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HARLAN COUNTY USA

Barbara Kopple's Academy Award-winning *Harlan County USA* unflinchingly documents a coal miners' strike in a small Kentucky town. With unprecedented access, Kopple and her crew captured the miners' sometimes violent struggles with strike-breakers, local police, and company thugs. With a haunting soundtrack—featuring legendary country and bluegrass artists Hazel Dickens, Merle Travis, David Morris, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece—the film is a heartbreaking record of the thirteen-month struggle between a community fighting to survive and a corporation dedicated to the bottom line.

4K UHD + BLU-RAY SPECIAL EDITION FEATURES

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4K UHD + BLU-RAY
COMBO EDITION

1976
104 MINUTES
COLOR/BLACK & WHITE
MONAURAL
1.33:1 ASPECT RATIO

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HARLAN COUNTY USA



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THE CRITERION COLLECTION

1976

THE CRITERION COLLECTION



a film by barbara kopple



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Blu-ray Disc



4K
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334

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a film by barbara kopple



JANUS FILMS



334









Photo by Robert Gumpert

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C R E D I T S

Produced and directed by
Director of editing
Associate director
Principal cinematographer
Cinematography
Additional cinematography

Assistant camera

Sound recordist
Editors

Assistant editors

Consulting editor
Contributing editor
Sound editor

Barbara Kopple
Nancy Baker
Anne Lewis
Hart Perry
Kevin Keating
Phil Parmet
Flip McCarthy
Tom Hurwitz
Anne Lewis
Shane Zarintash
Dick Donovan
Michael Hamilton
Alex Lukman
Barbara Kopple
Nancy Baker
Mary Lampson
John Walz
Judy Rabinovitz
Helene Susman
Bette Fried
Lora Hays
Mirra Bank
Josh Waletzky

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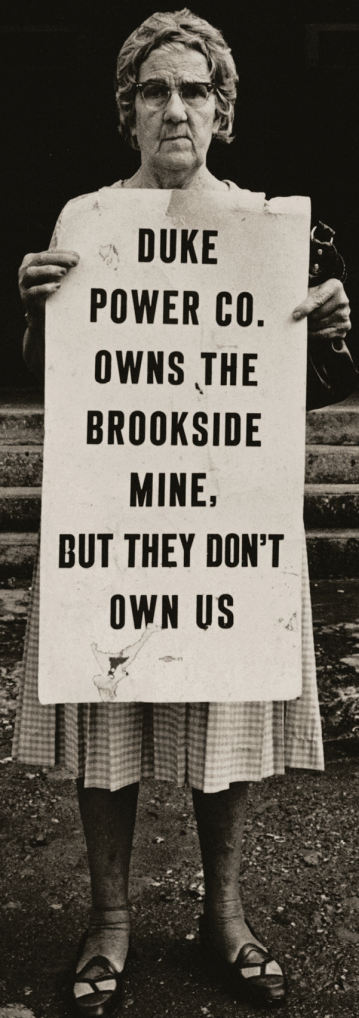


Photo by Earl Dotter

BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER

by michael atkinson

Talk about movies as time travel—look at the chasm between 1976 and 2026. We supposedly live at present in a golden age of documentaries, and that's true at least in terms of sheer numbers: never before have so many nonfiction films been produced, made easily available (via streaming), and consumed by millions. But we have not lately seen a film anything like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA*. Today, you can make a Netflix documentary on a social topic by conducting a few sit-down interviews and amassing a few hours of archival footage on your laptop. But back in the days of analog filmmaking, documentaries were a devotional calling, a full-contact blood sport, often requiring, per film, years of dedication, unlimited selfless commitment, and crates of battlefield nerve. The old film-stock-loaded cameras alone demanded subservience, hand-held on location and otherwise, in ways the new HD cameras never do. Artists like Kopple would spend more time with her subjects off camera than actually filming; a sense of devoted, expended life-stuff emanates from films like hers (Kopple's tradition dates to the early 1960s and the Direct Cinema docs of Robert Drew,

Richard Leacock, Frederick Wiseman, Les Blank, D. A. Pennebaker, Charlotte Zwerin, and the Maysles brothers). *Harlan County USA* was in many ways a kind of culmination of the era's plunge into nonfiction cinema, in the sense that the dramatic social textures and confrontations it captures had immediate and distinctly hair-raising stakes. For decades afterward as well, it was a singularly shocking document—a hot report from the edge of the American abyss.

