



Pretty Serious Saro  
Singer's mission leans toward the  
political.

# MINE CRAFT

Ballad Singer Saro Lynch-Thomason  
Revives the Oral Tradition



A strike camp during the 1912-1913 Mine War  
(painting by Saro Lynch-Thomason)

By Katy Nelson  
Portrait by Caroline Voagen Nelson

There's something electric about Saro Lynch-Thomason's voice, though her mode of singing goes back at least 400 years. A transfixed audience at a September performance swayed, clapped, stomped, and sang along as Lynch-Thomason taught them parts. They were learning "knee to knee," an expression Lynch-Thomason picked up from renowned Madison County ballad singer Sheila Kay Adams.

"There's a lot of patience and reverence that is learned through the oral tradition that I think should be revived," Lynch-Thomason says. In her performances and through Asheville Community Sing, a bimonthly meeting she founded in the summer of 2010, she's on her way.

But reviving the oral tradition isn't the only mountain she's climbing.

Lynch-Thomason is a storyteller and a bit of a Renaissance woman: a self-taught ballad singer, musician, producer, budding folklorist, anti-mountaintop-removal activist, and a professional illustrator (her work in that arena includes the forthcoming kids' book *Lone Mountain*). She's also pursuing a continuing-education graduate certificate in Documentary Studies (with a concentration in audio) at Duke University.

And, yes, she just recently turned 27.



Saro, far right, performs with Asheville Community Sing members Michael Garner, Steve Dodd, and Natalie Marsh in 2010 at the Heritage Festival on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



## A “Vessel” of Stories

It's no wonder Lynch-Thomason titled her recently released solo album *Vessel*, because she is just that — a vessel of stories, from centuries-old ballads to the labor history of coal mining.

In the traditional song “Farewell to Old Bedford,” a reckless young man can't get his act together. “You can imagine him drunk while singing the song,” Lynch-Thomason says. “What's great about ballads is that they allow you to be those characters. So often in these songs the narration is a sort of detached third-person narration, but it allows the listener to place themselves into those archetypes, which is harder to do in contemporary songwriting when it's very much about the ‘I,’ the songwriter's perspective.”

She says it's all about people from different eras conveying what's important to them. “The magic happens,” she believes, “when other people choose to relate to that piece as well, and then pass it. There's this invisible but very strong community of ancestors who affirm your feelings through those songs.”

“If I'm singing a [traditional ballad] like ‘Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair,’ those past several generations are affirming how I feel, and that's a unique experience ... it's the combination of access to the archetypes, of being able to participate in the story, and the meditative aspect of singing along to a song like that.”

“I can say a lot about how I'm feeling without displaying myself emotionally, and that leaves space for the audience to also channel and share.”

Religious songs from the region are also in Lynch-Thomason's songbook, a favorite being “Guide Me Great Jehovah,” from the Baptist “lining out” tradition of singing hymns a cappella in the form

of call and response. The songs, she says, have “a melody with a lot of ornamentation and opportunities for the singer to take her time with each line.”

Lynch-Thomason notes how group song is a way to get total strangers to connect to each other very quickly, at a physical and emotional level. “Literally our bodies are vibrating together,” she says, adding that it's “always a joy” to see new singers gain confidence through an evening.

Between 8 and 20 singers join her in song twice a month in her Asheville home. She started the project because she missed her singing community at Bard College in New York's Hudson River Valley. It would take time, she found, to build that sense of home in Asheville.

## “Pretty Saro”

Lynch-Thomason gave herself a new first name in 2008, when she began her activist work to help stop mountaintop-removal mining in Appalachia. So many women named Sara(h) were volunteering that she picked the name “Saro” to distinguish herself, while paying homage to her love for folk music. (“Pretty Saro,” an old-time mountain-music staple, is an English folk ballad that originated in the early 1700s.)

When she moved to Asheville the next summer, the name stuck. She still uses the name Sara with family, who are mostly in Tennessee. Her mother is a storyteller and writer and her father is a historic preservationist whose playlist of British rock and folk revival bands, including Fairport Convention, were early influences, as

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Leading songs with fellow activists at the March on Blair Mountain in 2011. Mountaintop-removal protestors wore red bandanas to identify with the rebellious mining community of 1921.



was Sinead O'Connor, “not as much for what she's doing now — but certainly her use of voice and her mix of traditionalism and radical politics has always been incredible to me,” says Lynch-Thomason.

While working on a studio-art degree at Bard, she met other “folkies” who encouraged her to move forward on the ballad path. She has memorized 80 songs, mostly through listening to recordings, and as a teenager learned to play the mountain dulcimer, “the only instrument I've ever really stuck with,” she says with a laugh. Her dulcimer teacher, the late David Schnauffer, introduced her to radical Appalachian history and politics, including the mine wars.

Lynch-Thomason built on that knowledge and in 2010 began developing Blair Pathways, a touring multimedia project with a companion CD financed through a Kickstarter campaign.

America's largest labor uprising took place at Blair Mountain in 1921. At the Battle of Blair Mountain, decades of labor conflict culminated with a weeklong militant uprising involving more than 10,000 men and women. Lynch-Thomason, along with recording artists such as Don Flemons (formerly of the Carolina Chocolate Drops), want to protect Blair Mountain for both environmental and historical reasons.

“A strong combination of issues motivated musicians to be a part of the project because they could come to it from different places,” Lynch-Thomason explains. She studied and selected songs from the Mine Wars period for the CD. “I was learning how to articulate what I wanted to hear, learning to articulate America's musical heritage.”

Blair Mountain currently meets standards to qualify as a national historic battle site, but faces threats from mountaintop-removal mining. In February, Lynch-Thomason is presenting her Mine Wars show at Warren Wilson College, and in the spring she will be touring the show in the Northeast.

Last spring, she won a fellowship from the Berea Sound Archives at Berea College in Kentucky. She spent a month there studying rare Kentucky ballads, and will be teaching those ballads to students this year, including a performance this month in front of 1,400 first-

year students as part of their freshman seminar series — her largest audience yet. “I'm excited,” she says.

## Her Appalachian Spring

Lynch-Thomason has settled into her life in Asheville, sharing a home with other activists. “Asheville had a lot of the aspects I wanted. There were people here with radical politics; there were ballad singers; there was a market for art and illustration; and it was close to my family. Those instincts proved right.”

However, in her first year here, Lynch-Thomason says “it was hard” for her to connect with other ballad singers. “There aren't many in the first place, and they also tend to be very busy. It's hard to pop into someone's life and just ask them to teach you all of their songs.”

“[But] I definitely in the first year became a stronger singer. I had a job in a shop where I was the only one working, and sang to myself all the time,” she says.

In 2011, Lynch-Thomason met ballad singer Bobby McMillon at The Swannanoa Gathering (whom she now collaborates with on the Bobby McMillon Anthology Project), and later connected with Sheila Kay Adams, by invitation from another friend.

After years of working in hospitality and food service, Lynch-Thomason now partners with friends from her activism work in worker-owned tech cooperative FullSteam Labs, with an office in the River Arts District. They specialize in creative design, digital storytelling, and consulting for both national and local nonprofits and small businesses, including the National Paideia Center, an education resource.

“This has been new ground for all of us,” she says of the partnership.

It's just one more mountain to climb.

*Saro Lynch-Thomason performs at Warren Wilson College on February 26. See [sarosings.com](http://sarosings.com) for details. (Also: [blairpathways.com](http://blairpathways.com), [lonemountainbook.com](http://lonemountainbook.com))*