

**Elaine Purkey**

With Rick Wilson

Where: Skeeters Restaurant

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## **Elaine Purkey**

Elaine (Moore) Purkey is an activist songwriter and musician from Harts Creek, West Virginia in Lincoln County. She was born on May 29, 1949, on the same piece of property where she still lives. She was raised in a family of musicians and flatfoot dancers and attributes her powerful voice to the acapella singing she learned as a member of the Church of Christ. As a teenager she played in bands with her brother, and in early adulthood she was the lead singer of a local country band. In the 1980s, she began performing regularly on the Wallace Horn Friendly Neighbors Show, a live radio program out of Logan County that has been on the air since 1967. She now hosts the show.

Purkey wrote songs for the Pittston Coal Strike and Ravenswood Lockout and has performed at concerts and festivals across the continent. Her song "One Day More" written for the Ravenswood Lockout, is featured on the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings compilation Classic Labor Songs. Purkey is portrayed in the 2014 film Moving Mountains, based on a book by Penny Loeb. A proud mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Purkey teaches singing classes to children at the Big Ugly Community Center.

EH: Emily Hilliard

EP: Elaine Purkey

RW: Rick Wilson

00:00

EH: Could you introduce yourself, tell me who you are, where you're from...

EP: See, I'm used to having somebody else do that for me!

EH: (laughs) We could do it—I could have Rick do it!

EP: (laughs) No! No!

EH: I would like to hear that, actually!

EP: (laughs) Yeah Rick, why don't you do it?

EH: (laughs)

EP: Oh lord.

EH: Oh, he's gonna hold it [the mic]!

EP: I don't like that look!

RW: We are here today to hear from the finest flower of Harts Creek, the woman with the golden voice, the little girl standing on the rock, my dear friend Elaine Purkey with whom I have shared a struggle and a story or two, most of which are better left unspoken.

EP: (laughs) yes.

EH: (laughs) I'll just hold it so you don't have to. Well that was great!

EP: Yeah, that was different.

EH: What's your version?

EP: My version is I'm Elaine Purkey from Harts Creek! I'm originally from that area, I still live on the same piece of property that I was born on, and I'm happy to do that. And really, um, I'm a grandma, great-grandma, and I didn't know anything about union stuff and all of that until 1980s, I guess, when Pittston, when my husband's mine—he worked for the Pittston Coal Company then, when they came out on strike! And I had to get involved! And, and that's how I met Rick. And I mean, that's it. In a nutshell that's it. I always sang, I've been singing since I was a little girl. I'm from a family of singers and guitar players and my daddy was a great musician and he sang, but he didn't have that great of a singing voice. He just did little itty ditty type things, but he could play anything. And play it well. And my oldest brother has that talent, but I have two other brothers, they play guitar and sing, my sisters—I have 2 sisters and they play guitar and sing. And I play guitar and sing. And talk. (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Could you tell me a little bit about your family history?

EP: Well, my mom is from a family of 14 kids. And they all picked and sang. I mean they, it was varied—they all didn't do both of 'em, but some of 'em did. And danced. My grandpa did old mountain flatfoot, and he taught that to some of them, and then they taught it to me. And I mixed a little bit of 50s rock 'n' roll stuff with it and came up with my own version of it. And um, then there's 6 of us kids in our family. There was only 6 kids in my dad's family. And he's the only one that's musically inclined out of them. My uncle Raymond could play guitar and mandolin a little bit, and my uncle Roy could play banjo, but they never you know, just plunking around the house. And, but... my mom's family are the singers. They're known throughout this country as the... Herb Shelton's daughters and they um, sang at all the funerals and they, you know, different things, and always were known for singing. We used to gather in and my grandpa's house on the weekends and that's... Rick had referenced to the little girl standing on the rock, and I was 5 years old and they would... I mean a whole yard full of people and they'd stand me up on that rock in the middle of my grandpa's front yard and I'd sing for 'em. Whatever I could sing, I'd sing it, but it was mostly "Frankie and Johnny" by Johnny Cash. (laughs) And as I was telling y'all a while ago, my mom had to learn the song because as little kids do, I would get almost to the end of it and forget the words. And I would start back over. So she got tired of listening to it over and over, and she just learned the words so she could kind of punch me when I'd forget 'em and I'd take off from there.

And then my brother, oldest brother and I sang at all the talent shows and anytime anybody needed somebody to you know, like school or whatever, to fill that bill to have a stage performance, we were there. He'd play guitar and we'd sing together and then I'd sing some of the songs by myself. And, course then we grew up, we got a little bit older and he went to Vietnam and I went to D.C. to work and that ended that. And when I came home—worked a year and a half out there, got on stage out there, I sang out there too, and with a country band. And came back here and met Bethel, my husband, right after I got back, who was a coal miner. 3<sup>rd</sup> generation coal miner, and he was in the service then, and met him, married him and not too long after we were married then the Pittston Strike... well we got married in 1970. And the Pittston Strike was in the 80s and um, they needed somebody to sing for 'em, and it was me—I was really the only one they knew that could sing. I was already doing the radio program by then [The Wallace Horn Friendly Neighbors Show]. But I was just a guest person on it and Wallace Horn started the radio program—Wallace Horn Friendly Neighbors Show. And on Logan Radio and I'd go up there and sing and then when he got sick and passed away, before he passed away, he signed it over to me. So it's Elaine Purkey's Friendly Neighbors Show now.

5:54

EH: And could you tell me a little bit about that meeting with Rick and other activists and what that awareness was like?

EP: Pshew! Well I tell everybody, that my birthday, my actual natural birthday was May 29, 1949 but I really wasn't born until in the 1980s after I met Rick and got involved in all of this stuff because that's when my blood really started pumpin'.

Always before that, people—I mean I was just mundane, I did all this singing and you know, went to church, did all the things I was supposed to do, had babies and raised 'em and I cooked and I cleaned and

took care of everything, and that was it! I was known by the company I kept, you know, nobody knew who I was.

And, but that changed everything. That takes some getting used to. And I sang-- Linda Meade, a friend of mine, died at my house and I, they wanted me to sing at a memorial they were having for her at Charleston and that's where I met all these traditional performers and it was like gosh! You know, seemed like the skies had opened up and started puking right on top of me! And it was like everything was happening all at the same time! All at once. And from that people started calling and then—I can't remember the name of that organization.

