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## Living in Music (Part II)

By Trish Hatfield ('08), Program Assistant

"... To know a song is to know its meaning. To know a song's meaning, in turn, is to know its power—that which inspires, uplifts, and edifies" (Lassiter, *The Power of Kiowa Song*, 141).

In our last issue, Pete Kosky ('04) and Colleen Anderson ('03) shared what singing and songwriting means to them. In this one, we talk with two folks who connect with music differently, though deeply valuing it all the same. The first interview is with Michael Tierney, Founder and Executive Director of Step By Step, a non-profit working on behalf of children and families in the southern coalfields of Lincoln, Logan and Kanawha counties and based at the Big Ugly Community Center. Our second interview is with Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Director of the Graduate Humanities Program.



### Singing & Songwriting with Michael Tierney, Director, Step By Step

**Michael, besides being a long time community activist, you also write non-fiction stories, poems, and compose music. You already have a Master's in history, but you identify yourself joyfully as a groupie of the Graduate Humanities Program. Tell us why.**

The classes have been a source of kindred spirit-hood; people who care about story, about language . . . thinking deeply, broadly, and unselfconsciously about what life means. It's more than a narrow intellectual community—I treasure the way people talk in class about their lives and relate them to humanities themes and to literature. My classmates are willing to think hard, thinking the big thoughts and anchoring them in people's lives. For example, the people I've gotten to know through Renae Bonnett's ('08) stories root me even deeper in West Virginia and remind me of what's worth fighting for here as much as any social action tract I've read. And her stories are funny as hell. It's important to remember that the people who are fighting for their lives have a much better sense of humor than most of us activists do.

#### Tell us about your music.

I'm a community organizer and educator rather than a singer so performance feels counter intuitive to my greater purpose, however . . . I love it when the image and words and melody come together. I think you can lose yourself in writing and the images that bring tears to my eyes come to me more through songwriting. I've probably written 20 songs. I sing in the car and memorize them. I don't play an instrument so people like Ron Sowell, Heidi Miller, and the late Becky Skeen Webb have helped me transpose it onto sheet music.

#### What role does music play in your life?

Music is a means of keeping people and stories and movements alive. And it's just a source of joy. It can be a source of laughter and of tears—sad songs help us survive. But as an adult, music needs to be a source of transcending our circumstances.

#### Is there a "purpose" to your music?

To me, music is very, very participatory. Whether it's social movements or a religious practice, songs are a means of inclusion and participation rather than performance and standing out as an individual. See *Tierney, Page 4*



## Singing & Songwriting with Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Director, Graduate Humanities

**Dr. Lassiter, you have a music history that not many folks know about. Would you tell us what singing and song means to you?**

When I lived in southwestern Oklahoma, I was very active in the Kiowa community, particularly learning how to sing Kiowa songs. Later, I developed a scholarly interest in the history and meaning of the songs, and developed that interest as an anthropologist, which came many years later. I became interested in things like: How can you translate and understand music among different kinds of people with very different understandings for what music is? How to translate certain words, ideas, and different histories without taking away deeper meanings? It's relevant not only for students of music like myself, but also for Kiowas.

For example: Kiowa singers say they “receive” or “catch” songs instead of compose them. Songs are said to already exist, waiting to be heard, to be “caught.” When a song is “caught,” so is “power.” And that “power” can take many forms. One of the Kiowa singers with whom I worked closely once put it this way: “Singing is what thinking spiritual, gathering of thoughts, means; and when the thoughts and sounds come together, that makes your song. It’s a gathering of medicine words . . . .” It’s an idea that I went to great lengths to try to understand when I wrote what eventually became my first book, *The Power of Kiowa Song*.

**This all sounds really different from the way we view music in mainstream society.**

My experience in Kiowa country changed me. And it changed how I thought about music. One of the things that struck me early on was how music infused every part of life for many Kiowas, every hardship or joy,

from birth to death, songs marked every occasion. For example, I once went to see a friend who was dying in the hospital. Dozens of people were there, filling his room, and into the hallway. They were there to sing him through death, singing Kiowa and Comanche hymns for hours until he finally passed. It was a very beautiful—and powerful—thing to witness.

**How do you think about music as an anthropologist?**

What we know to be “music” exists everywhere: all human beings use music to express themselves. Music is also incredibly diverse, so diverse that our understandings of what music is does not translate easily into how other people in other times and places think about what music is. Music is actually a very illusive thing cross-culturally. What might sound like music to us might be what people in other societies separate out differently from speech, or something entirely different for that matter.

For the Kiowas, many of the songs keep alive a very specific history, for instance, articulating a very specific relationship between and among Kiowa people in the present. Music is that way, of course. It has enormous power not only to express people’s thoughts and ideas, but to change how they think and act in the present. Music can affect people in very profound ways. Not just emotionally, but politically, socially, and culturally. People use music to mobilize action, to change people’s minds, to pull people together and also to push people apart.

