen and heard in Kopple’s *Harlan County USA*. That Portelli’s first visit to Harlan County in September 1973 roughly coincided with Kopple and her film crew’s arrival in the county (by a difference of months) to document the strike, could be marked simply as coincidence. By that time, the Brookside strike had already begun, including the violence that erupted between miners and the “gun thugs” hired by the coal operators to clamp down on the miners and their families. But such a parallel begs Kopple’s documentary to be understood as a work of sociopolitical, cultural, economic oral history as much as Portelli’s book, one that further positions song as testimony, testimony as song, via the sound design and soundtrack.

7 In truth, *Harlan County USA* is a distinct work apart from other archival works, be it a musical collection or a literary work, in that one could view and/or *listen to* the film, and its power would be no less diminished in either case. As in the statement above, Portelli himself identifies the visual and aural power of Kopple’s documentary in the way that it tangibly conveys the striking Brookside miners, including their families and living conditions, that are of course absent in his book by virtue of their respective media formats. Certainly, Portelli’s book chronicles the larger historical context and chronology that surrounds the Brookside strike, which is on the whole absent or fragmentary in Kopple’s documentary, and is therefore a useful complementary reference. Moreover, it also conveys the strong element of song that is characteristic of both the region’s mining communities and their labour activism. But *Harlan County USA*’s visual and aural power lays precisely in the way it brings to the eye *and* ear the depressed conditions in which Harlan County’s mining communities were living and working as well as the organisation, sounds, and songs of protest resulting from such conditions, past and present. In this way, the film leaves no doubt as to the dynamic interconnections between music/musical performance, acts of remembering and witnessing, and testimony as well as local/class identity formation and

the critique of capitalism, in the name of enacting socio-political/-economic change.

3. “Political Mimesis” in Song and Sound

8 In her essay entitled “Political Mimesis,” Gaines tackles the thorny question of how documentary films have incited socio/political action and/or change. What is it about certain documentary films and their representations of bodies in “sensuous struggle” (Gaines 1999: 91) onscreen that could translate into complementary acts of struggle offscreen? What are the aesthetics of this particular documentary realism, this political mimesis, which can “produce compelling similarities—*in* one’s body (through imitation [of screen bodies])” (Gaines 1999: 94)? Furthermore, what kind of images of violence are more/less sympathetic to rousing collective action outside of the filmic text and in the world? Though Gaines presents more questions than answers, she addresses an important issue within documentary film studies with regards to the link between aesthetics and activism. For the purposes of this article, I use her concept of political mimesis as a productive point of departure to examine the more specific link forged between film, aesthetics, music, and activism, past and present. And it is here where the soundscape and soundtrack of documentary films in their representation of communities in “sensuous struggle,” such as that of *Harlan County* USA, comes into critical play.

9 Gaines acknowledges from the beginning that even a “highly charged image” (1999: 98) of documentary realism cannot by itself induce spectators to action. She therefore writes, “What has been unacknowledged is the use of elements on either the image track or the sound track that make a visceral impact, that may have a strong connotative resonance for particular communities” (1999: 98-99), for “it is important to remember that in the radical film the documentary image seldom appears entirely ‘naked,’ that is, entirely without aesthetic supplements” (1999: 99). For a documentary that has as its subject a community in which labour activism, songwriting, and musical performance cut across its history and culture, such as that of Harlan County, it goes without saying that the inclusion of songs native to the community in the pro-filmic space and/or in the soundtrack

would hold very "strong connotative resonance." On a further note, Gaines rightly concedes that "[W]e are only just beginning to think about music and the rhetoric of documentary" (1999: 92) to develop that resonance and even possibly political mimesis.

10 Gaines' conceptualisation of "political mimesis" rests on examining what she terms the "political aesthetics of documentary" (1999: 99), and she centers her examination on the body. In the process, she recuperates mimesis from a simple, reductive process of imitation or empty reproduction to a value-laden phenomenon that produces its own authentic knowledge of being in the world: "as [Michel] Taussig argues, that mimesis is a body-first way of knowing should be to its credit and not its detriment. There are things that the body 'knows' that the mind does not, he would say" (Gaines 1999: 93-94). Within the context of moving images, mimesis has a dual power from the perspectives of production and reception, which Gaines elaborates through the terms "image back" and "body back." "Image back" refers to marginalised communities/figures taking the means of representation and representing their own faces, bodies, and thus experiences and identities on their terms instead of having others do it for them. "Body back" is precisely Gaines' definition of political mimesis, in that spectatorial bodies critically imitate and reflect screen bodies and therefore "carry on the same struggle" (1999: 100) in one and the same world. As such, political mimesis "begins with the body" (1999: 90). But what of voice and sound, and particularly song? Though she writes that "[p]erhaps the most easily understood example of the bodily effects I am talking about are the effects produced by popular music" (1999: 91), she does not elaborate what such effects are. I thus extend Gaines' political mimesis to include another tier of power that lies specifically in vocal performance, one that I term "song back," which also operates along both production and reception levels. For this article, I limit my critical application of "song back" to an older film such as *Harlan County USA*, whose historical context is characterised by the prominence of music in protest/activist movements. Nevertheless, my formulation of "song back" and examination of Kopple's film should be read in direct connection to and in dialogue with more contemporary activist audiovisual production, such as videos featuring music songs uploaded to YouTube by protesting cit-

