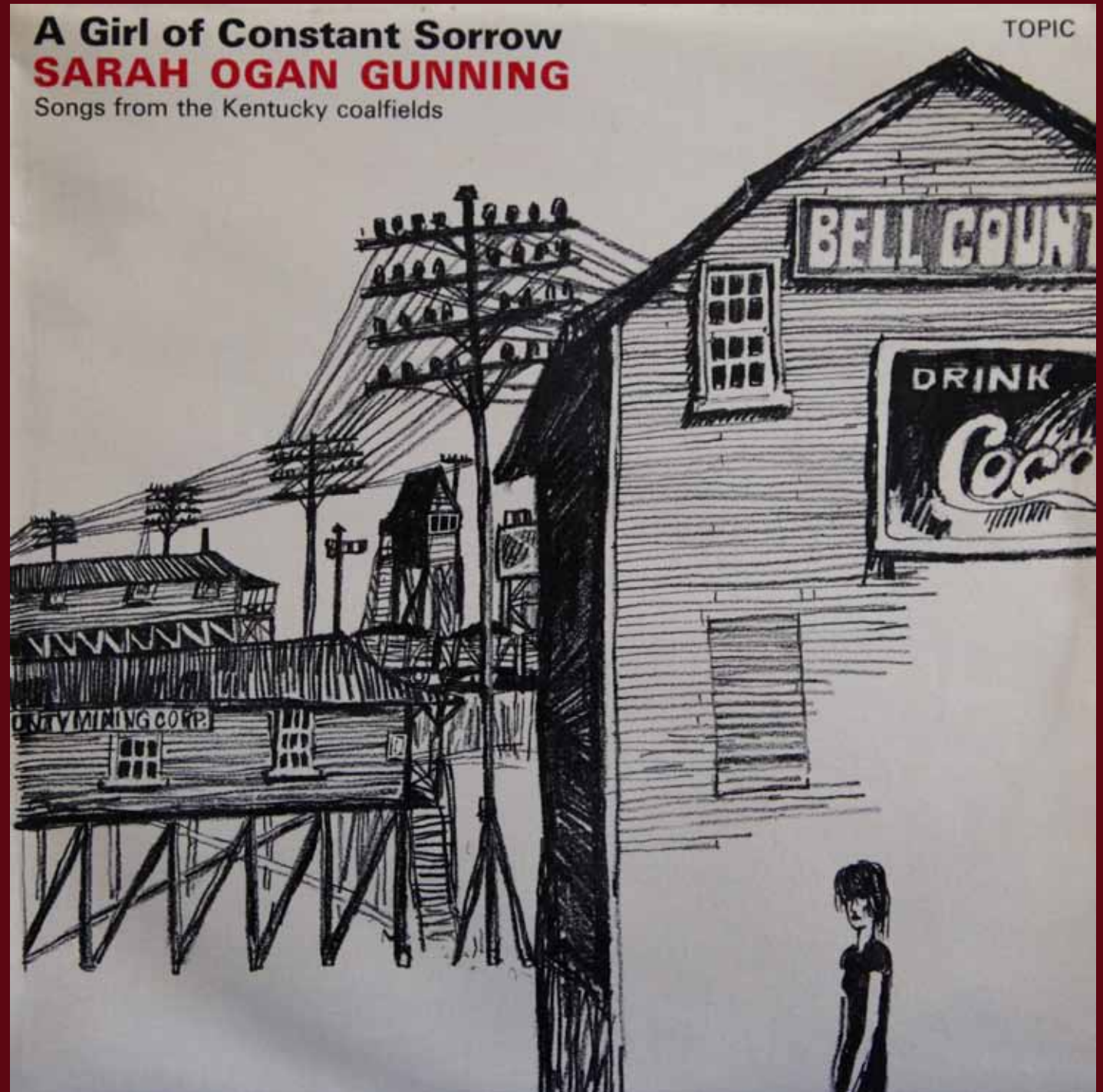


A Girl of Constant Sorrow
SARAH OGAN GUNNING
Songs from the Kentucky coalfields

TOPIC

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Songs from the Kentucky
coalfields



