

Sugarloaf Mountain: An Irish-Appalachian Gathering | Program Notes

The People of the Mountains Raise their Voices

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Nestled between the hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the eastern Appalachians, just at the northern tip of the Shenandoah Valley, lies beautiful SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN. Nearby, Amanda Powell, Kathie Stewart and I spent some formative years of our lives. From Frederick County where I lived as a teenager, and where Amanda later went to college, you can see the rounded slope of Sugarloaf Mountain in the distance.

This area became my home when I was 14. I was still trying to figure out how to understand the Southern accents when unexpectedly, I was offered my first job - playing the piano for the Greenway Southern Baptist Church. A job! I was welcomed with open arms by this small Revivalist congregation, which represented a completely different culture than the one I knew. I was entranced by the beautiful, stark harmonies of the Southern hymns and by the passionate singing of the congregation. There was a sense of communal joy there.

I also keenly remember the lovely Appalachian ballad singer, Madeline MacNeil, who would travel around to the small towns of the valley, playing her lap dulcimer and singing these ancient ballads - most of which had come over from the British Isles, but she sang them in an Appalachian way.

I left Virginia at the age of 17 and never looked back – until 2008, when a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts sent me to the libraries

for two years of research in early American traditional music – and, inevitably, a journey back to my teenage years in the Valley. From this was born Apollo's Fire's 2010 disc, *"Come to the River: An Early American Gathering."* The completely unexpected popularity of *"Come to the River"* – sold-out concerts for years and two weeks in the Top 10 of the Billboard Classical chart - led me to ponder the way this music speaks to us, and to our shared roots.

This new disc is not a sequel to *"Come to the River."* If anything, it is a prequel – reaching back in time to explore the earliest roots of the Appalachian heritage.

The immigrants from the British Isles who made the crossing and built the Appalachian community were mostly from the impoverished lower classes. They left their beloved isles of Scotland and Ireland due to endless years of unemployment, hunger and civil strife. The ballads they brought with them, which date back to the Renaissance and in some cases the Medieval period, include many that are dark and haunting. Topics such as murder and even fratricide are very common in this repertoire; but there are also delightfully playful children's songs. In short, life was hard back in the home country - and it was still hard in the Appalachian hills. But it was also filled with joy and laughter.

In this program we explore the communal journey of these Celtic immigrants, who left their island homes with sadness, but also with great hope. Their stories involve many young men who had to leave their sweethearts behind in Scotland

or Ireland; many young women who had to face the choice of a dangerous and unknown life in the wilderness of the New World, or the seemingly certain poverty and hopelessness of remaining at home in Ireland; and many children who made joyful games for themselves amidst the hard-working poverty of their parents, playing “play party” games (traditional songs that are danced) without the need of books or toys. The stories, the sorrows and the shared laughter of these immigrants are told in the ballads throughout the disc.

The typical instrumental ensemble of early America was the Old-Time band, consisting of a fiddle and a banjo to start with, and maybe adding a guitar and a singer if available. Of course the Irish were among the most prominent groups of immigrants, and they brought their airs, jigs and reels with them. In our opening Prologue, the traditional Celtic air “Mountains of Rhúm,” a young couple bids a sad farewell to the beautiful Scottish island. This leads into a set I call **“Crossing to the New World.”** Here we evoke the last night at home before boarding the ship for the New World, with a lively *ceili* dance featuring the Irish reel “Farewell to Ireland” and the Appalachian version of the Scottish reel “Highlander’s Farewell.” Our version of the traditional British and Canadian sea shanty, “We’ll Rant and We’ll Roar,” evokes the hopes and fears of the men and women who made the crossing – sometimes by choice and sometimes in desperation.

The large group of ballads from renaissance England and Scotland that made their way across the Atlantic and permeated the fabric of Appalachian culture are known as the Child Ballads – named for the ethnomusicologist James Frances Child who spent a lifetime collecting and cataloguing them. As mentioned, many of these are dark, and we explore that aspect of the Appalachian psyche in the second set, which I call **“Dark Mountain Home.”** This section includes the renaissance ballad *The Cruel Sister* or *Two Sisters* (*Twa Sisters* in the earliest sources). About 26 different versions of the text and about 5 different tunes can be found in New England and Appalachian folk music sources. The version that I created uses three different tunes, chosen to suit the character at different moments of the story. I drew the text and the tunes from amongst the versions in the *Northumbrian Minstrelsy* (an 1882 publication of much older ballads as they were sung in North England and Scotland), and Cecil Sharp’s collection of *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1932).

The medieval ballad “Nottamun Town” can still be heard today in the English Midlands, particularly in Nottinghamshire and Southern Yorkshire. It is much more popular in Appalachia though. Probably “Nottamun” is a corruption of Nottingham. The nonsensical lyrics describe an absurdly topsy-turvy world. The song may have been part of the Feast of Fools, a medieval festival where the hierarchy of the local clergy was flipped for a day, with the lower clergy elevated to power. The festival was frowned upon by the Church and repeatedly condemned in the 15th century. In the 20th century, Bob Dylan used the melody of “Nottamun Town” for his song, “Masters of War.” On our disc, Brian Kay sings this ballad while accompanying himself on an Appalachian long-neck dulcimer.

The **“Cornshuck Party”** section of our program was inspired partly by the descriptions that respected folk singer Jean Ritchie provides about her childhood in Kentucky – neighbors would gather for songs, stories, tall tales and dancing, while shucking the corn or grinding the wheat. The ballad “Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night” is centuries old and can be found in many early English sources as well as in Appalachian versions. (There are even two versions in Middle English from the time of Chaucer).

Our version of the famous 1848 minstrel song “Oh Susanna” was inspired by our wish to sing the praises of our fabulous fiddle player, Susanna Perry Gilmore. Our resident “minstrel,” Brian Kay, begins the song with “a banjo on his knee” – and indeed he plays a gourd banjo similar to the African instrument in use by the 19th-century minstrels. Then Susanna takes the spotlight, performing a virtuoso set of variations composed by our cellist René Schiffer.

No program about early America could be complete without a look at the music of Old-Time Religion. The **“Glory on the Mountain”** section of our program evokes the small meeting houses of the Revival Movement in the Appalachians, where Southern hymns and spirituals were born in the early 19th century. From 1800 to 1850, several different shape-note hymnals were published, including *The Kentucky Harmony* in 1816, *The Southern Harmony* in 1835, and *The Sacred Harp* in 1844.

This was the era when the Celtic immigrants of the Appalachians met the music of the African slaves – resulting in the vibrant infusion of African-American spirituals into the musical fabric. The Kentucky fiddle tune “Glory in the

Meeting House” opens this set with fiery ecstasy. The spirituals sung by Amanda Powell – “Go March Along” and “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” – represent the fervent and soulful expression of rural Appalachian worshippers, both black and white. Our version of “Oh Mary” is inspired by the tradition of à cappella vocal ensembles such as *Take 6* and the Cherrylmes family.

This program probably would not have been possible without the pioneering work of the great American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax. Lomax, who died in 2002, spent most of his life journeying through rural America and making field recordings of Old-Time and Appalachian singers. His series of anthologies of traditional American songs and dance tunes is a treasure-trove of the folk art of regional cultures.

To close the disc, the echoes of the Scottish air that opened the program now return with a more Appalachian feel. I took the liberty to write new lyrics to this melody, celebrating SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN and its settlers. The song reflects the communal journey of our grandparents and their grandparents, as they made the crossing to the New World and built their new mountain homeland, one cabin at a time. We hope that this recording rings with their inextinguishable spirit.

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