

Ghosts of West Virginia: A moving new album by Steve Earle & The Dukes

By Matthew Brennan
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Veteran rock and folk musician Steve Earle released an album in May, *Ghosts of West Virginia*. The songs were created in conjunction with a stage play about the 2010 Upper Big Branch (UBB) mine explosion in West Virginia, which killed 29 coal miners.

The documentary-style play *Coal Country*, created by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, opened at New York City's Public Theater just a few weeks before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The production was forced to cancel performances early in the run, along with plans to stage the play throughout the country.

The songs on the album are built into the play itself, with Earle performing much of it onstage with the actors. He stated in recent interviews that he intended the album to stand on its own, to mark the tenth anniversary of the deadliest mining disaster in the US in nearly half a century.

Unlike the stage production, the album includes Earle's long-evolving band The Dukes, which in this incarnation features Chris Masterson on guitar, Eleanor Whitmore on fiddle and vocals, Jeff Hill on bass, Brad Pemberton on drums, Ricky Ray Jackson on pedal steel guitar and dobro and Earle on vocals, guitar and banjo.

The ten songs employ various strands of traditional Appalachian "roots" music, but also incorporate elements of electric blues, folk ballads and up-tempo country music.

Much of the album is lively and sincere, and it is the most interesting music Earle has created in over a decade.

Earle has a long history in country, folk and rock music. He was one of the youngest artists to emerge among a loose collection of largely Texas-based songwriters and musicians during the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes known as the "Outlaw Country" movement.

Operating largely outside of or in opposition to the highly polished Nashville studio sound of the time, these artists generally developed their connection to folk-country in opposition to the Vietnam War and as a wing of the 1960s "counterculture." Earle's style developed within this milieu, which emphasized a poetic "realism" in the lyrics and a guitar blues underpinning to the music, and included artists like Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and Rodney Crowell. A 20-year old Earle can be seen singing among these figures in the 1975

documentary *Heartworn Highways*.

Though he was a songwriter for other artists early in his career, Earle did not produce his own records until the mid-1980s and became popular with wider audiences with the gritty and well-crafted albums *Guitar Town* (1986) and *Copperhead Road* (1988).

After struggling with drug addiction, his career reached a certain high point in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the albums *El Corazon* (1997), *Transcendental Blues* (2000) and the sometimes sharp anti-imperialist war albums *Jerusalem* (2002) and *The Revolution Starts Now* (2003).

Across this period in particular, Earle proved himself a flexible and evolving musician, with a gift for writing moving songs about love and heartache—for example, "The Galway Girl"—that worked well alongside his biting songs about political hypocrisy and social oppression, such as "Rich Man's War" or "The Mountain." The latter song has been revived for inclusion in *Coal Country*, with its attention to the difficulties facing coal miners and their families in southeastern Kentucky.

Earle is a talented guitarist, and, at his best, his songwriting can be refreshingly direct and empathetic. He is a well-known opponent of the criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a principled defender of democratic rights, particularly through his opposition to the death penalty. He collaborated with Blank and Jensen on the 2000 theatrical production of *The Exonerated*, another documentary-style play, about death-row inmates later found to be innocent.

However, since the late 2000s, Earle has not left much of a musical or social mark. It may not be a coincidence that this period coincided with the coming to power of Democrat Barack Obama.

Despite describing himself as a socialist, Earle—along with many others—has consistently supported Democratic presidential candidates since 2008 in the name of the infamous "lesser of two evils." Is it possible that this compromise with one of the two major parties of Wall Street, war and relentless attacks on the working class created an artistic situation in which Earle, no doubt unwittingly, could not be as entirely forthright or radical as he would like to have been? In any event, during the Obama years he produced more demoralized, by-the-numbers music.

But Earle's newest album is something of a reversal in this regard. No doubt one of the strongest driving forces behind *Ghosts of West Virginia* is the subject matter itself, the horrific 2010 mine disaster.

Other than relative slaps on the wrist, very little has been done to prosecute Massey Energy coal operators, safety inspectors and the political officials connected to those responsible for the 29 miners' deaths.

