

I wish to perform a dramatic reading of my short story, "The Singer," from THE LAST BIZARRE TALE [UT Press, 2014],

I perform, as an actor would, both voices of two men in an unbroken duolog as they conduct conflicting comments on a documentary movie that is being shown [only referred to, no actual movie on a screen] in the basement of a church to raise money to finish the film, which is critical of federal government programs to help Eastern Kentucky. The two men also refer to the camera man, a mute, who is showing the film, and who has intercut views of a legendary gospel singer who wandered the mountains, singing.

This is a solo performance, requiring only a microphone.

THE SINGER

By David Madden

Thank you, Reverend Bullard. Your introduction was exaggerated, of course, but I won't say it made me mad. Ladies and gentlemen, I want to say first what splendid work your church has been doing. And I'm speaking now not as a man but as a citizen and a Christian. As the reverend was saying, the church must play a role in the important issues of this changing world of ours. Not don't anybody go away and tell it on me that Pete Simpkins talked here tonight like some radical. Politics is one thing, and the hard facts of social life is another. You can't legislate morality. But now you *can* educate people about the facts of their state government and where it's not doing right by the people. So "Christian Program on Politics" is a good, 100 per cent American name for what you're doing in this election year. Now with the ward your church is in, I don't have to guess how most of you folks have voted for the last half-century, but tonight I just want to *show* you some of the mistruths that the present administration is forcing upon the people, and you can vote accordingly. Because this movie I'm going to show you—which I was in on making—is to show you the truth, instead of what you read in the papers, about how they're wiping out poverty in eastern Kentucky.

You know, in spring, when the floods aren't raging, in summer when they ain't a drought, and in the fall, when the mountain slopes aren't ablaze, eastern Kentucky is beautiful. In the winter, though, I don't hesitate to call it a nightmare landscape: nature hides herself under a mossy rock and you see the human landscape come into focus, especially in *this* winter's record cold and hunger. We took these movies all this summer and fall, off and on, up the narrow valleys, creeks, and hollers of the counties of eastern Kentucky: McCreary, Owsley, Bell, Breathitt, Perry, Pike, Laurel, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Clay, Harlan, Knott, Floyd, and let's see, Magoffin, Martin, Whitley, and Wolfe.

So let me show you what we saw in eastern Kentucky. Now, you understand, we're in the early stages of working on this movie. We got a lot of work and a heap of fundraising ahead of us yet, before we can get it in shape to release to the general public on TV and at rallies where it can do the damage. So, Fred, if you're ready to roll....

Wayne, you want to get up here with me, so if there's any questions I can't answer, maybe you can? Come on up. You had more to do with this project than I did. As the reverend told you, ladies and gentlemen, Wayne was our advance man. We sent him ahead to prepare the people for the cameras—set things up. I got my poop sheets laying on the pulpit here, Wayne, else I'd let you see how it feels to stand in the preacher's shoes.

You're doing fine, Pete.

Then let's start, Fred....Ha! Can you all see through me okay? Those numbers show up awful clear on my shirt. I better scoot off to the side a little. Now, soon's those numbers stop flashing, you'll see what the whole national uproar is about. People better quit claiming credit before it's due, just because

they're trying to win an election.

Now these washed-out shoulders you can blame on the Department of Highways and Politics. Coming down the steep mountainsides, you have to swerve to miss holes that look to be made by hand grenades, and then around the curve you try to miss the big trucks. Hard freezes, sudden thaws, an coal truck traffic too heavy for the roads they travel can tear up a cheap narrow road. But if the administration kept its promises to maintain certain standards of construction . . .

Folks, that's not an Indian mound, that's a slag heap. Something else that greets you around every curve: slate dumps from shut-down mines and sawdust piles from abandoned wood-pecker mills, smoldering, thousands of them, smoldering for ten years or more. The fumes from these dumps'll peel the paint off your house. A haze always hangs over the towns and the taste of coal is in the air you breathe. That smell goes away with you in your clothes.

Good shot of one of those gas stations from the 1930s. Remember those tall, skinny, old-timey orange pumps with the glass domes? This station was lived in for about twenty-five years before it was abandoned. They don't demolish anything around there. Plenty of room to build somewhere else. Look at that place. You know, traveling in eastern Kentucky makes you feel you're back in the '30s. Ah! Now this is a little ghost town called Blackey.

I think this is Decoy, Pete.