**Can you give us an example of music being used to mobilize action?**

Well, think of protest songs; or even music used for political campaigns. But it goes beyond this. People often shape music toward their own ends, to make distinctions between “us” and “them,” to comment on who “we are” and “who we are not.” See *Dr. Lassiter, page 4*



**Gabriella Williamson ('11)** “I recently became the Certification Officer and Assistant to the Dean on the South Charleston campus. I work with teachers seeking certification from the West Virginia Department of Education and with the faculty and staff of the MU Graduate School of Education and Professional Development (GSEPD). Come by and see me, I’m on the second floor not far from the elevator.”—Gabi

## Summer 2013 Seminars ♦ May 20 - August 9, 2013

See [www.marshall.edu/humn](http://www.marshall.edu/humn) – for more information and seminar classroom assignments.

**CULS 611 – Appalachian Studies: Themes and Voices (Luke Eric Lassiter); Summer 1 (May 20 – August 9) online T–Course with live meetings on T, May 21, 6-9 p.m.; T, June 18, 6-9 p.m.; T, July 23, 6-9 p.m.** This interdisciplinary course orients students to the significant issues and research in Appalachian studies. Important political, social, and cultural issues will be considered. Research areas are introduced. (This core course in the Graduate Certificate in Appalachian Studies may be taken by degree students in Humanities.)

**HUMN 600 – Introduction to the Study in the Humanities (Luke Eric Lassiter); Summer 1 (May 20 – August 9), Th, 6-9 p.m.** Interdisciplinary core course addresses questions/

concepts central to the humanities. Texts from philosophy, history, literature, the arts and the sciences provide insights into selected historical periods. Open to non-degree students.

**HUMN 650 – Special Topics (Independent Studies arranged between instructor and student—contact Director to arrange course)** For students who need to conduct independent research and/or reading in a specific topic in the humanities, the Program will offer independent studies in those topics as funds allow. Contact the Director for more information. Examples of Special Topics might include: • Film Criticism • Museum Studies • Studies in Appalachian Music • Studies in Poetry • Language and Communication.

## Fall 2013 Seminars ♦ August 26 - December 13, 2013

See [www.marshall.edu/humn](http://www.marshall.edu/humn) – for more information and seminar classroom assignments.

**CULS 540 – World Religions (Luke Eric Lassiter), T, 4:30 – 6:50 p.m.** Study of several religions as they developed within their individual times and cultures. *Dr. Lassiter, director of the Graduate Humanities Program and professor of humanities and anthropology, has written extensively in several books and essays on the relationship of encounter, experience and story, especially as they relate to issues of belief and worldview, language and culture, memory and identity.*

**CULS 600 – “Directed Reading Seminar”: SpTp: Explorations in Language & Identity (Robin Conley), Arranged, CLASS LIMIT: 3 students. NOTE: “Directed Readings” is a new kind of seminar. It will be limited to 3 students who will read 3 – 5 books along with a faculty expert in a particular area.** This seminar will draw from literary works including memoir, ethnography, and autobiography to explore the connections between language and identity. Working from a social science perspective, we will investigate how language in different cultural and historical contexts helps to construct a variety of identities in the U.S. and abroad. *Robin Conley is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Marshall University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research and teaching focus on legal, linguistic, and cultural anthropology; gender and language; and violence and empathy in democratic institutions.*

**HIST 585 – Coal Mine Life, Work & Culture (Michael Workman), Th, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** This course provides students with a better understanding of the continuing economic, political, environmental and cultural impact which the extraction of coal has had on West Virginia. *Michael Workman worked in the underground coal mines of southern West Virginia before earning degrees in political science and his doctorate in history at WVU. He has written and published on*

*coal and labor history, and currently is Assistant Professor of History at WVSU.*

**HUMN 601 – Literary Theory & Criticism (Ann McConnell), M, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** Core course introduces modern critical approaches, concepts and methods of research and scholarship in the broad field of literature. Open to non-degree students. *Dr. Anne McConnell teaches world literature, critical theory, and writing in the English Department at West Virginia State University. She recently published Approaching Disappearance at Dalkey Archive Press; the book explores the work of Maurice Blanchot, Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka, and Nathalie Sarraute.*

**HUMN 650 – Special Topics - Independent Studies arranged between instructor and student (contact Director to arrange course)** For students who need to conduct independent research and/or reading in a specific topic in the humanities, the Program will offer independent studies in those topics as funds allow. Contact the Director for more information. Examples of Special Topics might include: • Film Criticism • Museum Studies • Studies in Appalachian Music • Studies in Poetry • Language and Communication.