izens, to help illustrate that the "protest song as political communication is still relevant in the Internet era" (Jenzen, et.al. 2020: 2012).

11 If political mimesis "begins with the body," then it should always already include vocalisation, which is the body's process of producing sound with/through the mouth. To "song back," then, is to vocalise one's/another's history, memory, and experience precisely in song, including the showcasing and curation of songs directly related to a specific event, place, and/or a community's history and identity. Through the process of "song back," the performance and/or sharing of lyrics bridges a song's distinct past and present invocation tied to specific socio-political contexts and, by extension, bridges one's/another's set of experiences and that of (new) listeners/viewers. Sociomusicologist Simon Frith, in his examination of the interlocking of music and identity/formation, already points to the empathetic simultaneous self/other and individual/collective in the performance of music: "Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective" (2011: 110). And echoing Robert Neustadt's statement of music as a powerful mnemonic symbol, Frith also writes, "Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social" (2011: 109). One could argue that to "song back" does not amount to full-fledged socio-political action or change on the part of spectators of documentary films. However, following Frith, the act of singing can be read as a kind of political action insofar as by singing and sharing (as one sings inevitably for an audience, even of just one) one continues and passes on, however unwittingly, an oral tradition that details the labour activism of communities often absent in mainstream media and public memory, to younger generations who might be compelled to learn more about such activism and communities on their own. In the process, one community's activism can be joined with those of another community by "song back," thereby inciting a greater and more powerful solidarity for potential change or, at the very least, changes in perspectives. A prime example would be Florence Reece's song "Which Side Are You On?". Though dated and composed in the 1930s during the "Bloody Harlan" strikes, it was subsequently repurposed by the group The Freedom Singers during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, newly mobilised for the Harlan County Brookside strike in

the 1970s, and even taken up in the 1980s by English musician/activist Billy Bragg in support of British miners’ strikes and against then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s anti-union policies. In this way, “Which Side Are You On?” operates as testimony and witnessing of its originary historical moment as well as an archive of and connections between subsequent periods of activism.

12 If Gaines identifies that “[t]he whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling” (1999: 91), *Harlan County USA*’s sound design and soundtrack play a key role in “mak[ing] struggle visceral” precisely through its praxis of “song back.”

4. Song as Archive and Performance of History, Community, and Protest

13 This article does not aim to define and position the citizens of Harlan County (and the rest of Appalachia, for that matter) solely within a musical framework. Rather, it seeks to understand through the lens of Kopple’s documentary why it is “[n]o wonder that…[it]…is intensely narrated through music and song” (Portelli 2011: 242). By extension, it seeks to elaborate how these citizens have consistently mobilised music to cultivate a creative as well as socio-politically-conscious oral tradition, which encompasses their perspectives on labour/relations, community, and/or family. Above all, my aim is to demonstrate how *Harlan County USA* engages in “song back,” wherein song serves simultaneously as: 1) testimony of lived experience, individual and collective, including the violence inflicted by the “gun thugs” in the present strike and labour activism of the past; and 2) a formal, aesthetic, and narrative structuring principle that organises spectatorial understanding of the strike, its participants and progress, and the film’s mediation of them.

