

SIXTEEN TONS

A Thematic Unit on the Music of the
Coal Mining Industry

Submitted To

Dr. Dean Saitta

University of Denver

Work and Culture in the Southern Colorado Coal Fields, 1860-1960

By

Anna Marie Tobey

Pueblo, Colorado

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“Songs are the statement of a people. You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.”

John Steinbeck

The life and work of coal miners is reflected in their music. The songs created and sung by the miners and balladeers are important because they help us understand the nature of work in the coal mines and its inherent dangers, labor and strike issues and the feelings of miners in regard to the joys and hardships of their lives.

Coal Dust On The Fiddle, a pioneering work by George Korson, contains a wealth of information on the music and culture of the American coal miner. Korson states: “From the earliest days of the industry, music has been a major interest and activity among bituminous miners. It is one of the richest traditions in the bituminous regions.”

Organized bands and choruses were common in the camps. These groups were approved, and sometimes subsidized by the coal companies (Korson 1943:17). Miners were isolated in the camps and work schedules were often inconsistent due to down time in the mines. During this leisure time miners created their own diversions. They played the fiddle, danced, and produced unique ditties and ballads related to the miner’s life experience. These songs evolved not from a single region or nationality but from the industry of coal mining itself (ibid:20-21).

The following pages contain a thematic unit on music related to coal mining. This unit is appropriate for use in 4th and 5th grade General Music classes. Sections of this unit may also be used to integrate music into the study of Colorado History, American Labor History and Immigration.

The criteria used for selecting material for this unit is as follows:

Texts and melodies must be accessible to students of a young age (9-11 years).

Texts should give students a sense of time and place.

Texts should be descriptive enough to elicit discussion of the experiences of the miners and their families, mining conditions and the history of the industry.

Songs are divided into three categories: Mining Life, Union Songs and Songs of the 1913-1914 Colorado Coal Strike.

UNIT GOAL: Students will explore a variety of music related to the coal mining industry and organized labor.

This goal will be met through the following student activities:

Group Singing : Music Standard 1:a,b,c

Creative Movement to Music: Standard 3:a

Playing Instrumental accompaniment to songs with unpitched percussion, body percussion and tonebar (Orff) instruments:Standards 4:b,c 5:a

Discussion of the relationship of music to historical events: Standards: 5:b 6:a,b

ASSESSMENT: Standards based assessment will be made as students perform the activities listed above. Students will also evaluate their own performance according to criteria set by the instructor.

MINING LIFE

“SIXTEEN TONS”

“Sixteen Tons” by Merle Travis is one of the most well known songs about coal mining. I chose to begin the unit with this song because it will have great appeal for students. The melody is tuneful with interesting rhythms, and the beat is driven by syncopation. The text is an excellent vehicle for class discussion of mining terms and mining life. I found a fairly good piano/vocal score of the song in *Songs of Work and Protest* (Fowke & Glazer 1973:52-53). The melody is a bit different than Travis’ recording, but could easily be arranged to match the recorded melody. Depending on how much time you wish to spend on this song, one or more of the following activities could be adapted for use in your classroom.

Students should listen to a recording of the song several times while following the score.

Discuss the text.

The song may be sung as a group when students are familiar with the melody.

Movement: Students could explore movement such as shoveling coal, wielding a pick and heaving coal chunks into a coal car. These, and other movements that illustrate the text, could be combined into a dance piece performed to the music.

Compare and contrast the musical style of a Merle Travis recording with that of Tennessee Ernie Ford. Discuss why Ford’s version was such a big commercial hit.

Perform an ensemble accompaniment to the song using bass bars and body percussion. For example, bass bars can play the tonic notes of the chord progressions. Students snap on beats 2 and 4 during the verse and during the chorus clap this pattern: x x x On the last phrase of the chorus, “ I owe my soul to the company store”, the bass bars rest, the clapping stops, and the snaps resume on beat 4. (I prefer to keep the accompaniment sparse so it does not overshadow the melody.)

