



# THE MINERS' HYMNS

A film by Bill Morrison  
Music by Jóhann Jóhannsson  
An Icarus Films Release

Theatrical Opening: February 8, 2012 at Film Forum, New York  
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"A elegiac testament to the lost industrial culture of the Durham coalfields"  
—*Sight & Sound*

"The flickering figures of history as captured on film [are] creative fodder  
for Bill Morrison" —*The Wall Street Journal*

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## SHORT SYNOPSIS

*The Miners' Hymns* is an inspired documentary depicting the ill-fated mining community in North East England. The film, which tells its story entirely without words, features an original score by the Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson and rare archival footage selected and edited by the American filmmaker Bill Morrison.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

*The Miners' Hymns* is an inspired documentary depicting the ill-fated mining community in North East England. The film, which tells its story entirely without words, features an original score by the Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson who collaborated on the project from its inception with the American filmmaker Bill Morrison.

Using archival from the British Film Institute, the BBC, and other sources, *The Miners' Hymns* celebrates social, cultural, and political aspects of the extinct industry, including the strong regional tradition of colliery brass bands.

Focusing on the Durham coalfield located in the northeastern United Kingdom, the film depicts the hardship of pit work, the role of Trade Unions in organizing and fighting for workers' rights, the annual Miners' Gala in Durham. It also portrays the pitched battles between miners and police, representing the British government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that took place during a 1984 strike and sounded the death knell for the British mining industry.

*The Miners' Hymns* weaves together footage from the past 100 years, from the early 1900s, through years of increased mechanization, to the miners' strikes of the 1980s. The film also includes two contemporary aerial sequences, shot in color from a helicopter hovering over the sites of former collieries, that have become sites of modern consumerism. *The Miners' Hymns* is a reminder of decision about labor made a generation whose repercussions continue today.



## FILM CREDITS

Title: The Miners' Hymns

Director: Bill Morrison

Composer: Jóhann Jóhannsson

Conductor: Gudni Franzson

Musicians:

    Organ: Robert Houssart

    Electronics: Jóhann Jóhannsson

    Cornets: Niall Thompson  
            Tony Thompson

    Trumpets: Thomas Glendinning  
              Russell Jackson  
              Ellie Lovegrove  
              Alex Maynard

    French Horns: Callum Mackay  
                  Graham Tedd  
                  Alan Tokeley  
                  David Tollington

    Trombones: Steve Baxter  
               John Bell  
               Brian Gibson  
               Alex Trotter

    Tubas: Eric Leckenby  
           Owen Wallage  
           Jeff Winter

    Percussion: Beth Steele  
               Ian Wynd

Aerial Footage Camera: Steve Desbrow

Aerial Footage Pilot: Ian Evans

Produced by: Forma

Production Crew:

Production Manager: Caroline Smith

Stage Manager: Rachel Shipp

Orchestration and Music Production: Jóhann Jóhannsson

Sound Engineer (performance): Audun Strype

Sound Engineer (recording): Sveinn Kjartansson

Sound Mixing (recording): Peter Albrechtsen

Mix Assistant (recording): Jacques B. Pedersen

Archive material gratefully received from: Amber Film & Photography Collective  
BBC  
British Film Institute  
Northern Regional Film and Television  
Archive  
Yorkshire Film Archive

Archive material transferred by: Prime Focus

Premiered as a live performance in Durham Cathedral, 15 & 16 July 2010.  
The premiere performances of *The Miners' Hymns* formed  
part of the 75th anniversary celebrations of the BFI National Archive.  
Durham Cathedral portrayed by kind permission of the Chapter of Durham.

Developed as part of the Culture10 regional festivals and events programme.  
Enabled by Northern Film + Media and the UK Film Council's Digital Film Archive Fund  
supported by the National Lottery. An original commission for BRASS Durham  
International Festival 2010. Funded by Durham Brass, BFI, Long Live Film, OneNortheast,  
NFM, UK Film Council, ACE, Durham CC and Culture Durham

THE MINERS' HYMNS — USA/UK — 52 minutes  
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AN ICARUS FILMS RELEASE.

## BILL MORRISON BIOGRAPHY

Director Bill Morrison was born in Chicago, Illinois. He is a filmmaker and multimedia artist whose work has been screened at festivals, museums and concert halls worldwide, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Tate Modern, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall. The Museum of Modern Art has acquired eight of his titles for their permanent collection. Morrison has been commissioned to create films for numerous composers, including John Adams, Laurie Anderson, Gavin Bryars, Dave Douglas, Richard Einhorn, Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Henryk Gorecki, Vijay Iyer, Jóhann Jóhannsson, David Lang, Harry Partch, Steve Reich and Julia Wolfe. Morrison has received the Alpert Award as well as fellowships from Creative Capital, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the NEA. His multimedia stage work with the Ridge Theater has been recognized with two Bessie awards and an Obie Award. *Decasia*, his feature length collaboration with composer Michael Gordon, was described by *The Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman as "the most widely acclaimed American avant-garde film of the fin-de-siècle." Bill Morrison currently lives in New York.

