

# "After This Is Over We'll Lay Our Hands On You": Music as a Form of Cultural Resistance in Depression-Era Pennsylvania

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## Prelude

Venerated social historian Herbert Gutman, in his essay on industrializing America, drew a sharp distinction between culture and society. Gutman described society as "a kind of arena" within which culture, defined as "a kind of resource," is used in conflicts over power, wealth, status, and identity. This analytical distinction allowed Gutman to perceive that "even in periods of radical economic and social change powerful cultural continuities and adaptations continued to shape the historical behavior of diverse working-class populations."<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s the coal fields of Pennsylvania were experiencing precisely the kind of radical transformation of which Gutman spoke. Isolated, impoverished, buffeted by economic and political forces they only vaguely understood — and armed company guards they understood all too well — the mining folk of Pennsylvania grasped at any "cultural resource" available in their struggle to survive the tempest which engulfed them.

Music provided, in some respects, the most significant cultural resource the miners possessed. Music constituted an essential element in all spheres of the miner's life: at work, at home, at church, and in the tavern with his buddies. In the face of economic forces which threatened to tear apart the social fabric of life, music provided a thread to help repair the damage. In addition, music offered the possibility of transcending the various ethnic, racial, religious, and interpersonal tensions which gnawed at many coal communities.

By the mid-1920s music remained one of the few resources, cultural or otherwise, left to miners and their families. Long before the stock market crashed in October, 1929, the coal fields had been devastated by overproduction and the anarchic competitiveness of American capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The situation had been exacerbated by a questionable strike settlement in 1922 — some thought it a betrayal — by the United Mine Workers president, John L. Lewis.<sup>3</sup> But in early 1923 some optimism remained, at least in official circles. A song entitled "When The Lockout Is All Over," printed in the *United Mine Workers Journal*, expressed this feeling of hope:

When the lockout is all over, and our daily toil's begun,  
 When the particles of bug dust fill the air;  
 When you see the coal trains moving down toward the western sun,  
 Then you know our grand old union still is there.<sup>4</sup>

But in 1924 the ineffectual Jacksonville Agreement between the union and the operators, brokered by Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, was quickly abrogated by the coal companies.<sup>5</sup>

### King Coal

In the 1920s, life in Pennsylvania's coal towns — already hard — became harder. The great folklorist of the coal fields, George Korson, described Pennsylvania's company towns:

Being unincorporated, the mining village and everything in it, including church and school sites, were owned by the coal operators. From the time they were brought into the world by a company doctor to the day of their burial in a cemetery, the ground of which had been leased from the company, the mineworkers live in the shadow of their employers, often absentee owners, whom they personified as the Coal King.<sup>6</sup>

One central Pennsylvania miner remembered the bleak 1920s this way:

During the time of scabs, if it was time to come out of the mines, the company would bring out the coal first. The men came last. Without the union the miners were like slaves.

People were blacklisted. They owned you body and soul. You had to live on their property. If you didn't buy they put pressure on you. You couldn't fight back — they'd shoot you — who would help you?<sup>7</sup>

An epitaph engraved on one miner's tombstone captured the contradictory nature of this existence:

Forty years I worked with pick & drill  
 Down in the mines against my will  
 The Coal King's slave, but now it's passed;  
 Thanks be to God I am free at last.<sup>8</sup>

Those miners not yet freed from King Coal's grasp continued to struggle for their basic human rights. On March 27, 1925, the residents of the small company town of Adrian, Pennsylvania were greeted by the sight of hundreds of striking miners, marching down the main road, preceded by a brass band. The strike was directed at the Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal & Iron Company, whose president, B. M. Clark, also led the Central

Pennsylvania Coal Operators Association. This Association guided the efforts to undermine the Jacksonville Agreement in District 2 of the miners' union.<sup>9</sup>

Rallies and demonstrations continued throughout central Pennsylvania for the next few weeks. Typically the event culminated with a parade, led by a brass band. The martial spirit of these parades was so effective that the R & P Company filed an injunction. In his decision, the judge characterized these marches as "angry, hostile assemblages," while asserting that "nothing can be more terrifying than a large body of men manifesting their hostility or anger toward another body."<sup>10</sup> Here then, in central Pennsylvania, traditional marching music was put to good use by striking miners as a weapon of industrial warfare.

### "Hostile Hymns"

Despite actions like these the United Mine Workers of America had, by 1927, virtually disappeared from the coal fields of Pennsylvania, surviving only in the hearts and minds of loyal miners. Central Pennsylvania District 2 president, John Brophy, described the desperate situation as a state of "guerrilla warfare" that had left the union "bleeding from a thousand wounds."<sup>11</sup> Facing starvation and the depredations of company thugs, many mining folk turned to their churches for solace. In the fall of 1927, in the small central Pennsylvania town of Rossiter, striking miners and their loved ones gathered at the local Magyar Presbyterian Church to sing hymns and share their misery. Little did they know that like their union brothers and sisters in Adrian, their musical activities would be perceived as "threatening and hostile" to the local power structure.<sup>12</sup>

In late November the Clearfield Bituminous Coal Corporation, a subsidiary of the New York Central Railroad and owner of the Rossiter mine, requested the notorious "injunction judge," Jonathan Langham, to issue an injunction against the dangerously melodious United Mine Workers. The injunction stated that its purpose was to prevent miners from "assembling outside of the building at such times as particularly annoy and intimidate the employees of the plaintiff." In February, 1928, this situation received national attention when Idaho Senator Frank Gooding announced that a special Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce would be visiting western and central Pennsylvania to gather testimony regarding conditions there. Included in the entourage would be Progressive Republican, Burton Wheeler of Montana, and New York's Democratic Senator Robert Wagner.<sup>13</sup>