RW: Ronnie Gilbert, remember Ronnie? Ronnie was the singer with the Weavers

EP: Yeah. Who was that that had her come there?

RW: Oh it was like a woman's group...

EP: Yeah, it was a women's group and but they had her, Ronnie Gilbert to come to Charleston. This was after the strike started, the Pittston Strike of the 80s started, and they had her come over there for um, a concert in honor of the miners you know, and the miners' side of that strike. And um, she had heard about me at Camp Solidarity down in Virginia. And she said I... "Do you all know this woman? I've got to meet this woman." And so they called me and asked me if I'd come over there and do a couple of union songs. Well I didn't know any union songs! I hadn't done anything like that at all! And so I learned um, "Solidarity Forever" and um... what was the other one. Um, about the... I can't think...

RW: "Which Side Are You On?"

EP: No, no, no. It was the one about the women on the picket line.

RW: You wrote that one!

EP: No, no, no, not "Picket Line Ladies"

RW: The Woody Guthrie song...

EH: "Union Maid"

RW: Yeah.

EP: "Union Maid!" Yeah. "Union Maid" and so there was. It's like, "Solidarity Forever" to me when I first started learning that song, it has too many words in it! You know, a person could hyperventilate trying to sing that song. Especially a person that couldn't play guitar very well! And so I was sittin' on the bed practicing one night and I was listening to the T.V. and I heard all this junk going on being said about the strike and people in the strike, and I thought, you know, we shouldn't have to be doing this. We should not have to fight for our right to work and make a good wage! A good livin'! And that's when I wrote "America, Our Union" and sang it over there. And got a standing ovation. And I thought it was the miners that did that, but it wasn't, it was the people that were there that just came to support them—that was the people that started the standing ovation. And it was something, I just... and I had to sing another song and that's when I actually did sing "Solidarity Forever," even though... but I didn't sing with my

guitar cause I could slow it down really well and you know, leave a few words out if I didn't sing it with my guitar, so I did it acapella. And "America Our Union" is acapella also.

EH: That was the first song you ever wrote?

EP: Yeah.

RW: "Picket Line Ladies" was right about then.

EP: Everything was right about then! I don't even remember the first time we met!

RW: We met at the parking lot at Hardees—I was going down there.

EP: Was it really the parking lot?

RW: I think Beth [Beth Spence] might have been there... well, you were working' and I'd just tried to learn to play guitar, and I said "Do you flat pick or fingerpick" and then we went out in the parking lot and we got out, we both got out our guitars...

EP: (laughs)

RW: ...and I embarrassed myself and you did alright.

EP: Was that the time that I told you that you could do a whole lot better singing if you would raise your key and quit trying to sing in such a low key?

RW: Probably!

EP: (laughs)

RW: Yeah, that's when I went out and bought a capo...

EP: I thought I'd known you... (laughs)

RW: ... which Elaine called a "claiimp"! Remember that?!

EP: Yeah!

RW: "Put the 'claiimp' on the guitar!" (laughs)

EP: And you called it a cap-o.

RW: Claiimp!

EP: (laughs)

RW: Anna [Rick's wife] still calls it a claiimp and she's from Vermont.

EP: (laughs)

RW: Put the claiimp on there!

EP: People ask me what a capo is and I tell ‘em—it’s a guitar clamp! Only now I don’t say “claimp” I say “clamp.” (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

EP: It’s a cheater bar!

And then by the next time I saw Rick, that was, was about a month later, here he had—I mean he could do so much more on a guitar than I could! I mean he was a better guitar player than I was at that point, and he just kept getting better and better and better and better. And then we did some Bob Dylan stuff together.

RW: We used to do “Ride Me High”

EP: Yeah, right! (laughs)

RW: “Ooooo ride me high...”

EP: “Ride me high”—I love that song!

RW: You would do “Tonight” —you know, “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight”—is that the one you would do?

EP: I don’t remember that one.

RW: “Close the door, you don’t have to worry, you don’t have to bring that bottle over there.”

EP: (laughs)

RW: Remember “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight”?

EP: Yeah! (sings) “Cause I’ll be youuuuuur baby tonight” – yeah. I haven’t thought about that song, I ain’t done that since I sang it with you, I guess!

EH: (laughs)

EP: But I mean, that just started a whole roller coaster! I mean everything! It’d be hard to put everything in perspective—I didn’t keep notes!

RW: I gotta tell one.

12:21

EP: Oh lord.

RW: So they gave me crap for my fondness for Bob Dylan, who won the Nobel Prize!

EP: Ain’t that something! (claps) That’s just so cool, I think!

RW: And once during the Pittston Strike I mean there were these scabs driving through cars, there was all kinds of hell breaking lose and I told Bethel, we oughta get Bob Dylan and just crank it up real loud.

EP: (laughs)

RW: And he said “that might hurt some of our own people!” (laughs)

EP: (laughs)

RW: Right, right.

EP: I used to tell Bethel, every time something of his would come on the radio, I would say “It’s Rick’s favorite singer. Would you tell me PLEASE, what he sees in that man!” (laughs) What?! How can you enjoy that because he just growls! He doesn’t sing a tune. But I learned to appreciate Bob Dylan’s music, simply because you need to listen with your whole head, and not just your ears. And when you start listening to the words and to what he wrote, and the, the genius that was in all that, it’s like, yeah man, this guy’s got something. It doesn’t matter how he sings it. And that made me start listening to other people I had liked over the years? Um, Hank Williams Senior? I don’t like Hank Williams’ Senior’s voice. I don’t like to hear him sing. But I love his music and I’ll listen to him sing at any time because he’s the artist. You know, and there’s a lot of people like that. And if you go back and you listen to 1950s rock music? So much of that was out of tune!

RW: Oh yeah, ... Ford (?) Yeah.

EP: Al King, Chuck Berry! He hit so many bad chords, I never heard a beat in my life!

EH: (laughs)

EP: I said... I’d rather listen with my entertainment ears than I would my critiquing ears. I mean it’s... it’s terrible! And the horns? I love those saxophones, but man! Were they awful! Some of ‘em weren’t even on key the whole time they were in the song! But it’s still good stuff. From the heart.