More information: <http://www.hypnoticpictures.com>

## FILMOGRAPHY

<i>The Great Flood</i>	(2012, 75 min, B/W, HD)
<i>Tributes - Pulse</i>	(2011, 65 min, B/W & color, HD)
<i>The Miners' Hymns</i>	(2011, 52 min, B/W & color, HD)
<i>Spark of Being</i>	(2010, 68 min, B/W & color, DVD)
<i>Release</i>	(2010, 13 min, B/W, HD)
<i>Every Stop On The F Train</i>	(2008, 5 min, color, DVD)
<i>Dystopia</i>	(2008, 30 min, B/W & color, DVD)
<i>Fuel</i>	(2007, 25 min, color, DVD)
<i>Who By Water</i>	(2007, 18 min, B/W, DVD)
<i>The Highwater Trilogy</i>	(2006, 31 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>How To Pray</i>	(2006, 11 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>Outerborough</i>	(2005, 8 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>Gotham</i>	(2004, 18 min, B/W, DVD)
<i>Light Is Calling</i>	(2004, 8 min, color, 35mm)
<i>The Mesmerist</i>	(2003, 16 min, color, 35mm)
<i>East River</i>	(2003, 5 min, color, DVD)
<i>Decasia</i>	(2002, 67 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>Trinity</i>	(2000, 12 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>Ghost Trip</i>	(2000, 23 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>City Walk</i>	(1999, 6 min, B/W, 16mm)
<i>The Film of Her</i>	(1996, 12 min, B/W, 35mm)
<i>Nemo</i>	(1995, 6 min, B/W, 16mm)
<i>The Death Train</i>	(1993, 17 min, B/W, 16mm)
<i>Footprints</i>	(1992, 6 min, B/W & color, 16mm)

## MULTIMEDIA PERFORMANCES

- 2011 "The Great Flood", composer Bill Frisell  
Krannert Center, University of Illinois, September 2011 (world premiere)
- 2011 "Tributes - Pulse", composer Simon Christensen  
Royal Danish Theater, Copenhagen, June 2011 (world premiere)
- 2010 "Persephone", composer Ben Neill / Mimi Goese  
BAM Next Wave, October 2010 (world premiere)
- 2010 "The Miners' Hymns", composer Jóhann Jóhannsson  
Durham (UK) Cathedral, July 2010 (world premiere)
- 2010 "Spark of Being", composer / trumpeter Dave Douglas and Keystone  
Stanford Lively Arts, April 2010 (world premiere)
- 2010 "Release", composer / pianist Vijay Iyer  
Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, March 2010 (world premiere)
- 2009 "Block Ice and Propane", composer / cellist Erik Friedlander  
Dartmouth, 2009 (world premiere staging)
- 2009 "The New Royalty", composer / violinist Todd Reynolds  
Royal Theater, Philadelphia, 2009 (world premiere)
- 2009 "Grasses of a Thousand Colors", Wallace Shawn (playwright) and Andre Gregory (director),  
Royal Court Theater, London, 2009 (world premiere)
- 2009 "The Origin", composer Richard Einhorn, with the Kitka Ensemble  
SUNY Oswego, 2009 (world premiere)
- 2008 "Lightning at our Feet", Michael Gordon (composer),  
BAM Next Wave, 2008 (NY premiere)
- 2008 "A Man In A Room Gambling", Gavin Bryars (composer), Todd Reynolds Ensemble  
German Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, May 2008 (world premiere staging)
- 2008 "Every Stop On The F Train", Michael Gordon (composer), Young Peoples Chorus of NYC  
Miller Theater, New York, 2008 (world premiere staging)
- 2008 "Dystopia", Michael Gordon (composer), Los Angeles Philharmonic,  
Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 2008 (world premiere)
- 2007 "Gorecki's Third Symphony", Henryk Gorecki (composer), Brooklyn Philharmonic  
Brooklyn Academy of Music, May 2007 (world premiere staging)
- 2007 "Fuel", Julia Wolfe (composer), Ensemble Resonanz,  
Hamburg, April 2007 (world premiere)
- 2007 "The Sinking of the Titanic", Gavin Bryars (composer), Orchestra of Boyer College,  
Union League of Philadelphia, March 2007 (world premiere staging)
- 2007 "Decasia", Michael Gordon (composer), Tactus Contemporary Ensemble,  
Angel Orensanz Foundation, New York, January 2007 (Manhattan premiere staging)
- 2006 "Cello Counterpoint", Steve Reich (composer), Maya Beiser (solo cello),  
Zankel Hall, New York, October 2006 (US premiere staging)
- 2006 "Difficulty of Crossing a Field", David Lang (composer), Mac Wellman (libretto)  
Kasser Theater, Montclair, NJ, September 2006 (world premiere staging)
- 2006 "Who By Water", Michael Gordon (composer), Tactus Contemporary Ensemble  
Merkin Hall, New York, February 2006 (world premiere staging)
- 2005 "Shelter", M. Gordon, D. Lang, J. Wolfe (composers), D. Artman (libretto),  
BAM Next Wave, November 2005 (US premiere)
- 2005 "Harry Partch's Oedipus", Harry Partch (composer), New Band  
Kasser Theater, Montclair, NJ, April 2005, (world premiere staging)
- 2004 "Decasia", Michael Gordon (composer), Tactus Contemporary Ensemble,  
St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, September 2004, (US premiere staging)