Decoy. And I mean, there's not a soul lives there. But plenty of evidence a lot of them once did. You get there up fifteen miles of dirt road. Millions of dollars were mined out of there. That's the company store, there's the hospital, post office, jail, schoolhouse—turned coal camp gray, and may as well be on the dark side of the moon. See the old mattress draped over the tree limb, and all the floors—see that—covered with a foot of wavy mud that's hardened over the summer. That crust around the walls close to the ceiling marks the level of the flood that bankrupted what was left of the company. Ripped couches in the yard there, stink weeds all around, rusty stovepipes, comic books, romance magazines, one shoe in the kitchen sink, the other somewhere out in the yard under the ropes where they've hacked the swing down. Rooms full of mud daubers building nests, dead flies on the sills and half-eaten spiderwebs. And over the crusts of mud in the houses and in the yards is strowed about a bushel of old letters from boys that joined the services out of desperation or hoping for adventure, and photographs the people left behind when they fled to God knows where. So it's just out there in the middle of the wilderness, doing nothing. Decoy.

Here we are in a typical eastern Kentucky town. Harlan, wudn't it, Wayne?

Hazard.

Hard to tell them apart. Well, next time we show this thing, God willing, it'll have one of the biggest TV announcers in Louisville narrating.

See the way the slopes of the mountains kindly make a bowl around Harlan? Houses cover the hillsides—just sort of flung up there. No streets or even dirt roads leads up to some of them. Swaying staircases and crooked paths go up to those porches that hover above the road there. Go along eh highway, and see washing machines and refrigerators parked on the front porches. See high up, just below the clouds, that brown house with the long porch—just clinging to the cliffside? Houses like that all over, deserted, some of them just charred shells, the roofs caved in under tons of snow, the junk spewed out the front door.

Now *this* you see everywhere you go: old folks sitting on the front porch in half-deserted coal camps. On relief, on the dole, *been* on the dole since the war. That old man isn't near as old as he looks. Worked in the mines before they laid him off and idleness went to work on him like erosion. Wife got no teeth, no money to get fitted. Dipped snuff and swigged RCs to kill the pain of a mouth full of cavities till the welfare jerked them all out for her. And there comes the little baby—right through the ripped screen door—grandchild the daughter left behind when she went to Chicago or Cincinnati or Detroit or Baltimore, which is where they all go. Didn't they say this baby's momma had it, Wayne, just had it, so they could collect on it?

Yeah.

And another girl, under twenty-one, had four babies and drew on *all* of them. Why, the government takes an interest in her that no husband could hope to match. Look at that baby's little tummy, swollen out there like a—Fred, you shoulda held on that one.

And this is a general view of how high the mountains are. *Way* up high . . . (What *was* the point of that, Wayne?)

(I don't know.)

See that stream? Watch . . . See that big splash of garbage? Fred, did you get a good shot of that woman? *There* you go! She just waltzed out in her bare feet and tossed that lard bucket of slop over the back banister without batting an eye.

Even the industries dump—

Well . . . And that stream—Big Sandy, I think. See how low it runs? Well, every spring it climbs those banks and pours down that woman's chimney and washes out every home along that valley. See the strips of red cloth left hanging on the branches of the trees? Like flagging a lot of freight trains. And rags and paper and plastic bleach jugs dangle from the bushes and from the driftwood that juts up out of the riverbed mud. In the summer those banks swarm with green, but don't let it fool you. See how wavy that mud is? And that little bright trickle of poisoned water. Fish *die* in that stuff, so leave your pole at home. And stay away from the wells. Lot of them polluted.

This is a trash dump on a slope high above Harlan where whole families go to root for "valuable." Look like bats clinging to a slanting wall, don't they? But if you go in among them, why, seems like it's just a Sunday family outing.

Most of the graveyards are up on a hill like this one, to escape the floods, I guess. But living on the mountains, maybe the natural way of thinking is up. Look close under that inscription: it's a photograph, sealed in glass, showing the deceased sitting in the front-porch swing with his wife, morning-glories climbing the trellis.

With that red sky behind them, those kadziu vines crawling all over the hillsides, dripping from the trees, look like big lizards rising up out of the mud. Come around a bend on a steep mountain highway and they've crept to the edge. Those kadziu vines are the last greens to go.

Here we are up in the mountains again. (Who said to shoot the scenic overlooks, Wayne?)

(Nobody. Fred loved to shoot the view, I suppose.)

(That'd be fine if this was called "Vacation in Eastern Kentucky.") Now, this part, Wayne, I don't remember at all.

This is Cumberland. You were still asleep and Fred and I went out for coffee and passed this big crowd—Wait a minute . . .

Actually, folks, this is the first time I've had a chance to see the stuff. I told Fred just to throw it together for tonight. The real editing comes later.

Just a bunch of miners standing on a street corner. You might take notes on some of this stuff, Fred, stuff to cut out, and, ladies and gentlemen, I hope *you* will suggest what---

Good Lord, Fred!

(Watch your language, Wayne, I saw it.) Fred, I think you got some black-and-white footage accidentally mixed in. Folks, please excuse this little technical snafu, but as I say we wanted to get this *on* the screen for you, get your reactions, and I think Fred here—He's worked pretty hard and late hours, these past three weeks especially, and we only got back to Louisville a few days ago. . . . Ha! Ha. Fred, how much of this? . . . As some of you folks may know, Fred is mute.

