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The Bristol Sessions: A Memorable Marriage of Tradition and Technology

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poetry & poets

Lisa Alther Presents Her Appalachia Novel



Lisa Alther

Friday, February 24 at 7 p.m.

Author Lisa Alther reads from her sixth novel, *Washed in the Blood*, a unique 3-part, multi-generational tale set in the melting pot of Appalachia. Alther, originally from Kingsport, Tennessee, aims to "portray the human reality behind cultural stereotypes, particularly those regarding women." Her previous five novels have been enormously popular, being translated into dozens of languages. She brings to her stories a love of the mountains, a keen sense of what it means to be human, the pull of romance, and plenty of humor.



www.lisaalther.com

IF YOU GO

Lisa Alther reading and book signing, Friday, February 24 at 7 p.m. Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, 55 Haywood Street, downtown Asheville. For more details please call (828) 254-6734.

The Bristol Sessions:

A MEMORABLE MARRIAGE OF TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY

Transcribed from a timeless song recorded in August 1927 by the Carter Family, the above lyrics (and their accompanying, memorably lilting melody) have moved millions of people worldwide.

Adapted from the traditional Scottish ballad "The Lass of Loch Royale," "The Storms Are on the Ocean" was A. P. Carter's effort to craft a commercially viable, compact composition that would fit onto a 78-rpm record. When that recording was made in Bristol, Tennessee — on Monday evening, August 1, 1927 — the Carters (A. P., his wife Sara, and Sara's cousin Maybelle) were unknown outside of their rural Scott County, Virginia, community.

"The Storms Are on the Ocean" was recorded a few hours after the trio had successfully auditioned for Victor Records' producer Ralph Peer, who had set up a temporary studio in Bristol for the purpose of locating and recording some of Appalachia's music talent. The recordings the Carter Family made in Bristol earned them a contract with Victor and ultimately launched them to fame as the immortal "First Family of Country Music."

Another soon-to-be-famous music act that caught Peer's ear in Bristol that same week was Jimmie Rodgers. Arriving from Asheville, where during early 1927 he had been performing on radio station WWNC, Meridian, Mississippi-native Rodgers made his first recordings in Bristol. Those records were a bit tentative (though the yodeling on "Sleep Baby Sleep" was utterly distinctive), yet Rodgers' obvious potential led Peer to offer the TB-afflicted performer a contract with Victor, launching "the Father of Country Music" on his short-lived yet legendary career.

"The Storms Are on the Ocean"

BY TED OLSON

Verse:
I'm a-going away for to leave you love
I'm a-going away for a while,
But I'll return to you sometime
If I go ten thousand miles

Chorus:
The storms are on the ocean
The heavens may cease to be,
This world may lose its motion, love
If I prove false to thee

During his 1927 Bristol visit, Peer also recorded seventeen other music acts, including such stalwarts of old-time country music as Ernest Stoneman, Blind Alfred Reed, Henry Whitter, Ernest Phipps, and Alfred G. Karnes. Experiencing commercial success with the recordings and management contracts he had generated in Bristol that summer, Peer returned the next year to that city on the Tennessee-Virginia border to make additional recordings by Stoneman, Phipps, Karnes, and other musicians.

The "field recording sessions" Peer conducted in Bristol during 1927 and 1928, known collectively as the Bristol Sessions, became legendary for having influenced the emergence of modern country music and for inspiring a range of musicians working in such genres as Americana, alt-country, bluegrass, and rock.

Johnny Cash once referred to the Bristol Sessions as "the single most important event in the history of country music." Wynton Marsalis said in a recent interview: "I can't tell you how many times I've suggested to musicians to get 'The Bristol Sessions' — Anglo-American folk music. It's a lot of different types of music: Appalachian, country, hillbilly. It's folk music in the Anglo-American tradition. It's essential for musicians to know that."

Last year, the Bristol recordings, over 120 in all, were collected and released on a CD box set. Entitled *The Bristol Sessions, 1927-1928: The Big Bang of Country Music* and released by Germany's Bear Family Records, this box set features strikingly clear digital remasterings of the original 78s as well as a detailed interpretive book. The box set was reviewed widely and recently received two Grammy Award nominations ("Best Historical Album" and "Best Album Notes").

In the interest of full disclosure, I should confess that I helped produce this project — it was a logical next step for me after the 2005 publication of a book I co-edited with the scholar who first researched the Bristol Sessions, the late country music historian Charles K. Wolfe.

Rapid River readers will be interested to know that the Bristol Sessions marked



only the second time ever that commercial records were made in Appalachia — the first field recording session within the region having occurred in Asheville. In late August-early September 1925, Peer (then a producer for Okeh Records) set up a temporary studio in Asheville's George Vanderbilt Hotel and recorded such important 1920s-era musicians as Stoneman, Whitter, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Wade Ward, and Kelly Harrell. (In the Fall of 1925, Robert W. Gordon of the Library of Congress travelled to Appalachia to make noncommercial documentary cylinder recordings of regional music.)

The idea of transporting recording equipment to Appalachia was a shift from previous practice (formerly, record companies had depended upon musicians leaving the mountains to make records in large Southern cities or up North). The Bristol Sessions recordings of 1927-1928, though, were dramatically superior to those made at the 1925 Asheville Sessions. Whereas the Asheville Sessions employed low-fidelity horn microphones, the Bristol Sessions utilized the newly introduced electronic carbon microphone system, which permitted the capturing of a fuller dynamic range of sound.

By utilizing state-of-the-art technology and by "discovering" stellar talent whose music was integral to the future evolution of American music, the Bristol Sessions are remembered today as the most significant documentation of Appalachian music from the early years of recorded sound.



Ted Olson is the author of such books as *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications, 2006) and *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998) and he is the editor of numerous books, including *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). His experiences as a poet and musician are discussed on www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm

Poets who would like for their poetry to be considered for a future column may send their books and manuscripts to Ted Olson, ETSU, Box 70400, Johnson City, TN 37614. Please include contact information and a SASE with submissions.

DO TELL STORYFEST

Nationally renowned storytelling performers David Novak, Michael Reno Harrell, and Gwenda Ledbetter, and a host of regional NC favorites perform February 11-12 at the Flat Rock Play House, 125 Main Street, downtown Hendersonville, NC.

IF YOU GO: Admission: Saturday afternoon Showcase, \$12; Saturday evening Michael Reno Harrell Concert, \$12; Sunday afternoon Abraham Lincoln Birthday Celebration, \$8. Advance tickets available from FRPH Box Office (828) 693-0471. For more details call (828) 388-0247. Full schedule at www.dotellfestival.org.

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