

About the album *Appalachian Fall*

Michael Martin (1936–2023), called “the foremost meditative poet of Appalachia” by former North Carolina Poet Laureate Shelby Stephenson, lived and wrote for 30 years in southwest Virginia, in a mountaintop cabin he built himself, a mile from the nearest road or utility line. There he forged deep friendships with the members of his rural community. Much of his writing chronicles their tragedies and triumphs, as well as those of their ancestors who lived in the hollers beneath his mountain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and links these lives to the continual striving of human history. His deep exploration of a small place thus achieves a resonant universality.

His son, Washington, DC, composer and guitarist Alex Martin, has worked primarily as a jazz musician, as reflected on his previous three albums: *Nostalgia for Terra Incognita* (2007), *Second Life* (2011), and *Folk Songs, Jazz Journeys* (2021). But as his father’s health declined in recent years and much of Alex’s life became devoted to caring for him, he brought his music back to his father’s Appalachia. This album is the fruit of a final collaboration. They were joined in creating it by some of the DC area’s finest folk, Americana, and jazz musicians, including former Bumper Jacksons vocalist Jess Eliot Myhre.

About the songs (all New World Jazz/BMI)

Alex, writing in the first person:

Before returning to my first love, music, I thought I wanted to be a writer like my father. I worked for a while as a newspaper and wire service reporter in North Carolina, and even got a master’s degree from the Creative Writing Program at the University of Texas in Austin. I wrote poems, short stories, and a couple of novels I never published, before coming home to my guitar as my vehicle of storytelling. But in the course of my writing career I also learned a lot about editing, and it remains my other line of work. These skills proved invaluable in creating these songs from my father’s poems, most of which are quite long and navigate the borderlands between verse, prose, and transcription of oral history. Unsurprisingly, I first chose the shortest ones I could find, including the little gems that are “Second Letter to Marlea” and “Twang.” Although I created a reprise for the latter, for the most part these first poems required almost no edits to become songs. The music wrote itself.

After that, things got a lot more difficult. I wanted to represent what perhaps appeals to me most in Dad’s work: his portraits of his closest friends in the community, two mountain elders whom he calls Philo and Beulah. They transmitted to him a treasure trove of Appalachian culture, stories of the community’s inhabitants going back more than a century, as well as spiritual and cosmological worldviews of extraordinary depth. My father’s writing about them records with great empathy and detail a way of life that has largely vanished but that left a profound mark on America. I knew I had to make Philo and Beulah central characters on this album, but it required a lot of hard choices, as anyone who has read his work will realize immediately. My father’s greatest gift to me in his final two years was his most precious possession: his writing, which he allowed me to work with to the ends of music. In one of his final poems, dictated to my sister in the hospital, he called this his son’s “rigor of revision.” He gave it his blessing.

1. Into the Desert

The order of the songs on *Appalachian Fall* is quite intentional, moving from the poet’s internal world out to the community. “Into the Desert” is the only piece that is entirely spoken and reads as a kind of statement of purpose, and a reflection on the costs of his writing life. Trains run through the valley

beneath my father's mountain, as they run through much of his poetry, symbols of the connections and the labor taken up across generations of human history. I tried to reflect that in my guitar accompaniment. At the time I was working on pieces by the great Brazilian composer Guinga, whose music also explores the rhythms of trains that link Rio de Janeiro to its working-class suburbs.

2. Second Letter to Marlea

Many of my father's poems began as letters. In this one he is accompanied by his collie Hannah (whom he named for the philosopher Hannah Arendt) on a walk during which they discover a source that becomes the Source. I wrote a cello solo that is beautifully performed by Jodi Beder (of Dovetail, Zen for Primates, and other groups). A dear friend and neighbor, she has made a specialty of accompanying spoken word artists. Dad is among the poets she has performed with.

3. Twang

As a guitar player, I obviously had to include this one. I love what I hear as this poem's mischievous playfulness, and my jazzy setting tries to respond to that, as do, for me, Jess's clarinet solos. Gabby Cameron's banjo adds to the twang. My father's mountain cabin was far from any electrical or other utility lines, but he nevertheless filled it with music: Schubert, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms on a stereo powered by car batteries. Long before this album, music infused his poetry.