Now this, ladies and gentlemen, is the girl some of you have been reading about in the *Courier*. And the other girl, the one leaning against the front of that empty pool hall, is--- Wayne, I don't think—I'm sure these fine people aren't interested in hearing any more about that little incident. Listen, Fred, that machine has a speed-up on it, as I recall.

I think he brought the old Keystone, Pete.

Oh. Well, folks, I don't know how long this part lasts, and I apologize for Fred, but we'll just have to wait till it runs out.

In the meantime, what I could do is share with you some facts I've collected from eyewitnesses and that my research staff has dug out for me. Barely see my notes in this dim light. The Cumberland Mountains are a serrated upland region that was once as pretty as the setting of that old *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* movie. It has a half-million inhabitants. But there's been a twenty-eight per cent decline in population of people between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, and an *increase* of about 85 per cent old people. In some counties about half the population is on relief and it's predicted that some day about 80 per cent of the whole region will be drawing commodities. There's about twenty-five per cent illiteracy for all practical purposes, and those that *do* get educated leave. And something that surprises me is that there's only about fifteen per cent church affiliation. All in all, I'd say the poverty is worse than Calcutta, India, and the fertility rate is about as high, seems like to me. In other words, the people are helpless and the situation is hopeless. The trouble with this administration is that they *think* a whole lot *can* be done, and then they claim credit even before they do it, to make *us* look bad. We don't make no such promises. Because we see that the facts---

I think a lady in the audience has her hand up, Pete.

Ma'am? . . . I'm sorry, that old moving-picture machine makes such a racket, you'll have to speak louder.

Pete, I think what she said was, "Did any of us get to talk with her?"

With who? Oh. Ma'am, that really isn't what this movie is about. We went in there with the best color film money can buy to shoot poverty, and where Fred got this cheap black and white newsreel stock---

I think it was from that New York crew.

Now, Wayne, this is not the place to drag all that business in. We came here tonight to show what it's like to live in the welfare state where all a body's got is promises instead of bread to put on the table. *I* know. *I come* from those people. Now there *are* some legitimate cripples, caused by explosions, fires, roof-falls and methane gas poisoning in the mines, and some have been electrocuted and blinded and afflicted with miner's asthma. But a majority that's on relief are welfare malingerers who look forward to getting "sick enough to draw," and whose main ambition is to qualify for total and permanent disability. For those people, all these aids, gifts, grants, and loans are the magic key to the future, but I see it as what's undermining public morals and morale. That's the story I was hired to get, and as I remember that's the story we *got*, on those thousands of feet of expensive color film. And if--- Well, now we're back at the heart of the matter. Her we are on Saturday in Hazard.

Pete.

What?

I think *that's* Harlan.

Wayne, I was *born* in Harlan.

Well, Pete, there's that twelve foot pillar of coal in the middle of the intersection, which you told us to shoot because it belonged to your childhood.

Fred's got the whole thing so fouled up, he's probably spliced Hazard and Harlan together.

Okay. . . .

Now the shot's *gone*. That, as you could see, folks, *was* the bread line. The monthly rations.

I guess Wayne was right, after all. Says WORK, THINK, BUY coal, painted right across the top of the town's highest building.

Here you see a mother and her four kids standing beside the highway, waiting for her goldbricking husband to row across the river and pick her up and take the rations and the donated clothes over to the old log cabin—calked with mud, see that, and ambushed by briars and weeds. That's their swinging bridge, dangling in the water from the flood last spring that he's too lazy to---

Now this is *really* the kind of thing we went in there to get. That's not a desert, that's a dry river bed those two women are crossing. What they're lugging on their backs is tow-sacks full of little pieces of

shale coal that---Now see that steep ridge? You can just barely make them out on the path now. See that? See that man under the bridge? A little too dark . . . Get down under there, Fred. *There* we go! Squatting on the bottom of that dry river bed with his five kids, actually rooting in the dirt for pieces of coal no bigger than a button that the floods washed down from the mountains. Whole family grubbing for coal, looking toward winter. Sunday. Bright fall morning. Church bells ringing in Harlan while we were shooting. Kids dirty. Noses and sores running. Don't that one remind you of pictures of children liberated from Auschwitz? Look at the way he stares at you. I offered to *buy* the man a truckload of coal. What he said, I won't repeat. Who's he talking to now, Wayne?

Fred.

Sure got a good close-up of him, Fred. The eye that belongs in that empty socket is under tons of coal dust in some choked-up mine shaft, and when he lifts those buckets and starts to follow the women, he'll limp.

Black and white again, Fred! Now where did this stuff *come* from? Who's paying for this waste?

That other crew, Pete, when they went back to New York, they practically gave it to Fred in exchange for a tank of gas.

(Wayne, I wouldn't be surprised if Fred put up as much as he made on the whole expedition.)

(Frankly, I think he did.)