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|----|--|----|---------------------|
| 1 | I AM A GIRL OF CONSTANT
SORROW | 18 | JUST THE SAME TODAY |
| 2 | LOVING NANCY | 19 | SALLY |
| 3 | OLD JACK FROST | 20 | OH DEATH |
| 4 | MAY I GO WITH YOU JOHNNY? | | |
| 5 | THE HAND OF GOD ON THE WALL | | |
| 6 | DOWN ON THE PICKET LINE | | |
| 7 | I HATE THE COMPANY BOSSES | | |
| 8 | I'M GOING TO ORGANIZE | | |
| 9 | CHRIST WAS A WAYWORN
TRAVELER | | |
| 10 | WHY DO YOU STAND THERE IN
THE RAIN? | | |
| 11 | DREADFUL MEMORIES | | |
| 12 | OLD SOUTHERN TOWN | | |
| 13 | I HAVE LETTERS FROM MY FATHER | | |
| 14 | CAPTAIN DEVIN | | |
| 15 | GEE WHIZ WHAT THEY DONE TO
ME | | |
| 16 | DAVY CROCKETT | | |
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A Girl of
Constant
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Songs from
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In the half-decade, 1929-32, a band of U.S. northern labor organizers – radical and intellectual – met a number of rural, conservative folksingers in the southern mountains. From this setting came a group of topical songs using old melodies to set off intensely stark and militant texts. Needless to say, with Roosevelt's New Deal the thrust of radicalism in labor was diverted and the main body of left, sectarian songs was forgotten. Almost none entered tradition. (However, a few have been retained by students and 'revival' singers of folksongs.)

The radical pieces of the Great Depression are not insignificant because they failed to become folksongs. Today, as the nation focuses on poverty in Appalachia and civil rights in the Black Belt, a song which draws attention to the plight of poor or deprived people has utility. When such a song flows from the experience of a traditional folksinger and is delivered in authentic style, it becomes a poignant statement for the listener – even a potential guide to new values.

The best of such living bards is Sarah Ogan Gunning, who complements her own journalistic numbers with a songbag of old ballads, love lyrics, comic ditties, and religious pieces. Sarah is important for her dual repertoire – traditional and topical. She adds to the largeness of this gift a magnificent mastery of Appalachian style. The contents of her personal

songs stress hardship and sorrow. She does not separate such contents from her delivery, in which pathos and loneliness sound so natural.

At the time of Sarah's birth (June 28, 1910), southeastern Kentucky was still in transition from an economy of frontier farming to coal mining. Her father, Oliver Perry Garland, was the farmer-minister who turned to the mines while still a young man. He cast his lot with trade unionism as soon as the mountaineers began to organize; Sarah recalls union meetings at her home from earliest childhood. All the youngsters shared the frequent moving from one raw camp to another. His children – unaware that industrial life was altering rural folkways - absorbed the stock of traditional lore normal to their culture. One of the daughters, the late Aunt Molly Jackson (half-sister to Sarah), made her mark as a folksinger and is still well known. One of his sons, Jim Garland, is also known as a folksinger.

About 1925, Andrew Ogan (born April 28, 1905) from Clairborn County, Tennessee, came to work in the Fox Ridge Mine, Bell County, Kentucky. He soon fell in love with fifteen-year-old Sarah, and they eloped to Cumberland Gap, across the line, to be married. It was her first trip out of state. But before long, Ogan was back in Kentucky and Sarah exchanged the role of a miner's daughter for that of a miner's wife.

