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research article

Music in the Mountains: Music's Relation to Emotion for Individuals in Central Appalachia

—Caitlin Baummer (Edited by Kristin Brodeur)

The Appalachian Mountains, stretching 1500 miles from Canada to Alabama, are known for their rugged beauty. However, the central and southern regions are also home to one of the most severe cases of poverty in the country. Political, economic, and environmental injustices, due to the coal mining industry and especially the devastating practice of mountaintop removal, have left the people of Appalachia in chronic rural poverty (Duncan 3-30). At the last census in 2000, the poverty rate in West Virginia was 144.6% that of the national average (County Economic Status, Fiscal Year 2009). In 2007, West Virginia ranked 49th in the country for median household income (Wetzstein).

I first traveled to West Virginia, part of central Appalachia, in March of 2007 on a weeklong spring break trip with the University of New Hampshire's Catholic Student Organization. While I was there, other college students and I provided home repair services and got to know the struggling residents. However, their economic poverty was in no way indicative of poverty of spirit. In that short week, I witnessed the individual strength and sense of community and heritage that emanate from the residents.

A great deal of attention is often focused on providing for the financial needs of individuals living in poverty, but considerably less attention is devoted to their emotional needs. As a music major, I had learned about the folk music of central Appalachia but had never seen or heard it in person. Because of that, I became curious about music in Appalachia and how it functions to provide emotional support for the people who live there. Funded by a UNH Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship in the summer of 2008, I pursued my guiding question: How does music fulfill the emotional needs of Appalachian individuals?



Author interviewing Randy Goodson, musician, at the River of Life Baptist Church in Alderson, West Virginia.

Paving My Way

During that summer, I spent eight weeks at Bethlehem Farm in Pence Springs, West Virginia. Bethlehem Farm is a Catholic community and non-profit organization that serves the local area by providing home repair services and whose members strive to live in solidarity with those around them. As a member of the community, I lived a simple lifestyle and led groups of high school volunteers on home repair projects. By working at different homes, I was able to get to know and eventually interview the homeowners. The staff members at Bethlehem Farm also recommended other people that they knew in the area for me to interview.

Using the ethnographic approach, a qualitative research method based on immersion, participant observation, and interview, I interviewed fourteen residents about their musical experiences. I spoke with five women and nine men ranging in age from twenty-three to seventy-eight. Some were lifelong residents, others had moved to the region later in

life. Most of the people I talked to were musicians, while others were just avid listeners. I spoke with individuals in their homes, churches, places of work and places of performance, each interview lasting anywhere from ten minutes to two hours. I recorded each interview with a digital voice recorder so that I could reference them later. Once I returned home, I listened to the recordings, looking for patterns and themes regarding the residents' emotional responses to music. In the summer of 2009, I endeavored on another SURF grant to transcribe and archive the interviews so that others may hear the same stories that I did.

The Musical Terrain

Because of my general knowledge and music history classes, I was aware of the traditions of Appalachian folk music, beginning with the old English ballads and Celtic music brought over by the first settlers that later evolved into the old-time string band and bluegrass music that we associate with the region today. Some of the commonly played instruments in these genres are guitar, fiddle, mandolin, dobro, and dulcimer. However, I did not see any of that music when I first arrived, so I went looking for it.

I found that the old English ballads are rarely sung anymore, but one seventy-two-year-old woman, who grew up in the area, told me about her aunt singing them when she was a young girl. Celtic music is still very prevalent and is frequently performed at local pubs. I also found that there is an interesting relationship between the old-time string band music and bluegrass. Old-time came first; bluegrass music did not come until the 1940s. It became widely popular in the 1960s, and even today there is often animosity between players of the two genres. However, while the musicians that I spoke with may have listened to the aforementioned styles of music, they played mostly gospel, country, or folk music of the '60s and '70s. Artists frequently mentioned as favorites were the Carter Family, Earl Scruggs, and Dotty West.

Individual Enjoyment

One way I gathered information on residents' feelings about music was by asking each individual what he or she enjoyed about singing, playing, dancing, or listening. One woman I talked to, Lisa Carter, is a mother of two teenage boys, plays piano, and is very active in her church. When I asked what she and the people around her got out of the music, she said: "Music helps; whenever you're having a bad day or something, if you can get in a good church service with good, sweet music or good, uplifting music, you're not going to feel like you did when you got there." Church is a place where many Appalachians find both musical and emotional outlets. A predominantly Baptist and Pentecostal region, Appalachia has many churches. Although the choirs may be small, the voices are impassioned and the entire congregation joins in song.