14 On the one hand, the film operates largely in the present-tense observational mode of documentary filmmaking (in which Kopple was trained under the Maysles brothers and their concept of Direct

cinema) to chronicle the strike. On the other hand, the documentary also deviates from such a mode by delving into the recent and distant past of Harlan County and the UMWA in order to establish not only the labour activism that has characterised the mining communities but also the climate of struggle and violence to which these communities have been witness and subject for decades. Kopple and her crew arrived in Harlan County in mid-1973 and remained for the duration of the Brookside strike, and therefore witnessed the dynamic development that was crucial to its stamina and duration: the prominent role that women eventually had in the course of the strike, from the time they began to replace their miner husbands, fathers, brothers, and/or sons (following court injunctions that dictated the number of men allowed to be picketing) on the picket lines to staying their ground, even laying themselves on the road, to prevent state police-escorted strikebreakers from crossing the picket lines and thereby becoming subject to arrest. The film also charts, leading up to the strike, the corruption-infested state of the UMWA, involving its former president Tony Boyle and the 1969 murders of his political opponent Joseph Yablonski, his wife, and daughter (the order for which was eventually traced back to Boyle) and, subsequently, the momentous victory of Arnold Miller, the pro-rank-and-file miner candidate, as the new UMWA president in 1972. The documentary also presents Harlan County union history by including archival footage and photographs of miners at work and in protest during the 1930s “Bloody Harlan” strikes, alongside present-day interviews with miners and family members who were politically active at the time and either witnessed or directly participated in “Bloody Harlan.” Through archival footage from the 1930s and present-day interviews that she conducts throughout the film with miners and their families, with her voice often heard offscreen, Kopple transgresses the Direct cinema dictate of observational, unobtrusive, invisible, impartial filmmaking. But such transgression was a foregone conclusion, as Kopple and her crew were clearly on the side of the miners, most particularly the rank-and-file miners and their families who braved the picket lines and the “gun thugs” on a daily basis during the strike. It was on their behalf that Kopple and her crew also found themselves under threat from these hired armed men working on the side of the mining company, as one sequence in the documentary clearly demonstrates. Inversely, as Alessandro Portelli identifies, “The film was also a way of

indirectly influencing events in Harlan” (2011: 316). Kopple corroborates, “Sometimes we would be sitting on the picket lines with no film in the camera just to be there, just because we thought that it would protect people” (2006). But in constant dialogue with the proximity of the coal-mining families, the immersion in their locale, and the threat of bloodshed always bubbling underneath the surface during the strike at a visual level in the film is the constant presence of song at the aural level, which also intersects with the visual.

15 In the following statement, Kopple essentially lays out the prioritised narrative, visual, *and* aural elements of her approach to documenting the Brookside strike for her film:

> *Harlan County* had to have historical material as well as current material to really let you have that deep understanding of where these people came from and what their culture was all about – and the music that tied them all together, ‘cause coal miners are geographically so isolated that the music sometimes tells the stories of what they’re going through (2006).

16 In dialectical dialogue with the images, songs in the documentary function as acts of protest, solidarity, witnessing, and remembering. In the course of the film, as songs from both past and present accumulate, presented through the soundtrack, archival footage, and present-day on-site footage, they come to constitute a veritable aural testimony of the histories of Harlan County’s labour activism, unionism, and political resistance. Kopple thus made a conscious decision to use music that was directly connected to these histories, “the songs expressing the same dialectic between communal and individual self-reliance and agency that [she] saw in the Brookside strikers” (Weisberger 2006: 13). It is therefore no accident that the film’s first interview, with retired miner-singer Nimrod Workman, begins with him singing several verses of his song “Forty-Two Years,” which denotes the number of years he worked as a miner, before speaking of how miners were more or less expendable bodies. The song concluded, the interview continues with Workman, the “lack of a break between song and speech emphasiz[ing] the fine line between the two” (Hale 2017), as in the interviews conducted by Portelli for *They Say in Harlan County*. No less deliberate is the opening sequence, which starts underground as a miner yells out “Fire in the

hole!” several times to signal an imminent blasting and concludes with miners emerging from the dark, at which point Merle Travis’ “Dark as a Dungeon” (sung by the late West Virginia folk singer-songwriter David Morris) plays on the soundtrack.[2] In dialogue with the images, the song speaks of the dangers involved in coal mining. In this manner, these opening sounds, songs, and images leave no doubt as to whose side the film is on.