- 2004 "Gotham", Michael Gordon (composer), Tactus Contemporary Ensemble,  
Zankel Hall, New York, February 2004 (world premiere staging)
- 2004 "The Mesmerist", Bill Frisell (composer), with Tony Scher, bass, Kenny Wollesen, drums.  
Winter Garden, NY, January 2004
- 2003 "The Death of Klinghoffer", John Adams (composer), Brooklyn Philharmonic,  
BAM Next Wave, Brooklyn, December 2003 (world premiere staging)
- 2003 "Light Is Calling", Michael Gordon (composer), Todd Reynolds (violin )  
BAM Next Wave, Brooklyn, October 2003 (world premiere)

## VISITING ARTIST / LECTURER

University of Alaska, Anderson Ranch, University of the Arts, Bilgi University (Istanbul), Brown University, Cal Arts, University of California -Irvine, Catholic University of Chile, Chicago Humanities Festival, University of Chicago, Columbia University, Cooper Union, Cornell University, CUNY Graduate Center, Dartmouth College, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Duke University, Emory University, Robert Flaherty Seminar, University of Iowa, Louisiana State University, Maryland College of Arts, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, Université de Montréal, New York Institute for the Humanities, New York University, New School, Northwestern University, Orphan Film Symposium, University of South Carolina, University of Southern California, Stanford University, SUNY Binghamton, SUNY Buffalo, Syracuse University, Temple University.

## SELECTED RETROSPECTIVES / SOLO SHOWS

- Eastern State Penitentiary: "Release" installation, Philadelphia, March 2010 - ongoing
- Moscow Film Festival: Retrospective, Moscow, June 2008
- Walt Disney Concert Hall: "Dystopia Live", Los Angeles, January 2008
- Cork Film Festival: Retrospective, Cork, October 2006
- Walt Disney Concert Hall: "Decasia Live", Los Angeles, March 2006
- Maya Stendhal Gallery: New York, October 2005
- New Zealand Film Festival: Retrospective, Wellington & Auckland, July 2005
- Viennale: Retrospective, Vienna, October 2004
- St. Ann's Warehouse: "Decasia Live", Brooklyn, September 2004
- : Retrospective, Paris, September 2004
- Maya Stendhal Gallery: New York, November 2003 – January 2004
- Tate Modern: London, October 2003
- Detroit Film Theater: Detroit, September 2003
- Facets Multimedia: Chicago, June 2003
- Anthology Film Archives: New York, March 2003
- Museum of Modern Art: New York, May 2002
- Sundance Film Festival: "Decasia" premiere, Park City, UT, January 2002
- European Music Month: "Decasia Live", Basel, November 2001
- Institute of Contemporary Art: London, November 1998
- Scratch: Paris, November 1998
- Anthology Film Archives: New York, April/May 1998
- Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes: Buenos Aires, November 1997
- Museum of Modern Art: New York, March 1995

## GRANTS / FELLOWSHIPS / RESIDENCIES / AWARDS

Chinati Foundation: Artist-In-Residence 2011  
San Francisco International Film Festival: Golden Gate Award 2010  
Rio de Janeiro International Short Film Festival: Grand Prix 2009  
Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative 2009  
Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors' New York State Music Fund 2006  
Alpert Award in the Arts 2006  
Forum des Images: Grand Prix, Etrange Festival 2004  
Berlin Interfilm: Best Film Award 2004  
NEA: Creativity Grant 2004  
Acadia Summer Arts Program 2004  
Ucross Foundation Residency 2003  
Dance Theater Workshop: Bessie Award 2003 and 1993  
NYSCA: Individual Artist Grant 2003  
Foundation for Contemporary Art: Fellowship 2003  
New York Foundation for the Arts, 2001  
Creative Capital, 2001  
Village Voice: Obie Award, 2001  
MacDowell Colony: Residency 2000  
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation: Fellowship 2000  
Fabrica: Fellowship sponsored by the Benetton Corporation 1995-6  
Gerrit Rietveld Academie: Scholarship 1989  
Cooper Union School of Art: Scholarship 1989

## SELECTED BIBIOGRAPHY

*The Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2011

"A Filmmaker Mines History for Meaning" by Nicolas Rapold

*Artforum*, December 2009

"21st Century Cinema: Death and Resurrection in the Desert of the (New) Real"  
by J. Hoberman