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During 1931, Kentucky coal fields were at their nadir. Some miners responded to gloom and despair by joining the National Miners Union, a communist-led organization rival to the United Mine Workers. Sarah was active in neither union nor radical affairs, yet she absorbed the exciting new posture of protest from her husband Andrew and brother Jim. Eventually, most of the NMU stalwarts returned to the older union, particularly after Jon L. Lewis revitalised the UMW with the fabulous 'Blue Eagle' organizational drive of 1933-4. But some NMU miners, isolated by extreme positions or exhausted by work-induced sickness and injury, journeyed away from their mountain coal fields. The Ogan family made such a trip to New York City about 1935. Slum life on the lower East Side was an inadequate substitute for southeastern Kentucky's poverty. Andrew Ogan's TB worsened, and when he knew that his sickness was fatal, he returned to Brush Creek, Knox County, Kentucky, where he died on August 15, 1938.

Sarah herself was frequently ill during this period but managed to survive New York's privation. On August 7, 1941, she married Joseph Gunning, a skilled metal polisher. During World War II the Gunnings traveled to the Pacific Coast for shipyard defence work at Vancouver, on the Columbia River. After the war they lived in Kentucky briefly, but in time they moved

north to Detroit to seek industrial employment. Here they put down new roots in the auto city.

During Sarah's years in New York she had met many of the persons caught up by the folksong revival: Pete Seeger, Burl Ives, Huddie Ledbetter, Earl Robinson, Will Geer, Woody Guthrie. She learned a few songs (*Joe Hill, Tom Joad, Bourgeois Blues*) from them, but, perhaps unconsciously, guarded the purity of her style and her repertoire. While physically removed from her mountain home, she retained hill ways, and, in part, worked out some of her sense of geographic separation and personal loss in song composition.

As early as June 12, 1940, Woodie Guthrie had penned an affectionate portrait of his friend Sarah for the *New York Daily Worker*. In 1947 he expanded this sketch for his informal *American Folksong* (Moe Asch: Disc Company; reprinted Oak Publications 1963). Guthrie liked Sarah's militancy as she recounted a meeting with a coal-camp sheriff. The Oklahoma singer also responded to 'her natural voice...dry as (his) own, thin, high...with the old outdoors and down the mountain sound to it.'

Like other folksingers, her repertoire encompasses a variety of emotions: anger at needless poverty and exploitation, affirmation of self-help as a way

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of life, pleasure in love, solace in religion, peace in death. Sarah's prodigious talent has permitted her to fuse disparate radical elements with traditional forms to create a handful of significant songs beyond the legacy of well-known material left to her by her family.

1 I Am a Girl of Constant Sorrow

In recent years, the Appalachian lament *I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow* has become popular in urban folksong circles, in part through the performance of the Stanley Brothers and of Mike Seeger. No study of this haunting piece is available; the earliest text I have found was printed about 1913 in a pocket songster hawked by Dick Burnett, a blind singer from Monticello, Kentucky. During 1918, Cecil Sharp collected the song and published it as In *Old Virginny* (Sharp II, 233). Sarah's recomposition of the traditional Man into a more personal Girl took place about 1936 in New York, where her first husband, Andrew Ogan, was fatally ill. The text was descriptive of loneliness away from home and anticipated her bereavement; the melody she remembered from a 78 rpm hillbilly record (Emry Arthur) she had heard some years before in the mountains.

2 Loving Nancy

Sarah, while very young, learned a number of songs from her mother, Sarah Elizabeth Lucas Garland, from Lizzie's sisters, and their children. Such pieces were known to the Lucases for many generations and were brought directly from the British Isles or absorbed from other Anglo-American singers in Kentucky. This particular variant of 'Loving Nancy' is not found in standard collections.

Jim Garland has suggested to his daughter that Kentucky men who rafted logs out of the mountains sang *Loving Nancy*. Perhaps we see here an ocean voyage localized to a trip down the Ohio-Mississippi.

3 Old Jack Frost

This children's song, for which Sarah usually acts out motions while singing, came from her mother. When it was suggested that the piece might have originated in a Victorian school book, Sarah indicated that her mother had learned to read and write by studying books brought home from the Civil War by her father, Wilson Lucas. Regardless of origin, *Old Jack Frost* came to Sarah traditionally. To date, I have not found the song in print or disc form.