But today? We could say that part of the film's evergreen pertinence resides in the perhaps dubious comfort we can take, along with the embarrassment a little introspection would bring thereafter, in the fact that the kind of extrajudicial gestapo barbarity we've seen in the streets of 2026 is hardly new. It's certainly not new to generations of Black, brown, Indigenous, and Asian Americans, but it's also been pretty familiar to members of labor unions in this country, regardless of race, since the 1880s. In that corpse-strewn timeline, Kopple's film stands alone—easily the most pungent and vivid media evidence of antiunion violence ever set down in any American form.

The coal miners of the Brookside mine in Harlan County, Kentucky—owned by the behemoth Duke Power Co.—joined the United Mine Workers of America and went on strike in 1973, having been paid a subliving wage in impoverished living conditions (no electricity or running water), at a time when coal-company profits were climbing (in 1975, they were up by 170 percent). There was nothing special about the strike, except that the miners and their families were hickory-tough and immune to both placation and bullying. It dragged on for over a year, a hard time (as we see) of passionate resistance, murder, thuggery, betrayal, inspiring communalism, and progressive principles savagely tested by violence and deprivation. Kopple, all of twenty-seven at the time, took her small crew straight

to the people; the film's ending credits thank all “who fed us and let us live in their homes.” The miners and their families—particularly the wives—work the strike like they'd all memorized a pile of early-century Wobblies pamphlets. We are there: strike organizer Lois Scott, a coal-camp daughter and now a miner's wife, at one point in a Brookside Women's Club meeting reaches into her blouse to reveal that she is carrying a pistol, a symbol that Brookside families won't back down. The picket lines are unflinching, the near-riots blocking scab workers are hot to the touch, the roots-style protest songs (including an elderly Florence Reece singing her classic anthem, “Which Side Are You On?”) are relentless, the rhetoric (“feudal system,” “gestapo tactics”) is unequivocal, in your grill, and coming from Americans who do not hyperbolize.

You see the unionized community already formed; it's clear these people would go down in flames for one another. With the food drives, public fundraising (moms with placards and tin cups on the side of busy roads), cooperative songfests, and endless meetings, Harlan's citizens formed a busy hive. Kopple's film can actually serve as something like a primer course in how to conduct a strike and battle antiunion forces—if you are, in fact, ready to go the distance. As the miners make clear, workers have no rights in this democracy for which they won't have to fight like dogs, and the fight never truly ends.

The bloodshed does the talking, starting with the archival footage Kopple ladles in depicting the “Harlan County War” of the 1930s, which saw both union and coal-company killings, multiple sabotage and bombing sieges, and county occupation by federal troops more than a half dozen times. This tradition carries to Kopple's present, when UMWA president Tony Boyle—an idiotic monster in the footage we see—is convicted, in 1974, of having his union rival

Joseph Yablonski and his family murdered. The film's miners are themselves in continual confrontation with the company's barrel-toting "gun thugs"—preeminently, one Bazel (Basil) Collins, a hulking hired strikebreaker and trigger-happy goon whom Kopple actually catches on film trying to shoot her, as he drives by in the night. One young miner, Lawrence Jones, is in fact murdered offscreen—Kopple finds his spattered brain tissue in the dirt—and his death becomes the flash point that brings the strikers and the company back to the negotiating table. The workers do get their contract, but the living and working conditions we've seen of Harlan County could make any resolution seem essentially Pyrrhic, particularly given the prevalence of black lung disease, which miners in Kopple's film describe as a catch-22—in order to claim disability, you had to keep working until the disease was well on its way to killing you. In many ways, this 1974 may as well be 1934, or 1914. (The more things change, the less they do: in 2022, long after most of the people we meet in the movie had died, the county-seat city of Harlan renamed a bridge off Route 421 after Bazel Collins, honoring the "World War II veteran," with no mention of strikebreaking.)

