

Song Warrior

Jennifer Osha (Col '97) is on a mission

by Paul Evans

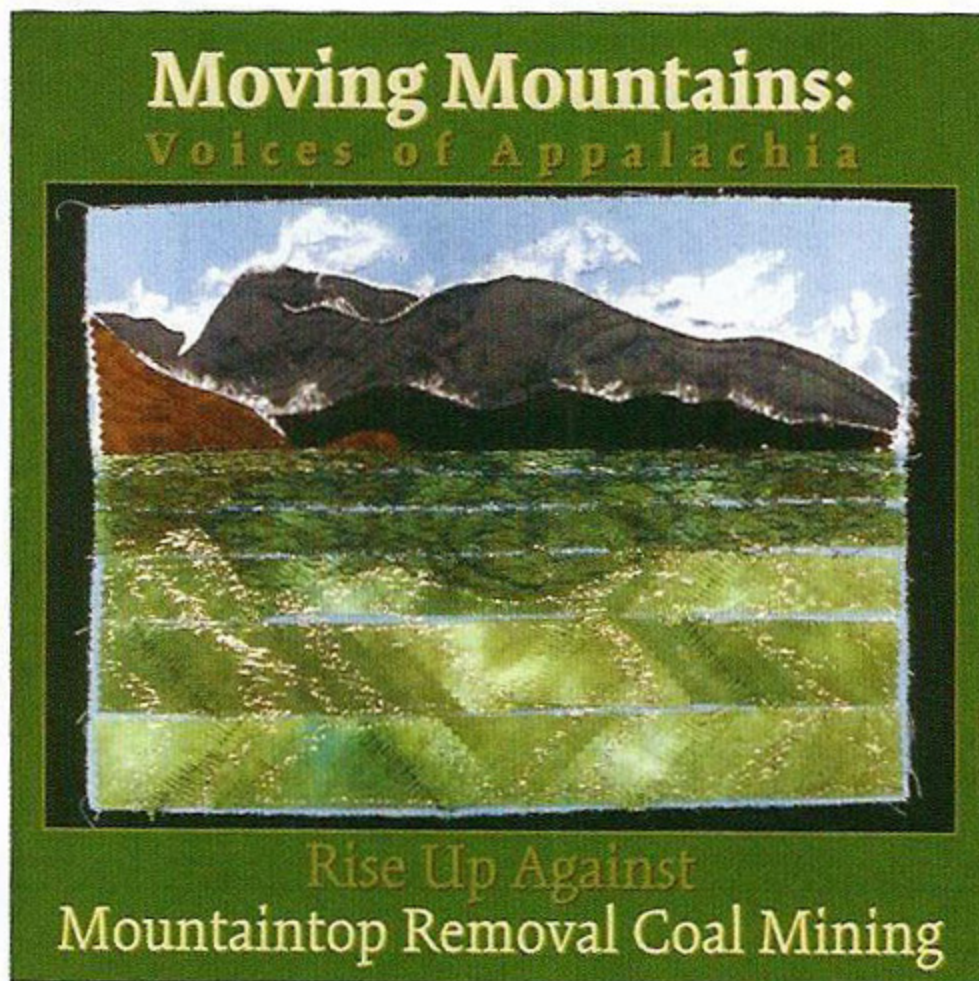
Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, The Clash, Public Enemy—all of them made music with a message. But the message would hardly have been heard had not the music been so compelling. A song, after all, isn't a slogan. To quote Duke Ellington: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Mountain Music swings righteously. It also delights, laments, and inspires. Yet, like all effective message music, this 15-song CD stirs both compassion and outrage. Subtitled *Voices of Appalachia Rise Up Against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining*, it's a manifesto from a world imperiled, a "deep-rooted culture," says producer Jennifer Osha, "that is being destroyed by short-term greed."

Since the early 1990s, mountaintop removal mining has decimated America's coal country, polluting nearly 600 Appalachian springs, endangering 230,000 acres of the region's land, and eroding a traditional way of life.

Osha created *Mountain Music* after assembling 10 bands for a 2002 concert on Kayford Mountain in southern West Virginia to raise consciousness about this ecological disaster. Their style ranging from spare, straight-talking folk to keening, hardcore country, the album's musicians share a passionate commitment and a low profile. Singer/songwriters like The Kines, Mary Anne Hitt, Keith Pittzer and Osha herself are hardly household names; they're just excellent working musicians as earnest and self-effacing as the working-class lives they celebrate.

The album is also the latest chapter in Osha's own politically conscious autobiography. "I've been an activist all my life," she says. A former Echols scholar and English major whose final thesis took the form of a novel, she now teaches English and ecology at West Virginia's Salem International University. The school's 500-strong student body is extremely culturally diverse; international visitors mingle with the progeny of coal miners in a classic coal-mining hamlet. The daughter herself of mining folk—her union-activist uncle died from black lung—Osha grew up in a musical family. "We were like the Von Trapps," she recalls. "Everyone sang or played an instrument." On *Mountain Music*, Osha pays tribute, with "The Fiddler's Ballad," to her miner father. The album's genesis was spurred long ago by her involvement in social justice causes—a zeal whetted by her work with U.Va. professor and civil rights leader Julian Bond.



"After U.Va.," the 28-year-old says, "I attended the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Larry Gibson came to speak to us about mountaintop removal mining. And, for the first time in a lecture hall, I cried." Gibson, a leading voice for ecological vigilance, became a mentor, and is featured in a series of interviews that augment the songs of *Mountain Music*. Before embarking on a field study of mining conditions in the American South, Osha journeyed to Ecuador, where she worked to reforest abandoned minelands and founded Aurora Lights, a nonprofit that promotes social and environmental action. Armed with that experience, she set out in 2002 for West Virginia. Criss-crossing the state, living in her car and recording interviews with miners, she began thinking of ways to spur awareness of their plight.

While Chopin's *Nocturnes* had been early favorites in her training as a classical pianist, Osha was drawn also to the stirring folk strains of America's labor movement and the civil rights struggle. Putting out a call for song submissions through a network of musicians and activists, she received more than 40 entries—and sifted through them for the gems that became *Mountain Music*.

"I think it's important to realize that this is an all-volunteer project," Osha says. "Everyone from the musicians to our record label, Falling Mountain Music, volunteered. Talk about good

energy." The album has sold more than a thousand copies, largely through word of mouth. The cause it benefits, Osha says, has been gaining in media prominence; John Kerry talked about mountaintop removal mining on the campaign trail, and it's been debated in the pages of the *Washington Post* and the halls of the United Nations. Julia Thompson Bonds, a coordinator for Coal River Mountain Watch and a hero of Osha's, recently won the Goldman Environmental Prize, the nation's top honor for ecological work. Osha is hopeful that such recognition—and the proceeds from *Mountain Music*—will help dispel a media blackout on mountaintop removal mining.

"I think that people haven't heard as much as they need to about it," Osha says, "because sto-

ries about Appalachia and its people tend to conform to stereotypes. And the press thinks people don't want to hear about this part of the world."

Together with her new son and his father, a photographer she met while interviewing miners, Jen Osha has chosen "this part of the world" as her home, workplace and crusade.

The work championed by *Mountain Music*, she feels, will be over only when "kids don't have to go to sleep in their clothes at night, afraid of the next mining explosion." And of her work entire—as activist, educator and artist—she says that a common theme compels it: "I really do believe that individuals can make a difference. I just see myself as fanning that flame that's inside everybody. I'm trying to bring out the light that's inside."