Another faith-filled person I met was Faye Miller. She is a sixty-eight-year-old widow with long, poofy white hair, who likes to sing; but more than anything else, she likes to dance. Bethlehem Farm hosts weekly community nights and invites local friends and neighbors to share a meal with staff members and volunteers. Faye is a regular at these community nights and is known for her love of dancing to the guitar and fiddle music. When I asked what she enjoyed about singing and dancing, she said: "Well, dancing . . . it's good exercise for your whole body. It's good for your mind. And singing—it's a joy in your heart. It keeps you from having a long face."



Author with Lawrence Bennett and his granddaughter, Amanda, in their garden.

Faye was probably one of the most joyous people I encountered while in West Virginia. If she had struggles, she hid them well. One person who shared his struggles with me openly was Lawrence Bennett. At seventy-eight years old, he and his wife Bonnie care for their three-year-old granddaughter, Amanda, as well as for ponies, dogs, kittens, chickens, a garden, and ninety-two acres of land. Besides losing several people who were very close to him, he's had numerous operations and was in a neck brace when I talked to him. He says that through all this, music has "made life easier for me and life has not been that easy for me . . . It took away my worries, my problems."

Lawrence releases his worries and problems by playing familiar tunes or songs by other artists. Luke Bair, on the other hand, writes his own music. Luke is a guitar player in his thirties who lives with his wife and daughter on the same farm that he grew up on. He told

me that writing and playing music are therapeutic for him because they allow him to express himself emotionally and creatively through storytelling. Luke sings his daughter to sleep with old coal mining songs and looks for any opportunity to gather around a campfire and play music with his wife and friends.

Another musical storyteller I talked to was George Daugherty. Also known as the “Earl of Elkview,” his stage name, George is a lawyer during the day but also performs at festivals and on radio shows throughout the state. When I asked George how he felt when he performed, he replied, “At one with the universe, at one with my fellow man, and at one with the higher power. It just does something to the soul when I play.”

Observing the Community

This idea of being “one” with others led me to my first observation that emotional fulfillment was based on the sense of community that it fostered. There is no doubt that music is a very participatory pastime in Appalachia. Appalachian folk song collector Cecil Sharp wrote, “I found myself in a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking” (xxv).

I had the pleasure of witnessing music in several different community settings. One of these places was the Riff Raff. This is an arts collaborative that “organizes music and arts events that promote respect and understanding” (“Home” Riff Raff Arts). Lori McKinney, the twenty-three-year-old woman who founded it, told me about her motivation for opening the Riff Raff: “It’s clear to me that in towns like ours . . . there’s something missing a lot of the times as far as exposure to other cultures . . . and music and art are the perfect bridge . . . The idea that music and art are our window into the humanity of another people is just so profound.”

The Bluegrass Supper, held at Wellspring of Greenbrier, was, for me, a window into the humanity of another people. Wellspring of Greenbrier is a non-profit organization that aims “to create a non-judgmental environment where disadvantaged people who live on ‘the edge’ might receive assistance through emotional, monetary and/or physical support to improve their circumstances” (“Home” Wellspring of Greenbrier). I talked with Scarlet Kellerman, one of the founders of Wellspring, who grew up in West Virginia and, after retiring, decided to open Wellspring with her husband in response to the great need that she saw in the area. She said, “I just know that music brings people together . . . I think it’s like that in other places, not just here in Appalachia, but I think that when we get together and we sing all these wonderful old songs, it brings up something inside of us that we wouldn’t normally be able to express without the music.”

Scarlet made a good point. Music fosters relationships and community in other places as well. However, several of my interviewees expressed to me that there was a closer relationship between music and community in Appalachia than in other places where they had lived or visited. So why is that?

Arthur Bufogle is a priest and folk music lover who moved to Summers County about five years ago and is very involved in the community. His experience in different parts of the country combined with his familiarity with Appalachian music and people helped give me some perspective. He told me, “I think Appalachian people are culturally different from the rest of America. Like, intense emotions and emotional expression, especially . . . mournfulness and joy, are part of life, and I think the music is like that too.”