*Ikonen*, No. 12, Winter 2008/09

"Bilder des Verfalls - Bill Morrison" by Matthias Abel

*Vertigo*, Vol 3, No. 7, Autumn/Winter 2007

"Artist's Pages: In the Ongoing Moment" by Bill Morrison

*Senses of Cinema*, Issue 41, Oct - Dec 2006

"Memories are Made of This: Bill Morrison's The Film of Her" by Ursula Böser

"Trajectories of Decay: An Interview with Bill Morrison" by Maximilian Le Cain and  
Barry Ronan



*Virginia Quarterly Review*, Summer 2006

"Excursion: Bill Morrison's paintings" introduced by Lawrence Weschler

*The Moving Image*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2005

"Decasia: The State of Decay" by Cindi Rowell

*American Anthropologist*, December 2004, Vol. 108, No. 4

"The Orphanista Manifesto" by Emily Cohen

*Offscreen*, November 30, 2004, Vol. 8, Issue 11

"Matter and Memory: A Conversation with Bill Morrison" by André Habib

"Plus belle que la beauté est la ruine de la beauté" by Claudy op den Kemp

"The Cinematic Poetry of Bill Morrison" by Donato Totaro

*The New Yorker*, November 8, 2004

"America, the Baleful" by Alex Ross

*The New York Times*, September 11, 2004

"From Dying Movies, the Birth of a Score" by Allan Kozinn

*Vertigo*, Issue 7, Summer 2004

"Interview with Bill Morrison" by Chris Darke

*Artforum*, May 2004

"Bill Morrison at Maya Stendhal Gallery" by Elizabeth Schambelan

*NY Arts*, Vol. 9, No. 3/4, March-April 2004

"The Story of 'Decasia'" by Catherine Wayland

*The New York Times*, February 7, 2004

"After the Decay of Decay, a New Modernity" by Herbert Muschamp

*Sight & Sound*, December 2003

"Decasia" by Tony Rayns

*Detroit Free Press*, September 28, 2003

"Movie Finds Beauty in Celluloid's Decay" by John Monaghan

*The Guardian*, September 26, 2003

"Ghost World" by Jonathan Jones

*Libération*, June 15, 2003

"Rencontre avec Bill Morrison" by Elisabeth Lebovici

*Time Out New York*, March 20-27, 2003

"Decasia" by Andrew Lewis Conn

*The Village Voice*, March 19-25, 2003

"The Art of Destruction: Back to Nature" by J. Hoberman

*Millimeter*, February 1, 2003

"Decasia the State of Decay" by Darroch Greer

*The New York Times*, December 27, 2002

"Composing a Varied Collage Out of Decomposing Film" by Anita Gates

*The New York Times Magazine*, December 22, 2002

"Sublime Decay" by Lawrence Weschler

*The New York Times*, December 3, 2002

"Where a Film's Goopy Bits Are the Real Showstoppers" by Sarah Boxer

*Senses of Cinema*, March-April 2002

"The 21<sup>st</sup> Sundance Film Festival – A Report" by Bérénice Reynaud

*Variety*, February 4-10, 2002

"Sundance in Brief – Decasia" by Dennis Harvey

*The Moving Image*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2001

"Archives and Archivists Remade: The Film of Her" by Gabriel M. Paletz

*Exploding No. 2, Le Ralenti*, May 1999

"Archéologie: Bill Morrison" by Laure Bergala and Emeric de Lastens

*LA Weekly*, September 17, 1998

"The Film of Her" by Hazel-Dawn Dumpert

*SF Weekly*, November 25, 1997, Vol. 16, No. 41

"The Exquisite Cinema of Bill Morrison" by Gregg Rickman

*The Village Voice*, October 26, 1993, Vol. 38, No. 43

"Views from Nearby" by Manohla Dargis

# JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON BIOGRAPHY

Composer Jóhann Jóhannsson was born in Reykjavik, Iceland. He is known for his distinctive blend of classical orchestration and electronica. Although mostly instrumental, Jóhann's work often involves complex narratives, which deal with humans' relationship with the world of machines and decaying and obsolete technology. His music often incorporates found recordings.

His score for the play *Englabörn* was released in 2002 on the British label Touch, and then re-released, in 2007, by 4AD. Jóhannsson's second album, "Virðulegu Forsetar" (2004, Touch) was written for a brass ensemble, pipe organ, electronic drones and percussion. His third album, "IBM 1401: A User's Manual" (2006, 4AD), involved a 60 piece string orchestra. "Fordlandia" (2008, 4AD), which combined minimalist string writing and baroque-influenced counterpoint with elements derived from Krautrock, post-rock, glitch electronics and Icelandic folk music, was voted best classical album of 2008 at the Icelandic Music Awards. His fifth album, "And in the endless pause there came the sound of bees" (Type, 2010), is comprised of his award-winning music for Marc Craste's animated film "Varmints."