Harlan County USA was Kopple's first film, but she wasn't a novice, having worked uncredited out of college on the Maysles-brothers films *Salesman* (1969) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970). Her first significant credit didn't turn out to be a credit at all: she was one of eighteen anonymous filmmakers associated with the long-unreleased Vietnam-vet film *Winter Soldier* (1972). The "Winter Soldier Investigation" was simply the public testimonies, filmed in a Detroit Howard Johnson conference room, given by many dozens of veterans about atrocities they'd witnessed and performed upon the peasant population of Southeast Asia. We can perhaps assume that working the crew in that terrifying Detroit meeting hall galvanized the midtwenties Kopple, and enabled her to commit to the gray zones

between what was supposed to be and what was, and to embracing the line of fire, literally, in Harlan.

The larger point is that the film she made in Kentucky remains a landmark, an indelible canto in the *Inferno* book of twentieth-century America, because of the way she had made it: with her body and her time and her willingness to sacrifice her comfort and safety, at length, just as she had made it with shouldered cameras and Nagra tape recorders and 16 mm stock. In the seventies, it was the only way; the history of avoiding that level of traction and dedication is a history of unmade films. The payoff is that Kopple's film today powerfully challenges us as a culture, in our timidity: we would've liked to have forgotten, we were never taught this, and we weren't supposed to see it, the century-plus-long legacy of union bereavement and union victimization, of the boot coming down, of paid-for state forces—cops, sheriffs, guardsmen, soldiers, mercenaries—threatening and slaughtering working Americans at the behest of corporate owners. Of watching wealth and greed take armed shape somewhere in the nation's workaday fields or roads or squares, and squash men and women like worms because they simply wanted to be paid fairly for their work and to feed their children.

Fifty years later, we're even further removed from that history, at least in terms of union-busting—no one needs homicidal strike-breaking thugs any longer, now that industrial union membership is down below 6 percent of workers generally (excluding the public sector), and unions' ability to threaten mass action against employers has been worn down to the bone. More to our present point, of course, is the fact that the shameless corporate terror that was once so shocking in Kopple's film can feel substantially less so today, in light of the Trump administration's rampaging abuses—suddenly, video footage of ordinary people gunned down in broad daylight,

apropos of almost nothing at all, is routine daily news. This could be our best excuse for rational nostalgia right now: a longing for the bygone ethical calculus that prompted—as per Harlan or, say, the 1970 Kent State shootings—an immediate, deep, pervasive, and lasting horror. Today, outrage, when we bother to express it, is typed at our desks and launched harmlessly and silently into the internet ether, disappearing without a ripple.

Kopple's movie contrasts its strenuous then to our anesthetized now. Although these Kentuckians had next to nothing, their robust collective bonds, dogged self-sacrifice, and righteous picket-line valor should shame us. The perspective that nonfiction films—always, for better or worse, a record of their time and place, as history, caught in amber—can provide remains underappreciated, I think. Imagine the deep hoofprint *Harlan County USA* would make in the cortices of American students raised on TikTok, were it to be mandated. In an ideal world, no American would be able to graduate high school without having seen it. Or raise that bet: make a screening of *Harlan County USA* a voter-registration requirement. Things could change after all.

Michael Atkinson writes regularly for the Village Voice and Sight and Sound, and teaches at Long Island University. His books include Exile Cinema (SUNY Press) and Blue Velvet (British Film Institute), which was reissued in a new edition in 2021. This essay is adapted from one that first appeared in the March–April 2026 issue of County Highway magazine.