However, it is impossible to understand why music generates those emotional responses without understanding the history of the Appalachian people, the struggles that they endured, and the cultural values that those struggles produced. Someone who helped familiarize me with this history was John Wyatt, whose father worked in the coal mines, earning two dollars a day to feed his family. John has now devoted his life to preserving and teaching Appalachian heritage with an organization called The Appalachian Cultural Heritage Alliance. It was he who told me about what he called the Appalachian “moral values system” that influences the character of the Appalachian people. He also described how and why these values developed: “[The] first people came into Appalachia, and they came here for all different kinds of



Tim O’Farell playing fiddle and Faye Miller dancing with a volunteer at a Bethlehem Farm community night.

reasons, and it was so remote and so rugged... And from that beginning came a group of people who were self-sufficient and rugged, who were strong and independent, but who also knew that to survive they had to depend not just on God but on each other, too.”

George, the lawyer and performer, is glad for that dependency: “There’s something special about being raised in a culture in which your folks, historically, have had to look to each other for support and sustenance. Having been a culture, having been deprived.”

But deprived how? In the late 1800s, the discovery of coal brought a flood of residents and commerce to these mountains. However, technological advances in the early twentieth century lessened the need for manual labor. The work that was available in the mines continued to be dangerous, was sometimes fatal, and rarely paid enough to provide for a family. Although jobs and resources have always been scarce in the region, many families have been there for generations, feel connected to the mountains, and have a hard time leaving.

Therefore, many of these individuals live lives of material simplicity, but they also adopt that simplicity in their ideals and interactions. Arthur described this, saying, “The people also have a purity about them. They’re simple, most of them. And that doesn’t mean simple as far as being uneducated and illiterate or anything like that, but they’re simple in their faith, they’re simple in their respect for each other, [and] they’re simple in the way they look at life.”

This simplicity was another cog in the wheel of this moral values system as well as a reoccurring theme in my interviews and in the music itself. Luke explained to me why this musical simplicity might initially sound unpleasant to a non-Appalachian listener: “[T]he execution might be very archaic and the vocal ranges might be annoying or the instrumentation might drive you nuts, but it’s what these people knew and it’s what they figured out without being taught.” Luke and many other Appalachians are very proud of this fact, in the same way that they are proud of their heritage.

Music as a Form of Identity

Back home listening to my interviews, I began to realize some of the major ways that the music of Appalachia meets the emotional needs of the people who live there: it lifts spirits and provides individual enjoyment, it brings them together as a community, it expresses pride in a shared heritage, and it reflects the moral values of a simple way of life. Despite recognizing these things, I felt there was something larger that I could not quite articulate. Then Lori, founder of the Riff Raff arts collaborative, did it for me. She told me that, “when people go through hard times, their music reflects that and it just becomes so much a part of who they are and how they identify themselves.”

I did not fully grasp the weight of these words when she said them on July 17, 2008. But when I returned home and heard this sentence again, I stopped the recording and thought, “That’s it!” For the people of West Virginia and the rest of central Appalachia, music fulfills an emotional need for identity. While music may not be considered tangible like architecture or other physical artifacts, it is tangible in the sense that it can be passed on to future generations and kept as evidence of a way of life that is slowly slipping away from its people with the rise of technology. The music is something the Appalachian people can take ownership of, even if, by some people’s standards, they don’t own much at all.

Luke told me that he sees the mountain music disappearing. When I asked him why, he said, “because the kids just aren’t doing it anymore, you know. They don’t play with their fathers or their older brothers or their grandfathers. They play videogames and watch TV.”

However, all is not lost. There is still hope in the young people of Appalachia. The Appalachian Cultural Heritage Alliance puts forth initiatives that use music to bring young and old together. Arthur told me, “you have this group of younger kids . . . who are going out of their way to learn these old songs and old methods, and what’s good is, as the *old* old-timers with all the skill and memory and everything die, there’s going to be these younger people carrying it on.”



Passing on the music: Luke Bair's daughter Casey playing his guitar.