While in the Rossiter area, the Committee questioned Judge Langham, who by his own admission had \$60,000 invested in local mines. Apparently he saw no conflict of interest. Langham reiterated his ruling that the strik-

ing miners had been singing "hostile hymns" such as "Onward Christian Soldiers," "We'll Get You Bye and Bye," and "After This Is Over We'll Lay Our Hands On You."<sup>14</sup> Also questioned was A. J. Musser, General Manager of the CBS Corporation, who revealed that Pennsylvania Governor John Fisher had previously been an officer in the company and had held considerable stock.<sup>15</sup>

The Committee concluded its investigation by negotiating the winding central Pennsylvania backroads leading to the dreary Magyar Presbyterian Church, which sat perched on a hill overlooking the Rossiter mine. The Committee members filed inside the homely church, already crowded with miners and their families, and requested that the congregation sing the hymns which had earned them an injunction. Led by their preacher and former miner, A. J. Phillips, the assembled sang "Sound the Battle Cry," "The Victory May Depend On You," and "Nearer My God To Thee." Apparently swept up in the spirit of the moment, the Senators added their voices to the chorus.<sup>16</sup> Although the subsequent Committee report criticized the operators and called for a Federal Coal Commission, the Senators declined an appeal by the miners' attorney to testify in the trial before Judge Langham. The injunction was made permanent. The somber, dark hills of central Pennsylvania no longer echoed the miners' "hostile hymns."

### **"Abodes of misery and despair"**

The onset of the Depression which followed the stock market crash of 1929 only served to deepen the feelings of desperation among the mining folk. "A Miner's Prayer," a mother's lament sung by a Pittsburgh woman for George Korson, eloquently evokes this sadness:

I keep listening for the whistles in the morning,  
But the miners are still; no noise is in the air.  
And the children wake up crying in the morning,  
For the cupboards are so empty and so bare.  
And their little feet are oh! so cold they stumble  
And we have to pin the rags upon their backs,  
And our home is broken down and very humble,  
While the wintry wind comes pouring through each crack.

Oh, it's hard to hear the hungry children crying  
While I have two hands that want to do their share,  
Oh, you rich men in the city, won't you have a little pity,  
And just listen to a miner's prayer?<sup>17</sup>

This moving plea apparently fell on deaf ears.

By the spring of 1933 the Depression had reached its nadir, with one

quarter of the American workforce unemployed.<sup>18</sup> For the miners of Pennsylvania this was a dark time. UMWMA "membership was at its lowest since 1878, and most districts consisted only of a paper organization and a few unemployed members in scattered locals. . . . Wages were as low as \$2.50 a day; contracts, where they existed, were unenforceable; mining towns were abodes of misery and despair."<sup>19</sup> But the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and his promise to help the nation's struggling workers, seemed to raise the miners' flagging spirits. With the formulation of the National Industrial Recovery Act in May miners sprang into action throughout Pennsylvania. UMWMA leader, John Brophy, remembered: "The miners, relying on the government's promise to protect their right to organize, flooded into the union. Within ninety days, the industry was organized. There was no need to campaign; an organizer had only to see that he had a good supply of application blanks and a place to file them, and the rank and file did the rest."<sup>20</sup> If the union's resurgence was spectacular, the mere survival of the miners and their communities had been a great achievement.

## Coda

The reorganization of the United Mine Workers, and its close ties to the New Deal in the 1930s, tended to undercut the miners' songs of protest which had flourished in the very depths of the Depression. The songs had been the result of a unique set of historical circumstances: the despair of poverty, the inwardness of physical and cultural isolation, the sense of community which seems to burn so brightly among mining folk, and the creative energies of an extraordinary group of people. These particular conditions were being challenged by the intrusion of modern industrial capitalism and mass culture. But contrary to the fears of many folklorists at the time, the traditions of cultural resistance which music provides have not been destroyed. As long as there is social transformation, inequality, and oppression — and these do not seem to be at risk of disappearing any time soon — music will remain a critical form of cultural and political resistance.

## Notes

1. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture & Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 15-18.
2. Thomas Coode and John F. Bauman, *People, Poverty, and Politics: Pennsylvania during the Great Depression* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981), 23-24.
3. Heber Blankenhorn, *The Strike for Union* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1924), 228; John Brophy, *A Miner's Life* (Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 190-197.
4. Cited in George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle: Songs and Stories of the Bituminous Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1943. Reprinted by Folklore Associates, 1965), 427.
5. Ellis Hawley, "Secretary Hoover and the Bituminous Coal Problem, 1921-1928" *Business History Review*, 42, (Autumn 1968), 247-270. James P. Johnson, *The Politics of Soft Coal: The Bituminous Industry From World War I Through the New Deal* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1979), 118-119.
6. George Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 354-355.
7. Quoted in Barry P. Michrina, *Pennsylvania Mining Families: The Search for Dignity in the Coalfields* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 149-150.
8. Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*, 355.
9. "Jefferson and Indiana Coal Company v. James Marks, et al.," 46 Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, Western District, March Term, 1926 located in United Mine Workers of America, District #2 Papers, Collection 52, Box 52 Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. *Indiana Evening Gazette*, 4 August 1924.
10. "Jefferson and Indiana Coal Company v. James Marks, et al.," UMWA District 2 Papers, Collections 52, Box 52, Indiana Univ. of Pa.
11. Brophy, *A Miner's Life*, 209.
12. *Indiana Evening Gazette*, 22 November 1927.
13. *Indiana Evening Gazette*, 20 February 1928.
14. *Indiana Evening Gazette*, 27 February 1928.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Korson, *Pennsylvania Songs and Legends*, 382-383.
18. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 134.
19. Brophy, *A Miner's Life*, 234.
20. *Ibid.*, 236.