Fred, shut off the dang picture and let the thing wind ahead by itself.

This is the old machine, Pete.

(I don't understand how he could make such a mistake. Anybody can see when they've got color and when---)

Pete, young man in the back has his hand up.

Yes? . . . Listen, son, I don't know one thing about that girl. In fact, I'd be happy to forget what little I *do* know. All three of them, in fact, and the motorsickle and the whole mess. . . .I'm sorry, you'll have to talk louder . . . (Wayne, you should have *previewed* this movie!) Now, son, I don't have a thing to say about that girl.

(Well, somebody better say *something*, Pete. It's only human for them to be interested.)

(Then *you* tell them. You're as bad as Fred was—*is*.)

To answer your question, young man. No one has yet located the parents of the two girls.

These shots show them walking along the highway between Whitesburg and Millstone. The smoke you see is coming from one of those slag heaps Pete was telling about. It's the first light of morning before the coal trucks begin to roll. Later, on down the road, one of those trucks, going around a hairpin curve, turned over and slung coal almost 200 feet. That's The Singer, as she was called, the one with the guitar slung over her shoulder, and there's the friend, who always walked a few steps behind, like a servant. These black and white shots were taken by the crew from New York. I don't think *they* were mentioned in the newspaper stories, though. But they crossed paths with the girls in Wheelright, Lovely, Upper Thousand Sticks, Dalna, Coal Run, Highsplint, and other towns along the way. Yes, Reverend Bullard? What did he say?

He said no smoking on church premises, Pete.

Oh. Sorry, reverend. Nervous habit, I guess.

Somewhere in here is a shot of the preacher who started it all. Soon after people started talking about The Singer, he described himself as God's transformer. Claimed God's electricity flowed through *him* into *her*. The day they found the girls, he put it a different way—said he was only God's impure vessel.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to focus your attention on a really fine shot of a rampaging brushy fire that---

Hey, Fred, I didn't know you got those girls in color!

Okay, Fred, okay, okay! Just throw the switch! Lights, somebody! Lights!

Fred, Pete said to cut the projector off!

Folks, I apologize for Fred, but I had no way of knowing. Fred, this is what I call a double cross, a real live doublecross, Fred! You promised that if I'd hire you back, you'd stay away from that New York outfit and those two girls.

(Pete, aren't you doing more harm than good by just cutting the thing off?)

(This stuff don't belong in the picture.)

(Just look at their faces. They want to know all about it, they want to *see* every inch of film on that reel.)

(This ain't what I come to show.)

(She couldn't be in *all* of it. We didn't run into her that often, and neither did that New York bunch.)

(It's distracting as hell.)

(The poverty footage is *on* the reel, too, you know.)

(You *want* to tell them, don't you? *He* wants to *show* them and *you* want to tell all about it. Admit it.)

(Look, Pete, it's only natural---)

(Yeah, like looking for a job when you're out of one. Go ahead. Tell them. If Fred wasn't a mute, he'd furnish the sound track in person.)

Folks, this is just our little joke tonight. We thought we'd experiment. You know, give you a double feature, both on the same reel.

Here, Fred got a shot of the revival tent in Blue Diamond where she first showed up about five weeks ago, early in September. That's a blown-up photograph of Reverend Daniel in front of the tent. Sun kind of bleached it out, but the one in the paper was clear.

That's the old company store at Blue Diamond and the photographs you see on the bulletin board there are of miners killed in the war. Maybe one of them was The Singer's brother.

The tent again . . .

The way people tell it, Reverend Daniel was preaching pretty hard, lashing out at sinners, when he suddenly walked straight to the back, pointing at a girl that he said he knew wanted to be saved because she had committed a terrible sin that lay heavy on her heart. And standing where the tent flap was pulled back, dripping rain, was this girl. Thin and blond, with the biggest eyes you ever saw.

Good footage on that wrecked car in the creek, Fred. You know, the young men go to *Detroit* to work awhile, get homesick and drive some broken-down Cadillac or Buick back home and leave it where it crashed in the river or broken down in the front yard, and the floods ship it on to the next town. Hundreds of roadside scrap yards like this one where cars look like cannibals have been at them. Good panoramic shot. Fred's pictures are worth a thousand words when he's got his mind on his work.

And here's Fred shooting the mountains again. Couldn't get enough of those look-offs.

So there she stood, a little wet from walking to the tent in the rain, and Reverend Daniel led her up front, and pretty soon he began to heal the afflicted. They say he was great that night. Had them all down on the ground. He laid hands on them, and there was speaking in tongues, and those who weren't on the ground were singing or doing a sort of dance-like walk they do. And when it was all over, he went among them with his portable microphone and asked them to testify.

Then he came to *her*. And instead of talking, she began to sing. A man that lived nearby was sitting on his porch, and he said he thought it was the angels, coming ahead of Gabriel.

