



*How Appalachian People
Use Art To Make Change:*

STORIES OF THE POWER OF ART

The following profile is part of a series envisioned by the Appalachia Funders Network and written by Elizabeth Wright
Photo courtesy of the Cattywampus Puppet Council



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CLEAR CREEK CREATIVE

A community uses theater to defend control of their land against extraction

In the winter of 2014, land prospectors started showing up in Rockcastle County, Kentucky. They were scoping out land for the next big hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking”, boom in Appalachia, looking to extract mineral rights and resources before the coal industry finally took its last dying breaths. Using divide-and-conquer tactics, they were hoping to buy up land leases from families in the community, offering money as the cold winter months approached in exchange for mineral rights.

It was a tactic that had worked in other communities, where the promise of profit sharing had lured residents into leases that allowed corporate access to drill for oil and gas on their land. Unfortunately, the corporations rarely kept up their end of the bargain, devastating not only property and the natural environment, but families’ checkbooks, too – contracts were reneged, payment percentages drastically reduced, if paid at all, and the corporations extracted the wealth and the resources, leaving community members with nothing but contaminated water, increased risk of earthquakes, air and noise pollution, and empty pockets.

That winter in Rockcastle County was different. Many in the community were already well aware of the resource extraction and land exploitation in their region and beyond, and they had recently come together to talk about it through a dynamic, intentional process

that celebrated art, culture, and story sharing to envision a different path forward.

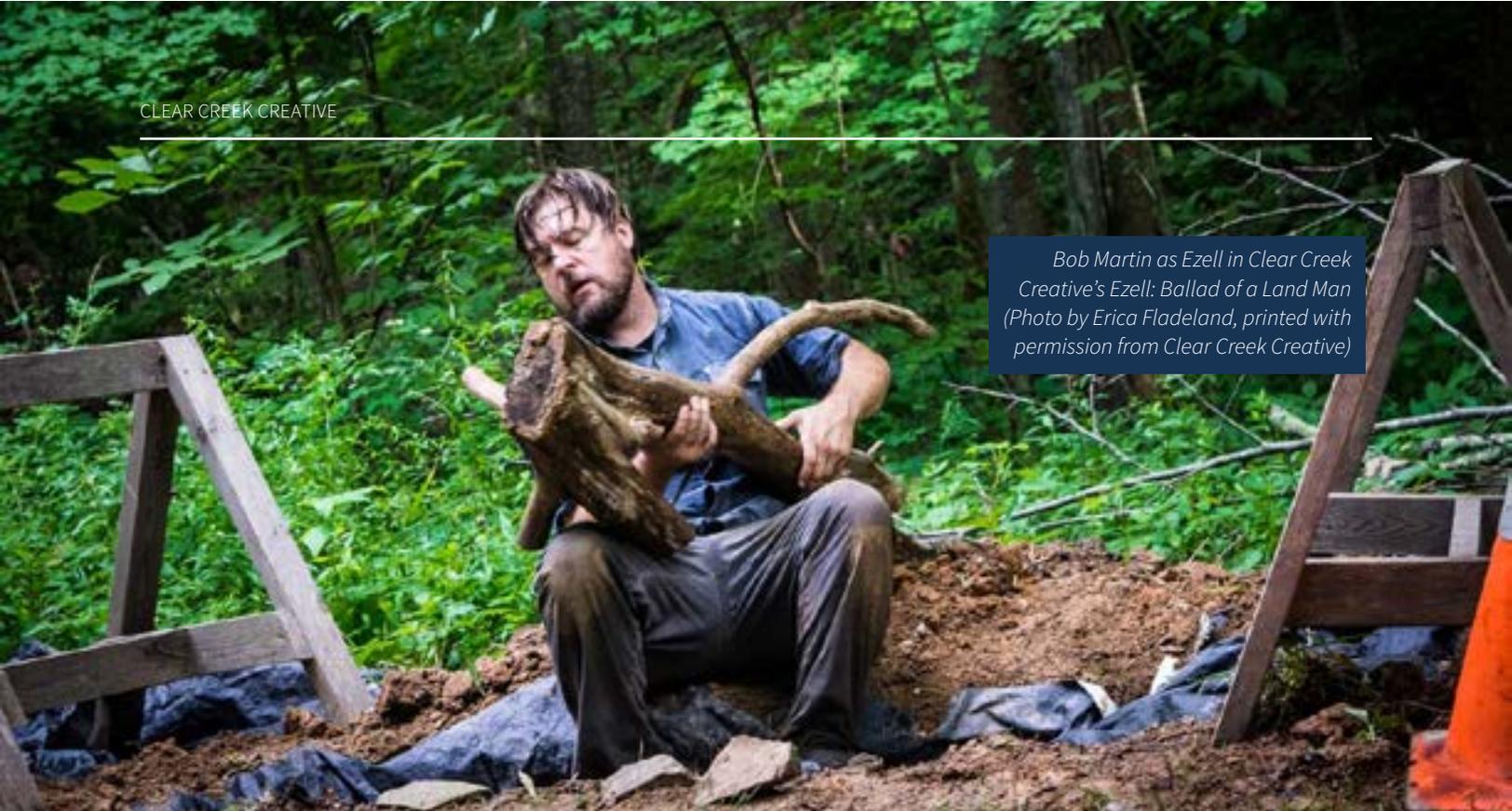
Clear Creek Creative in Rockcastle County is an initiative in which Carrie Brunk and Bob Martin facilitate art, cultural and community organizing and leadership development programming. They had hosted the Clear Creek Festival for 8 years leading up to that winter, bringing artists of varied disciplines and backgrounds together in an annual event that lifted up popular education, foodways, relationship building, and community. Just a few months before the land men arrived on locals’ doorsteps, Clear Creek had added a theater component to the festival to embrace the larger stories of the place it calls home, the people who are its neighbors, and to engage with community members in creative dialogue about land and culture. To facilitate the process and build bridges of commonality over geographical divides, they invited *Cry You One*, a theater project of New Orleans companies ArtSpot Productions and Mondo Bizarro, to collaborate, bringing their performance that addressed the consequences of extraction in the Gulf Coast to an Appalachian context and a Clear Creek audience of 150 people.