Photo by Robert Gumpert





Photo courtesy of Cabin Creek Films

THE SOUND OF HARLAN COUNTY USA

by jon weisberger

Like the film it accompanies, the music of *Harlan County USA* offers rich, compelling insights into the lives of coal miners and the communities in which they live and work. But where many films use music especially composed for the purpose, Barbara Kopple and her team chose to rely on songs largely indigenous to the film's eastern Kentucky locale and the surrounding Appalachian region. Many of the performances were new, but with the notable exception of Hazel Dickens's "They'll Never Keep Us Down"—written for the film with Kopple's encouragement and heard as the credits roll—the music was not.

The decision to use mostly grassroots and traditionally flavored music was a deliberate one, the songs expressing the same dialectic between communal and individual self-reliance and agency that Kopple saw in the Brookside strikers. That is, the songs are at once intensely personal and grounded in and significant to entire communities. We catch a glimpse, for instance, of Depression-era housewife and union activist Florence Reece singing her enduring "Which Side Are You On?" at a national union gathering; written in the heat of the

moment, when antiunion gun thugs ransacked her house during a 1931 strike, it quickly became an anthem for labor activists, not just in the coalfields but across the country and around the world. Similarly, Nimrod Workman's moving a cappella ballad "Forty-Two Years" both offers intimate details of his life as a miner and reflects the lives of countless others, while Dickens's "Black Lung" commemorates the death of a brother from that disease yet speaks to its thousands of victims, commenting, as does virtually all of the music, on the film's scenes and events, and hammering its messages home. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the film could have achieved its full measure of power without the soundtrack Kopple and her crew assembled from the musical materials they found all around them during its making.

This music has a rich and often complicated history. Thanks in large part to the difficulty of travel into eastern Kentucky until mining brought railroads into the area, elements of colonial-era music remained important in the region well into the modern era—indeed, they continue to be so even today. In the early part of the twentieth century, that legacy included tunes (both lyrics and melodies) and vocal mannerisms brought over from the British Isles; an emphasis on ballad lyrics that related and commented on stories of significance, including personal and family tales; a strong religious component; the prominence of the fiddle as accompaniment for both singing and dancing; and a tendency to embed performances in communal and informal communicative contexts rather than in stylized and commercial ones, such as concerts. (*Harlan County USA* offers a glimpse of one of the most durable examples of this heritage in "Oh, Death"—also known as "A Conversation with Death"—as sung in an uncredited on-camera performance by Phyllis Boyens and Workman; a performance of the same song on the popular *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack won regional favorite Ralph Stanley a Grammy in 2002.) In short, it was folk music—expressive and at times entertaining but also functional,

and hence a natural resource for working-class people during times of social struggle, such as the great labor-organizing drives of the 1930s.

Still, the area's folk-music traditions were not impervious to influences from the broader American society. Not only did commercial recordings begin circulating in the area as soon as they were available but, even earlier, professional and amateur musicians moving into or traveling through the area, as well as published sheet music and a variety of other sources, were bringing new sounds and new instruments to eastern Kentucky. By the time the first recordings of musicians from the area were made, in the 1920s and 1930s, external influences could already be heard—notably, in the adoption of the African American blues song form and the five-string banjo, the increased popularity of such instruments as the guitar and mandolin alongside the fiddle, the adoption of lyrics and melodies originally appearing in big-city publications, and the clustering of musicians into what were generally called "string bands."