4. Philo Meets the Machine

Enter Philo Lightfoot, the central figure of this and the next three songs. Although he lived "in town" (Chilhowie, VA) when my father knew him, he grew up in the hollers of the Jamison Gap, which runs between my father's mountain and the one facing it, and he often visited my father's cabin on his walks through the mountains, which he knew like the palm of his hand. Many of the hollers' inhabitants worked in the quarries of Saltville, a few miles' walk away, and there Philo got his first job. He worked at the commissary, where he encountered a strange machine. Will McKindley-Ward's vocal tells the story.

5. Mr Plummer, Preacher Dan, and the Moonshiners (Philo Speaks)

This trilogy of character sketches by Philo is, with the title track, for me the most joyful song on the album. Philo tells us first about an extraordinarily skilled African American mechanic and inventor, who "musta been a wizard," then about a preacher who didn't suffer fools or hypocrites (though he might cause *them* to suffer, with a solid left hook). The final story is about Philo himself, running moonshine in the 1930s with his friend Rob Heneger. Philo wishes that these "unusual types" had come to the attention of Sherwood Anderson, perhaps the most famous American short story writer of the early 20th century, who late in life moved to nearby Marion, VA, and started a newspaper. Will again provides the vocal, and Tom Espinola joins the fun on mandolin.

6. A Lightfoot Death

This song consists of excerpts from Dad's chronicle of the last weeks of the man he called his "mountain father." The parallels between his experience visiting Philo in the hospital in Marion and my own, more than three decades later, caring for Dad during his decline, were inescapable. Jodi weaves gentle cello commentary around Jess's vocal before another exquisitely rendered solo. My friend the folk musician and artist Vernon Sears, whose roots are in Harlan County, Kentucky, incarnates Philo during the spoken passages, and Will harmonizes with Jess and Vernon on the final chorus.

7. Echoes in the Jamison Gap

In this song, my father recalls more stories Philo told him, this time about the men and women who lived in the cabins along the Jamison Gap, in years going back to the Civil War. Cutting wood on his mountain, Dad hears the sound of his ax bounce off the opposite ridge, and in it the echo of these lives and deaths in woods that have since gone largely silent. He “says their names,” so that their spirits live on, as presences that envelop him. Jess’s vocal and Sarah Foard’s haunting fiddle people this landscape with ghosts.

8. Planing the Ragged Twilights

The most “rockin’” song on the album, “Planing” is about the hard work of creating and nurturing community, and the acceptance or shaving away of the rough edges and differences—in personality, ideology, and otherwise—that allows us live together and appreciate each other. Dad wrote the poem on which this song is based in the 1980s, but it feels like it could have been written for our present moment. Sarah returns on fiddle, in conversation with my electric guitar.

9. Sparklers

Enter Beulah, a potter who grew up as a neighbor and playmate of Philo’s in the Jamison Gap and who was my father’s other closest friend. This song is composed of passages from a longer poem Dad wrote about a nighttime talk with Beulah on her front porch, under the mountains and the stars. The melody and my accompaniment are inspired in part by the Chandrakauns raga, which I’ve studied as a member of the Indian fusion band Kundalika, led by my friend Deepak Shenoy. Chandrakauns is associated with night and has elements that sound bluesy to Western ears. Tom’s mandolin returns to provide sparkle.

10. Appalachian Fall

The lyric of this concluding track is another short gem of a poem that required very little work on my part to become a song, beyond deciding which part to bring back as a refrain. In it, my father is perched high an apple tree in the Henegers’ yard, overlooking the valley. The panorama of his neighbors’ fields gives him a feeling of plenitude and belonging in this world that he adopted, and that adopted him. Gabby’s banjo contributes to the celebration.

The musicians

Alex Martin: guitars (1–10); Jess Eliot Myhre: vocals (1–4, 6–10), clarinet (3); Steve Arnold: bass (1–10); Keith Butler Jr.: drums (1–10); Will McKindley-Ward: vocals (4–6); Vernon Sears: vocals (6); Sarah Foard: fiddle (7, 8); Jodi Beder: cello (2, 6); Gabby Cameron: banjo (3, 10); Tom Espinola: mandolin (5, 9)