She sang "Power in the Blood" for an hour, and when she stopped, Reverend Bullard— excuse me—Reverend *Daniel* asked her what she suffered from. And when she didn't speak, he said he bet it was rheumatic fever, and when she still didn't speak---

Moving on now, we see a typical country schoolhouse. In the middle of the wilderness, a deserted schoolhouse is not just an eyesore, it's part of the country. When people live on the front porch, relics

of the past are always in view, reminding them of times that's gone: the era of the feuds, of the timber industry, of the coming of the railroad, of the moonshine wars, and of the boom and bust of coal. Ha! Fooled you, didn't I? Thought it was deserted. Ha. There's the teacher in her overcoat, and the kids all bundled up in what little clothes they have. See that one girl with rags wrapped around her legs in place of boots? That's the reason: gaps between the boards a foot wide. And believe me, it gets cold in those mountains. Now what's the administration going to say to the voters about *that* when they go to the polls in November? They claim they're *improving* conditions.

From the highway, you don't often see the scars in the earth from the strip mines and the black holes where the augers have bored. I suppose those New York boys are trying here to give you an impressions of the landscape The Singer wandered over. On the highways, you may pass a truck hauling big augers, but to watch the auger rig boring, you have to climb steep dirt roads. That's where The Singer and her friend seem to be going now— not on purpose, I don't think. Just aimlessly wandering, those New York boys following close behind with their black and white. Now, who's *that* girl? Oh, yeah, the one that starred in *their* movie. What was her name? Deirdre. . . . Back to The Singer again. Going on up the winding road, and those black eyes staring at you out of that far hillside—auger holes seven feet in diameter. The dust those trucks stir up barreling down the mountain is from spoil banks that get powder-dry in the summer and it sifts down, along with coal grit, onto the little corn and alfalfa and clover that still grows in the worn-out land. With its trees cut down by the stripping operation, its insides ripped out by the augers, this mountain is like some mangy carcass, spewing out fumes that poison the air and the streams.

Where these augers and the strip mining have been, snows, rains, floods, freezes, and thaws cause sheet erosion, and rock big as tanks shoot down on people's cabins. This used to be rich bottomland. Now it's weeds, broomsedge, and thickets. Don't look for an old bull-tongue plow on *those* hillsides. And the big trees are gone. Of course, the blight got the chestnuts, but what do you call *this*?

Wayne, let's keep in mind the money that helped make this movie possible.

Well, this, friends, was once called Eden. Some people have reason to call it dark and bloody ground. There's places that look like the petrified forest, places like the painted desert, but it's a wasteland, whatever you call it, and the descendants of the mountaineers are trespassers on company property that their fathers sold for a jug, ignorant as a common Indian of its long-term value. And they can't look to the unions any more. The UMWA has all but abandoned them, some say, while the bulldozers that made the road and which drag that auger apparatus into place for another boring every hour continue what some people call the rape of the Appalachians. . . . I'm sorry, I didn't hear the question?

Young lady wants to know what happened next.

Next? Oh. You mean about The Singer? Oh, yes. Well, the story, which we got piece by piece, has it that when the girl didn't speak, Reverend Daniel got a little scared and looked around for someone that knew her.

In the entrance to the tent, where The Singer had stood, was another girl: black-haired, sort of stocky, just a little cross-eyed, if you remember the picture, but pretty enough to attract more men than was good for her. She didn't know The Singer but was staring at her in a strange way, and several boys in leather jackets were trying to get her to come away from the tent and go off with them.

Now this is a shot of the girls drinking from a spring that gushes out of the mountain with enough force to knock a man down. Her friend sees the cameraman and steps behind The Singer to block her from the camera. Those New York boys would barge right in without blinking an eye.

Well, Reverend Daniel did find someone who knew her and who said there was absolutely nothing wrong with her, physically or mentally, that when she saw her the day before The Singer was

just fine. That made everybody look at Reverend Daniel a little worried, and he turned pale, but an old, old woman began to do that dance and speak in tongues and when she calmed down she said *she* knew what had come over the girl. Said she had what they call—
Now here we see the Negro section of Harlan. Notice—

Just a second, Pete.

The old lady said that the girl had got a calling, to sing for Jesus. And The Singer began to sing again, and the girl that travels with Reverend Daniel gave The Singer her guitar, said, “Take it, keep it, use it to sing for Jesus.” Then *she* took up the tambourine, the whole tent began to shake with singing, The Singer’s voice soaring above it all, and listen, ladies and gentlemen, before that night nobody in that area knew a thing about her singing.

You pass this condemned swimming pool and that graveyard of school buses and go over a concrete-railing bridge that humps in the middle and there you are in the Negro slums. The cement street burns into a dirt road a country block long, and the houses are identical, and the ones that haven’t turned brown are still company green. See, the street is just a narrow strip between that hill and the river that floods the houses every year. At each end, wild bushes reach up to the tree line. At the back steps, a steep hill starts up. There’s no blackness like midnight dark in the Cumberland Mountains, but the white man can walk this street safely. No one wants to discourage him from buying the white lightning and the black women. And here we are inside the dance hall where the Negroes are having a stomping Saturday night good time. Awful dim, but if you strain a little . . .