While many musicians in eastern Kentucky and throughout surrounding areas continued to operate in the informal and community realms, others began to see the possibility of making a living—or at least a part of one—as performers. Among the former is Workman, whose "Forty-Two Years" appears both on the soundtrack, in an instrumental version, and on camera early in the film, while the latter are best represented, if indirectly, by Merle Travis. Born the son of a miner in the smaller coalfields of southwestern Kentucky, near Bowling Green, Travis first achieved prominence as a dazzling guitarist and the composer of such songs as "Sixteen Tons" and what has become a virtual anthem among miners, "Dark as a Dungeon"; both appeared on the 1947 collection *Folk Songs of the Hills*, and the latter is featured on *Harlan County USA*'s soundtrack. Similarly, Billy Edd Wheeler, whose "Coal Tattoo" is heard here, was born and raised in the mountains of

West Virginia, before making a career as a country music performer and songwriter.

Yet while the distinction between “folk” and “commercial country” music became increasingly clear and important for growing audiences from the 1930s on, it held little significance for many in eastern Kentucky. Amateur and semiprofessional regional performers drew on the products of Nashville’s Music Row publishing houses for entire songs as well as melodies and paid close attention to the sound of bluegrass music (a commercial country-music style, developed by Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys in the late 1940s, that featured high, rural-flavored singing and the five-string banjo), even as they continued to recycle old melodies and lyrics to offer sharp commentary on social and economic conditions during the great union-organizing struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. And while “protest songs” of that era and later had their roots in the older tradition—both “Which Side Are You On?” and Sarah Ogan Gunning’s memorable “Come All You Coal Miners” fit sharp new lyrics to traditional tunes—they fit easily alongside (and were sometimes adapted from) gospel songs and country material that offered similar, if less pointed, depictions of the social, economic, and emotional difficulties encountered in the lives of working-class people.

One can hear the tangle of influences unmistakably in the songs and singing of the film soundtrack’s most notable composer and performer, West Virginia native Hazel Dickens. Like Gunning and Reece, she was born into a coal-mining family and absorbed older church and communal music influences as a youngster. And like thousands of other Appalachian women, she migrated to an urban area in search of work, where she became intimately familiar with the music of key commercial country singers, like Ernest Tubb and George Jones, even as she encountered the early stirrings of the urban folk music revival,

and the confluence of the two in Baltimore’s thriving bluegrass scene. Her “Black Lung” has a strong archaic flavor in its melody and almost unbearably direct lyric content, while “Mannington” and “They’ll Never Keep Us Down” (the former performed by David Morris, the latter by Dickens, and both with typical bluegrass accompaniment) rely on modern country songwriting practices. Already a veteran performer and pioneering female bluegrass singer-songwriter by the time *Harlan County USA* was made, Dickens went on to a distinguished career that included recognition by the International Bluegrass Music Association and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In the end, the music of *Harlan County USA* reflects the same perseverance and flexibility that the miners and their families demonstrate in their confrontation with the mine operators. Even today, in the face of a seemingly irresistible onslaught of mass-produced popular culture, the musicians of eastern Kentucky and Appalachia have maintained their belief that music can be more than simple entertainment—that it can console and inspire, and by doing both, serve as a rallying cry and as spiritual sustenance—and have demonstrated an ability to cling to essential elements of tradition while embracing useful features of more recent developments. In choosing to feature their music as it already existed, rather than to create a new soundtrack for the movie, the makers of *Harlan County USA* made a wise—indeed, the only—choice.

Jon Weisberger is an award-winning bluegrass musician and a former music journalist. This piece originally appeared in the Criterion Collection’s 2006 edition of Harlan County USA.

ABOUT THE MASTER

Harlan County USA is presented in director Barbara Kopple's preferred aspect ratio of 1.33:1. Supervised and approved by Kopple, this new 4K restoration was created from the original 16 mm A/B/C rolls housed at the Academy Film Archive. The original monaural soundtrack was remastered from the 35 mm DME magnetic track.

Mastering supervisors: Lee Kline, Giles Sherwood

Colorist: Anthony Raffaele/Resillion, New York

Image restoration: Prasad Corporation, Burbank, CA

Audio restoration: The Criterion Collection

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U.M.W. ^{OF} A.
ON STRIKE
Brookside



a film by
BARBARA
KOPPLE

