

Harlan County USA

USA | 1976 | 103 minutes

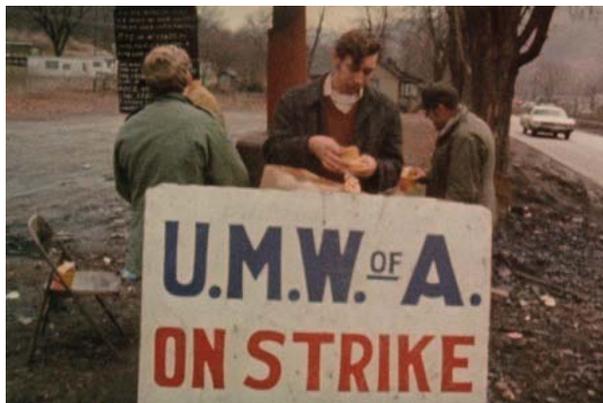
Credits

Director Barbara Kopple
Music Hazel Dickens, Merle Travis
Photography Kevin Keating, Hart Perry

In Brief

Winner of the best feature documentary at the 1977 Academy Awards, Barbara Kopple's film tells the story of the Brookside colliery miners' strike against the Eastover Mining Company after the company refused to acknowledge the miners' unionisation.

The current popularity and cultural importance of documentaries would have been inconceivable in 1976, when *Harlan County USA* briefly ignited commercial movie screens. It was the dawn of the blockbuster age: the buzz around *Jaws* had barely receded, and *Star Wars* loomed on the horizon. Although realistic dramas still attracted mass audiences—as evidenced by *Dog Day Afternoon*, *All the President's Men*, and *Network*—feature-length nonfiction remained an essentially highbrow pursuit. During the mid-seventies, only a handful of docs per year were released theatrically, almost exclusively in art-house venues. Despite an uproar over *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis's 1974 dissection of the Vietnam debacle, press coverage was sporadic at best, and television had scaled back its earlier commitment to documentary programming.



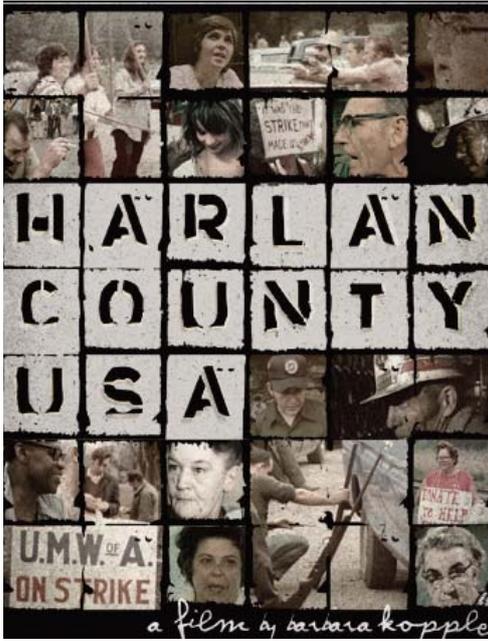
Barbara Kopple's detailed analysis of a Kentucky mine workers' strike is unmistakably of this time—a virtual hub of urgent themes, formal tendencies, political debates, and material practices that define post-sixties documentary in America. But unlike other docs of the period, its theatrical distribution and relatively wide appeal generated considerable public support; it is still the only nonfiction film to have played the New York Film Festival, won an Academy Award, and been granted a listing on the National Film Registry. Moreover, its compelling dramatic structure, hybrid visual style, and rejection of fly-on-the-wall impartiality anticipate key developments in contemporary nonfiction. Despite its modest subject and visual resources, *Harlan County USA* encompasses an extraordinarily broad and complex aesthetic agenda whose influence can be felt in later fictional movies—including *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Harlan County War* (2000)—as well as political docs.

Kopple's cinematic career has been equally broad, a singular concatenation of nonfiction and scripted dramas, independent and commissioned projects, network TV episodes and theatrical features, celebrity portraits and journalistic reports, pharmaceutical TV ads and public television miniseries. Kopple served an apprenticeship in the cauldron of American cinema vérité, or Direct Cinema, with Albert and David Maysles, and to varying degrees, her later films—even fictional productions like the recent *Havoc* (2005)—display traces of a vérité ethos: spontaneous, mobile-camera observation of ongoing events; ambient sound textures; chronological organization.

Of course, none of the fabled Direct Cinema exemplars are nearly as pure, as detached, or as unencumbered by editorial manipulation as their makers often claim. (*Grey Gardens*, by the Maysles, for instance—completed a year before *Harlan County USA*—turns on repeated exchanges between its two female subjects and the pair of brothers, just off camera, a foregrounding of process usually proscribed by nonfiction advocates.) But *Harlan County USA*'s deviations from vérité orthodoxy were even more telling. Not settling for strict present-tense exposition, Kopple tapped into an emerging documentary paradigm of direct interviews coupled with archival footage—a format intended to bring history “to life”—exemplified by James Klein, Miles Mogulesco, and Julia Reichert's *Union Maids* (1976). Further, when Kopple questions rural Kentuckians in their homes and in public spaces, her voice is often heard in dialogue with the social actors; she makes little effort to disguise her subjective imprint as filmmaker or her engaged partisanship. Although Kopple's authorial presence is different from, say, Michael Moore's first-person antics in *Roger and Me* (1989), it constitutes an initial step toward an ethics of self-reflexivity, the belief that because no filmmaker can exert complete authoritative knowledge over a given reality, it is more truthful to disclose tensions between straightforward recording and personal sympathies.