17 The songs present in *Harlan County USA* diegetically and extra-diegetically are performed testimony, protest, individual/collective memory, and an archive, particularly of the prominent and consistent role of women in Appalachian labour activism, including in Harlan County. The women’s rise to prominence in the strike *and* documentary is marked meaningfully by song. Paul Arthur has thoughtfully recognised Kopple’s “innovative sound design” (2006: 8) and use of songs in the documentary. Moreover, he rightly recognises that “[the fact that its] dominant musical voice is female is hardly incidental to its wider themes” (2006: 8). As already mentioned above, Kopple personally chose and invited singer-songwriter Hazel Dickens to provide most of the soundtrack, including “They’ll Never Keep Us Down,” specifically written and recorded for the documentary and played at the film’s conclusion on the soundtrack. In one sequence, over present-day and archival footage that charts the long history of women in Harlan County unionism and political activism, Sarah Ogan Gunning’s “Come All You Coal Miners” plays on the soundtrack, a song written from the perspective of a coal miner’s wife. When some of the women are arrested for lying down on the road to prevent strikebreakers from driving through and are placed in a jail cell, Kopple and her film crew capture them in conversation. One of the women, Lois Scott, voices her thoughts on the matter and breaks into song to help express her feelings: “Stay on the picket line/always on the picket line.” Deep into the strike and later in the film, during a very tense standoff between the women on the picket lines blocking traffic on a main road and company armed men and strikebreakers, the former group breaks out into “We Shall Not Be Moved” when the latter are compelled to turn around and in response to the local sheriff who tries to talk the women into moving. Such a moment expresses how “[m]usic as part of political movements is important…to mobilize people” (Reading 2015: 150) and to provide a “collective experience – not ex-

actly courage, but a sense of belonging to something greater than the individual, instilling a sort of strength” (Eyerman quoted in Reading 2015: 150). Of course, one of the most unforgettable moments in the documentary is of Florence Reece in her early seventies singing “Which Side Are You On?” at a podium in a packed UMWA meeting as a conclusion to her speech. As she does so, the camera zooms in on young women in the audience mouthing the lyrics, the song and its performance by Reece clearly connecting generations of community, empowerment, and resistance and incarnating a rousing instance of “song back.”

18 In its pursuit of registering the soundscape and climate of turmoil surrounding the Brookside strike, the recent and distant past of the UMWA in relation to Harlan County, and mining in general, the documentary at times deviates from its chronological, present-tense mode. In these instances, Kopple as documentarian and Dickens as singer-songwriter collaborate to “song back” the tragedies that accompany a miner’s life and family as the other face and voice of protest. Dickens’ “Mannington Mine” (sung by David Morris) tells of the 1968 mine explosion in Dickens’ home state of West Virginia, in which seventy-eight men were trapped and only four miners survived, and accompanies a sequence of mourners at a burial service interspersed with interviews with surviving family members of the deceased miners. Dickens’ performance of “Black Lung” plays over an extended sequence on black lung disease among miners, in the mines, at a clinic, in an interview excerpt with a Duke Power representative who denies the existence of such a disease, and in more footage that overwhelmingly exposes the lie of such a denial. Dickens’ performance of “Cold Blooded Murder” relates the murky UMWA presidential election campaign and the murders of candidate Yablonski, his wife, and their daughter by then president Boyle, over footage that details the events. This series of sequences of image and song may at first viewing seem scattered, particularly because it strays from the Brookside strike timeline, but it is in fact deliberate in its arrangement and juxtaposition. As Hale describes, it is above all the film’s soundscape that “pushes the viewer into the fight” (2017). Over and above the lyrics directly communicating meaning, the piercing emotional quality of Dickens’ or Reece’s voice singing accapella adamantly demonstrate how “musical sounds could also convey polit-

ical meaning” (Jenzen, et.al. 2020: 215-216). These image-and-song editing choices operate in equal measure as a lament, a memorial, and a shout of struggle, outrage, and resistance. This lament, memorial and shout is also present with Phyllis Boyens and her father Workman singing the traditional folk song “O Death” over footage of the Yablonskis’ funeral, which then cuts to Boyens and Workman’s real-time performance for Kopple’s camera. The film’s sound design and soundtrack also “present protest [simultaneously] as something creative and artistic” (Jenzen, et.al. 2020: 219). The stakes of the Brookside strike are literally heard all the more clearly precisely through the film’s soundscape, which constitutes Kopple’s own political action of “song back.”

19 Yet initial writing on the film either neglected or dismissed Kopple’s combative and creative approach to the sound design and soundtrack. In her 1977 review of the documentary, E. Ann Kaplan writes that “the aim of the film is not to provide an aesthetic experience but rather to inform people about a specific political event and, if possible, inspire them, through the sympathy it elicits, to help further the miners [*sic*] cause” (1977). Peter Biskind writes in his own review from the same year, “What visual beauty the film does have comes almost by accident, from the blue-gray early morning mist that shrouds the pickets gathered by the roadside to block scabs imported by the company to break the strike” (1977). Yet the frequent bursts of songs throughout the film provide an aesthetic, instructional, as well as potentially inspirational experience, and an *aural* beauty in expressing protest, experience, community, and agency all at once, and notably among women. Though Biskind concedes that “Which Side Are You On?” “plays an important role in the film, both as a constant reminder of the historical continuity of the miners’ fight, and as a commentary, of sorts, on the kind of partisan filmmaking practiced by Kopple and her crew,” he reproaches Kopple for “us[ing] the music too liberally, flooding the sound track with ballads and union songs. I found myself wishing she had allowed the people their moments of silence, of muteness,...and had not been in such a hurry to elevate their experience to the level of myth” (1977).