“A MINER’S LIFE FOR ME”

A miner’s life was extremely difficult and dangerous but they managed to make the most of their leisure time. Joe and Martha Bonacquista lived and worked in the coal mining camp at Berwind, Colorado in the 1920’s and 1930’s. They remember the miners playing accordions, concertinas, fiddles and harmonicas. Martha mentioned that there was an organized band in Berwind. She also recalls that musical events were a highlight for the people in the camp and that dances were held on Saturday nights. (Personal communication:1999).

Miners also spent their leisure time engaging in competitive activities. There were baseball and soccer games, foot and horse races and contests of strength such as tug of war (Korson 1943:101-102). The song “A Miner’s Life for Me” was printed in the United Mine Worker’s Journal in 1898 and sung to the tune “Emancipation Day” (ibid.:108-109). Korson includes this song in a chapter entitled Miners At Play, but after reading the text we might find a hidden message about the miner’s view of life. It would seem unlikely that the miners would feel that their life was “jolly”, considering the conditions under which they were working. Students could analyze the song and come to some conclusion about the deeper meaning of the text.

“A MINER’S LIFE FOR ME”

A miner leads a jolly life as time does jog along;
With his pipe and glass the time does pass,
In harmless mirth and fun.
He works all day down in the mine,
No fear or dread has he,
For when night comes, away he runs
With his friends to join a spree.

CHORUS

A miner’s life for me

With the boys that's light and free,
So join with me and give a hearty cheer,
For frolic, fun and mirth
You may search o'er all the earth,
A miner's life is happy all the year.

At seven o'clock when the whistle blows
We're underneath the ground,
Where a gleam of sunshine
Never can be found;
Digging dusky diamonds,
'Way down in the mine,
But wait with patience, boys,
Till Eighteen Ninety-Nine.

Some like a game of billiards,
And others like a game of ball,
Some like to take a buggy ride,
And others no game at all.
Some like to put their mitts up,
And others a race to run,
Some prefer a game of freezeout
Boys, I like no better fun.

“POOR MINER’S FAREWELL”

This lament, written by union activist and composer Aunt Molly Jackson, is found in *Songs That Changed The World* (Whitman 1969:68). The text illustrates the hardships a

family faced when the father was killed in the mine. The melody, especially in the chorus, is quite lovely and soulful and one that children would enjoy singing.

UNION SONGS

“I been a member of a jillion different unions. And we didn’t have no big newspapers or radio station telling our side of the story.

We didn't have no judges and no police force.

But we had people."

Woody Guthrie

The stirring rhythms of union songs lifted the spirits of striking miners as they marched in protest against the coal companies. New words were set to familiar tunes such as "Marching Through Georgia", "Battle Hymn of the Republic", "Dixie" and "The Battle Cry of Freedom". Korson states: "Few could resist the band music and the marching ballads, and so the procession grew larger and larger until it numbered by the thousands-men, women, and children." (Korson 1943:287).

"SOLIDARITY FOREVER"

"Solidarity Forever", the anthem of the American labor movement, was written in 1915 by Ralph Chaplin. Chaplin was an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, aka the Wobblies. The arrangement in *Songs of Work and Protest* (Fowke & Glazer 1973:12-13) has an excellent piano/vocal score. An instrumental ensemble can be created by adding drums, percussion, and on the chorus, glockenspiels. Students will undoubtedly want to march along as they sing this rousing tune.

"UNION MAID"

Woody Guthrie wrote this song in 1940 after attending a union meeting in Oklahoma City where many of the men had brought their wives. In this popular song he portrays the union maid as tough, smart and fearless. "Union Maid" can be found in *Songs of Work and Protest* (Fowke & Glazer 1973:17-19), along with some interesting information on the role women played in helping build the labor movement.

Students will enjoy singing this song with its lilting melody and clever rhyme scheme. The following accompaniment pattern could be clapped or played on percussion instruments:

x x x x This song will certainly become a favorite for young students.