Jóhannsson signed to FatCat in 2010; the score for "The Miners' Hymns" is his first release for the label. Composed for brass band, pipe organ and electronics, it made its live premiere in Durham Cathedral in July 2010. "The Miners' Hymns" is a minimalist take on the traditions of England's colliery brass bands. The music, also recorded in Durham Cathedral, will be released by FatCat in 2011.

Jóhannsson has composed the scores for films including *The Good Life* (dir. Eva Mulvad, 2010), *By Day and By Night* (dir. Alejandro Molina, 2009), *Dreams in Copenhagen* (dir. Max Kestner, 2009), *Varmints* (dir. Marc Craste, 2008), *Diary of a Madwoman* (Janos Szasz, 2007), *Voleur de Cheveaux* (Micha Wald, 2007), and *Wicker Park* (dir. Paul McGuigan, 2004). He has worked and performed with artists including Marc Almond, Barry Adamson, and Pan Sonic. His collaborations with the internationally renowned choreographer and dancer Erna Omarsdottir have been performed widely across Europe.

Jóhannsson is founding member of Kitchen Motors, an art organization that curates events, commissions artwork, and releases records and has been an influential part of the Icelandic cultural scene for the last ten years. Members of múm, Sigur Ros, and Anniina have been affiliated with Kitchen Motors and participated in their projects. Jóhann's other side projects include the electronic "supergroup" Evil Madness and the all-analog Apparat Organ Quartet, which has been featured at London's ICA, New York's Central Park Summerstage, and Paris's Centre Pompidou. He performs regularly throughout Europe and the rest of the world with his 6 piece ensemble, which includes a string quartet, piano, electronics and percussion. He currently resides in Copenhagen, Denmark.

More information: <http://www.johannjohannsson.com>

## SELECTED PUBLICITY & REVIEWS

### Sight and Sound

By Nick Bradshaw

Durham Cathedral was the perfect setting for Bill Morrison and Jóhann Jóhannsson's tribute to the north-east's colliery glory days.

Bill Morrison's archive collage film *The Miners' Hymns*, an elegiac testament to the lost industrial culture of the Durham coalfields, takes in sweeping helicopter shots, lunar-lesque landscapes and pitched battles with police cavalry, not to mention the Stygian sights of half-naked termite men hacking blankly away at the underbelly of the earth. It features shades of action movie, industrial *noir* and zombie sci-fi, but true to the *Decasia* director's signature work it's also a dialogue with the ghosts of the past, those of workers and communities now permanently lain beneath Durham's remodelled landscape, yet here exhumed on film.

Morrison and his composer, the Icelandic musician Jóhann Jóhannsson, unveiled the work with two live performances performed by the NASUWT Riverside Band in Durham Cathedral-- the spiritual hearth-place for generations of miners whose annual Gala, or 'Big Meeting', culminated here. Introducing the show, the bishop described the relationship in reversed terms, coal being, he said, "the one thing in this country as iconic as this building."

"Live musicians and the cathedral environment change everything," Morrison had said in a talk before the second night's performance. "I'm aware it will be all downhill from here."

The film started with flyover footage of the present-day coastal landscape, grass fields and business parks covering, the subtitles tell us, the former sites of Ryhope, Silksworth and fellow collieries. A muted cacophony of brass and decaying organ notes accompanied the helicopter's landing and a fade back in time to a 1960s Gala audience in monochrome: a study of studious faces, hints of modernity (two young women in sunglasses) punctuating the sea of flat caps.

Then the earth opened up--hard-boiled men in hard hats descended to work the underworld--and the brass rumbled and roared. Pick-axes were swung, pistons pumped, colossal drill-bits churned. White horses emerged from the gloom, to be succeeded by trolley carts and conveyor belts ferrying charcoal lava flows. The blacks in these restored film fragments were truly Orphean; some of the original camerawork was astonishingly dynamic: low-angles on the workers, shots of oncoming trolley carts, or from inside them, travelling with the coal.

Back on the surface, black waves lapped at a beach full of sea coal. Hands, spades, sacks, cages and a huge digger took turns to collect the debris; kids slid down otherworldly mountains of anthracite on the shore. The film followed them to their

tenement homes, to Durham's flat rows of roofs and washing lines. Early of a morning down the high street, police began diligently unpacking crowd barriers, as the musicians took up a stately, plaintive fugue. As it swelled, miners' buses began to arrive: suddenly we were in a riot of falling visors, rising shields, flying batons and hooves.

The turmoil was hard and fast, after which the film retreated to the air again, to colour and the present-day: helicopter shots of the former Hylton Colliery, now a business park, and the former Monkwearmouth, now Sunderland's Stadium of Light.

Morrison had spoken in his talk about the effect of assembling archive footage from multiple eras. Showing decade after decade of kids playing or people marching, he suggested, led a film away from politics towards sociology; it became a tribute to the way people lived. He also discussed how audiences seemed to bring to live shows less expectation of being told a narrative.