RW: Some of the labor songs you wrote—you wanna...?

EH: Yeah, will you talk about those?

EP: “One Day More” would have to be the biggest one. And that was really weird—that included a car breaking down in the middle of Logan and everything. Rick...

RW: It was like a 12-hour period, wasn’t it? Or 24 hour?

EP: Yeah. I don’t, it just took me 12 minutes to write that song. I had to study about it because I didn’t know anything about the Ravenswood lockout. But Rick called me one day and I’ll not tell that whole story! (laughs) But Rick called me one day and said “you know, they need a shot in the arm, and I think you’re just the person to give it to ‘em.” So I had to meet him in Logan and get a stack of papers to read about that because I just got so disgusted with the news—I quit watching. And I mean it was just like every time you turn the TV on the first 10 minutes is somebody getting killed, getting robbed, or a bunch of people getting hurt, you know, and I just couldn’t take it. And uh, so I read about it and read about it and then, I thought you know... he said he’d like for it to... there was a slogan “one day longer” and we had the shirts, you know, Pittston had the shirts with that on it and I... and I tried to write... he said I



think the song should be along those lines. And I thought, well you want to give me the KEY that you want me to write it in?

RW: I said I wanted it in minor, didn't I?

EP: Yeah! He said, yeah, "It'd sound better if it was in a minor key." I said, "well if you want to give me some words, why don't you just go ahead—you can write the whole thing and I'll sing it!"

EH: (laughs)

EP: So we did it, I did it in A minor and I couldn't rhyme "longer" (laughs)

RW: (laughs)

EP: So I wrote "One Day More" is a whole lot easier to put in a song. And that's how "One Day More" came about and Barbara Kopple was filming her show number 9 for her series, TV series "We Do the Work" and Ravenswood was gonna be her... the ninth show. And so she was gonna be up there filming that night that he wanted me to sing this song for 'em. And I had bronchitis, I could barely talk, and I don't know, something happened when I started doing that song—you'd never know I had anything wrong with me. And immediately afterwards I could barely talk again. But I sang that song for like 30 minutes, those people climbed... they KNEW it was about them, and they climbed up on the tables, we did it at the fairgrounds.

RW: At the union hall, wasn't it?

EP: No, it was the fairgrounds at Jackson—Jackson County fairgrounds is where the meeting was that time. And, 'member they climbed up on the picnic tables? And then the camera person was right in my face, at one time he even hit my teeth! With a microphone while I was singin'! (laughs) It's like (makes sound). And then uh, so she filmed that whole thing, I mean she showed them, but when it came on the TV, they, she played the soundtrack as they were walking into the capital building. And Rick, the neck of Rick's guitar got, got in...

RW: My lamented 12-string

EP: Yeah, exactly. His 12 string.

RW: It was in my 12-string period.

EH: Uh-oh.

EP: (laughs) And so, and it was, that was really, if Rick hadn't, you know, got me to write, I wouldn't have even started writing songs. I mean, I wrote that one, "America Our Union," but that was just for that...

RW: And "Picket Line Ladies"

EP: Well, no but at that point I had only written "America Our Union." That was out of necessity because I wanted something that was familiar that you know, that I could say something through... somebody else

already had the idea for. And if you hear the song, you know, I mean that's what, it goes right along the lines of "America The Beautiful."

EH: What role did that song have in the strike?

EP: Which song?

EH: "America Our Union."

EP: Oh, it was like a national anthem for a long time.

RW: But you're the only one I've ever heard sing it.

EP: Yeah, yeah. And I mean it was, the only other person that I've heard sing any of my stuff has been uh, Jen Osha and there was a group down in North Carolina.

Waitress: You got a phone call.

EP: Okay.... In North Carolina that sang "One Day More."

18:56

(takes call) END OF TAPE 1

00:00

EH: Okay, turning it back on. Yeah, so you were saying...

EP: "America Our Union" for the UMWA [United Mine Workers of America] was something that they always wanted to hear. I always had to include that one. And um, I always did the jack rock song—Rick's responsible for that. Rick loves jack rocks. I think if he could had (corrects self, enunciating) could have had a love affair with 'em he could have.

RW: I have never actually been aware...

EP: He came close to it!

RW: ...of jack rocks. I mean I've heard about 'em, but...

EP: (laughs) Oh, yeah right! They're all...they're alleged.

EH: Will you tell us the legend of the jack rocks?

EP: Well you know, it didn't start here. You'd think that Pittston came up with it during the 80s but they didn't. It was... it's been a long...

RW: Medieval, they called them caltrops then. They'd use them for cavalry and...

EP: You know, and what... road jacks is what they called them... oh shoot, it wasn't Australia? Some place. I can't remember where it was.

RW: I had a Mexican-American friend who called them *michalitos*, little Michaels. I don't know where that...

EP: (laughs) But here they were called jack rocks because that's what they... they looked like jacks! That you play with, only, they've only got 4 points on 'em, but no matter how you pitch 'em, they're gonna land with a point up. You take 2 nails, cut the head off of 'em, at an angle, and then bend 'em, each one of 'em at a 90-degree angle and cross 'em and weld 'em in the middle. And they were called salt and pepper during the Pittston strike. And the word was, you better now go on this side or that side or wherever because it's... there's salt and pepper there. "We've already salt and peppered it." And one guy in Bethels... that was in Bethel's, in charge of one of Bethel's picket sites, didn't listen to him and he jumped off, when the trucks came out of the holler hauling non-union coal, he jumped off on the wrong side and one of 'em went through the middle of his foot and he spent the rest of the strike on crutches. I said that's not very good, the captain of the picket side. (laughs) It was funny though! Everything was funny, even the goon guards with the guns were funny then. Looking back at it.

RW: Then one time that saved, you know the union women saved 'em when their truck went into the ditch... do you remember that story?

EP: Mmm, no.

RW: Linda Grimmett and them... there were some scabs there driving a truck and it turned over and they were the, they went out and rescued them and I mean, made sure they were okay.

EP: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, the water was up. And the... the creek was up. That was up there at um, Stollings.

RW: Rum Creek or Dehue.

EP: I thought it was Stollings.

RW: Right around 17. Route 17.

EP: Okay. And um, but yeah, they got the scabs out of the truck and... you know I saw Linda not very long ago.