Earle's best songs on *Ghosts of West Virginia* draw their strength from their attention to the difficult and complicated lives of the people involved. In gathering material for the play, he accompanied Blank and Jensen to Beckley, West Virginia to speak with and record the stories of the surviving UBB family members and fellow miners. His sensitivity to the feelings and humanity of these individuals is felt on many of the album's best songs.

The opening two songs, the gospel-tinged "Heaven Ain't Goin' Nowhere" and "Union, God and Country" start by invoking some of the traditional tropes and imagery of previous folk ballads about coal miners, with an emphasis on the difficult lives and work they endure, and the kinds of things that have sustained them through these times in the past.

The next several songs follow in this theme but are stronger in their impact. The banjo-driven blues ballad "Devil Put the Coal in the Ground" and the contemplative "Time is Never on Our Side" each take up the often deadly conditions and potentially short lives miners and their families have to endure.

There is a high level of vibrant and tight musicianship throughout the album between Earle and The Dukes. Earle's gravelly, Texas-twang has a hard-earned edge to it, and he convincingly conveys the sentiments of the miners and families for which sings.

Perhaps the most poignant song in this regard is the driving country-based "It's About Blood." Sung from the perspective of family members and surviving UBB miners, perhaps outside a courtroom or Massey Energy headquarters, the opening verse sets the angry tone: "Look me in the eye when you're talkin' to me/ I wanna see in your soul when you lie/ Don't try and tell me that you couldn't foresee/ What everybody reckoned was a matter of time."

The song builds in this way until the somewhat unexpected crescendo, in which Earle yells out each of the names of the miners killed in the UBB explosion, at times nearly losing his voice.

"It's About Blood" is placed at the midway point of the album. It is a kind of turning point, and is followed by the haunting dirge "If I Could See Your Face Again," sung from the perspective of a widow, and powerfully rendered by Eleanor Whitmore ["Maybe we could find a town/ Where dreams aren't buried underground/ And not so many ghosts around to haunt us"].

The howling "Black Lung" also reminds the listener that the miners who survive tragedies like the UBB disaster face a no

less grim fate potentially in the form of the deadly lung disease specific to coal miners.

The album ends on a stark and gripping image, with the subtly complex song "The Mine." Whether Earle is totally conscious of it or not, the song emphasizes that certain economic imperatives will continue to propel young workers into the mines, despite the dangers.

Sung from the perspective of a young person who wants to prove to his new wife that he can make a life for them, he sees mining as the only way forward. It ends abruptly with the lines "But hey babe, I know it's hard/ These days babe, and you're sick and tired/ But it can only get better and know it's just a matter of time/ Till I get myself together when my brother gets me on at the mine."

Without moralizing, it is a chilling and somewhat objective way for Earle to end. Despite all the misery and difficulty miners and their families take on, the treacherous mines are the only meaningful way to make a living, and the cycle of difficulty will undoubtedly continue for a new generation.

All told it speaks to the strengths of Earle and The Dukes, as a sensitive and musically moving attempt to capture elements in and around the UBB mining disaster, and for workers and families of the region in general.

It is not a totally worked through album. There is a somewhat out-of-place inclusion of a rockabilly song praising the West Virginian military pilot Chuck Yeager ("Fastest Man Alive").

And the approach would be strengthened if Earle were to work through more critically the experiences of the miners with the United Mine Workers of America over the last 40 years. The UMWA's bitter betrayal of the 1984-85 general strike at A.T. Massey was a significant milestone. Time after time, miners have been left vulnerable to exploitation and dangerous working conditions not only by the blood-thirsty coal operators, but also by the UMWA itself, which has become an adjunct of management, and spends much of its efforts isolating and suppressing the opposition of the miners to their conditions. In that sense, songs like "Union, God and Country," while somewhat pleasant musically, lose their emotional punch.

But these weaknesses are largely overshadowed by the overall strengths of the album. Earle and his band have considerable musical talents, and the album is largely a welcome return to his strengths as a serious artist.

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