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## MARY HOTT REVEALS *DEVIL IN THE HILLS: COAL COUNTRY RECKONING* JUNE 4, 2021

Berkeley Springs, WV - Harmonic Alliance is proud to announce the release of **MARY HOTT** with The Carpenter Ants *DEVIL IN THE HILLS: COAL COUNTRY RECKONING* on **JUNE 4, 2021**. With *Devil in the Hills: Coal Country Reckoning*, Hott lends her beautifully crystalline voice to the most compelling subject of her career: the long-hidden stories of the men, women and children who labored in West Virginia mining country during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (\*Summer 2021 marks 100 years since the end of West Virginia's notorious Mine Wars.)

A 7th generation West Virginian, the Paw Paw, WV native songwriter/singer devoted years to the making of *Devil in the Hills*. The 11-track song cycle features seven original songs and Hott's interpretations of the miner's march "Blair Mountain Ballad" and Southern gospel hymn "Life's Railway to Heaven." There's also a deeply felt reinvention of John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

Don Dixon, the legendary indie-rock producer, co-produced *Devil in the Hills* with Michael Lipton, (longtime Mountain Stage house band guitarist, WV Music Hall of Fame Founder/Director and guitarist/songwriter in The Carpenter Ants – the Americana/Gospel Charleston, WV-based band that served as the album's studio musicians). Dixon recorded the album with his portable studio gear in Lipton's acoustically warm and lively old house in Charleston. "She's a gifted storyteller who makes a direct connection to the people in these songs," Dixon said. "Her clear, powerful voice is a perfect communicator for the emotions these characters experience as they try to survive and make sense of the world around them."

Indignation about what happened to young women and girls in coal country—as well as an incident during her own childhood—was among the reasons that compelled Hott to tell the region's stories in song.

In the Celtic-style ballad, "Annabelle Lee," an impoverished family rents a 12-year-old daughter to coal company agents who seek "comfort girls" for company managers in remote coal camps. Another song, the driving "Take the \*Esau," alludes to the terrible price women paid just to keep their families fed when a husband was injured or died in the mines. \*scrip/money in exchange for sex

"They Built a Railroad," a rolling, country-tinged original song written by Hott and Lipton, sets the scene for the coal industry's domination in West Virginia. "Our ancient hills held a rich man's treasure," Hott sings. "They carried workers from Ellis Island. They brought freed slaves to work the mines. They trafficked girls for comfort and pleasure. Total power over humankind."

The anthem "Rise Up, WV" adds a touch of funk to the album, pairing tragic history with an empowering message. And Hott soars through "Take Me Home, Country Roads," transforming Denver's folksy pop hit into a heartfelt gospel performance.

"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."

in July 2015, Hott made the first of her three annual visits to the Whipple Company Store and Museum. Talking with the museum's owner Joy Lynn and reading the museum owner's books gave the singer a deeper understanding of the hardships coal camp residents endured. Many of the coal camp stories that became songs came to light as oral histories told at the Whipple Company Store and Museum in Fayette County, West Virginia. Between 2007 and 2018, former coal camp residents who'd been children in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century told Lynn harrowing accounts of life in the coal camps. Lynn documented the stories in the books "Coal Camp Voices" and "Life in the Shadows." Hott

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states, *"The mine bosses constantly cheated the miners. The miners' wages went back to the company as rent for housing and whatever else they earned went to the company store for food and other necessities. And the coal companies hired mine guards to stop the miners from unionizing. It was slave labor, but they figured out how not to call it slavery."* While the financial deprivation and anti-union violence and intimidation miners experienced at the hands of the coal companies is well known, the Whipple Company Store and Museum stories contain long-hidden tales of systemic sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Born & raised in the small town of Paw Paw in West Virginia's eastern panhandle, Mary Hott was singing at 4 years old in the children's choir at the local Methodist Church. Her mother, now 88, still plays piano and organ there for Sunday services. After church let out, Hott loved to sit on the family's front porch and listen to the gospel music emanating from The House of Jacob, the African-American church across the street. *"They were rocking,"* she recalled. *"That music came from the soul and reached the soul."* Hott's mother introduced her to big band swing music. Then as a preteen she heard her uncles talking about some hippies that had moved up on Spring Gap Mountain and were playing some of that same swing music. The bandleader was Ray Benson whose group would later be known as Asleep at the Wheel. Her young age didn't stop her from sneaking into the group's shows at the local American Legion (through the open back door).

By her teens, Hott was teaching piano and subbing for her mother at special church services on piano and guitar. She studied music briefly at West Virginia University before moving to New York City at 19. While living in NYC, D.C. and Boston, she sang jingles and demos, and fronted bands that ranged from post punk to big band jazz at festivals and clubs throughout the northeast. She also studied with two veteran jazz singers. One of them, Anne Marie Moss, was a former member of Maynard Ferguson's band and Count Basie's Orchestra. In Boston, she studied piano at Berklee College of Music and blues harmonica with Jim Fitting (Treat Her Right, Bonnie Raitt).

Aware of the many financially struggling musicians she befriended in NYC, Hott decided to go back to school and earned a master's degree in computer science. For 16 years, she worked at software engineering and project manager jobs and, for a few years, grew detached from music. Then the life-changing experience of being a mother helped her find a way back to making meaningful music. *"I asked myself, 'If you died tomorrow, what have you done in your life you were most proud of?'"*

The singer's musings about the importance of music in her life led her back to West Virginia. That sense of community and continuity that is so strong in West Virginia remains a driving force in both her life and music. In late 2006, Hott returned to her native Morgan County to run the local arts council.

Hott continued singing, performing with jazz bands and the blues-based Hott Thompson Project with guitarist Billy Thompson, with whom she produced her debut album of originals (2014). In 2015, inspired by the stories from the Whipple Company Store and Museum, she began the most important work of her career, *Devil in the Hills: Coal Country Reckoning*.

\*Hott's launching her national campaign for *Devil in the Hills* during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Battle of Blair Mountain. In the late summer of 1921, 10,000 union miners battled an army of 3,000 state police officers, deputies and militiamen. The fighting didn't end until federal troops arrived.

*"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,"* Hott added, *"if we face what our ancestors endured, maybe we can overcome our own injustices, and make ourselves whole. I suppose that is my ultimate goal of making this album. Our history matters."*

[www.maryhottmusic.com](http://www.maryhottmusic.com)

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