In terms of chronology, *Harlan County USA* adopts an unusual trajectory by starting in 1973 and then circling back to recount the contentious, turned murderous, election between Tony Boyle and Jock Yablonski for president of the United Mine Workers. A major theme embellished over the course of the film concerns historical continuities of union struggle and the persistence of worker exploitation. To augment and corroborate the verbal testimony of retired miners and union supporters, Kopple inserts shots taken of local battles in the 1930s—the origin of “Bloody Harlan” and of Florence Reece's famous song “Which Side Are You On?” The legacy of the past imbues the present strike with heightened meaning, for participants but also for the director, who at least implicitly links her active witnessing to a tradition of radical newsreels produced by the Workers Film and Photo League.

Kopple has indicated that unfinished sections of *Harlan County USA* were used as organizing and fund-raising tools—besides having a powerful dramatic arc, it is practically a how-to manual for conducting a strike—and certain sequences are unabashedly pro-union arguments. Just as left documentarians of the thirties relied on Soviet-style montage to create symbolic connections, Kopple scores



rhetorical points through clever editing juxtapositions; in one instance, she derisively annotates company spokesman Norman Yarborough's euphemism about "upgrading" miners' living conditions by inserting shots of abject housing as he speaks. Later, the strikers' desire to escalate their tactics is expounded visually by cutting from a local picket line to protests at Duke Power's corporate headquarters, in North Carolina, then to demonstrators on Wall Street imploring passersby not to buy energy stocks. At each new location, the action is framed in such a way that we are temporarily disoriented, a pattern that forces us to see how local miners' issues segue into our own immediate economic concerns. The stirring effect is to posit an abstract concept—the solidarity of miners and urban energy consumers—through the collision of small fragments of actuality.

During the latter sequence, a snippet of Reece's song is heard over the spreading protest activities. Among Harlan County USA's many deviations from *vérité* dogma is its innovative sound design, featuring the intensive use of working-class musical anthems, which is crucial to the film's emotional impact. American Graffiti (1973) had recently captured commercial audiences with a nonstop pop-song soundtrack. Kopple's fourteen tunes, many sung by Hazel Dickens, serve several functions: as transitional devices between scenes, as aural evocations of a distinctly rural cultural heritage, and, at times, as editorial supplements to hammer home messages of misery and defiance. Coincidentally, the mid-seventies is a period celebrated not only for Hollywood's

rediscovery of social class as a dramatic device—Rocky (1976) is an obvious, baleful example—but also for a popular reengagement with proletarian musics, including recondite folk and blues masters recorded on tape and film by Alan Lomax and the buoyant regional ethnomusical portraits of Les Blank.

The fact that Harlan County USA's dominant musical voice is female is hardly incidental to its wider themes. Although Kopple was not a charter member of the feminist filmmaking cohort that emerged in the late sixties and early seventies—including Joyce Chopra, Claudia Weill, Cinda Firestone, Amalie Rothschild, and Martha Coolidge, among others—the impact of feminist thought and cultural activism is everywhere apparent in her first feature. A signal aspiration of the women's movement was to document the lives of ordinary women, produce "counterhistories" to combat the habitual and continuing exclusion of women's contributions from narratives of social change. Kopple clearly demonstrates how the political resonates through the deeply personal, gendered tasks of child rearing and other domestic chores in the daily lives of miners' wives. However, these women are also shown taking vital leadership roles: organizing picket lines, forming support committees, and directly confronting the violence of scabs and company thugs. Their double duty, as it were, is indicative of a dilemma still afflicting women's labor. The film's two strongest personalities are the gun-toting adversaries Basil Collins and Lois Scott, the latter a charismatic agitator who embodies the film's most troubling, and enduring, question: how to fight against corporate intimidation without jeopardizing the goals or moral capital of the union cause.

Oddly, in its time Harlan County USA was repudiated by elements of the cultural left, including some feminists; it centered a debate involving the political efficacy of documentary realism and the probity of commercial distribution. If a supposedly progressive film reached a popular audience, was that evidence of a compromised political perspective? Could adherence to standard codes of dramatic closure or visual transparency be understood as reaffirming aspects of bourgeois ideology? These were heated issues in the mid-seventies. While it is true that Harlan County USA privileges individual agency as a driving force in political struggle, and that it lays out a craftily calibrated three-act structure—replete with an epilogue of poststrike updates and two gritty excursions: the union election campaign and a mini-essay on mine safety and black lung disease—it is far from a simple, unselfconscious recording of events. Accusations of naive propagation of documentary authority seem, on closer inspection, particularly ill-founded.

Paradoxically, it is Kopple's avoidance of liberal, ecumenical nostrums that makes the "voice" of her film so spiky, and its commercial distribution so significant. In the early seventies, specialized companies such as New Day and Women Make Movies were formed to enhance public access to feminist work. Kopple supported these initiatives but went a slightly different route via Harlan County USA's original distributor, Cinema 5, which carried primarily European auteurist titles. If her film never quite managed to break out of the art-house league, it signaled a breach in the invisible barrier separating the fiction and documentary markets. This *de facto* resistance to compartmentalizing movie genres or categories of production resurfaces in Kopple's subsequent career, especially in her tenacious mixing of social analysis and entertainment. In this sense, Harlan County USA can be considered a signpost for recent nonfiction successes like Fahrenheit 9/11, Super Size Me, Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, and The Corporation. As Florence Reece put it, "They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals there." For Barbara Kopple, the absence of neutrality proved to be not just a virtue but a cultural prophecy.

Paul Arthur is the author of *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965* (University of Minnesota Press). He is a regular contributor to *Cineaste* and *Film Comment* and is coeditor of *Millennium Film Journal*.