RW: Really?

EP: Yeah, she was working down here, up there on Big Creek at her daughter's um business and she won't even talk about the strike. It affected her that much. I mean, it... a lot of people, it just tore them all to pieces, tore their lives up. Families, homes busted up, and they just couldn't handle the stress and they just went crazy. And couldn't... we had, Bethel and I had a lot of problems too... I can't say anything bad about that because he was gone all the time and I had 3 girls at the house, trying to take care of them, and he wasn't getting strike benefits at that point. And I was having to work at Hardees to try to get money. One thing food stamps doesn't pay for is laundry detergent and electric bill and all that. And the girls were, 2 of the girls were in sports, and one of our girls, our baby girl had kind of like a nervous breakdown. She missed school so much and she wouldn't go back and she fought me when I tried to get her to go back. Of course, you know, that all ended but still, it put you through hell. And it's... it was a hard, hard thing. There were... except for that part of it, I'd go back and do it again.

RW: Oh yeah!

EP: It gets in your blood! Everybody I've talked to that was involved in that strike, it was like God, where did those days go to? And where did all the people go to?

EH: (laughs)

EP: But yeah, Rick got me to write "One Day More" and he said, "you know, there's never been a song written about a jack rock." And he said, "I think I'd like to hear a song written about a jack rock." So, I couldn't write. I mean how do you write a song about a jack rock? A song? So I wrote... and he named it. He named it "Talking Jack Rock Blues."

EH: Mmhm.

EP: And I wrote that one and uh, "Picket Line Ladies" only I was talking to people, I tried to get an idea about women on the picket line, you know, because I wasn't allowed to walk the picket lines. They... well I can't... if I wanted to, I would have—if I wanted to go over their feelings. But the men that Bethel worked with came to me, some of 'em did, and asked me to stay away from the picket lines because he was like the stability and if he lost it, then... he said, we'll lose the strike. If he loses it on the picket line, we will lose the strike. And so I stayed away. Except the day that Howard Green and ah... what was his name... Bernard Evans, got arrested. I was up there. But they didn't have anybody... there was two preachers that came from down south with letter... a letter in their pocket, supporting the uh, union side of the strike, and they didn't have anybody to take 'em up to the picket site, so they could give 'em the letter. And so, um, I... they called me and asked me if I would and I said, "you know, you all asked me to stay away from up there." "Well you don't have to go actually on the picket site, you just take 'em up there and you can turn around and come back home." Well, anybody that knows me knows, that ain't gonna happen.

EH: (laughs)

EP: So I took 'em up there and got out and Bethel said, "you need to go, you need to get outta here!" and I said, "why?" and he said "Elaine, you need to go home!" and I said, "why?" and he said, "just go, and I'll tell you later?!" Well I was going back to my car and a...

(Waitress comes over)

And about that time, here the trucks come out of the holler. And I mean, it was bad. It was really bad. And Barnard and the whole thing was set up to see what would happen, and probably set up so somebody could go to jail. And they took them to jail, arrested 'em, took 'em to jail, and those preachers, when they got there, they made them, make you empty your pockets when they book you and stuff, all they had in their pockets were the letters from those preachers from down south supporting. I mean two Methodist preachers I think they were, from two Methodist congregations down there. And that's all they had in their pockets. I said that really looked bad. I mean, these big bad murderers walking the picket line up there, didn't have anything but a letter from 2 churches in their pocket. But you know, and so I didn't go back up there anymore. And they told me at the office, no matter who they needed to take up there, they wouldn't call me to take 'em up there! (laughs) I said, "I guarantee something's gonna happen!" But see, we didn't know that was gonna be one of the days they were gonna try to haul coal. We had no idea. And

the office didn't know it either, I don't know... I think all the men were out of the office, which would have been clue one, you know, for me if I'd been working up there, all the men are out of the office, something's going on. You better wait and let me get ahold of 'em first. But, I mean, It's... you can look back on it, hindsight's 20-20.

And the "Picket Line Ladies" song, I mean, I went and asked people about... and one guy gave me a song about women on the picket line. And it was like Peyton Place. Or a soap opera. I said, "I ain't writing about... The women that I know aren't like that. And I said I'm not writing that stuff! That's nasty." So...

RW: I know about (unintelligible)

EP: (laughs) Oh, he had this big long page I mean it was like a legal sized paper about women on the picket lines and I said, I wouldn't even read all that let alone write and sing that stuff. But, you know, everybody started knocking on the door and calling on the phone and getting me to come here and there and sing and I traveled all over the place. And then they called from a festival that they were having um, up in Canada and wanted me to come up there and sing and I thought it was because of the union stuff but in addition to doing union stuff, when I would sing that, I would also sing the mountain stuff, the traditional music that I grew up listening to, and that's what they wanted me for, and I did that plus the union stuff up there. And then they wanted me to do gospel and I did that too. And it just started a whole ball of wax a rolling, a whole snowball rolling downhill.

RW: Did you do "Labor's Got Its Hands in Its Pockets?"

EP: Oh yeah! You were responsible for that one too.

RW: Well I didn't write it!

EP: No, but you had me to write it! "Labor's Got Its Hands In Its Pockets" about the old idea of the... who was it?

RW: IWW...

EP: Yeah, the IWW.

RW: This was my syndicalist phase.

EH: (laughs)

EP: Like, like throwing...

RW: Like It'd be if labor put its hands... nothing would happen, everything would just stop.

EH: Ah yeah.

EP: If they just walk, step back, put their hands in their pockets, you know, what would happen. And I wrote a song about that. And all of 'em went over real well, every one that he had me write went over real well. He had some really good ideas.

EH: And these were—were they all during the Pittston strike?

RW: And Ravenswood.

EP: And “One Day More” was Ravenswood, but Ravenswood was like.... During the 16 months that Pittston was out, or right at the tail end of the Pittston thing.

RW: Yeah, shortly after Pittston. And then Bethel and I went up there right after it started and they though they didn’t want us, they had it, and a year later I got the call (laughs) and started going up there.