4 May I Go With You, Johnny?

Female warriors and their adventures are abundant

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in British and American broadsides. One particular group is categorized as *The Girl Volunteer*. Sarah's lovely version comes from her mother, who identified it as a Civil War story. Sarah is fond of songs which engage the heroine in struggle – whether in affairs of the heart or on the industrial front.

5 The Hand Of God On The Wall

Although the general theme of handwriting on the wall appears in several collected Negro spirituals, I have not found Sarah's splendid religious song elsewhere. She credits the composition to Uncle Dan Lucas, who had died before her birth; Sarah actually learned the piece from her mother. Harlan Daniel, formerly of Stone County, Arkansas, places this song or a similar number in his family tradition. At least two alternatives are possible: several persons may independently have composed songs based directly on Belshazzar's Feast in the Book of Daniel, 5:1-31; or a common song – possibly in print – spread to various sections of the South.

6 Down On The Picket Line

Many of Sarah's topical songs were general commentaries on hardship or exploitation and were composed after she reached New York; however, some were labor-radical songs with a specific time-place setting. *Down on the Picket Line* stems from

the 1932 National Miners Union strike on the left fork of Straight Creek, Bell County where miners and their wives walked the coal-camp railroad track picket line. This is Sarah's first song; she composed it before she left Kentucky, when her own role as a trade union protagonist was vivid. She identified her melodic source as the widespread hymn *As I Went Down in the Valley to Pray*.

7 I Hate The Company Bosses

About 1939, Moe Asch – now the proprietor of Folkways records – first heard Sarah sing this piece. He complimented her by commenting that it was the most radical composition he had ever heard in his life. The original title was *I Hate the Capitalist System*; the song was recorded as such for the Library of Congress. Sarah thought of it as autobiographical – a response to the death of her loved ones – and not polemical. Although she stated to me that the music was made up out of her mind, it is clearly related to at least two tunes known in mountain tradition: a Carter Family melody for a broadside usually called *The Sailor Boy*, a haunting air printed by Combs from his mother's singing on Troublesome Creek, Knott County, Kentucky, about 1889 *On the Banks of that Lonely River*.

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8 I'm Going To Organize

Not all of Sarah's labor material is sombre. *I'm Going To Organize* seemed to appeal particularly to Woody Guthrie. Guthrie met Sarah soon after his arrival in New York. When she was in the hospital in the summer of 1941, he recorded (and altered) this song, and titled it *Babe O' Mine*. In this form the song reached a number of CIO trade unionists during World War II.

I'm Going To Organize has intrinsic interest as a union song; it is also one recent branch of the *Baby Mine – Banjo Girl* family tree. In hillbilly tradition the text is usually secondary to the tune, which has become a lively vehicle for a banjo instrumental.

9 Christ Was A Wayworn Traveler

On the whole, the sacred numbers in Sarah's repertoire are the oldest both in point of origin and in her manner of delivery. Sarah learned *Christ Was a Wayborn Traveler* from her father, Oliver Perry Garland, a farmer-miner-Baptist minister. It was his favorite sacred number, perhaps because of his own pluralistic values. This hymn, also known as *My Warfare Will Soon Be Ended*, is found in Negro and white tradition. I do not know the precise age of Sarah's piece; however, 'the warfare ended' phrase has been traced to Sacred Harp booklets of 1844 and

1846.

10 Why Do You Stand There In The Rain?

Of the 20 numbers on this, Sarah's first LP album, all but one are traditional songs or songs of her own composition. The exception is Woody Guthrie's *Why Do You Stand There in the Rain?* During the Lincoln's Birthday weekend, 1940, the communist-orientated American Youth Congress met in Washington to hold a Citizenship Institute and to criticize President Roosevelt for his aid-to-Finland policies in the USSR's war on Finland. When the more-than-400 delegates met on the White House lawn, the President castigated them for their defence of the Soviet invasion.

