Victor Talking Machine Company sessions in Bristol, Tennessee--The Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, Ernest Stoneman, and others (1927)

Added to the National Recording Registry: 2002
Essay by Ted Olson (guest post)*


Ralph Peer


The Carter Family


Jimmie Rodgers

In a 1988 essay published in the book “Country: The Music and the Musicians,” music scholar Nolan Porterfield observed: "Music historians and others fond of dates and places have a special weakness for 'Bristol, August 1927.' As a sort of shorthand notation, it has come to signal the Big Bang of country music evolution." Many other scholars—even if they have not shared Porterfield’s hyperbolic assessment—have concurred that those commercial location recording sessions from 1927 were inarguably significant.

Today, many if not most fans of American roots music have heard of the Bristol sessions, the now-legendary recordings produced by Ralph Peer for Victor Records in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia, during the Summer of 1927; but before 2011 relatively few people had in fact heard many of the recordings from those sessions. Held the last week of July and the first week of August in 1927, the Bristol sessions were not widely recognized until 1987, when the Country Music Foundation released a compilation album of cherry-picked recordings from those sessions; that album would be nominated for two Grammy Awards. In 2002, the 1927 Bristol sessions were selected as one of 25 significant recordings included in the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry during that program’s first year of existence. In 2011, Germany’s Bear Family Records issued a complete Bristol sessions boxed set—a package that included all of the 1927 recordings from Bristol and all the recordings that Peer made in Bristol during follow-up sessions in late October-early November 1928. The Bear Family release likewise received two Grammy nominations. In 2014, the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, dedicated to interpreting the Bristol sessions, opened in Bristol, a couple of blocks away from where the sessions had taken place.

In the early 1920s, recording sessions of country music—then known as “hillbilly music,” a catch-all term for much of the white folk and popular music composed and performed in the southern United States—were conducted in larger cities like Atlanta and

New York City. The musicians, generally from rural areas in the South, traveled to those cities to make records and to earn money for their efforts. At the urban studios, those musicians performed essentially the same repertoire heard on front porches and in other community environments across the South, and some of their records sold many more copies than recording companies had anticipated. Looking for new talent to make additional "hillbilly" recordings for commercial release, A&R [Artists and Repertoire] producers transported recording equipment to various locations in or near certain rural areas where so many of the musicians lived.

Through 1926, two of the major recording companies of that era, Columbia and OKeh, had successfully promoted commercial records of "hillbilly music"; the next year, another major label, Victor Records (operated by the Victor Talking Machine Company), sought to enter into the "hillbilly music" market. Leading that effort was A&R producer Ralph Peer, who while working for OKeh, from 1920-1926, had been responsible for many early "hillbilly" records (including the first such commercially released recording, made in Atlanta during June 1923, by Fiddlin' John Carson). Now working for Victor, Peer identified an ideal place for securing new recordings of "hillbilly music": Bristol, a small city straddling the Tennessee-Virginia state line. Many musicians who had previously appeared on "hillbilly" records were from this region, including Ernest V. Stoneman, who had recorded for Peer when the latter was with OKeh. On July 22, 1927, Peer and his two engineers set up a temporary studio on the Tennessee side of State Street in downtown Bristol (Virginia was on the other side of the street); and on Monday, July 25, the Bristol sessions began. The first musician to record was Stoneman, who performed for Peer alongside various family members and friends. Other acts who recorded in Bristol over the next two weeks included now-famous acts "discovered" during the sessions: the Carter Family, from nearby Maces Springs, Virginia; and Jimmie Rodgers, of Meridian, Mississippi. Several lesser-known acts who recorded for Peer in Bristol in 1927—especially Blind Alfred Reed, Ernest Phipps, Alfred Karnes, B. F. Shelton, and the Tenneva Ramblers—generated for Peer what are considered classic recordings from the early years of country music. When Peer concluded the brief trip to Bristol on Friday, August 5th, those sessions had yielded 76 recorded performances by 19 music acts.

The Bristol sessions recordings dramatically improved upon the sound quality heard on earlier "hillbilly" records; earlier releases were generally muddy or remote in terms of sound, in large part because of the widespread use before 1927 of dynamically imprecise, low-fidelity acoustic horn microphones. Peer and his engineers in Bristol utilized state-of-the-art equipment, including the recently introduced Western Electric double-button carbon microphone, which ensured a heightened level of sonic clarity on the recordings from Bristol. Although Peer was primarily interested in producing records that would sell well, his meticulous attention to quality at Bristol produced distinctive recordings of lasting merit; indeed, the recordings continue to influence musicians (perhaps some contemporary mainstream country musicians and certainly numerous musicians in the bluegrass, folk, Americana, and rock music scenes). The Bristol sessions are remembered and commemorated within the region that hosted them, including in Bristol

and at the nearby Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, Virginia, and the sessions have inspired a nationally traveling exhibit dedicated to representing Peer's legacy.

The 1927 Bristol sessions indisputably influenced country music in at least three additional ways. First, Peer introduced in Bristol a soon-to-be-widespread music-marketing model. Reflecting Peer's business savvy, this model involved a one-time payment to the act for recording his/her/their music and the promise of a share of profits generated from sales of copyrighted material on records and in songbooks; others (the producer, music publisher, and record company) would retain a share of profits from sales (which would be particularly sizeable with material owned via copyright). Peer's business model also involved the issuing of contracts, which ensured the sharing of revenues generated through live performances of that material. Second, by emphasizing vocals and lyrics over purely instrumental numbers during the 1927 Bristol sessions, Peer provided a successful template for future country music songwriting and performance. Third, given the sheer number and variety of sacred-themed recordings generated for Peer at Bristol, those sessions emphatically demonstrated the popularity of gospel material on commercial records, leaving no doubt that new as well as traditional gospel songs in modern-styled performances could explore religious themes and sell remarkably well.

Perhaps inevitably, sustained focus on the 1927 Bristol sessions—some would say to the neglect of other early "hillbilly" music stories—has led to a backlash. Some scholars have challenged claims that the Bristol sessions should be called "the Big Bang of Country Music" and that Bristol should be considered "the Birthplace of Country Music." In 2014, music historian Dave Samuelson (referring to early August 1927, when the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were "discovered" and recorded in Bristol) argued that, "While that productive week on Bristol's State Street yielded many classic masters of old-time music, it's also the foundation of an erroneous, revisionist interpretation of recorded country music's genesis." Samuelson and others, contending that various 1920s-era commercial location recording sessions were historically important and aesthetically innovative, have pointed out that the records from Bristol were not the first releases to feature what came to be called country music—and that those records were not even the earliest commercial location recording sessions to be held in Appalachia (considering the Appalachian Regional Commission's boundaries for Appalachia, earlier sessions in the region included the OKeh sessions in Asheville, North Carolina, during late August-early September 1925, and the Gennett sessions in Birmingham, Alabama, the first week of July 1927). Furthermore, some scholars have insisted that a few of the other location recording sessions conducted in the immediate aftermath of the 1927 Bristol sessions (such as Columbia Records' 1928 and 1929 sessions in Johnson City, Tennessee), while not as commercially successful as the Bristol sessions, equaled or even surpassed the more famous sessions in terms of fairly documenting the full range of musical sounds and styles that formed the foundation for country music.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.