EP: Mmhm, yeah, it... there, they tried using jack rocks in their steel trucks, their loaded down steel trucks were flattening the jack rocks, and I said “well, y’all gotta look at it this way—a load of steel weighs more than a load of coal. The trucks are bigger, the steel is heavier, and it’s gonna be different.” So Bethel got the idea that you could use 20 penny nails, those little short fat nails? And that’s what they did! And they worked!

11:17

RW: Now see, I never really used them or was around them, but I did suggest pipe cleaner just to mess with them.

EP: He was...

RW: Pipe cleaners, you know the...

EH: (laughs) yeah.

EP: He was the historian throughout the whole thing. Rick was.

RW: Philosopher, really.

EP: Yeah. (laughs)

EH: Um, and then “Picket Line Ladies”—were there other women on the picket line?

EP: There was a lot of women on the picket line. Pittston was really the turning point for that. They’d done it in a previous strike but they swore they’d never go back again because they were treated so badly. We created an organization called Women.... Friends and Family of UMWA” because we wanted to disconnect ourselves from the union because according to our historian here, families can do things in a strike that union members cannot because union members are bound by law and family members are not. So, it got to the point, we were good at what we did, and I told them when we first started, and we told the men when we, you know, we said, “we’ll... we got to check with you, we gotta listen to you all because we gotta know what you’re doing so we can do what we do.” But I said, “We’re not gonna just make coffee and cupcakes and carry it to picket lines.” And course we did cook on the picket lines, they had—that was another plus, the men didn’t have to go out and get their food or anything, they cooked it right there on the picket lines. And we wore our camo just like they did. I didn’t do the picket line stuff, but a lot of other women did.

EH: How did you cook and what did you make?

EP: Well, they had hot plates set up. And um, cause it had electric. They had electric at those places. And they kept coffee made and course, they weren't there all night, you know they'd go home in the evenings and then come back the next day and start the same thing all over.

We marched with the men, and uh, they, the women up at um, Slab Fork, up in that area, stood out in front of those trucks and climbed on 'em, which was really stupid, I think. But you know, it was, it was our lives we were talking about. That strike was about... a lot of people think it was just about higher wages, but it wasn't. We didn't, we still don't have a guaranteed pension plan. And I think recently they've started the wheels rolling' to get it guaranteed. 50s pensioners do but the 70s pensioners don't. And our health care—they can yank it from us anytime. And it's what they're trying to do right now.

RW: Well you've gone to the bankruptcy things and performed.

EP: Uh-huh.

RW: Recently—like Patriot, right?

EP: There, yeah! Well, I worked, they called me to get me to come and just actually they want me to sing for them because, you know, it kinda gets people's blood boiling, but... and that's what I do. But in doing that I meet a lot of people and I talk to 'em about what happened before and then I learn from them and it's, it's... I mean they...not only the Patriot workers, but look what they did to the ones in Huntington, the... oh shoot, sounds like a telephone company....

RW: Hmmmm...

EP: I can't remember. But, I mean those men...

RW: MINCO (unintelligible)

EP: No. No, it's... name some of the telephone companies.

RW: Especially, especially ... it's like the aluminum plant, right?

EP: No, I didn't do anything with that—this was before that. But they um, it was a coal company. It's a coal company but it sounds like a telephone company—I can't remember. But and... they... they took their benefits. They didn't have anything left! And they said, "well, we'll set up a program where we can retrain you." 58 years old? You can retrain all you want to, people aren't gonna hire that man—he's too close to retirement age. And that's what happened with Pittston when they shut down a lot of the mines at Pittston, when they "reorganized" and did all of that. The old... it was to get rid of the older men who were close to retirement age so they wouldn't have to pay their retirement! You know? And these young workers that are out there working now don't see that. They're gonna get the screws put to them just like we did to us! You know?

RW: We oughta think about some new ones (songs) for the new situation.

EP: Mmhm. It's different! It's different cause they got smart! I mean the companies did. And there aren't as many workers out there to stand up and fight. You're gonna... you're finding workers on the side of the companies now. And they've convinced everybody that the... the environmental laws are what's

wrong with the industry. No! The coal industry has been on the demise for a long time, a lot of years. We saw it in Pittston. And it's been progressing ever since, ever since. And the thing that's wrong with the coal industry are the greedy company people at the top that run the whole thing. I... I tried to avoid calling 'em parasites, but that's what they are. And I mean it goes back, way back to in the I guess 30s and 40s when they called 'em greedy parasites. That's what they are!

RW: That's "Solidarity Forever"

EP: They're not making any less money. Mmhm.

RW: That's verse two!

EP: Yeah. And I mean you just need to go back and look at your history. But you can understand where the miners are coming from! They're scared to death they're not gonna be able to provide for their families! But you need to look at both sides of that coin. I mean it's something I feel really really... I get really hot about. Because people... I don't know if they want to take the shortcut to getting what they want or they just don't want to get out there and hoof it and fight for it. It's easier to believe somebody that's gonna come in and tell you a nice story with real pretty icing on top of it.

What?

RW: We oughta think about like a series of several... you know what I mean, like a whole cycle for right now. You know?

EP: Mmhm.

EH: So after um, Pittston and Ravenswood, then what did you get involved in? I know you were doing some water stuff?

EP: Well that was with the... that was with my work.

EH: Okay.

EP: And um, I, because of my work and with the union, I got offered a job with the West Virginia Organizing Project and I worked with them two different times for several years, as a community organizer. And that was... (sighs) mainly over in Pigeon Creek. And I don't know if people are familiar with the movie *Moving Mountains* and the book that Penny Lo...

RW: It's a new movie, right?