20 Similarly, in a more recent piece, Grace Elizabeth Hale finds on the one hand that Kopple’s film accomplishes “some of its most compelling work…by engaging the sense of hearing,” wherein “sound an-

chors, explains, and makes ‘authentic’ visual imagery compromised by the long history of documentary making in Appalachia” (2017). On the other hand, Hale also finds that Kopple “labors to use these sounds in ways that disrupt the powerful cliché of singing mountain people,” which strongly “evokes the long history, from the song catchers to [Alan] Lomax, of representing Appalachian people through music,” including characterising Appalachians as people to whom music comes “naturally” due to their isolated ways of living. Hale’s critique is understandable, for it reflects what Shauna L. Scott describes as the “contradictory image of Harlan Countians and other Appalachians as political actors” (1995: xviii), depicted as victims of underdevelopment as well as accelerated industrialisation, from which emerge their political militancy, and often rendered exotic, or othered, in the process (Hevener 1978; Scott 1995). Various media outlets and figures have historically entered the Appalachian region, documented Appalachian lives, perspectives, and voices, and collected the musical styles and songs produced in the region, only to frame such music as a marker of “primitive authenticity” (Hale 2017) and engage in a kind of colonialist ethnography.

21 Within the world of the strike and film, however, I would argue that the songs express the striking mining communities’ heightened and collective political consciousness while grounding their experiences in the body and in the specific language, history, and geography of Harlan County, not as victims but as activist citizens. The songs also therefore combat the silence and muteness imposed on the miners through intimidation tactics by coal operators and their hired bodyguards, which included the local sheriff and state police. Biskind’s choice of the word “flooding” understands the songs in the documentary as overpowering the people’s everyday lives and experiences, which could be read as part of the historical othering of Appalachian communities, socio-politically, culturally, and economically removed from the greater United States. But the songs hold testimonial, performative, and archival value by expressing their perspectives and fight, not just in the moment of the Brookside strike in the 1970s but also in previous decades; the songs should be read, then, not as marks of “primitive authenticity” but rather of their “labor militancy” (Hale 2017). The power of the (singing) voice in action and in its locality reverberates in and around the images, making Kopple’s docu-

mentary much more multi-dimensional in registering Harlan County’s musical oral tradition, culture, and activism. As Simon Frith writes, “[T]he issue is not [just] how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical experience, an aesthetic experience” (2011: 109). Frith could very well be describing the audiovisual prominence of song and musical performance in both the Brookside strike and *Harlan County USA*.

5. Harlan County’s History of Music, Protest, and “Song back”

22 As Kopple found through her experience of making her documentary in and on Harlan County, part of understanding the Brookside strike was learning about the 1930s coal-miners’ strikes and the fight for the right to form a union. And fundamental to the history of Harlan County activism is how music is used in relation or in reaction to such experiences. As British sociomusicologist Simon Frith states, “Making music isn’t a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them” (2011: 111). Likewise, Portelli elucidates in *They Say in Harlan County*, “In Harlan, music was often literally a way of living” (2011: 239). In short, an oral history tradition in Harlan County is also a musical one that is not static but rather dynamic, constantly nodding to the past while also evolving in the present in dialogue with local events and outside influences. Portelli further details,

> Modernization and the mining industry had been dumped upon Harlan wholesale, so quickly that there had been no time to forget the expressive powers of oral tradition. The result was an unusual dialogue of traditional gospel and ballad tunes (“Lay the Lilies Low,” “Precious Memories,” “Jack Munroe”) with contemporary and radical words and themes (“Which Side Are You On?” “Dreadful Memories,” “Join the NMU”) (2011: 235)

23 along with the influence of the blues, particularly from Black miners, and popular music beginning in the 1920s with the advent of radios. Songwriting and musical performance are therefore positioned as a fundamental element of Harlan Countians’ political conscience, activ-

ism, and agency, and also of the "Bloody Harlan" and Brookside strikes.