Woody was in the downpour. Upon his return to Manhattan, he responded to the Presidential spanking with a new song (set to a melody he and his cousin Jack Guthrie were to use later for the Country-Western hit *The Oklahoma Hills*.)

11 Dreadful Memories

In 1952, when John Greenway visited Aunty Molly Jackson at Sacramento, California, she sang for him a poignant song modeled on the familiar hymn *Precious Memories*. Molly placed the date of composition as 1935 and the 'experience' as 1931. Greenway used *Dreadful Memories* in AMERICAN FOLKSONGS OF

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PROTEST and recorded it twice. Consequently, I was pleased and surprised to collect it from Sarah in 1963, for she generally eschewed her half-sister's material. Sarah told me that she composed the song in New York about 1938 and that Molly 'learned it from her' when the Gunnings visited California during World War II. There is no question in my mind as to the veracity of Sarah's statement. Here it can be said that folksong students are in debt to the two sisters for this excellent example of variation within a single family tradition.

12 Old Southern Town

While she was in New York, Sarah composed this song out of her feelings of loneliness for Kentucky. Yet it is a curious kind of nostalgia that sees heartache and starvation, theft and exploitation in the mind's eye. Sarah calls this a true song; although it narrates no specific event, it does recall her childhood memory of farmers selling their land to coal companies for ten dollars per acre and subsequently going into debt to these same organizations

13 I Have Letters From My Father

The symbolism in most folk spirituals is fairly obvious. *I Have Letters* is a more complicated piece than many in Sarah's songbag. When I pressed her for the story behind the song, she replied only that

it was very old in the Garland family. As she sings it she conforms to her father's 'dwelling-on-the-words' or lingering style which she contrasts with Holiness or modern style. I have no clue to the spiritual's background except that it is part of the *Captain Kidd* – *Wondrous Love* tune family.

Sarah's association for *I Have Letters* is that of the Biblical concept of universal brotherhood which her father strongly held, not only as a minister but also as a staunch trade unionist. Coal miners were the first southern workers to organize across the colour line. When Sarah's brother Bill Garland died at Arjay Creek (ca 1954), Preacher Mays, a Negro minister from Old Straight Creek, sang *I Have Letters* at Bill's funeral; they had sung it as a duet in previous years while they worked and worshipped together.

14 Captain Devin

Whiskey in the Jar is popular today among revival singers in Ireland, England, and the United States. The good texts generally stem directly from Irish broadsides. Sarah's text is significant because this ballad has been infrequently found in the Southern Highlands. Sarah learned *Captain Devin* from her mother and quite naturally believes King's Mountain to be in Clay County, Kentucky.

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15 Gee Whiz What They Done To Me

Mrs. Frank (Alice) Smith, Sarah's mother's sister, gave this surrealistic item to her niece. Aunt Alice was both a Holiness preacher and moonshine pedlar at Little Goose Creek, Clay County; in fact, she sold whiskey to her congregation. It seemed incongruous to Sarah as a child to hear a preacher sing such a funny song, and she has retained Alice's number until the present. Although the text is written from a man's perspective, I do not know whether Alice and Sarah are hostile or sympathetic to the rambling blade.

16 Davy Crockett

Davy Crockett is a fine example of the compression into a single song of characters from diverse sources: the minstrel figures of Pompey Smash and Old Zip Coon (Jim Crow), and the historical as well as legendary Colonel Crockett. It is a widespread and long-lived folk-song worthy of study, if only to contrast its life in tradition with that of the Walt Disney ballad. Sarah learned 'this funny little song' as a youngster from her mother's singing and 'connected' it with the sheep sorrel plant which her mother gathered in the woods for cooking.

17 Battle of Mill Spring

Sarah learned this Civil War ballad from her mother and believes that she, in turn, got it from her father,

Wilson Lucas – like many mountain boys – a Union Army soldier. Sarah's retention of the piece stems in large part from her identification with the "little sister" who was told not to weep for her dying soldier brother. As a child, Sarah felt that she *was* the little girl in the song; seemingly the narrative elements did not impress Sarah as deeply. She never associated the song with this particular battlefield less than sixty miles from her birthplace.