Want to let me finish, Pete?

Then The Singer walked out of the tent and they followed her up the highway, but she kept walking, higher and higher into the mountains, and the people kept falling back, until only one person walked behind her—that black-haired girl with the slightly crossed eyes.
You through?

Sure, go ahead.

(They just *missed* the greatest shot in the whole movie.)

(They saw it, Pete.)

(The hell. They were listening to *you*, ‘stead of looking at the *move-ee*. For an Ohio Yankee you sure act like you know it all. Now when *my* part is on, *you* shut up.)

(Fair enough, Pete.)

More of the black and white. . . Shots of The Singer at a coal tippie near Painsville. Truck mine. No railroad up this branch, so they just pop-shoot it with dynamite and truck it out.

Anyway, what would happen was that The Singer and the other girl would walk along and whenever and *wherever* the spirit moved her, The Singer would sing. Just sing, though. She couldn’t, wouldn’t, anyway *didn’t* speak a word. Only sing. And while she sang, she never sat down or leaned against anything. Hardly any expression on her face. Sometimes she seemed to be in a trance, sometimes a look on her face like she was trying to hide pain, sometimes a flicker of a smile, but what got you in the funny way was that the song hardly ever called for the little things she did, except the happy songs, “I Love to Tell the Story,” or “Just As I Am,” you know—those she’d plunge into with a smile at first, until she would be laughing almost hysterically in a way that made you want to hug her, but, of course, nobody, not even the kind of women that’ll take hold of a sweating girl full of the Holy Ghost and drench her with tears, really dared to. No, not The Singer.

She wasn’t touched, that I know of, though people sort of reached for her as she passed.

But then sometimes you’d feel that distance between you and her and next thing you knew she’d be so close in among people you could smell her breath, like cinnamon. She had ways of knocking you off balance, but so you only fell deeper into her song. Like she’d be staring into your eyes, and her lids would drop on a note that was going right through you. Or coming out of a pause between verses, she’d suddenly take three steps toward you.

They walked, they never rode. They walked thousands of miles through those hills,

aimlessly: through Sharondale, Vicco, Kingdom Come, Cumberland Gap, Cody, along Hell-for-Certain Creek, and up through Pine Mountain.

And here we are in a jailhouse in Manchester. Handle a lot of coal around there. And these boys you see looking through the bars are teenagers the sheriff rounded up the night before. Out roving the highways in these old cars, shooting up road signs. They loved having their picture taken—a mob of little Jesse Jameses.

Now, I ask you: can the administration just *give* these youngsters jobs?

Winding road . . . coiled up like a rattlesnake. See where those boys—WATCH FOR FALLEN ROCK. Just shot it all to pieces. Most of them will end up in the penitentiary *making* road signs.

Now in this shot—in Hellier, I think—The Singer has wandered into a church and they've followed her. And off to the side there, among the parked cars and pickup trucks, you can see the other girl, leaning against the door of a car, talking to some men and boys. Can't see them for the car. There. See them? Talking to her? Well, that's the way it was, after awhile.

A boy told one of the young men on the New York crew that he was outside the tent at Blue Diamond that first night, and that the black-haired girl was going from car to car where the men were waiting for their wives to come out of the revival tent and the young boys were waiting for the girls to come out. But this girl never made it in. They always waited for her outside, and she went with all of them. And then—I don't know who or where I got it—the girl heard the singing and left the cab of a coal truck and went to the entrance of the tent, and then when The Singer went out to the highway, she followed her. Then after about a week---

Oh. Go ahead, Pete.

Folks, here we are, back on the track, with a shot we were afraid wouldn't come out. Good job, Fred. A carload of pickets waiting to join a caravan. Eight young men in that car, all of them armed. You can hear them at night, prowling up and down the highways in long caravans, waking you up, and if you look between the sill and the shade by your bed, you can see lights flashing against Black Mountain under the cold sky, full of stars.

And here we are swinging down the mountainside. . . . Some of the early September shots before this record cold drove people indoors. We just suddenly, in the bright morning sunlight, came upon this train, derailed in the night by dynamite. Don't it look like an exhibit out in that big open space, all those crowded porches huddled around on the bare hillside?

Going along the highway, you can expect to find anything in the yards, even in front of inhabited houses. See that car? Pulled up by a block and tackle tossed over a tree limb—looks like an old-time lynching. This man's taken the junk that the floods leave on his porch—sometimes on his roof—and arranged a *display* of it all in his yard.

