



# Anthology of Appalachian Writers

Bobbie Ann Mason Volume III

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*Mountain Music* by Rachel Herbaugh

## MUSIC MOUNTAINS

by Kelley Rae

*Story is shaped by sound, and it structures what we know. —Magie Anderson, West Virginia Poet*

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 assimilated to other places but more often felt foreign to their new homes, and to appease the longing they felt, they would return to their holler or hill on the weekends, or when they could 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 also one of the three and one-half million displaced people of Appalachia—rootless and searching. It wasn’t until after my children were older that I came back to the place I once called home to find 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, where the high mountain vapors obscure the dark green forests and beckon us home. Mountain 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.

My first experience in a festival-like atmosphere was at a writers’ workshop called “Allegheny Echoes,” in Pocahontas County, West Virginia. Here, 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. After being gone for 25 years, I finally saw my home with 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 other 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 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 had 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 some folks still 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 where I live, 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 amid mountains nearly four hundred thousand years old that West Virginia poet Maggie Anderson calls "ancestral and related to the sky." The festival site is at the point of merger 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 refers to the location as "a place called solid." I find both observations astute because I look for my solid spot 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 return once more. At the festival, 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, bodhrans, 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.

The Appalachian String Band Festival is a gathering like most of its kind: 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. If the food is prepared in the dining hall, waiting is in order, especially if the power goes out or the water runs low. 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 tipsy 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, 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. This is the nature of the mountains I knew as a child.

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. 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, 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 (for the Cajun affiliation), and South Hills (for the "snobbish" neighborhood near Charleston). Every festival has its regular crowd, and the camps are made into a second home. It is tradition.

No matter what time of the day or night you might wander into the different neighborhoods, you will find music. 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, Appalachians 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 out how the same song is played 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 other states and many foreign countries just to see how the music 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 board when they hear a tune they like, wherever they may be, and commence to provide their own 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 permeates the camp. Each campsite has a musical forte and a steady stream of visitors who bring along any instruments they play. Visitors join in with whatever song is being played. Everyone seems to know the music, and when they are on the last stanza, the fiddler lifts his left foot to indicate they are finished. Then, a few people might move away but others join. The songs change, the people move on to the next circle of players—the musical merging is one fluid movement that extends for the entire festival and grows exponentially.

My most memorable experience occurred 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. There was a communal hookah on a picnic table next to the camp. The dirt floor beneath our feet was smooth from the human traffic—a brown, earthen 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, despite the economic sacrifice. Colleen Anderson's song "West Virginia Chose Me" speaks to 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 we gather upon

Clifftop, making hillbilly jokes, laughing, and "in that self-mocking yet prideful defiance," as poet Maggie Anderson has said, "lies several generations of struggle."



“... I don’t aim to live out my days all hunched up over my memories. I want to watch the sun come up and hear a hen cackle over a new-laid egg and feel a kitten purr. And I want to see a flock of blackbirds whirl over the field, making music. Things like that are absolutely new ever time they happen.”

—Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Feather Crowns* (1993)



Shepherd University

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