All the same, after we'd seen the state mete out its apparently archetypal violence to more than one generation of miners, it became apparent how much better this community had been honoured by their spiritual authorities. The film climaxed with a montage of Big Meetings, crowds thronging Durham's streets and spilling out of windows, colliery bands wending their way to the Cathedral behind banners as big and ornate as stained-glass windows, drums pounding on- and off-screen, the soundtrack building to a fanfare as the procession swept into the very building where we were watching it. Past and present dove-tailed in a moving if fleeting communion, as if to ask: thus the mining culture; what now?

The Wall Street Journal  
By Nicolas Rapold

The flickering figures of history as captured on film have been creative fodder for Bill Morrison for more than a decade. The award-winning sculptor of found footage has become a contemporary ambassador of the technique largely thanks to his 2002 film *Decasia*, which literalized its title by turning physically distressed footage into quicksilver sequences of eerie beauty.

But despite opening door after door to bygone days of anonymous ladies and gentlemen in hats and frocks, there's one kind of movie that Mr. Morrison feels he still hasn't made, until now. In *The Miners' Hymns*, which will make its premiere Friday at the Tribeca Film Festival, the 45-year-old director eschews decaying found footage in favor of black-and-white archival material (courtesy of the British Film Institute) and fresh color shots (captured from a helicopter) to recount the rise, rhythms and ultimate fall of coal mining and miners in an English "pit town." The film serves as a requiem for an industry and a culture, framed by Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson's slow-building, six-movement score.

"I would call this my first documentary," said Mr. Morrison, who lives in the East Village. "Everything is fairly specific here--the localization of the region, the subjects, the time frame. It spans the 20th century."

The film supplements its images of weathered men descending into the earth with footage of their children playing on hills, stark rows of sooty houses, and banner-strung union celebrations--faces turning eagerly to the camera. In one underground stretch, humans cede the spotlight to the coal itself, which shimmers black in the strikingly well-preserved 35mm stock. Mr. Morrison drew on close to 100 archival titles in his initial sweep, including much-admired reels by Mitchell and Kenyon, the pioneering British commercial movie company, from the 1900s.

*The Miners' Hymns*, which takes its name from a wordless secular hymn written by a miner in memory of an accident, originated as a commission by the London arts organization Forma. Last July, the film served as an audio-visual contribution to the annual festival in the northern English city of Durham, where it made its premiere in the town's cathedral, accompanied by a live brass band. Though Messrs. Morrison and Jóhannsson were new to the mining town, David Metcalfe, Forma's director and a producer on *Miners' Hymns*, had smudge marks fresh in his memory.

"I grew up in Easington, a mining village a few miles from Durham Cathedral," he said via email. "Like everyone from that part of the world, many members of my family and friends had worked in coal mining, either down the mines, or in the offices."

Mr. Morrison's process of gathering and selecting footage was "entirely solitary"--something that, since studying to be a painter at Cooper Union, he has always valued. Also characteristic of his work are his musical collaborations. This time around, his teammate was the Copenhagen-based Jóhannsson, who composed the film's score without having seen the movie. Instead, Mr. Morrison edited the project while listening to Mr. Jóhannsson's score.

"The music that I was most drawn to was these old Victorian church hymns that they played at funerals and such occasions," the composer said. The piece is "a hybrid of traditional British collier band and a symphonic brass section." The soundtrack was recorded in the cathedral that is featured in the film and hosted its premiere, a Norman Conquest-era edifice that Mr. Jóhannsson called "almost an instrument, a part of the ensemble."

The monumental setting, which appears in the movie's unionist climax--the unsuccessful miners' strike of 1984--also neatly symbolizes Mr. Morrison's career. "The nature of my work has become much larger in scale, associated with big sonic events, he said. "That's a big no-no in the experimental film field. You don't marry your picture to music. I forge my own path."

## PopMatters

By Sachyn Mital

*The Miners' Hymns* issues a silent yet evocative reminder about labor economy.

Just about 13 months ago, the company Massey Energy made its name world famous when an unfortunate tragedy occurred at one of their coal mines in West Virginia. Twenty-nine people lost their lives in an explosion. Massey, with its repeat violations, and other companies, through the practice of mountaintop removal, have been problematic for the universal image of the laborious miner. Pollution of the water table in West Virginia has pitted families against members over one of the communities' few viable occupations. But without our miners' tireless and dangerous work, our country, as well as other ones, would never have achieved the modern industrial state, let alone reached the industrial revolution.

*The Miners' Hymns* by Bill Morrison combines archival footage from various British sources to stir up some melancholy for the heyday of mining. This film takes primarily black and white footage placed (sensationally if not accurately) chronologically to show the routine of the miner by day and the overall trend of mechanization in mining itself. Even without having previous knowledge of the film, a viewer of Morrison's careful selection will come away understanding the strong and cohesive narrative. Miners move from home to workplace with apparent uniformity to their actions. But there is a moment a worker is free from the Taylorism as he kisses a lantern for good luck. Scenes of undulating coal and giant cogs turning transform into trucks involved in large scale mining.