You look up and see those long porches, hanging over the road, seems like, clinging to the steep slopes, and what it reminds *me* of is little villages in Europe when I was in the army. Whole family sitting out there, on the railing, on car seats jerked out of wrecks on the highway, on cane-bottom chairs salvaged from their cabin home places far in the mountains, talking and swirling RCs and watching the road. For *what*?

Well, for *her*, wouldn't you say, Pete? Word of her singing ran ahead of her, and since nobody knew where she'd turn up next . . . One time she even walked right into a congregation of snake handlers and started singing. But not even that brazen New York crew got any shots of *that*. And sometimes she'd walk right out of the wildest woods, the other girl a little behind, both of them covered with briars and streaked with mud.

Here—somewhere along the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River—Fred seems to be trying to give an impression of the road, the winding highway The Singer walked. Pretty fall leaves stripped from the branches now. Abandoned coal tipples, bins, chutes, ramps, sheds, clinging to the bare hillsides like wild animals flayed and nailed to an old door. Those stagnant yellow ponds where the rain collects breed mosquitoes and flies the way the abandoned towns and the garbage on the

hillsides breed rats. You may leave this region, but the pictures of it stick in your mind like cave drawings.

Here you see The Singer and her friend walking along one of these mountain roads again.

Too bad those New York boys couldn't afford color. A light morning rain has melted most of the snow that fell the night before. This is along Troublesome Creek and they've already been through Cutshin, Diablock, Meta, Quicksand, Jeff, and Carbon Glow, Lynch, and Mayking. By the way, the reason the girls are dressed that way—style of the '30s—is because they're wearing donated clothes. Remember the appeal that came over television and filled the fire stations with clothes after last spring's flood?

These artificial legs were displayed in a window near our *hotel* next to the railroad depot in Harlan. Nice, hazy Sunday morning sunlight, but *that*, and this shot of a pawnshop window—little black-muzzled, pearl-handled revolvers on pretty little satin cushions—reminds you of what kind of life these people have in the welfare state. And those windows piled high with boots and shoes beyond repair are something else you see at rest on Sunday in Harlan.

There they are in front of a movie theater---What's that showing? Oh, yeah, an old Durango Kid movie. Fred and I saw that in another town—Prestonsburg, I think. Never forget the time she walked into a movie theater and started to sing right in the middle of a showdown in some cowboy shoot-out, and one big lummoX started throwing popcorn at her till the singing reached him and he just left his hand stuffed in the bag like it was a bear trap.

Anyway, as I was telling before, the other girl, after about a week, took to luring the men away from The Singer because they began to follow her and bother her and try to start something with her, so the friend had to distract them from her, and ended up doing the very thing she had tried to stop herself from doing by going with The Singer. They say The Singer never seemed to know what was going on. She'd walk on up the highway or on out of town and the other girl would catch up.

See how they just nail their political posters to the nearest tree? Sun sure bleached that man out, didn't it?

Here, Fred got a shot of the New York movie crew getting out of their station wagon. Three young men and a girl. Looks like somebody scraped the bottom of a barrel full of Beatniks, doesn't it? The local boys and men kept teasing them about their beards and they tried to laugh along, but finally they would get into fights, and we'd come into a town just after they had gone, with the police trying to get people out of the street, or the highway patrol escorting the crew into the next county. They came down to shoot what they called an art movie. They told Fred the story once and I listened in, but I can't remember a thing about it, except that this girl named Deirdre was going to be in it. She *was* in it. Yeah, this is one of the scenes! Shot her *in front of* a lot of things, and she would kind of sway and dip around among some local people—just like that—and everybody—Yeah, see the big grins on their faces? And the director kept begging them to look serious, look serious.

That's one of *yours*, Pete.

Shots of old men in front of the courthouse. . . . Young boys, too. . . . No work. Bullet holes around the door from the '30s. Bad time, bad time.

What those guys did, Wayne, was make everybody mad, so that when *we* came rolling into town, they were ready to shoot anybody that even *looked* like he wanted to pull out a camera.

Yeah. Always pointing those loaded cameras at things and running around half-cocked, shoot, shoot, shooting.

Then they ran into The Singer and her friend, and—Yeah, this is the one, this is actually the *first* shot they took of The Singer. First, this is a close-up of *their* girl—Deirdre—you're looking at, long stringy hair, soulful eyes to make the tears run. One time they even put something *in* her eyes to make the tears run. And in just a second they'll swing to catch The Singer. That's it! See

the camera jerk? The script writer saw The Singer on the opposite corner and jerked the cameraman around. Here you can see The Singer's friend standing off to one side, on the lookout for trouble-makers—front of a little café in Frenchberg. Cameraman got her in the picture by accident, but later when the director caught on to what she was *doing* with The Singer, he hounded her to death. Made her very angry a couple of times. Deirdre in *his* movie though—

Pete . . .

What's you want?

Your part's on.

Well . . .that's, as you can see . . .the garbage in the streams there . . .kids with rickets . . .brush fire in the mountains . . .

