

Fatal Femme Agency:

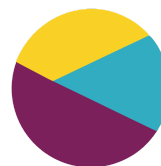
A Musical Live Show Reclaiming
Appalachian Murder Ballads



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The 2024 production of Fatal Femme Agency and this script was supported with a grant from Mid Atlantic Arts' Central Appalachian Living Traditions program.

**Central Appalachia
Living Traditions**



Host: I hope you showed up today expecting to hear about murder, because that's what's about to happen.

First let's talk about what murder ballads are and why I'm talking to you about them right now.

When I say murder ballads, I'm specifically talking about Appalachian murder ballads. They're a form of oral pop culture that draws influences from different immigrant groups that came into and replaced much of the original indigenous populations in the mountains tucked in the Mid Atlantic region during the colonial period.

There's a really basic format that you find in many of the more popular ones, where women's stories are framed as a sort of cautionary tale that reinforced traditional gender roles and punished women for transgressive relationships – especially sexual relationships outside marriage. A lot of them involve stabbing or drowning and tell things from the perspective of the typically male killer.

They're often gut wrenchingly violent morality plays that tell us a lot about how much our culture values women and I want to talk about them. So we're going to be part of the oral remix culture, and talk about these murder ballads from a feminist perspective in an effort to reclaim those narratives.

But sometimes you'll see historical examples that feature female murderers or more nuanced timelines – the old world ballad Lord Randall tells the story of the titular lord who slowly realizes he was just poisoned by the lover he came home from visiting.

And we're going to start with something a little deliciously subtle too: My Wild.

MY WILD

F **Bb** **F**
Oh, when I was young, these mountains were wild

C
And I ran wild too

F **Bb** **F**
Every creek was my bath, every tree was my perch

Am **F**
More than mama ever knew

But my mama she knew a lotta other things

About birds n bees n flowers
She showed me plants that can do a lotta help
All those herbal super powers

[Instrumental break]

First the axes came, and they chopped down my wild
Cut down all the trees in sight
Every bird silenced, every deer shot dead
Left the forest butchered by their blight

Then the mines came next, and they dug up my wild
Blasted every mountain top around
Every profit was pinched, every worker's life at risk
And many bodies never found

[Instrumental break]

Now I'm not young, but I still miss my wild
And I miss my mama too
Memories of every tender word, every tinkle of her laugh
Remind me what I have to do

Tonight the coal baron and the timber boss will feast
But I'll be the cooking all the food
Every bite that they take, every drink that they down
Will brighten up my dark mood

Because my mama she taught me a lotta special things
About birds n bees n flowers
She showed me the plants that could bring a lotta hurt
All those herbal super powers

All those herbal super powers

Getting back to our history lesson, in some cases, ballads are the direct descendents of printed broadsheet murder ballads popular in Anglo-Saxon europe, like the Tennessee tune Knoxville Girl, which is a new world corollary of the Irish song the The Wexford Girl, which is actually derived from an even older English one.

[Knoxville Girl instrumental interval if desired]

The Appalachian tradition of murder ballads also incorporated diverse musical influences from enslaved and free African Americans, like the inclusion of the banjo.

There are some traditional offerings of this genre that get their stories directly ripped from the headlines. You have to think back and recognize that this is a mass migration with varying levels of literacy – so stories really mattered.

And instead of keeping up with what once was Twitter, or TikTok, people got their gossip around campfires – often with a lot of alcohol and vocal lubrication. In that context it was both news and entertainment, a lot like, well, the same social media circles we rely on today.

Maybe a singer forgets a few verses so the story changes one night, or claims to remember more details the next – It's one big game of musical telephone.

That's certainly the case with Tom Dooley, a song based on a real killing of a woman named Laura Foster in the mountains of North Carolina in 1866.

Nearly a century later, a version that entirely erased Laura's name from the tune by the Kingston Trio became a smash pop hit in 1958 near the beginning of the folk revival.

But we're going to do our own little spin on it now.

SING 'BOUT LAURA FOSTER (to the chords of "Tom Dooley")

[Chorus:]

*Still singing about Tom Dooley
Hanging his head to cry?
Let's sing 'bout Laura foster,
Who at his hands did die*

*She met him on the hillside
To become his wife
She met the hillside and there,
there he took her life*

*She went to the roadside
where he begged to be excused
She went to the roadside,
then he hid her clothes and shoes.*

[Chorus]

She found him on the mountain

There he took her life
She found him on the mountain
Then he stabbed her with his knife

She laid in a grave four feet long
and dug just three feet deep
A blanket of cold clay over her
And trampled with his feet

[Chorus]

Trouble, oh, it's trouble
a-rollin' through her breast
As long as he's a-livin',
her soul ain't gonna get no rest

But tomorrow they're gonna hang him,
tomorrow, He's be dead
Despite the plea he never hurt
hair on poor little Laurie's head

- BRIDGE SOLO -

In this world and one more, then reckon where she'll be
If it wasn't for Sheriff Grayson, Dooley's be in Tennessee
You can take down his old violin and play it all you please
For at this time tomorrow, it won't be of use to Dooley

Now at this time tomorrow, folks,
where do you reckon she'll be?
Haunting yonder in the holler,
as he hangs from a white oak tree

[Chorus]

Stop singing about Tom Dooley
Hanging his to head to cry.
Time to sing bout Laura foster,
Who at his hand did die

A big focus of these type of songs were major crimes that happened, obviously. And there's a lot more I could say about Tom Dooley.