18 Just The Same Today

Three pieces on this disc (5, 9, 13), illustrate the oldest singing style known to Sarah, that derived from her father's treatment of hymns. In all my sessions with her, Sarah sang much modern church material which she labelled as 'Holiness' or 'Gospel'. She enjoyed taking a given song that had gone from the old way (Baptist) to the new (Holiness), singing it both ways without pause between sections. *Just The Same Today* – a series of Biblical vignettes – is one of the longest songs Sarah remembers from her father's repertoire. Here she sings a portion of it in the new up-tempo style.

19 Sally

A Rich Irish Lady under many titles is widely collected in America and has been extensively commented on by scholars, perhaps because of its association with

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The Brown Girl (Child 295). Sarah learned *Sally* at the age of five from her mother. When I expressed surprise that she retained so many songs from childhood, she indicated that before she learned to read she could learn a piece at church or at home after just one or two hearings. When she grew older and was exposed to musical notation (square and round) at the singing schools conducted by wandering teachers, she lost her power to learn a song 'at once'; that is, it might take her a period of days or weeks to learn something she liked. *Sally* is one of the few ballads that Sarah clearly identified as coming from England, unlike *Loving Nancy* and *May I Go With You, Johnny?* Which she localized, respectively, to Kentucky and the Civil War.

20 Oh Death

Oh Death is found in white and Negro tradition from Texas to the Georgia Sea Islands and is available in widely contrasting settings: unaccompanied vocal solo, hillbilly duet (with guitars), bluegrass band. This stark conversational piece has attracted a number of short stylized explanations which place the song on the lips of a dying slave beaten by a cruel plantation mistress, or on the lips of a Kentucky hill-preacher stricken by the Lord for ignoring His call. Sarah adds an excellent narrative of her own: Elizabeth, her

mother, used to sing this sad song while gathering herbs in the woods. One day she wandered near a concealed underground still. The moonshiners took Aunt Lizzie to be a ghost and in terrible fright abandoned the still (but only temporarily).

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Thursday
Dear Pamela,
Herewith another
hand-out for the Gunning
Record,
Yours,
Angelina Carter

500 Gold.
17.667.

Hand-out for Sarah Ogan Gunning record

Born in a coal camp in Kentucky in 1910, Sarah Ogan Gunning grew up in a world of stark poverty, of workers' militancy ~~and~~ of song. She was the daughter and later the wife of a miner; her half-sister was the well-known singer, Aunt Molly Jackson.

Mrs. Gunning herself is a superb singer in the ^{high} ~~best~~, lonesome mountain style and also one of the finest of the worker bards of the Great Depression, composer of many ~~poignant~~ stirring songs of the hardships of the other America, one of the most ~~poignant~~ of which, "A Girl of Constant Sorrow," gives its title to this fine record.

Mrs. Gunning's repertoire encompasses a variety of emotions; anger at needless poverty and exploitation, affirmation of self-help as a way of life, pleasure in love, solace in religion, peace in death. Old songs of rural America learnt from her family when south eastern Kentucky was still in transition from an economy of frontier farming to coal mining mingle harmoniously here with religious songs and her own radical ballads.

Such is the power and integrity of Mrs. Gunnings singing that all she sings becomes full of a most moving human significance. This is an impressive and masterly record from a singer far too little known in this country.

The folklorist Archie Green says of this wonderful singer: "Our choices while hearing or seeing Sarah Ogan Gunning are many: we can hear her as an excellent exponent of mountain style, we can seek out her rare song variants for comparative purposes, we can be moved by the beauty of her ballads, we can turn her messages into bellows to fan the flames of social action. To the extent ~~we~~ that we are able to perceive all these facets, we gain some of her wholeness and integrity for ourselves." ...ends

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