I was about to say about the folk singer from Greenwich Village—Deirdre—she got very angry too, over the way the movie boys took after The Singer, so she threatened to get a bus back to New York. But after they had listened to people tell about The Singer in the towns they came into, not long after she had gone on, and after they had tracked her down a few times, and after Deirdre had heard her sing, she got so she tried to follow The Singer. Deirdre ran away from the movie boys once, and when they caught up with her the black-haired girl was trying to fight off some local boys who though Deirdre was like *her*. But she wasn't. Not after The Singer got to her, anyway. I don't know what Deirdre was like in New York, but in Cumberland Mountains she heard one song too many. I never saw her after she changed, either. Finally, the New York boys had to lock her in a room at the Phoenix Hotel in Salyersville and one stayed behind to watch over her. Wish we had a shot of that hotel. White, a century old, or more, three stories in front, four in back, little creek running behind it. Three porches along the front. Sit in a broken chair and watch the people go by below. If you're foolish, you sit on the rail. If you leave the windows open in the room at the back, you wake up covered with dew and everything you touch is damp.

Pete.

Shots of another abandoned shack . . .

Go ahead, Pete.

They can see it okay . . .same old thing . . .

Oh. Now *that's* Reverend Daniel, the one that ministered to The Singer in Blue Diamond. He'd moved his tent to Pikeville and that's where we saw him, and got these shots of his meeting. Promised him a stained-glass window for his tent if he'd let us, didn't we, Wayne? Ha! Anyway, next time we saw him was a week ago, just before the accident, and he told me how he had offered to make The Singer rich if she would sing here in Louisville. Told her people all over Kentucky had read about the wandering singer for Jesus, and that he could make her famous all over the world, and they could build the biggest church in the country, and stuff like that. She just looked at him and walked on. He pestered her awhile, but finally gave up after about six miles of walking. Wayne, you saw him after it happened, didn't you?

Yeah. He blames himself. Thinks he should have looked after her. As though God meant him to be not just a transformer but a guardian angel, too. He'll never put up another tent as long as he lives.

And that girl—Deirdre—that came down from New York, she could be dead for all we know. The boy that was guarding her---

Sid he shouldn't have told her about what happened on the highway.

Slipped out of the Phoenix *Hotel* somehow and vanished.

She *may* turn up in New York.

And she might turn up alongside some highway in the mountains, too.

This is one of Fred's few shots of the girls. He hated to disturb them. Actually, The Singer never paid any attention to us or to the other crew, did she, Pete? Mostly, Fred listened to her sing, standing in the crowds in Royalton, Hardburley, Coalville, Chevrolet, Lothair, his camera in his

case, snapped shut. Right, Fred? But here, while they sat on a swinging bridge, eating—well, the friend eating, because nobody ever saw The Singer put a bite of food in her mouth, just drink at the mountain springs—Fred got them with his telephoto lens from up on one of those look-offs beside the road.

Kind of grainy and the color's a little blurred, but it looks like it's from a long way off through a fine blue mist at about twilight. Nice shot, Fred.

There's those numbers on my shirt again. What about that? Fred, you want to catch that thing—film flapping that way gets on my nerves.

Personally, I'm glad nobody's got the *end* on film.

Know what you mean, Wayne.

What the papers didn't tell was---

That the boy on the motorsickle? . . .

Wasn't *looking* for the girls.

And he wasn't a member of some wild California gang crossing the country, either.

Go ahead and tell them, Pete.

That's okay. You tell it, Wayne.

The way Fred go the story—Fred, this is one time when I really wish you could speak for *yourself*. Fred was the one who kept his arms around the boy till he stopped crying.

Tell them where it happened.

Outside Dwarf on highway 82. The girls were walking along in the middle of the highway at about 3 o'clock in the morning and a thin sheet of ice was forming, and this motorcycle cam down the curve, and if he hadn't slammed on his brakes---

More or less as a reflex---

It wouldn't have swerved and hit them.

You see, Fred had set out to catch up with them. Me and Wayne'd left him to come back to Louisville alone, because he said he was going to stop off a day or two to visit his cousin in Dwarf, and when he pulled in for coffee at Hindman and some truck driver told him he *thought* he had seen the girl's walking, out in the middle of nowhere, Fred got worried, it being so cold, and ---

So he tried to catch up to them.

The girls and the boy were lying in the road.

Kid come all the way from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Yeah, that's where they got the facts wrong in the paper. Saying he was some local hoodlum, then switching to the claim that he was with a gang from California. The fact is that the boy had quit school and bought a brand new black Honda, and he had set out to see the

United States.

Wait a second, Wayne. Fred's trying to hand you a note.

Thanks, Fred. Oh. Ladies and gentlemen, Fred says here that it wasn't *Halifax*, Nova Scotia. He says, "It was *Glasgow*, Nova Scotia. Not that it matters a damn."