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West Virginia

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Release pairs first-person accounts of life in coal camps with music

Paw Paw native drawn to stories reflecting heritage of freed slaves and immigrants drawn to mines by promise of jobs

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BERKELEY SPRINGS, W.Va. — Singer/songwriter Mary Hott has released “Devil In The Hills: Coal Country Reckoning,” a song cycle that was inspired by the first-person accounts of life deep in West Virginia’s southern coalfields.

“It was a life that was, at best, tough,” said Hott. “At its worst, it was a life dominated by the systemic oppression that kept miners under the thumb of coal companies, their bosses and their henchmen.”

A seventh-generation West Virginian who was born and raised in Paw Paw, with a current population of just under 500, Hott was led to the stories by a visit to The Whipple Company Store, a former coal company store-turned-museum in Fayette County.

The building’s owner shared

her collection of first-person stories from former coal camp residents.

Hott was drawn to the stories as she recognized similarities in her own family’s history. What followed was a three-year journey which was, by turns, “debilitating and spiritually cleansing,” she said.

The tales were haunting, reflecting the cultural heritage of the freed slaves and immigrants from dozens of countries who had been lured to the mines with the promise of jobs, Hott said. And for the first time, many women spoke out. Their heart-wrenching stories had been kept secret within their families for decades, she added.

“From the moment I read

the stories I connected with the heartache and pain,” said Hott. “Those people were at the end of their lives when they shared stories from decades before about the rape, torture, and murder that took place in the coal camps, to terrorize miners and their families, to keep them from unionizing. It took me a long time to complete this album, partly because I had to take breaks and reevaluate whether I could open to the emotions of it all.”

She spent three years sorting through the stories, writing the lyrics and, finally, turning them into songs that would stand on their own.

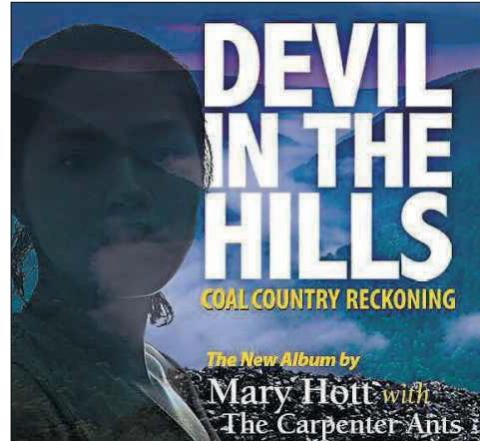
“As a culture we must acknowledge our deepest wounds in order to move forward. For years we have acknowledged what the extraction industries have done to our soil, air and water, but not what has been done to

our people,” said Hott, who lived in New York City and Boston before moving back to the Mountain State. She has resided in Berkeley Springs since 2006.

To frame these stories in a compelling musical context, Hott enlisted The Carpenter Ants, a longstanding West Virginia gospel-soul-American group that, in addition to its own releases, has backed a number of singer-songwriters on their projects. The result is a collaboration in the truest sense, with the music and songs evolving together.

To bring the project to fruition, Hott called upon Don Dixon who, for more than four decades, has been one of the most prolific and versatile engineers and producers in pop and indie music.

The album is accompanied by a 24-page booklet that invites the listener into the



Submitted Photo

Singer/songwriter Mary Hott has released “Devil In The Hills: Coal Country Reckoning,” a song cycle that was inspired by the first-person accounts of life deep in West Virginia’s southern coalfields.

background stories and grim historical context. The music itself ranges from bluesy Americana and roots rock to Celtic and gospel, and the deep groove of the anthemic “Rise Up, WV.”

The album is mostly original songs with two covers: one a traditional gospel song, the other a unique southern gospel version of West Virginia’s adopted state song, “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” It is an ongoing project, with more songs being written as more stories are discovered.

For more information on Hott and the stories behind the album, go to www.DevilintheHills.com.