And decided to end his fight

[Instrumental break]

*After the gun went off, the sheriff rode in
Threw me into this here jail
But until I'm let out, I'll scream and shout
So listen to my tale*

*He said: I know where they keep it
The silver in that vault
He made me go, I fought him off
This mess was all his fault*

The original songs in this production are all vaguely set in the timber and mining boom around the turn of the century - albeit an imagined version

And that's sort of how oral tradition works, with each new generation updating to share the different perspectives of the people who sing them. And it's continuing today - I remember, new feminist songs in the murder ballad vein like Goodbye to Earl by the band now called The Chicks when I was growing up, and this a musical project you're witnessing now.

Music is facing a #metoo movement reckoning right now and as a culture we're having to grapple with how or when to separate music from its creators.

Think about how you feel when the remix to Ignition comes on the radio now. Or maybe how you've felt about certain people on the Supreme Court for a few years.

Speaking of which, we're moving on to the song Injustice.

INJUSTICE

Em **G**
Before he was the judge, he was the bossman's son

Em
And when he had his whiskey

Am **D7** **Em**
Every girl here knew to run

*Sometimes he caught up, no matter how fast they ran
But even screams were risky*

Cause the law worked for The Man

G

So we kept it to ourselves, but thought almost every night

Em

"damn this place,

Am D7 Em

this injustice just aint right"

[Instrumental break]

His pa sent him to school, and he came back as the law

Pretended to be fair and just

Left our wounds open raw

But the girls he preyed on, we're grown women now

We've learned who to trust

And what we can't allow

For weeks we came together, whispering almost every night

"damn this place,

this injustice just aint right"

[Instrumental break]

We finally took the court, torches blazing in our hands

Marched into face the judge

Said justice we demand

When the coward tried to run, we blocked the courthouse door

Took revenge for our grudge

Now he can't hurt us anymore

As we watched the flames roar, we sang into the bright night

"damn this place,

We made that injustice right"

[Instrumental break]

But even with him dead, the law took his side

Threw us in this jail

Just to protect their pride

The trial was a joke, it's punchline the gallows

Our appeals will all fail

we'll be buried somewhere shallow

But until they string us up, we'll chant together every night

"damn this place,

That justice was our right"

But there's also just all of these really violent messages about women in America's music history, lyrically right out there in the open, in the oral history represented by Appalachia's murder ballads.

And I want to talk about - obviously, heck I must want to sing about it - because I do think there's something meaningful and powerful about sound, about coming together to join voices because that is part of joining forces.

Even when the world feels like it's trying to quash out your light, a song can make you feel like you can burn it all down.

BURN IT ALL DOWN

Gm Cm
First there was the miner
Gm Cm
Said he would treat me nice
Gm Cm
But that all changed, with his drink
Gm Cm
His heart was cold as ice

But I knew how to melt it
I lit his cabin with a flame
His screams rose up with that black smoke
And I never felt the same

Cm G Gm
I watched them burn, burn, burn,
Em
I burned it all down
Cm
I only regret
Em G Gm
I Didn't light up that whole town

[Instrumental break]

Then there was the banker
Promised me a loan
But then said I needed a man
Wouldn't give me one alone

But even brick will crumble
When the fire gets real hot
So I poured the gas and struck the match

And that's when I got caught

*I watched them burn, burn, burn,
I burned it all down
I only regret
I Didn't light up that whole town*

[Instrumental break]

*Last there was the sheriff
Said he'd let me go free
But first he wanted was some personal time
With fiery little old me*

*So I gave him up my body
But once he closed his eyes
I left the bed for the hills
As my flames began to rise*

*So I watched them burn, burn, burn,
I burned it all down
I'm so glad
I lit up that damn town*

[Optional group howl meditation]

Alright, thank you so much for doing our little musical history lesson tonight.

We're going to say good bye with one more original haunting tune. And if you want to join for some audience participation, you can howl when you hear the words wolf or howl...

TIMBER WIDOW'S LAMENT

Dm Am
I lost my love
Dm Am
I lost my love
Dm Gm
I lost him to the trees
Gm Dm Gm Dm
He went out on one cold dark night
Am Dm
And never came back to me

[Instrumental break]

*I saw the wolf
Out in the woods
I told my love to go
But there was no shot, just a howl
Never thought I'd feel so low*

*When we were young
My love was sweet
Never a harsh word to me
Now he's gone — how will I go on?
Just me and these dark trees*

[Instrumental break]

*But the dark years
They made him mean
He lost his love for me
Left his marks where they couldn't be seen
And made me want to flee*

*The coal man came
To talk last month
Here's what he said to me
There's something black that'll make you rich
Underneath those old dark trees*

[Instrumental break]

***I saw the wolf
Out in the woods
I told my love to go
Gave him his gun, but kept his shot
And no one has to know***

*I lost my love
I lost my love
I lost him to the trees
He went out on one cold dark night
And never came back to me*