



AAC Publications

Drop the Mic: Long Mixed Testpiece Outside Ouray

Colorado, San Juan Mountains

Noah McKelvin styling pitch seven on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R), on the Dark Side Wall off Camp Bird Mine Road, Ouray, Colorado.

Photo by Jason Nelson / Visualadventures.com

On November 21, Noah McKelvin, Phil Wortmann, and I completed the first ascent of Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R), a 1,400' route accessed off Camp Bird Mine Road, above Ouray. This could be the longest and most sustained mixed climb of this difficulty in the Lower 48.

Drop the Mic is on the Dark Side, a large north-facing wall across Canyon Creek from the road. Despite its proximity to Ouray and the presence of over a dozen established routes, including the historic Bird Brain Boulevard, first climbed by Charlie Fowler, Jeff Lowe, and Mark Wilford in 1985, the direct line up the center of the wall, beginning in an obvious cave feature, had never been attempted. In 2018, Noah and I walked along the base of the cliff to investigate this cave. We identified an improbable line going out the roof—if it was climbable, it would be epic.

We returned later that season with Phil and established the first two pitches. Bolting ground-up on lead, we pushed as far as we could between pro. The short first pitch was wildly overhung and physical M8. The second required us to holster our tools and rock climb with crampons; it was hard to grade, but is roughly 5.11-. Later, with some creative ropework, we were able to link these pitches into one amazing 115' lead. One after another, we each climbed the mega-pitch with no falls, smiling the entire time. It stands on its own as one of the finest alpine pitches we've done.

As we stood on the road at the end of the day, we drew imaginary lines linking features above the cave and up the tallest part of the wall. But our vision would have to wait. We were each pulled in other directions in 2019.

In 2020, when the pandemic gave us reasons to refocus our efforts closer to home, we returned to the project. In November, Noah and I reclinbed the steep first pitch and the Shelf Road–esque second pitch. From there, we dispatched three moderate pitches and fixed lines back to the ground. Later, we added a bolt to pitch three to mitigate a horrendous runout that Noah had navigated.

Pitches six, seven, and eight became the second round of crux climbing. Each of these had a different flavor, and we divided the work of establishing them among us.

Phil onsighted the tricky-to-protect Mitten Pitch at M6 R, later opting to replace a number 2 Pecker with a bolt, again in a nod to the well-being of future ascensionists.

We dubbed the spectacular seventh pitch the F**k Average Pitch. It was a tenuous M8 horror show. Noah placed the first four bolts along an insecure traverse and up a slightly overhanging groove, getting pretty worked in the process. Phil took over, pushing above the last bolt on continuously steep and sketchy terrain. When our drill sputtered and died, and with his rope clipped to the bolt 50 feet below him, Phil summoned a heroic effort to hang on through the life-threatening runout to the top. We later added two bolts, but this pitch remains serious and heady.

Pitch eight began with a low-angle chimney that brought me to the base of an overhanging offwidth.

Stacked blocks and shards of loose stone hung in and around the crack, promising a harrowing experience for climber and belayer alike. I spent three hours tunneling through it, while Phil and Noah dodged trundled choss. Cleared of detritus, it became a surprisingly cool pitch.

We climbed another moderate but engaging pitch to arrive below a cool diving-board feature, which we'd hoped would provide a wildly exposed and difficult capstone pitch. Unfortunately, Phil found the rock to be more like loosely coagulated mud. He bailed and opted for an adjacent chimney and final finger crack.

We made our final ascent in November 2021 in team-free style, with someone from the team leading each pitch free and clean. Including that day, we spent a total of nine days on this adventure. We chose the difficult line at each turn, challenging ourselves to connect features the way we had envisioned from the ground. We bolted where necessary, placed lots of dubious gear, and punched it when there was no other option. I am honored to have shared Phil and Noah's company, grateful for our complementary skill sets, and in awe of the monster we created.

— **Scott Turpin**

Images



Phil Wortmann beginning the ninth-pitch traverse on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R).



Scott Turpin transitioning into the eighth-pitch offwidth, the last of three consecutive difficult pitches high on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R).



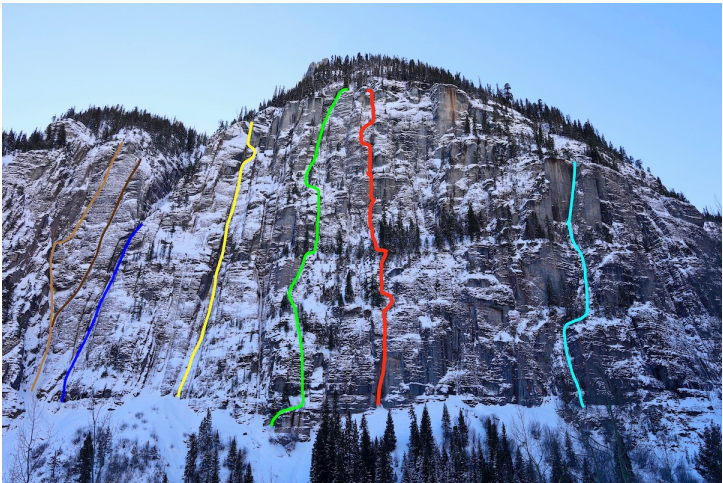
Phil Wortmann questing up pitch nine on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R), which is now the most sustained route on the Dark Side Wall off Camp Bird Mine Road, Ouray, Colorado. Scott Turpin



Scott Turpin rappelling a fixed line after a day's work on Drop the Mic. Turpin, Noah McKelvin and Phil Wortmann spent a total of nine days creating the 1,400' route.



Noah McKelvin beginning the seventh-pitch traverse on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R), on the Dark Side Wall off Camp Bird Mine Road, Ouray, Colorado.



The Dark Side Wall off Camp Bird Mine Road, Ouray, Colorado. Light brown: Desperado (M6 R, House-Kennedy). Dark brown: Rusty Cage (M7, House-Van Sickle). Dark blue: The Ribbon (WI4). Yellow: Bird Brain Boulevard (WI4 M5, Fowler-Lowe-Wilford). Green: Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It (5.10 WI3 M7, McKelvin-Wortmann). Red: Drop The Mic (5.11- M8, Turpin-McKelvin-Wortmann). Light blue: Dirty Minds (5.9 M6, Gilmore-Turner). Phil Wortmann



(Left to right) Noah McKelvin, Scott Turpin and Phil Wortmann at the top of Drop the Mic. Noah McKelvin



Drop the Mic routeline



Noah McKelvin styling pitch seven on Drop the Mic (10 pitches, V 5.11- M8 R), on the Dark Side Wall off Camp Bird Mine Road, Ouray, Colorado.

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