I had the pleasure of encountering some of these younger people at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival my last weekend there. The Old-Time Liberation Front, one of the bands, describes their music as “a unique acoustic blend of originals and covers, with influences from old-time, bluegrass, folk, and rock music” (“Old-Time Liberation Front”). The group combines traditional musical structures with current popular styles of music to communicate their concerns about relevant issues in today’s society.

It became obvious to me that it is difficult for older generations to see that the mountain music they are most familiar with is not as prevalent as it once was, but perhaps the changes and modernization of traditional Appalachian folk music are necessary means to keep it alive and to maintain that part of their identity. It does this by communicating the moral values of the Appalachian community in a leisurely, accessible way. For me, this was very

different from the disciplined techniques and performance practices of classical music. However, the objective of all music is the same: to bond individuals together through the expression of human experience. Appalachian music invites singers, players, dancers, and listeners to share their human experiences of the hard times that their community endured generations ago and continues to endure today.

Bringing it Back

After returning to New England, I gave a lecture presenting my conclusions at the University of New Hampshire and began preparing this article for submission. However, I still felt that there was something more I needed to do to share what I had learned. I felt that despite my best efforts, my descriptions and summaries could never fully communicate the depth of the interviews themselves.

This is why I decided to pursue a second SURF grant for the summer of 2009, to transcribe and archive the interviews from the previous summer. In the process, I learned the techniques and approaches of the transcription process itself, an integral part of the ethnographic method. However, the most rewarding part of that summer’s research was having the opportunity to listen to my interviews in more detail and with a new set of ears, having taken some time away from my research during the school year. Because of this, I noticed things that I had not picked up on the year before, whether that was a certain inflection in the speaker’s voice that gave a phrase new meaning or finding significance in sections that I had formerly thought to be inconsequential. The digital recordings and transcripts of the interviews are to be archived in the Milne Special Collections and Archives at the University of New Hampshire and in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University.

The opportunity to revisit these interviews was truly a gift because it reminded me of something that I had advocated for since the birth of my first project: the individual. While I still maintain that much of the emotional fulfillment that Appalachian music brings to its participants is linked to a sense of cultural identity, this is not to say that music fulfills one single emotional need for every person in Appalachia. It is my conviction that individuals living in rural Appalachia should not be generalized due to their place of residence, stereotyped for their economic status, or recognized solely for their forefather’s contributions to American music. Lori, Luke, Faye, Arthur, John, George, Lawrence, Lisa, Scarlet and all of the others that I interviewed have their own stories to tell, and they deserve to be the ones to tell them. It is my hope that by my having conducted, transcribed, and archived these interviews, others may recognize the unique attributes and beauties of each individual who touched my life during my summer research experience.

I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to all those who contributed to this extraordinary experience: the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research staff and donors for granting me two Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships and one opportunity that will remain with me for a lifetime; Professor Burt Feintuch, my faculty mentor, who graciously shared his own fieldwork experiences in order to enrich mine; all those whom I interviewed; Bethlehem Farm and the community of Summers County, West Virginia, for your warm hearts, open doors and inspiring words – you have changed me; and, finally, UNH Dimond Library Milne Special Collections & Archives and West Virginia University Libraries: West Virginia & Regional History Collection.

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Author Bio

Caitlin Baummer is a senior vocal performance major from Chelmsford, Massachusetts. The project she describes in her article began in spring of 2007 and culminated in the transcription and archiving of her interviews over two years later. Although it was a long project, Caitlin says it was immensely fulfilling to both listen to and share the people's stories. After graduation, Caitlin hopes to work with non-profit community arts organizations. She believes that this project contributed to her interest in this field: "This project...helped me see that every person, regardless of location or economic status, deserves the opportunity to learn about and grow in music."

Mentor Bio

Dr. Burt Feintuch has been a part of the University of New Hampshire community for the past twenty-one years. In addition to being Professor of Folklore and English, he is also the director of the Center for the Humanities. Dr. Feintuch's research ranges from folklore to cultural revivals and public culture, but he specializes in the ethnography of music. When Caitlin Baummer looked for help with how to study music in community settings, Dr. Feintuch was happy to be her mentor: "Caitlin is an ideal student—smart, dedicated, thoughtful. Working with her was a pleasure for me." Dr. Feintuch earned his B.A. at Pennsylvania State University in 1971. A year later he got his M.A. at the University of Pennsylvania, followed by his Ph.D. at the same institution in 1975.