24 Harlan County's politicised, musical oral history tradition is emblematic of and has arguably shaped the coal mining regions of Appalachia. A comparative case would be the 1970s Chilean folk/protest music movement called *Nueva Canción*, or "New Song," which "took form as a movement that protested injustice at the same time as it supported the establishment of [Salvador] Allende's [short-lived socialist and democratically-elected] government" (Neustadt 2004: 128). The movement developed within the county and continued in exile, following Allende's death, the toppling of his government in 1973, and the establishment of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship. In examining this movement, Robert Neustadt writes, "[M]usic offers a tangible cultural thread through which one can read recent history" (2004: 136). Together, *Nueva Canción* and Harlan County's musical production forcefully demonstrate "the imbrication of politics, history, memory and the processes of identity formation" and "[t]he pervasiveness of music as a mnemonic symbol" (Neustadt 2004: 136). Similarly, in her work on the connection between songs, memory flows, and cultural/feminist struggles, professor of culture and creative industries Anna Reading cites music as a "key to the construction of group identities, especially those that have been or that are under threat from a wider culture" (2015: 150). Ultimately, Kopple's documentary would not have the same emotional, immersive force and resonance without Harlan County's musical oral history tradition shaping its sound design and soundtrack. The songs rooted in the region and communities within the specific context of labour activism and Kopple's mobilisation of them would be better understood as not cliché but rather as one sustained choice and mode of agency, among others.

25 That the voices of Florence Reece, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Phyllis Boyens, and Hazel Dickens run deep in the documentary and help constitute the soundscape of Kopple's representation of the Brookside strike was therefore a strategic – and, in many ways, inevitable – decision on her part. For Appalachian singer-songwriters have by default been also protest singer-songwriters, and they have come from all over the region. And the most distinguished among them have been women. American ethnomusicologist and folklorist Henrietta

Yurchenco relates the active role of women during “Bloody Harlan” on the picket lines, as protesters as well as oral historians putting their experiences into song. She writes,

> [T]he southern Appalachian women of the 1930s were not only morale-builders, but were also union organizers... They organized many of the wildcat strikes. Like their menfolk, they were often harassed by “gun thugs,” beaten, thrown in jail, even shot and killed. ... Songs served a definite purpose in strike-bound Harlan County: to help form a union and to lift the spirits of the miners in their struggle. ... Many songs of the period were joyful paeans in praise of the Union (1991: 214).

26 Undeniably the most famous song composed during “Bloody Harlan” is Florence Reece’s “Which Side Are You On?”. Though not a native Harlan Countian, Reece grew up in a Tennessee mining community, lost her father to the mines, and her husband Sam was a miner who would eventually succumb to black lung disease. The couple moved to Harlan County in the 1930s, where Sam was a union organiser and therefore a target of the coal operators’ infamous “gun thugs” managed by local sheriff J.H. Blair. Reece witnessed firsthand their dirty work when they arrived one night at her house in search of her husband. After they had ransacked the place, she wrote the words to “Which Side Are You On?” that very same night. By capturing and including Reece’s performance of her song in *Harlan County USA*, Kopple not only charts the ongoing fight among miners and their families against corporate power at the time but also the historical context from which it developed, including the consistently prominent role of women as morale-builders and union organisers, following Yurchenco. This familial/community history is also reinforced in interviews throughout Kopple’s documentary, such as with Bessie Lou Cornett:

> My grandfather was a coal miner and belonged to the union – the U.M.W. – and he died with black lung. I can remember sittin’ around, you know, when we were younger, and him talkin’ about bein’ on picket lines and organisin’. I mean, that was – that was what we mostly talked about sittin’ around the table after supper and all. […] I told myself then, if I ever got the opportunity to get those coal oper-

> ators, I will. […] So when this strike came up, I saw the opportunity and I jumped right in there.

27 Sarah Ogan Gunning (along with her half-sister Mary Magdalene Garland Stewart Jackson Stamos – known musically and culturally as Aunt Molly Jackson) also expressed in song the hard and dangerous life of mining in Appalachia, greatly influenced as she was by her unionist miner father, as heard early in *Harlan County USA*. Like her many siblings and half-siblings, Gunning grew up in a coal mining camp (though by all accounts it appears she did not live in Harlan County). Compared to Aunt Molly’s larger-than-life personality, Gunning may have appeared quiet. But as folk singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie once pointed out, “Sarah’s homemade songs and speeches, made up from actual experience, are deadlier and stronger than rifle bullets, and have cut a wider swath than a machine gun could” (quoted in Yurchenco 1991: 216). Examples of Gunning’s words-as-weapons are “Come All You Coal Miners,” which end with the lines “Let’s sink this capitalist system/In the darkest pits of hell”; “I Hate the Company Bosses,” whose original title was “I Hate the Capitalist System”; and her first composition, “Down on the Picket Line,” whose subject is the 1932 strike in Bell County, adjacent to Harlan County. Like Aunt Molly, Gunning left Kentucky in the mid-1930s for New York, where she performed to live audiences and on radio and also went into the studio to record some of her material. Such diasporic activities further exposed urban populations to Appalachian folk/protest songwriting and the histories and testimonies that they carry.