The heartfelt response to the performance inspired Clear Creek to organize community members to create an Appalachian reflection on *Cry You One*, lifting up the same themes of land, place, loss, and community

connection. They embarked on a parallel process, crafting community meals with local farmers in a setting that invited participants to share stories and exchange ideas. The resulting dialogue was infused into a culminating performance of the community’s theater response. Soon after *Cry You One* wrapped, the land men came to town, and the themes and relationships the performance and its collaborative process had fostered helped bolster the community and rallied them to respond.

“Rather than being isolated in our homes, we had all been talking through this art piece on extraction,” Clear Creek Creative’s Bob Martin says. Clear Creek organized a new dialogue in response to the land grab, inviting the community to share who was visiting their homes and the details of the proposed leases. “[It was] building a unified front that this is not the place you want to start grabbing bargain basement land and speculating,” Martin says. The community’s opposition ran the prospectors out of town, and the process that began with *Cry You One* and continued with community organizing had solidified residents’ commitment to examine what they wanted for the land as part of a region in economic transition from the coal crisis.

“We often look to the shiny, new, innovative next thing, and the work of artists and activists is to help us remember the stories and things we need to bring forward and honor from



Bob Martin as Ezell in Clear Creek Creative's *Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man* (Photo by Erica Fladeland, printed with permission from Clear Creek Creative)

the past,” says Clear Creek’s Carrie Brunk. “I think that role of the artist and of arts as a strategy helps us to remember and bring forward the values, richness, and stories of what our communities are and have held in the past, as well as the vision and the aspiration for going forward. I don’t know of any other means that’s as rich and vibrant.”

For Clear Creek, that work led to *Land, Water, Food Story*, a project that continued to examine land and place as nourishment and sustenance through a community story-sharing and storytelling process. It became a collaboration with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) through *A Seat at the Table*, a statewide tour that engaged hundreds in story circles to develop a

Clean Power Plan for Kentucky. The story circles culminated in *Where’s That Power Gonna Come From*, a performance piece that synthesized the communities’ stories, hopes, and dreams for their infrastructure and green energy options, supporting KFTC’s work in presenting the Power Plan to Kentucky’s governor and legislature.

Cry You One had planted a seed in the foothills of Appalachian Kentucky that has flourished into larger, ongoing work that has allowed the community to pull together in the face of potential crises and that will soon take their stories to a national audience.

Ezell: Ballad of a Land Man is the latest Clear Creek theatrical work birthed from the collaborative art and cultural work that helped rally communities in the winter of 2014. Clear Creek says *Ezell* is “an environmental, cultural and spiritual parable derived from living in the foothills of Appalachia, one man among many seeking to make sense of the time, place and condition in which we live... as he seeks to take advantage of an anticipated fracking boom and the opportunity to reconnect with the people and land of his raising.” The project transcends a typical theater experience with an installation, a nature walk, and a communal meal, mirroring the process that built its story.

Produced in 2019, *Ezell* will tour nationally in 2020-21 with the support of the [New England Foundation for the Arts’ \(NEFA\) National Theater Project](#), expanding the impact of a local community coming together at the intersection of art, culture, place, and

politics to a broader stage. Clear Creek is particularly interested in touring in Appalachian communities facing fracking and extractive industries to continue to build dialogues and solutions around land.

Program Officer Meena Malik says NEFA seeks projects that embody the foundation’s core values of equity, inclusion, diversity, and accessibility. “At NEFA, since we incorporate our core values, it became really important to tell authentic stories. Even if you come from different places and different beliefs, you can always find commonality through stories. It brings it to a personal place where people can relate to each other,” she says. “For *Ezell*, this topic of fracking and the climate crisis is such an important part, but also a divisive idea that people have different beliefs about. We believe something like this production, where it’s not just about coming to a show, but creating a relationship with people through sharing a meal, a walk in the woods, experiencing the land and nature, that this could be a way to reach people to change their perspectives just a little bit. We all believe that and that’s why we do this work.”

This is a project of The Appalachia Funders Network's Art and Culture Group, profiling innovative projects in Appalachia that infuse community economic development work with arts and culture in order to strengthen strategies and outcomes. Through the profiles, we sought to:

- + Bring attention to the ways that arts and culture can integrate into any sector and across just transition issues;
- + Lift up arts and culture work in the region as a way to draw in potential new funders to the region;
- + Show funders who typically don't fund arts and culture that using arts and culture strategies can amplify project impact in new ways;
- + Demonstrate how funders are already engaging with and supporting this work;
- + Share perspectives of how projects can be funded holistically and across multiple sectors.

The project was originally envisioned before a pandemic brought our economy and in-person social activities to a halt and before the profound national attention on racial injustice began creating new openings for changing broken systems. These simultaneous crises and opportunities are now the context in which these profiles debut, and their themes are even more salient: art heals; art builds power; art resonates when other forms of communication fall short; art helps us reimagine new ways of being. These stories illuminate what is possible when communities set culture as the root for positive transformation.

The Appalachia Funders Network works across the Central Appalachian region to accelerate an equitable Appalachian transition by convening and connecting funders for learning, analysis, and collaboration. We envision a healthy, equitable, and vibrant region that, through strong partnerships, civic engagement, and leadership, preserves our unique assets and provides prosperity for all. (See more about the Network at Appalachiafunders.org)