EP: Yeah, it's new. At the book that Penny Loeb wrote? It's called *Moving Mountains* and it's about Patricia Bragg's struggle to get good water for her community over there in Pie. Pie and Varney area. And I was the organizer that went into organize that group because they would wake up at like 2 o'clock in the morning and aim to go get a drink of water and they wouldn't have anything but mud to come out of their pipes! And it was the blasting that was doing it. So we started that, well it ended up in court. And we are... we were a, like I said, a community organizing group and we did the direct action organizing which we went in, our organizers went in and taught people how to organize their own community and who to go, and go through proper channels of getting' stuff done. And I'm not saying lawsuits is not a proper



channel, but it should be a last resort because you should try to work it out first. But you can't work with the coal companies, I'm sorry! (laughs) There IS no working with the coal companies. And um, but it ended up in court. Oh, Robin... Bragg versus Robinson. And so Penny Loeb worked for U.S. News and World Report then and she came down to do a story on that. And ended up staying 2 years and wrote a book about it. And then people showed interest in a movie and she wrote the script for the movie and the movie was released just last year. And I just this past weekend, I did a... went to a, or weekend before last went to, oh shoot... can't remember... I am terrible with names of places. Oak Hill. And did a performance up there. They were showing, in their little amphitheater up there, they were showing the movie and there was a group of young kids that came to us and they were just so enthused about that... what we did in that movie. Because you know, Kayla was with us and Kayla's grown and got her own family now, but she was just 9 years old then. Patricia's daughter? And she was 9 years old and spoke before Congress! About the water rights over there. I mean, we empowered a lot of people through that. But I'm telling you, Trish, Trish was amazing, she... she was just like me, a stay at home housewife that asked her husband permission for everything, and she ended up going to college and graduating and working outside the home and providing for the family and everything. I think now she's just back to the house being a grandma and going around promoting the movie.

RW: Is the movie good?

EP: Yeah. Yeah.

RW: J-Lo plays you, right?

EP: (laughs) No. No—a lady called Tina Alexis Allen played me. And she's now on the weekly TV program "Outsiders" she plays Shurn on the Outsiders. I ask her if playing the part of me in the movie uh, helped her with that dialect and she said, "Oh yeah!" she said, "I didn't have to work very hard at all!" (laughs) cause it's in the mountains of Kentucky. That's where the people are from that are in that show. That the show's about. And she said, "Oh yeah, yeah, I had it down before I went down there." She said, "before I tried to get the job." And she was good enough, they've asked her back for a 2<sup>nd</sup> season, so she's doing season two too.

RW: I don't know why... is it on Netflix?

EP: No. I've got a copy of it. Just recently got my copy of it. They don't have 'em out for sale yet, but they're working with somebody now to try to get 'em out for sale. And it... I mean that was the good thing. It tells pretty true to the right story too. And our relationship with the DEP and you know, through the work of the West Virginia organizing project. And but, then she got involved with Mountain State Justice because they had to file a lawsuit—they wouldn't have gotten anything if they hadn't. We would have gotten some stuff but not nearly as much as they did through that lawsuit. And it raises awareness for a lot of people. But I mean the people in her community that believed what the company was saying instead of believing her you know, it just amazed me. You wonder how people can be so blind. But desperation will make people do just about anything. And that's what they were worried about then too, it's what the people are worried about now. And I'm worried for 'em! Because they're putting some of the mines back to work, but it's too little too late. And we needed to have been lookin' at alternative energy sources for a long time. And I'm not saying shut down the mines, I've never been against mining, my husband's a miner, his dad was a miner, and his dad was a miner. And I mean work in the mines, they

were what we call gauge hole mines, independent mines, but still, that's what they did. And it's made a good living for us and I wouldn't have it shut down for anything, but it's on its way out. I mean people aren't gonna do it that way anymore!

And, I think the music that I did and not just the songs that I wrote, and the... the struggle songs that other people had written, but the traditional music of the mountains. It's soul music. It's music... it's people pouring out their heart and soul on a piece of paper and then putting music to it. And it's stories about people and about their feelings. Even... the country music that I know, and I do country also, is the stuff of the 50s and 60s where they actually wrote about love and home, a lot of it was cheatin' but there was a lot of cheatin' going on during them days. (laughs) And... and, and... you know, alcohol was a big problem back then and a lot of those stories are about that. And um, I mean it's just a big part of telling the story and a big part of the history, and people's feelings, and I think they know that. When they call me to come pl... some place and sing, it's usually, that's what they want. I had a group from... oh that was when they called me from up in Canada, wanted me to come do that festival up there. They said, I ask 'em something about if they could have a guitar up there for me because I didn't want to take it on the plane, and she said, "you don't even have to bring your guitar," she said, "we'll get one for you. But you don't even have to get on stage with a guitar." She said, "people just want to sit there and listen to you talk!"

RW: (laughs)

EP: And I said, "No, I don't think I can talk for 45 minutes now." (laughs)

RW: That's bullshit.

EP: (laughs) I've learned since then I can! But it means a lot to people and especially the traditional stuff. They love I mean... "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art" were two of the most requested songs when I'd go to sing for a union activity or a work related activity—they wanted me to sing "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art."

RW: Do you do "Angel Band"?

EP: I... sometimes I do.

RW: Okay.

EH: Could you talk a little bit about what traditional stuff you play?

EP: Um, what do you mean—the types of songs I do?

EH: Yeah, the songs.

EP: I do Bluegrass, I do old country.

EH: Some titles, musicians that inspired you.

EP: Okay. Oh, musicians! Uh, that have... influenced me! Patsy Cline, first of all. Loretta Lynn of course. And um, I usually sing men's songs because there's more of them to choose from. And but, the old singers—George Jones, Merle Haggard, Bobby Bare, you know people like that. Just about everybody

that's on the Nashville channel now as... you know, they're old and fat and grey headed, sittin' there, just pickin' a flat top guitar and singing, those are the ones that influenced me. Rosemary Clooney—I love that woman. Patti Page. I love listening to their music and I got to meet some of the women in blues before I actually knew their work and I've learned about it since then. Mahalia Jackson—I always wanted to get up in front of a bunch of people and sing a gospel song like Mahalia Jackson. Course I'd never be able to do that, but I mean, the people to me they really felt their music and we all know George Jones and Merle Haggard LIVED their music and they wrote about it. And um, I just think that's the best way to say something if you've got something to say. And the very best way to do that is acapella. Course I go to the non-musical... non-instrumental Church of Christ and that's what we've always done. We've never had an instrument in church in our worship service. But I still pick my guitar and sing the gospel songs outside of that. And uh...

RW: SO one thing just to... the work you're doing now with kids kind of circles back. I mean, we did some of that years ago, but now you're really teaching kids to play and sing and write music, is that right?

EP: Not write music-- write songs!

RW: Yeah.