These specific miners are from the Durham coalfield area in the Northeast UK. At the beginning and near the end of the film are two aerial segments that contrast the past and present Durham area. What was once the pride of Durham has now become parking lots, malls and football stadiums. Where towns had once supported miners with parades for unions with power ("Miner fights your Battles" read one sign) the history is displaced. Even the protests and conflict which erupted in the 80's as the miners' unions faced collapse and braced themselves against Thatcher's free market agenda.

However, it was not apparent what the contextual history of the clashes was unless one was familiar with coal-mining history (particularly in the UK). This is not to say the film is not effective story-telling. But so far removed from that era, I found it became hard to share in the wistfulness or then understand and appreciate the outrage. Whether people outside England will comprehend the archival content is difficult to say in light of this part's localized nature. It may not help that the film originally had a very specific audience; it was produced for the Durham International Festival.

It is only in the final portion, where we revisit the community, that the film's significance becomes clear. Building off silent archival footage, Morrison required a score, for which he collaborated with impressive Icelandic composer, Jóhann Jóhannsson. Few would consider Jóhannsson a bringer of jollity, since his instrumental music is somber, stark and sometimes sinister, but also convey's grandeur at times. His score here is not far removed from his other work; there is little levity in the orchestral work, carrying gravitas

until the final song ("The Cause of Labour is the Hope of the World"). Here Morrison's curation is aided by Jóhannsson's dignified composition to majestically illuminate a more universal message.

We remember that our own pride about the contribution of miners has been forgotten and, in this transgression, trade unions' value has also diminished. Miners' history has become relegated to nostalgia if it ever comes up in a discussion over clean energy and climate change. Meanwhile trade unions, from Wisconsin's educators to Hungarian's against austerity measures, continue to battle for legitimacy in the globalizing world.

### Twitchfilm

By Brian Umstead

Bill Morrison is a preeminent figure in the found footage filmmaking scene. Working from raw materials found in the British National Archives, Morrison constructs a loose narrative and history on the miners and mines of Durham, England past, that, with the accompaniment of Jóhann Jóhannsson's score, stirs the soul.

Opening with an expansive aerial long take of modern Durham --a collection of nondescript shopping malls and suburban track homes between green fields - Morrison points out the former sites of collieries. As the wind whips up, and we move closer to the coast he begins to slow the footage down, and then we transition to the black and white setting of early 20th century Durham. The scene opens on thousands of people, here in the center of town to celebrate the miners; their friends, their brothers, their husbands and fathers. Bands play, banners sway, parades march. Thousands of smiling faces, hundreds of them looking directly at the camera. And with that we've traveled back in time. It is mesmerizing. 95% of the archived footage is in pristine condition, nary a scratch or a mark, the assembled film has some of the best footage I've seen of the mid-industrial period.

Morrison moves through the decades, continuing on with the eerily striking use of slow motion, with a visit down the mine shaft, to the beaches where young men and women search for washed up bits of coal, and onto miner's strikes, scab buses, and riots. There are no inter-titles, there is no voice-over, just Jóhannsson's organ and brass backed score ebbing and flowing, booming and brooding, stirring up the spirit and the spirits of the people of Durham.

If you are in New York for the [Tribeca Film] festival, please don't pass this one up. It's spectacular to see on the big screen. The only way better I could think to see this would be in Durham with live musical accompaniment.



## The Digital Fix

By Anthony Nield

The very first Durham Miners' Gala dates way back to 1869, kick-starting the annual 'Big Meeting' (as it is known locally) in which the county's coalmining heritage is celebrated through banners, brass bands, speeches and a service at Durham Cathedral. Interrupted only by strike action and war, there have been a remarkable 126 such events to date, nowadays incorporated into the BRASS Durham International Festival. For the 2010 celebrations a multimedia event was commissioned, one that incorporate live musical performance and images from the area's coalmining past to be staged at the Cathedral over two consecutive nights. Handling the music was Jóhann Jóhannsson, a multi-instrumentalist with a history in experimental and electronic composition as well as work in the theatre, contemporary dance and documentaries. The film side of things was dealt with by Bill Morrison, the New York-based creator of *Decasia* - arguably one of the finest cinematic works of this century's first decade - as well as numerous multimedia and avant-garde pieces oftentimes to live accompaniment. For the festival Morrison 'mixed' the images live as Jóhannsson's blend of percussion, brass and electronica played; later he would combine them as a finished film to be premiered at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival. And so *The Miners' Hymns* was born.

It's important to stress the joint contribution of Morrison and Jóhannsson. Whilst the temptation may be to assign superiority to the former owing to his director's credit, and therefore relegate Jóhannsson to mere accompaniment status, *The Miners' Hymns* is very much a film by both. Indeed, the soundtrack has since been issued as a standalone CD release by FatCat Records, whilst the title itself emphasises the musical component. Moreover, there is a sense that the film itself has been 'composed', structured in a manner so that we see it as a series of movements, each demonstrating how firmly in tune Morrison and Jóhannsson are. There is no impression of one leading the other, but rather an equal standing; the music is as important as the images and vice versa, to an extent where to remove or diminish one would be to lessen the whole. Ultimately, *The Miners' Hymns* is a genuinely collaborative effort.

