

ARTIST BIO: Mary Hott

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Mary Hott's music is informed by an interesting - and unusual mix - of influences that combine the intimacy of a small town with the perspective that comes when you live in some of the country's urban centers.

Hott was born and raised in Paw Paw, WV which, at the time, had a population of 600. Her high school graduating class consisted of 11 students. With just under 500 people at the last census, it's still as small town as it gets. (Paw Paw also happens to be home to WV's only "clothing optional community"!)

After 26 years going to school, playing music and working in New York City, Boston and Washington D.C., she found herself ready to make that often-perilous and emotional journey home.

As often happens, her time away gave her a new interest, appreciation, and perspective on the plight of West Virginia and Appalachia. Hott immersed herself in the stories of life in the state's ubiquitous coalfields. The result is her latest musical project titled "Devil in the Hills: Coal Country Reckoning."

"From the moment I heard the stories coming out of Whipple, I connected with the heartache and pain," said Hott. "Those people were at the end of their lives when they shared their stories about the rape, torture, and murder in the coal camps. 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."

Like many singers, Hott got her musical start singing in church - the Paw Paw Methodist Church children's choir. She was four and her mother, Jeanie, was the church pianist. Sixty years later, at 87, she still plays piano and organ every Sunday in the same church. Mary's first "job" was teaching piano when she was 15.

To this day, that sense of community and continuity that is so strong in West Virginia, remains a driving force in both her life and music. In 2014, when she happened on a trove of first-person accounts from the Whipple Company Store, those stories served as the motivation to expose the horrendous treatment that coal miners - and their spouses - endured.

"Taking the words of the people and expressing their stories through music was a catharsis for me," Hott recalled. "Growing up here, we were never taught the real reasons behind the mine wars. Powerful forces wanted to keep it hidden. And it occurred to me, when people are forced to hide their trauma, it causes deep emotional damage that can be passed through generations. I consider it generational trauma that still exists today."

But the mix of her cultural and musical influences has a few more flavors. Before she reached her teens, her family moved closer to town. Across the street, The House of Jacob, an African-American church, held services Sunday afternoons. After her church let out, she took in a very different style of religious music.

Around the same time, she heard her uncles talk about the hippies that had moved up on Spring Gap Mountain and were playing yet another style of music. The bandleader was none other than Ray Benson whose group would later be known as Asleep at the Wheel. After listening to the group's show at the local American Legion (through the open back door), Hott's cousin drove them to the band's "compound" where she received an impromptu lesson in music history. The band's penchant for big band and swing just happened to line up with the music Hott's mother loved.

Fast forward to 1980. While living in NYC, D.C. and Boston, she fronted bands and ensembles that ranged from post punk to big band jazz at festivals and clubs throughout the northeast. To earn money, she sang jingles and demos. She also studied with two veteran jazz singers. One, Anne Marie Moss, was a former member of Maynard Ferguson's band and Count Basie's Orchestra. The other, Janet Lawson, taught her to scat by listening to the sax solos of Lester Young, Charlie Parker, and Sonny Rollins. After moving to Boston, she studied piano at Berklee College of Music and blues harmonica with Jim Fitting (Treat Her Right, Bonnie Raitt).

While music was the driving force in her life, she also knew she needed a "real job." Armed with a sharp, analytical mind, she gravitated to computer programming and earned a Master of Science degree in Information Systems Engineering at Northeastern University. For the next 16 years, she worked as a software engineer and project manager. But then - as with many ex-pats - West Virginia called.

"Going home" is never simple. It's likely to bring up strong memories and emotions and, as often as not, rekindle family dynamics - good and bad. For Hott, moving within 20 miles of where she grew up was something of an emotional roller coaster. Diving headfirst into music was her salvation.

She began singing with a big band based in Metro-DC and establishing herself in the close-knit musical community and, coming full circle, opening for Asleep at the Wheel during one of their stops back through the area. But the first-person stories of coal miner's wives she found at The Whipple Company Store ignited a passion that, after three years, resulted in the release of "Devil in the Hills: Coal Country Reckoning."

"I don't come from a coal family," said Hott. "Paw Paw is an old canal and railroad town. But similar to the coalfields, we have our own unmarked graves and stories of the slave-like working conditions of the immigrants who dug the canal, built the tunnels, laid the track, all in pre-mining days. The working class everywhere has similar shared experiences, over multiple generations. I lost my own father from a massive heart attack after working three overtime shifts at a chemical company.

"I had to wonder," she added, "if we face what our ancestors endured, maybe we can overcome our own injustices, free ourselves from dependency and make ourselves whole. I suppose that is my ultimate goal of making this album. Our history matters."

- Michael Lipton
Director, West Virginia Music Hall of Fame