28 Phyllis Boyens and Hazel Dickens represent later generations of Appalachian women singer-songwriters who kept this musical oral tradition alive, in part through their participation in Kopple’s *Harlan County USA* and the feature films *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980) and *Matewan* (1987), in addition to their musical recordings. Their participation in Kopple’s documentary therefore proclaims, as much as Bessie Lou Cornett’s interview above, how the Appalachian musical oral tradition is strongly bound, nay, cultivated across generations. Both Boyens and Dickens were born in West Virginia and came from mining families; and their connection went further, for during the 1976-1979 strike at Stearns Mining Company, Kentucky, Boyens and

Dickens "led the first delegation of women to the picket line" (Lozaw 2006: 21). Boyens' father Nimrod Workman was a miner and established singer whose songs like "Coal Black Mining Blues" and "Forty-Two Years" attest to his decades-long experiences in West Virginia mines, from which he developed black lung disease. Workman recorded three albums in his lifetime, one of which was *Passing Thru the Garden* (1974), made with Boyens. One of Boyens' own songs, "Lawrence Jones," speaks directly to the Brookside strike and the part that Jones' death played to put an end to the strike. Moreover, her appearance and performance with her father in *Harlan County USA*, like Reece's performance of "Which Side Are You On?" while the camera shows young women mouthing the lyrics, further demonstrates how song is so intensely mobilised in labour conflicts. Though Boyens was also an actress, Dickens remains the more famous of the two: "Although a feminist by conviction, she never lost sight of her roots in Appalachia and the economic struggle that had fueled the previous generations of songmakers. Freed of a woman's traditional role, she became a professional singer" (Yurchenco 1991: 220). Like Boyens, Dickens lost family members to black lung disease. She wrote the song "Black Lung" in 1969, upon her brother's passing: "Black Lung, Black Lung/Oh your hand's icy cold/As you reach for my life/And you torture my soul/Coal dust, water hole/Down in that dark cave/Where I spent my life's blood/Digging my own grave." *Harlan County USA* would have ended up a different documentary altogether, aesthetically and emotionally, without Dickens' collaboration. Though never visually present, her voice and words ring throughout the documentary as a mode of testimony and witnessing of mining communities' lives.

6. Conclusion

29 In this article, I examined Kopple's *Harlan County USA* as the lens through which to address the intersection of labour, activist, and musical histories in twentieth-century America, specifically Harlan County, Kentucky and the Appalachian region of which it is a part. Using Jane M. Gaines' concept of "political mimesis" as a point of departure, I formulated the term "song back" to analyze *Harlan County USA*'s strategic audiovisual approach to capture and represent the Brookside strike, including the striking miners and their families, and

the prominent role of song therein. Through its carefully constructed sound design and soundtrack, Kopple’s film explicitly registers, on the one hand, how Harlan Countians have been subjected to and witnessed exploitation, poverty, terrorism, and deprivation over many decades and, on the other hand, how they have historically mobilised music as a creative and activist mode of testimony. Put another way, song and musical performance function as a component of activism and form of archive at one and the same time for Harlan Countians, past and present, with songs linking not only different eras of strikes and solidarity action but also generations of Appalachian coal-mining families, union activists, and protest songwriters, within the region and beyond.

30 Acknowledging the importance of “approach[ing] music as multimodal to be able to appreciate its function and effectiveness when understood as part of a [community’s or] movement’s communication” (Jenzen, et.al. 2020: 216), “song back” is my attempt to tease out how song in *Harlan County USA* fulfills these multiple testimonial and performative roles. “Song back,” within the context of *Harlan County USA*, is an act of connecting members within the same (activist) community through song and musical performance, across different ages and eras, such as the strikers in the film. Through its role of connection, “song back” also forges strong community and collective identities such as the coal-mining families of Harlan County, thereby also constituting an archive of experiences in song. But “song back” also has the potential to connect disparate protest and solidarity movements, across different temporal periods and geographies, as demonstrated earlier through “Which Side Are You On?” by Florence Reece, which was composed in the 1930s for the “Bloody Harlan” strikes, utilised during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, and used in reference to striking British miners in the Thatcher-era 1980s. And music continues to play these multiple archival, activist, and testimonial roles in contemporary activist/protest movements, which make of *Harlan County USA* an important reference and “song back” a useful manner of gauging the interplay of activism and the aesthetics/form of audiovisual media.