The specificity of the commission--that it should be staged at a certain event and in a certain locale - is similarly important inasmuch as it arguably dictates more of *The Miners' Hymns* than had it been produced as a standalone work intended simply for general cinematic consumption. The centrality of Durham to the Big Meeting is mirrored in its centrality to the film itself. This is a work specifically about the North East of England and its cultural and historical legacy through coalmining. Whilst the industry may now no longer exist within the county, it nonetheless has exerted - and no doubt continues to exert--a massive influence on its population demonstrated, most obviously, by the Gala itself. Morrison acknowledges this presence by utilising only footage shot in the region, whether it be from the archive or newly filmed material. Jóhannsson meanwhile included members of the local NASUWT Riverside Band in his ensemble to further the nod in this direction. You sense that *The Miners' Hymns* therefore spoke very directly to its audiences over those two nights in July 2010, providing them with images and sounds that had become part of their shared memories and landscape--an integral connection unlikely to be repeated.

Yet if this DVD cannot hope to replicate the Durham Cathedral events, their sense of occasion and this very specific link between the work and the viewer, it nonetheless allows many of *The Miners' Hymns'* other qualities to shine through. We open in colour and contemporary footage: helicopter shots passing over the North East coastline before settling on the sites of former collieries. One has become an Asda, another a dry ski slope. Titles appear onscreen to inform us of their closing some decades ago and whilst the landscape betrays hints of its former existence, they remain just that: hints and echoes of a bygone time. As with Morrison's previous works and their excavations of archives to reveal ghosts from the past, this cues up a delving into history as old black and white documentary footage is spliced and manipulated so that it complements Jóhannsson's often elegiac tones. Images of previous Big Meetings are slowed to the point where we can read every face. The trip underground in a lift shaft becomes a phantom ride. Even the sea, lapping at a different pace thanks to Morrison's influence, takes on a new ambience. Much of this material was gleaned from the National Coal Board's film output, a mere fraction of which (they sponsored or produced over 900 titles in total) was anthologised on the BFI's *Portrait of a Miner* volume. Occasionally a particular image will therefore seem familiar, albeit completely removed from its original narrator-led context. *The Miners' Hymns*, without recourse to voice-over or text, reduces such moments to purely cinematic objects--crowds of hundreds, men at work, the might of machinery and industry--and, with it, gains a certain epic scale. These are sights to behold and be amazed by, all the more so with Jóhannsson's careful emphasis applied on top.

Yet if this suggests a certain celebratory tone, such a mood is broken in the second half as Morrison's archival focus shifts away the NCB Film Unit and onto the television news. Courtesy of BBC and Yorkshire TV images windows are boarded up and policemen arrive by the coachload. The miners of, presumably, the thirties and forties who toiled away underground in the early stages are replaced by those of the eighties locked in bitter dispute during the strikes of 1984 and 1985. *The Miners' Hymns* can, of course, not neglect such a seismic period in the lives of those it puts onscreen and as such is as much a lament as it is a celebration. The personal history becomes indistinguishable from the political history and, fittingly, those images of police barriers being put up (and what they signify) carry as much weight as those of men at the coalface.

The result is a work that feels very British despite its two main creative voices being, respectively, American and Icelandic. In an interview with *Sight & Sound* Morrison admitted he knew little of the UK's coalmining past prior to working on the project: "Of course I had an idea there were coal mines in England, and I was aware of was the big strike in '84. But beyond that I certainly didn't know about the Gala, the banners or the miners' bands, any of this." It's an interesting angle to consider as arguably such a lack of background knowledge or previous engagement with the history of coalmining precludes *The Miners' Hymns* from being a genuinely political work. Put simply, it's not motivated by having a specific point to make, whether from an outsider perspective or not. (And of course, Barbara Kopple's superb *Harlan County USA* has demonstrated that political films about the mining industry are not solely restricted to the UK.) Rather Morrison is a filmmaker who responds to the visual and this is what we get: almost a century of industry condensed into 50 often dazzlingly cinematic minutes. Would *The*

*Miners' Hymns* be a better film had it engaged more thoroughly with the political ramifications? Or does its alternate route of mixing the political with the historical, the sociological and the personal - a weave of associations and connections--make for an ultimately more satisfying blend? I guess you would have to ask the people of Durham, after all it is their past which has put onto the screen. I'm sure they approached the images and sequences with a combination of recognition, nostalgia and anger, their force being such that it would impossible not to connect with them in anything other than a highly personal manner. For the rest of us, especially outside the confines of the Big Meeting and Durham Cathedral, we may not react with quite this immediacy, but nonetheless can recognise the weight of this history and the fact that, for the people of the North East, it is now a closed book.



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Brooklyn, NY 11201  
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