THE 1913-1914 COLORADO COAL STRIKE

For an excellent overview of the events of this strike go to the Colorado Digitization Project website at <http://coloradodigital.coalliance.org/cfindex.html> It is essential that students know the history of the strike so that they will better understand the meaning of the following songs.

“We’re Coming, Colorado”, sung to the tune of “The Battle Cry of Freedom”, was written by Frank J. Hayes in 1913 (Korson 1943:388). In his book *Out Of The Depths*, Barron B. Beshoar mentions that this song was sung at the Ludlow tent colony and in the streets of Trinidad during the strike (Beshoar 1942:92 &132).

“Our Cause Is Marching On” was written in 1913 by the miner bard Davie Robb (Korson 1943:389). These songs united the strikers and inspired them to persevere during this long and difficult strike.

“WE’RE COMING, COLORADO”

We will win the fight today, boys,
We’ll win the fight today,
Shouting the battle cry of union;
We will rally from the coal mines,
We’ll battle to the end,
Shouting the battle cry of union.

CHORUS

The union forever, hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the Baldwins, up with the law;
For we’re coming , Colorado, we’re coming all the way,
Shouting the battle cry of union.

We have fought them here for years, boys,
We'll fight them in the end,
Shouting the battle cry of union.
We have fought them in the North,
Now we'll fight them in the South,
Shouting the battle cry of union.

We are fighting for our rights, boys,
We are fighting for our homes,
Shouting the battle cry of union;
Men have died to win the struggle;
They've died to set us free,
Shouting the battle cry of union.

“OUR CAUSE IS MARCHING ON”

There's a fight in Colorado for to set the miners free,
From the tyrants and the money kings and all the powers that be,
They have trampled o'er the freedom that was meant for you and me,
But right is marching on.

CHORUS

Cheer, boys, cheer the cause of union!
The Colorado miners' union!
Glory, glory to our union!
Our cause is marching on.

We have tried to meet our masters for the people's common weal,
And to ease the miners' burdens which our wives and children feel,
That each miner may get honest weight which now the masters steal,
Our laws must all prevail.

There's no justice in a system which will give the tyrant scope,
To encroach upon the rights of men without a gleam of hope,

And well we know that better men have dangled on a rope,
With justice marching on.

Another song that could be studied by older students is Woody Guthrie's "Ludlow Massacre". It can be found along with a summary of the events of the massacre in John Greenway's *American Folksongs Of Protest*. (Greenway 1970: 150-155).

IMMIGRATION

Many Southern Europeans immigrated to the United States between 1880 and 1920 (Korson 1943:13). Italian immigrants made up a large part of the work force in Southern Colorado. Each nationality formed their own colonies in the camps and sang songs of their home countries (ibid.:19).

Some Italian songs that students could study are: "Finiculi, Finicula", "Eh, Cumpari" and "Santa Lucia". Students could also learn to dance the Sicilian or Neapolitan "Tarantella". I have had high school language clubs come to my music classes to teach songs and dances. This has been a successful learning experience for both older and younger students.

While doing research for this unit I found a wonderful children's book entitled *Growing Up In Coal Country* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti (Houghton Mifflin Boston 1996). It tells what life was like for children in the coal country in northeastern Pennsylvania. This book is a good resource and supplement for this unit.

Of all the reference books that I used for this unit Fowke & Galzer's *Songs of Work and Protest* had the most usable musical scores. It includes full piano scores with guitar chords, songs written in singable keys, historical notes about the songs, a reading list and discography. The Smithsonian and Library of Congress have recordings of American work and labor songs, and folk music collections that are available for purchase.

Conclusion

The music that has come from the coal mining industry provides a valuable account of the life experiences of miners and their struggle for better working conditions. This music allows for a richer understanding of the profound personal and social events which continue to impact the lives of those who live in the coal mining areas of Southern Colorado today. Through the music of the miners we can make this important chapter in our state and national history come alive for our students.

References

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