

Stories of Coal

Kathy Mattea looks into her own West Virginia past, working to halt the future of mountaintop removal mining by Sherri L. McLendon in *Mountain Xpress* Vol. 16 / Iss. 26 on 01/20/2010

In the battle to stop mountaintop removal in Appalachia, Grammy Award-winning singer Kathy Mattea is firmly entrenched in the center of the dialogue.

"I'm living in the question of how we talk about these things: how we disagree about problems, about civil discourse. I really have come to believe it is possible to grow our ability to hear each other," she says.



Answering the call: While "singing is like breathing," the challenges of advocacy and activism are "much more involved," says Mattea. Photo by James Minchin.

Mapping the internal and external landscapes of her coal journey, Mattea presents her emerging perspectives at Warren Wilson College. In a one-hour program, she will reflect on her process as an environmental and social justice advocate and musician, and suggest directions for the future.

The early parts of Mattea's coal journey prove well-documented. Connecting with songs about coal mining as a teenage intern at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, her interest in the topic remained dormant until 2006. Then, the Spago Mine Disaster killed 12 West Virginia miners, and Mattea was asked to perform at their service. Her family history and feelings about the experience, coupled with a rising political activism (spurred in part by Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*), led her to take action as an advocate and musician.

After painstakingly selecting material, Mattea released the album, *Coal*, in 2008. The work was nominated for a Grammy for best traditional folk album. *New York Times* critic Jon Caramanica says Mattea "immerses herself in the rich history of music that documents life in the mines," calling it a "modest concept album and a successful one."

Coal, like music, courses through Mattea's veins. Growing up in Cross Lanes, W.V., Mattea's home place lies in the heart of coal country. Both her maternal and paternal grandfathers were coal miners, and her parents were raised in coal camps. Her mother once worked for the United Mine Workers Association. Mattea's own coal journey has led her to consciously learn her family's oral history. In the past several years, she also witnessed others' stories of coal, from all sides of the issue of mountaintop removal.

Historically, the language of the coal experience is violent. Mattea herself has called the practice of mountaintop removal "eco-rape." Other words fly big as dynamited boulders through the discourse. Dig. Gouge. Blow. Uncover. Removal. Dismember. Strike. Slake. Slag. Doze. The negative connotation is unsurprising, considering that current strip-mining practices grew out of warfare tactics developed for use abroad during World War II, then applied to U.S. mining strategies afterward.

Mattea's empathetic narrative emerges with purpose. The "string of old family stories is now woven into larger narratives," she says, which in turn brings her deeply into the history of Appalachia, and the connection between the people and the mountains.

In "student mode," she studies nonviolence and communication skills, actively questioning her own place in the dialogue.

"How do I stop seeing the guy who runs the coal mines as the 'bad guy' and understand his priorities?" She cites the executive's position in a centuries-long coal tradition, "firmly entrenched in a culture and place to provide a service." Mattea believes she has more to contribute than the role of celebrity spokesperson. "I make an effort to live my life inside out and let actions I take come from a place deep inside," she says. When the internal call came to be of service in the fight to stop mountaintop removal, she chose to answer.

"I did not ask for this; I have learned from life experience that answering a call is the right thing to do. It's not always pretty or easy, but it gets you to the next place, a place of growth and service. It's a voice I've learned to listen to, that is my authority."

Along the way, she says, she's had to rethink the "technical stuff about singing." The last two years have been the busiest ever, but it's now time to think about another record.

"I'm planning to slow the pace down a little, and work very hard to pull back in and think about music," she says. "With a record, the idea you start with often leads you in a different direction, and the finished product is not the same thing." Though there remain, other creative, environmental projects in the works, these prove too early in the process to discuss, she says. While "singing is like breathing," the challenges of advocacy and activism are "much more involved."

Last summer, Mattea taught music at the Swannanoa Gathering and agreed to return as a featured speaker in the Sustainable Community Seminar Series. Thrilled in the midst of students working hands-on in an environment steeped in sustainability, and environmental and social justice responsibility, the 50-year-old creative wonders what might have been if she'd had her current convictions as a jumping-off point.

"We're already on the same page," she says of the students. "By telling what has happened to me, and what I think is important, I hope to wake others up to what is possible about their own journey."

Sustainability, she believes, is rooted in everyday life. She and her husband drive hybrids, recycle, reduce their garbage (and have plans to build a LEED house on their farm outside Nashville). But those decisions are mitigated by the reality that the electricity they use comes from coal. And there may be other compromises, too, until alternative methods become available.

Western North Carolina electricity is generated from coal mined in West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

"What we have to shift is the understanding that we are both part of the problem and part of the solution," Mattea says. "That's the kind of conversation we need to open to and tolerate. We are all works in progress. Just because we are not sprung forth fully formed doesn't mean we don't have a part to play."

"My vision and hope is that we take what actions we can, and that those can change the world," Mattea says. "Even the largest wave is made up of tiny drops of water."

Mattea's story, like that of coal and the individuals who fight mountaintop removal, constantly evolves. In Mattea's case, she deliberately opens herself up to vulnerability each time she takes action or gives a presentation, "soul searching and evaluating my own viewpoint before I go." Ultimately, the thing she values most in herself and others is honesty. "I stay in touch with my own story and re-evaluate." It's a constant process.