EP: And I mean, when Kate McComas first came to me and asked me if I would do that, it's an endowment from the Clay Center that pays um, West Virginia artists to go into afterschool programs and teach kids in afterschool programs about our music. And they don't really want... care if you teach 'em music or not, they just want you to teach 'em the songs. Because what Mr. Clay had realized was that—that's a lost art. The kids are not learning "Old Dan Tucker" and uh "Oh Susannah" and those songs that even go back further than that—the mountain songs that people wrote and sang when they were using machete to cut down the bushes so they could build a shack, you know, build a cabin on it. And, and work the land. The people that moved into this part of the country were the very poorest of the poor and they were, some of 'em came here because they were starving to death in their own country and it just all of that, uh, different nationalities and all the different types of music blended together into an Appalachian musical uh, feast, I think! I mean, we all think the guitar was the first instrument that was played in Appalachia—it wasn't. And you know, learning things like that and then how hard it was on those people—they wrote songs about um, about what they were going through. And the men would actually write the songs, but the women would sing 'em. They would learn 'em and sing 'em, simply because the men had to be out workin' and the women were at home. They didn't have time to sit down and learn 'em, but while they worked they could sing 'em and that's what they did!

And that... that... the kids don't know that part of their history. They don't know anything about traditional music. They don't even, when I first started teaching in the music camp over at Big Ugly, those kids didn't even know how to listen to music. I challenged them, "you bring your music to me." Because I would have them listen to a CD that they liked and then sing me a song off of it. They couldn't do it! They hollered. I mean, they just hollered the words. There was no tune, no beat, no nothing. And so I, I taught 'em. I taught 'em where their voice comes from and said, "this is important. If you're gonna try to get a message out to somebody, you've got to listen first. So we had a whole... we had 2 or 3 days there where we just practiced listening and they were singing by the end of the week! But it, that's what Mr. Clay had seen. You know? That was being lost. Women weren't teaching their kids those old songs anymore. And nobody was, so they hired me to teach 'em old mountain songs. Not music, it didn't matter

about the music, just teach ‘em the songs. And that’s what I started doing. But it turned into—we made our own instruments, we made drums and we made shakers and we wrote skits and you saw kids that wouldn’t even talk to ya when they first started class, coming up to you and saying “Miss Elaine I think we oughta do a song like this.” You know? And that’s just... it’s just so rewarding. It’s there for all of ‘em, but you just gotta get ahold of ‘em and develop it. And that’s what Mr. Clay saw and that’s what I’m doing now. I go—I’ve only got one school that I’m workin’ at, but I work for the Clay Center over at Big Ugly, through the Clay Center over at Big Ugly. And I work with the after school kids teaching ‘em... now I’m teaching ‘em songs that they wrote in that Patchwork Dreams Project that they had over there, where Heidi Muller worked with ‘em to write songs about Big Ugly and Harts Creek and the area and the life here. And she... they went into grade schools for... in 2004 and 2006 I think, or maybe 2007 and worked with kids and wrote all kinds of songs about the life. A lot of... just about every song I’ve taught the kids, been teaching the kids over there, has a line in it about a four-wheeler. I mean that is a big part of the life over there cause it’s so rural! You know you can get around better on a four-wheeler than you can on those roads, than you can a regular car. And uh, so... it’s sad that there’s not more programs like that around. Because we need to know about the music and... they’re trying to cut the performing arts out of schools? That’s a big mistake. That—the performing arts is a way for kids to see... “you know, I may not be able to play ball, I may not be able to jump the highest of anybody else and I may not make straight As, but hey, I can write a song!”

EH: Yeah!

EP: And I can sing it! I can let people know I’ve got a voice! I’ve got... I can let people know what I’m thinking. And it’s been lost, it’s been totally lost. And it was an effort by Mr. Clay to keep it going. That’s what the program was intended to do. And I think it’s done it so far. I’ve worked with them for 6 years but the program’s been active longer than that. But I’ve worked with ‘em for 6 years and I think I’ve got more out of it than they have.

EH: Well, and music is a lifelong skill. Those knees are gonna go but you can always sing a song.

34:08

EP: Well when my CD came out there... it was being played—got playlists from the different radio stations it was played in and it was... I was shocked. It was on the top 40 of a lot of ‘em. And it just... and it was because, one... one DJ said it was because of the feeling that’s in the CD. And um, he said especially, said the people don’t understand the words—this is from a place in Europe. He said people don’t understand the words. But they understand the feeling. And they call every night and request that song. And it was “America Our Union.” The one that, the very first one that I wrote. And I wrote it because I felt it. And I tell everybody this story. My husband was probably the best speech maker... giver... ever. He never used a note, he just spoke from his heart. And that’s what made the difference. And he knew what he was speaking about because he was involved in it. And, I mean people have speech writers and all that stuff. Well, that’s alright. But he knew what he was talking about. And he, he didn’t have the numbers that he needed and I looked ‘em up for him one time and put ‘em on a piece of paper and he stuck him in his pocket and they stayed there. He... he made that speech without using those numbers and it was just as effective as if he’d had ‘em. And so, that’s the way I’d like my music to be looked at and listened to.

EH: How did—I used to work for Smithsonian Folkways and I know “One Day More” is part of their collection of songs. How did that come about?

EP: They called me and asked me if they could use the song. They wanted to use one of my songs on it and asked me if they could and I said sure! Then they wanted me to sign over the rights to it to somebody else and I said “no... no. I don’t care if it never goes anywhere, I’m not gonna register it with the company. Because that means they can give it to anybody they want to.” And I really wrote that music for um, a specific purpose, a specific time and “One Day More,” though, I think is timeless. I mean any... you don’t have to use that one verse that names Marc Rich—that verse. You don’t have to use that, but the other verses that are there, they’re just universal. And that’s what he said about the music. He said, that DJ, he said, “this music is universal.” It doesn’t matter what language it’s in, people know what it means.

RW: And that was part of the original assignment—make it like for a specific event, but universal enough to be sung... (laughs)

EP: Yeah! (laughs) That’s what I was trying to remember! When you wanted me to write that song, he said, “Make it individual enough that they know it’s about them, but make it um, universal enough to... to uh, so other people can use it in other struggles after this.”

EH: Um, I think we want to get you to play one, but is there anything else you want to add?