31 For “song back” as a manner of reaching publics and generating activist solidarity beyond the scope of a county, region, or historical moment becomes all the more intensified deep in the age of the Internet

and social media. In their study of the visual aspects of music videos created and uploaded to YouTube by protesting citizens during the 2013 demonstrations in Gezi Park, Turkey, Ole Jenzen, et.al. write that "it is to a large extent through music that the protest energy [in Gezi Park] has lived on beyond the couple of weeks of actual occupation through continuous subsequent engagement online and across other performance venues and cultural fora" (2020: 218). With the Internet and social media rendering temporal and geographical differences ever more fluid, how "[m]usic can permeate protest [and audiovisual representations of it] in many different ways" (Jenzen, et.al. 2020: 213) remains a significant question. It is a question with which *Harlan County USA* grapples, thereby confirming its ongoing relevance in our time.

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1 Encompassing not only eastern Kentucky but also all of West Virginia, western Virginia, western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee following the Appalachian trail, the region more generally reaches as far north as Pennsylvania and as down south as Alabama.

2 Though Travis himself was not a coal miner, his song is a testament to his growing up around a Kentucky coal mine, where his father and brothers worked.

English

Barbara Kopple's debut documentary film *Harlan County USA* (1976) captures and continues an oral history tradition specific to a geography expressed particularly in song in covering the 1973-1974 Brookside strike among coal miners and their families in rural eastern Kentucky. This article examines the aesthetics of the film's sound design, and how the film is positioned to capture audiovisually not only the strike as it happened but also the historical role of song/songwriting as present-tense expressions of

protest and solidarity and as an archive of collective identity/experience, by using a more sound- and song-based interpretation of Jane Gaines’ concept of “political mimesis.” Rather than serving merely as background music overwhelmed by and secondary to the images and situations that unfold on camera, songs performed on screen and played on the soundtrack express the collective spirit and solidarity of the striking miners and their families that span generations and therefore play an important testimonial role within the documentary. Kopple’s decision to use songs specific to this community and region not only remembers as well as continues the significant role of song among miners, their families, and their personal/professional associates, particularly among women, but also reveals the multifaceted use of music in relation to remembering, fostering a sense of belonging, and expressing dissent. I thus also examine the history of protest songwriting/performance by women in the Appalachian region in connection to the key role that they played in the strike.

Français

Le premier film documentaire de Barbara Kopple, *Harlan County USA* (1976), s’inscrit dans (et perpétue) une tradition de transmission orale, où l’histoire locale se raconte à travers la chanson. Le film suit les mineurs de fond de Brookside, dans l’est du Kentucky, ainsi que leurs familles, lors de la grève de 1973-1974. À partir du concept de « mimésis politique » de Jane Gaines appliqué à la musique, cet article examine l'esthétique de la conception sonore du film et la façon dont le film se positionne pour capturer de manière audiovisuelle non seulement la grève telle qu'elle s'est déroulée, mais aussi le rôle historique de la chanson comme expression au présent de la contestation et de la solidarité et comme archive d’identités et d’expériences collectives. Plutôt que de servir simplement de musique de fond au service d’images et de situations qui se déroulent devant la caméra, les chansons jouées à l'écran et sur la bande sonore expriment l'esprit collectif et la solidarité des mineurs en grève et de leurs familles à travers les générations : elles jouent donc un rôle important de témoignage dans le documentaire. En sa qualité de réalisatrice et d’ingénieure du son, la décision de Kopple d’utiliser des chansons spécifiques à cette communauté et à cette région permet non seulement de prolonger le rôle important de la chanson chez les mineurs et leurs familles (notamment leurs épouses), mais aussi de révéler les multiples fonctions de la musique, celle-ci favorisant l’acte de mémoire, le sentiment d'appartenance et l’expression de la dissidence. J'examine donc également l’histoire de l'écriture/interprétation de chansons protestataires par des femmes dans la région des Appalaches en lien avec le rôle clé qu’elles ont joué dans la grève.

Mots-clés

documentaire, County (Harlan), performance musicale, histoire orale, témoignage

Keywords
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