**HUMN 604 – Expository Writing for Research (Cat Pleska), T, 7 – 9:50 p.m.** This core writing course develops proficiency in writing for research. Open to non-degree students. *Cat Pleska teaches writing at West Virginia State University, where she is also the Director of the WVSU Writing Center. She earned her MFA in creative nonfiction writing at Goucher College in Baltimore and is an essayist for West Virginia Public Radio.*

**HUMN 680 --- Independent Research Symposium (Luke Eric Lassiter), Arranged.** A pro-seminar required of all Humanities degree students who are beginning the thesis or final project. Arranged with the Program Director.

**Tierney** continued from Page 1

When you sing, you're celebrating life, you're celebrating community and each other. Even if you're singing the blues, you're singing, "Dammit, I'm surviving!" And when you're singing something joyful . . . I really do believe, "when you sing, you pray twice."

The other thing is I'm very passionate about sharing music as much as sharing children's literature. In the programs I've developed over the years, we've always had a music component. In 2000, "Bridge of Dreams" was a musical theater portrait of southern Lincoln County. Our other project, "Patchwork Dreams" was very much songs we composed and oral histories.

**Tell us about your song, "And I Shall Rise."**

I had this image of the parallels between hardscrabble ground from some of our oldest mountains and some of the women I've known, particularly my West Virginia "mom," Nora Dillion. Nora was a classic mountain woman who was "mom" to everybody. I had come to West Virginia when I was a shy, Midwestern 20-year-old to volunteer in Williamson helping out with a newspaper that had sprung up after the 1977 flood. That quickly evolved into organizing families with kids who had severe disabilities and had never been served by schools. Roads were bad between where I was living and the area I was serving. Nora kept on saying, "Why don't you just stay with us when you're working here?" . . . I ended up living with them, staying up in their loft under a tin roof.

The song's stories came from Nora. She had been told to rest after a hospital stay. I came downstairs in the middle of the night and found her churning butter in the dark so nobody would know. I wagged my finger at her, but Nora said, "I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it. You know what it says in the Bible about the virtuous woman who rises before dawn to prepare for her family, works through the day and is the last to go to bed . . . Well, that's who I try to take after." Thus the title, "And I Shall Rise."

**What would you like your audience to experience when they hear your music?**

A sense of connection to people and communities I write about. "Issue" songs are too clinical and too removed from the viscera of people's lives. I want people to care because they sense the flesh and blood of what happens with people, what they endure, and how they help others. People are moved towards change because they have a fundamental connection—they've come to care about people

whose lives they passionately want to meet. I think everyone has the capacity to remember and honor those who have come before us . . . and that we are capable of going out and kicking ass for others today. ■

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These can't be the only notes in the world, there's got to be other notes, some place, in some dimension, between the cracks in the piano keys.  
Marvin Gaye, musician

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It had never occurred to me before that music and thinking are so much alike.

In fact, you could say that music is another way of thinking or maybe thinking is another kind of music.

Ursula K. LeGuin, author

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I've found that no matter what life throws at me, music softens the blow.

Bryce W. Anderson, author

**Dr. Lassiter** continued from Page 2

Music is not just a mere reflection of human thought and action: it is an intimate part of a much larger equation of how humans construct meanings in their lives, and in turn, act on those meanings.

**How does all of this play into your work as Director of the Graduate Humanities Program?**

The Graduate Humanities Program is like singing in many ways . . . we all have our song to sing and directing the Humanities program is my latest song of sorts. One of the things I enjoy about the program is "singing" together with others who have their "own songs" to sing. These "songs" come out in our seminars and activities. We're all after the same sorts of things and, in a lot of the same ways, this is what singing is about—it's a collective activity.

Like song, the Humanities offers us not just ways of expressing ourselves but also of changing our lives, rethinking our lives, and, as in Michael Tierney's interview, the Graduate Humanities Program is a way of mobilizing ourselves to action. ■



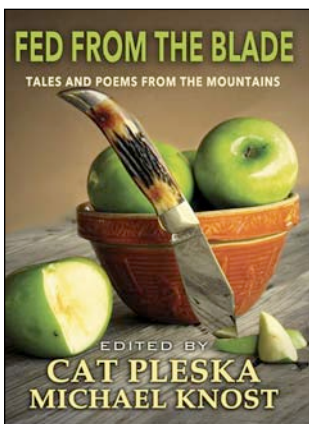
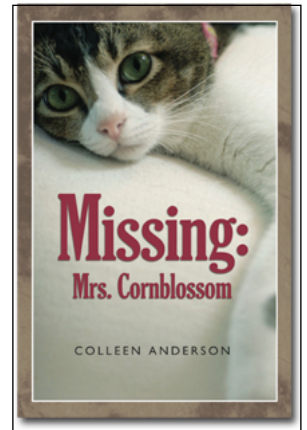
*Lisa talking about her culinary creation to local judges and appreciative onlookers.*

**Lisa Hechesky ('05)** “When I was a kid, elegant mud pie entrees and soaked up Julia Child repeats occupied my playtime. One of my Graduate Humanities professors, Dr. Bob Maslowski, and his wife Susan are actively involved with the Putnam County Farmer’s market. Susan suggested I enter the local Chopped challenge--she knows of my love of cooking and Food Network host Alton Brown. I decided to see if my culinary chops were really that great. According to the judge. . . no, I was chopped in the first round. But I had fun playing chef and would certainly do it again.”  
—Lisa, Library Associate, MUGC, South Charleston Campus.

**Colleen Anderson ('03)** In the previous issue of Graduate Humanities (Fall 2012), Colleen shared her love of singing and songwriting. In that interview we also learned that her first book, *Missing: Mrs. Cornblossom*, was hot off the press and recipient of the 2012 Moonbeam Children's Book Award.

As a follow-up for this issue, Colleen shared this: “Writing *Missing: Mrs. Cornblossom* started as a diversion—a game to entertain myself on a long car trip. I might have abandoned it except for two things that happened subsequently: my brother died, and I received a residency fellowship from the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of Taos, New Mexico. The need to comfort myself coincided with a lavish three months of solitude and freedom. The writing did comfort me. Surprisingly, it also entertained me. This story is a love letter to my community, the people and places that see me through times of loss and give me reason to continue living, loving, and laughing.”

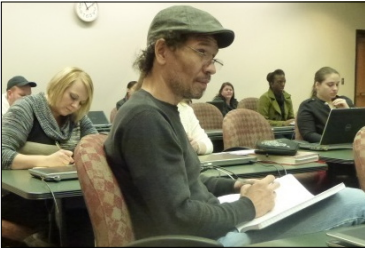
Look for it at bookstores, order it from West Virginia Book Company, or contact Colleen at [www.motherwitdesign.com](http://www.motherwitdesign.com) to get your autographed copy for \$9.95 plus shipping.



**Cat Pleska ('98)**, Senior Editor of *Fed From the Blade*, shared this of her editing experience: “In spring 2011, my co-editor, Michael Knost asked me to consider editing an anthology of writing from West Virginia Writers, Inc. members. As president, I faced a challenge: how to choose from submissions when I knew most of the authors? Choosing blindly from 170 entries, I selected 28 pieces. The title was a challenge. Then Michael and I witnessed Sherrell Wigal’s public performance of “I am the Daughter.” The final lines provided the title: “From one aged man, who sliced/green apples with a pocket knife, /fed me from the blade.” *Fed From the Blade* was born. Next, the cover art. For the photo, I chose a knife I had inherited from my father, an antique set of bowls, and green apples. The result is my photo for the cover that speaks to the pieces in the anthology.”

*Fed From the Blade* has been nominated for the prestigious 2012 Appalachian Book of the Year Awards. Available from Woodland Press and Amazon. Cat also teaches writing for the Graduate Humanities Program. Read more about her at [catpleska.com](http://catpleska.com) and at her blog, [rednecromancer.typepad.com/mouth\\_of\\_the\\_holler/](http://rednecromancer.typepad.com/mouth_of_the_holler/).

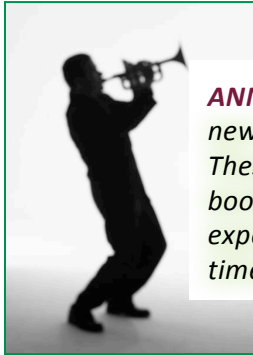
Interviews with Colleen and Cat by Gordon Simmons of the West Virginia Library Commission can be seen at [www.librarycommission.wv.gov/programs/ltn/videoserver/Pages/wvauthor.aspx](http://www.librarycommission.wv.gov/programs/ltn/videoserver/Pages/wvauthor.aspx). Look for their book titles to identify each interview.



A **SOCIAL MEDIA** workshop was presented on December 11, 2012, by Step By Step ([www.wvdreamers.org](http://www.wvdreamers.org)), a non-profit whose mission is to foster, support, and grow community leadership in the coalfields of southern West Virginia. This workshop was a collaborative venture with the Graduate Humanities Program as part of its Public Humanities Project. The project augments, strengthens, and grows a curriculum in public humanities that directly benefits our students, the



communities and the organizations surrounding the South Charleston campus. Seminars taught in this initiative since 2006 include: Seminar in Public Humanities, Public Relations for Nonprofits, Grant Writing in the Humanities, Museum Studies and Exhibit Design, Social Memory and Oral History, and Exhibits for and in Local Communities.



**ANNOUNCING** *The Graduate Humanities Program is starting a new kind of seminar in Fall 2013 called “Directed Readings.” These seminars will be limited to 3 students who will read 3–5 books over the course of the given semester along with a faculty expert in a particular area. Faculty and students will arrange times to discuss the books. See Fall Schedule inside.*



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