EP: No, just... if this is gonna... I don’t know who this is gonna go out to, but if there’s anybody listening to this or reading this and you’ve got any idea that you can do anything—tell a story... Rick’s a great storyteller. I used to love to listen to his jack tales. And write a story about what you’re going through, tell it, write it in a poem, just put it on paper and try to put music to it or put it on paper and try to get somebody else to put music to it. Just get it out there! Just get it out there and let people know what you’re thinking. And you’ll be surprised how much it will free you up and help you out. Cause it did me. It made a monster out of me. (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Well thank you!

EP: You’re welcome.

EH: We’ll let you go out...or do you want to grab the guitar?

RW: I could!

38:12

END OF TAPE

Elaine Purkey Songs

00:00

EP: I'd like to tell everybody before I sing this song that there's a, a line in it about little elves in a hollow log, er, hollow tree. And during the time that this was written, um, that was the big commercial, that commercial had just come out on television about the Keebler cookies were made by little elves in a hollow tree. Yeah, hollow tree.

(Sings "Talking Jack Rock Blues")

Well there's a little toy used at strikes you see

It's made by little elves in a hollow tree.

They ain't very big or expensive to make,

But if you're a scab, you've made a big mistake.

Now this little toy, he's a sharp little guy

And he if you cross him up, well he'll make you jump high.

He ain't very pretty, don't need to be smart,

But he can cripple a coal truck before it even starts.

Well he's made from two nails put together at night

And he's a union weapon when he's handled just right.

He'll help you, he'll hurt ya, he's made from good stock

This little homemade weapon—little toy called a jack rock.

Plant 'em in the ground and he won't grow

And just who thought him up, well I don't even know.

He just kinda lays there looking up at you

And if you haul non-union, he's gonna catch ya.

Now he's more dangerous than a loaded gun,

You'll go to jail if you're caught usin' one,

But scabs shoot rifles and don't have to stop,

But there's a big reward out for who's a-makin' them jack rocks.

Now they ain't never caught him and they won't you see,

You can't catch little elves in a hollow tree.

You can't catch scabs, I'll bet you a dollar

If you showed him a jack rock, he'd jump and he'd holler.

Woe is me, oh woe is me, I hate little elves in a hollow tree.

They're breaking the law and I wish they'd stop,

'Cause I have nightmares about them jack rocks.

(laughs)

EP: Then the other... Rick was responsible for that one.

This guitar is deplorable, believe me. I mean it is awful! It's the strings, not the guitar—the guitar sounds good.

This one is "One Day More." I told you a story about that earlier. Another one Rick's responsible for.

(Sings "One Day More")

One day more, one day more

People let me tell you what we're fighting for

We're fighting for our future, don't you understand

We don't need your pity we just need your helping hand.

Fight one day more, one day more

If the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.

One day more, one day more if the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.

We've got to change the way things are make people understand

Our working class is being denied their rights in a free land.

Our government lets criminals run free and steal again

Then take the jobs of honest working women and men.

Fight one day more, one day more

If the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.

One day more, one day more if the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.

Let's change the laws, remove the flaws and start all over new  
Demand our rights, take back our lands, spread freedom through and through  
Keep the scabs out of the White House, vote union brothers in,  
Then the feds won't ever take us off in ball and chains again.  
Fight one day more, one day more  
If the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.  
One day more, one day more if the company holds out 20 years, we'll hold out one day more.  
One day more, one day more  
People let me tell you what we're fighting for.  
We're fighting for your future, don't you understand  
You won't need our pity you just need our helping hand.  
Fight one day more, one day more  
If the companies can hold out 20 years, we can hold out one day more.  
One day more, one day more  
If the companies can hold out 20 years, we can hold out one day more.  
6:00  
EH: Can we do one more? My card... my card is full, I'm gonna put a new one in.  
EP: Do I have to do a union song, can I just...  
EH: No!  
RW: Do whatever you want!  
EP: Okay.  
EP: How 'bout I do "Amazing Grace"  
EH: Yeah! Hold on.  
RW: You think I gotta break down and change those strings, huh?



EP: Yeah, you really need to change the strings. I'd get me some light gauge phosphor bronze too. If you like medium strings, go ahead and get the medium gauge.

RW: No, I like the light gauge.

EP: That's what these are. Right? You know, they got extra lights now. I can't keep 'em in tune on my guitar, I get my strings.. (unintelligible)

RW: Okay, do you change your own or do you get somebody else to do it?

EP: I do it. If Mike's around, I get Mike to. Man, he can change 'em in a twinkling of an eye! And he wraps 'em around and around, makes 'em look real pretty like a little cone? And...

RW: Mine look like a crazy mess.

EP: Huh? I just barely can get mine on. I have to think about it still yet. Lee bought me one of them things that you screw 'em on with and screw 'em off with... I can't use that thing. Okay.

RW: Is this a cappella or are you gonna strum?

EP: Acapella. I only did "Amazing Grace" one time with music and I got together up at Ravenswood with a guy that worked at a car dealership and played it for me, and we traded off, and I'm telling ya, I wish somebody had been recording that because it was... you know how you do something and it's like, you know it's a one-time thing, you're gonna do it one time and one time only and it'll never happen again? That's what that was. A woman come in later and said, "I heard you all did a very, very nice rendition of "Amazing Grace" and I'd like to hear it again." I looked over at him and he looked, and we both just started laughing cause that ain't gonna happen again! (laughs) I said "we can do something close, but it ain't gonna happen again."

RW: That's the way that thing with Bethel was.

EP: Huh?

RW: That's the way that fling with Bethel was.

EP: (laughs) yeah, I know. I told you I've not been able to live up to that ever since!

(Sings "Amazing Grace")

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost, but now I'm found

Was blind, but now I see.

Was grace that taught my heart to fear

And grace my fears away

How precious did that grace appear

When I his word obey.

And then when we went there 10,000 years

Bright shining as the sun

We've no less days to sing God's praise

Than when we first begun.

Amazing grace saved me.

RW: It was good to see ya!

EP: It was good to see ya again!

EH: Alright, I'm gonna take your still photo.

11:03

You guys want a photo together?

RW: Break the camera—are you sure?

EP: (laughs)

EH: You don't want to get in there Rick?

EP: I can scoot over that way. Oh. (chair scoots)

EH: There you go!

EP: (laughs) Make Bethel jealous.

EH: Thank you so much.

11:38

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW