Blind Alfred Reed: Appalachian Visionary

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The West Virginia Night (Nite) Owls, late 1920s. l - r, Fred Pendleton (fiddle), Alfred Reed (fiddle), Arville Reed (guitar)
Today, many if not most fans of American roots music have heard of the Bristol sessions, the now-legendary recording sessions conducted in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia, during the summer of 1927 by producer Ralph Peer for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Those sessions—held the last week of July and first week of August 1927—were not widely recognized until the 1980s.

In 1987 a compilation of cherry-picked 1927 Bristol sessions recordings released by the Country Music Foundation was nominated for two Grammy Awards, and that feat was repeated in 2012 when a complete Bristol sessions boxed set from Bear Family Records—this time including all the 1927 Bristol sessions recordings and all of Peer’s recordings made in Bristol during follow-up October 1928 sessions—likewise received two Grammy nominations. In 2002, the Library of Congress selected the 1927 Bristol sessions as collectively constituting one of 25 significant recordings or recording events entered into the National Recording Registry in that program’s very first year of existence.

Historian Nolan Porterfield, in an essay included in the 1988 book *Country: The Music and the Musicians*, wrote “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.” And many other scholars—whether or not they share Porterfield’s hyperbolic assessment—have agreed that those recording sessions were undeniably important. The reasons for such glowing appraisal are various and complex. While not yielding the first recordings of “hillbilly music” (one of several terms used to describe country music during the 1920s) and while not constituting the earliest effort to record and commercially market Appalachian music (regional musicians had made recordings outside the region as early as 1923)—and while not even the first recording sessions to be held in Appalachia (the OKeh label had conducted sessions in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1925)—the 1927 Bristol sessions indisputably shaped the music industry by introducing a soon-to-be-wide-
spread music-marketing model. Reflecting Peer’s business savvy, this model involved a one-time payment to the artist for recording his/her music and the promise of a share of profits generated from sales of copyrighted material on records and in songbooks; others (the producer, the music publisher, the record company) would likewise retain a share of profits from sales (which would be particularly sizeable with material owned via copyright). Peer’s new business approach also involved the issuing of contracts ensuring the sharing of revenues generated through live performances of that material.

The 1927 Bristol sessions were important in other ways. The recordings that Peer made in Bristol for Victor in 1927 were noteworthy for their dynamically bold sound, rendered possible through the use of the electronic microphone, a recently introduced system of sound dissemination that was markedly superior to the acoustic horn microphone that just months earlier had been the industry standard. The 1927 Bristol sessions were also influential in encouraging a new focus within the hillbilly music industry on emphasizing vocals and lyrics over purely instrumental sounds, and those sessions demonstrated the popularity of gospel material on commercial records.
Invariably another aspect of the Bristol sessions story gets most of the attention: the media tends to focus on the fact that while in Bristol Peer “discovered” the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, both of whom made their first recordings there. Porterfield encouraged this tendency when he suggested in the aforementioned quote that the tag “the Big Bang of country music” was applicable specifically to the sessions held in Bristol the first week of August 1927, when the Carters and Rodgers recorded. Of course, Peer and the Victor label capitalized on the talents of the two acts into and (despite Rodgers’ 1933 death) through the Great Depression, gradually cementing their status as legends. Without a doubt, the presence of “the First Family of Country Music” and “the Father of Country Music” at the 1927 Bristol sessions will ensure that those sessions are remembered as a watershed event in the history of American music. Unfortunately, focusing on the Carters and Rodgers (as Peer/Victor did and as many people today continue to do) has inadvertently marginalized other recordings that Peer made in Bristol, including those from the last week of July 1927. Indeed, some of the recordings made that week in Bristol are equally worthy of attention today, especially the four recordings by Blind Alfred Reed from July 28, 1927.

Numerous musicians beyond those previously mentioned were invited to—or heard about (by word of mouth or via a feature newspaper story) and attended—Peer’s location recording sessions in Bristol that summer, and any attempt to tell the Bristol sessions story should mention them and their contributions. While a couple of those musicians were, by 1927, already well known recording acts (specifically, Ernest V. Stoneman and Henry Whitter), most of the musicians made their first recordings in Bristol (like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers). But most of those musicians were subsequently ignored by music fans of that era. (Alfred G. Karnes and Ernest Phipps recorded again for Peer and Victor at the 1928 Bristol sessions, but several other 1927 Bristol acts never recorded again.) The Victor label was not the only recording company, of course, and certain Bristol sessions musicians found receptive ears elsewhere. (Stoneman, for instance, made some of his finest recordings in 1928 for the Edison label, and the Tenneva Ramblers memorably recorded again that same year for Columbia Records as the Grant Brothers and Their Music, in nearby Johnson City, Tennessee.) Of all the musicians that Peer recorded at its 1927 sessions in Bristol, only three acts continued to record for Victor after 1928 and away from Bristol: the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, and Blind Alfred Reed. Alfred Reed’s contributions to the 1927 Bristol sessions may have been overshadowed by those from the two better-known acts, but this unique musician’s recordings—his four numbers from Bristol and his subsequent releases for Victor—remain relevant in that they advance a sometimes humorous, often searing vision of a world gone wrong. The fact that “Blind Alfred Reed” (so named by Peer) articulated a remarkably complex worldview in a comparatively small canon of recordings has only deepened the mystery of this Appalachian visionary. Although his total output was slight when compared to that of the Carter Family or Jimmie Rodgers, Reed’s best recordings are as essential as any of his contemporaries’ recordings in depicting and illuminating the changing realities of rural America on the cusp of the Great Depression.
Alfred Reed

Alfred Reed's story is that of a man looking within to find a light by which to navigate the darkness within and without. Alfred Lee Reed was born blind in Floyd County, Virginia. (The date of his birth has long been listed as June 15, 1880, though researcher Warren Moorman has recently unearthed an early document suggesting that the actual date was likely January 20, 1879.) The 1900 Census lists Alfred as still living with his parents in Floyd County, though he moved away shortly afterward to marry and start a family. Alfred's parents were farmers. Riley Reed and Charlotte Akers Reed had six children, two of whom were blind—the other was Alfred's older sister Rosetta, whose nickname was Rose; both children learned to read and write by utilizing the New York Point System, and both lived long and full lives. In the words of Alfred's grandson Denny Reed, who grew up very close (both literally and figuratively) to both Alfred and Rose, "Blind people have more senses than people with eyesight."

While his parents were not musically inclined, Alfred displayed a prodigious gift for music when quite young, mastering the fiddle, and also playing the banjo, the guitar, the mandolin, and the organ. He also loved to sing a wide range of songs—religious as well as secular, traditional as well as popular. Alfred developed a singular vocal approach marked by precision of enunciation and tonal clarity; his singing, unlike in the vocal styles of many Appalachian singers of his generation, exhibited little overt nasality. By the early 1920s, when radio became available in his area, Alfred listened to and enjoyed performances by several of the era's popular singers, including Vernon Dalhart and Carson Robison. Alfred would purchase songbooks and hymnbooks, and his wife Nettie would read the lyrics to him. Because the songs he learned from others did not always express aspects of what he was thinking, feeling, and experiencing, Alfred felt compelled to compose his own songs, and he was exceptionally talented in this endeavor—a craftsman with many things to say.

Alfred married Nettie Sheard (1882-1948) on July 25, 1903, in Giles County, Virginia, and the couple soon moved to southern West Virginia and rented the first of several small farms in that state. The next year brought the birth of their daughter Savannah, and the couple subsequently had several other children, including their first son, Arville (November 10, 1905—December 15, 1994), who would play an impor-
THE BLIND MAN’S SONG.
(For opening entertainments.)
Composed by the Blind Musician, A. L. REED.

Kind friends I have met you here to-night,
My promise to fulfill,
God has not blessed me with my sight,
‘Twas not his holy will.

CHORUS.
I’m sad, I’m lonely,
I’m blind and cannot see,
Kind friends to-night let me ask you
To do all you can for me.

I charge you no admission fee,
No money I require,
’Till after I have played for you,
Then give me what you desire.

’Tis hard for me to play and sing
Two hours and sometimes three,
But I will make this violin ring,
’Till satisfied you’ll be.

Now friends please help me all you can,
You know what you can give,
Some day the Lord will say come in,
You’ve helped the blind to live.

PRICE 10 CENTS.
Thought you might want
this Song of Blind Alfred.

An example of the song sheets that Alfred Reed sold. He never recorded this song.

Important role in Alfred’s music career. Among the other Reed children were three more sons—Tessie, Basil, and Collins—and a daughter Violet. Living on a succession of small farms in southern West Virginia (the 1910 Census documents the Reeds as living in the Mercer County community of Spanishburg, while the 1920 Census places their residence in the nearby community of Rock; shortly thereafter, the family relocated to a farm near Princeton, West Virginia; subsequently, the Reeds probably lived briefly in Bluefield before moving just outside Hinton in Summers County, West Virginia), the Reed family was mostly self-sufficient, growing or raising much of their food. At times during those years, Savannah and Violet would make extra money for their family by doing chores for other families. Granted that his blindness limited his employment options, Alfred persevered and was ultimately successful in supporting his family through the difficult years of the Great Depression. (As an indication of his work ethic, the 1910 Census lists the number of weeks he was unemployed in the previous year as zero.) Relying upon his talent to generate money, he gave music lessons, performed at dances and various social and church gatherings, sold printed copies of his own lyrics, and, in 1927 and 1929, made commercial recordings.

Alfred was a locally esteemed musician long before his first recordings. The Reed house often hosted music-making gatherings involving Alfred and several of his and Nettie’s children (specifically, Arville, Collins, Savannah, and Violet) and sometimes including such West Virginia musicians as fiddler Fred Pendleton and singer/guitarist Richard Harold. Alfred also frequently performed on the streets of nearby towns, particularly in Hinton. In 1971 his son Collins recalled that Alfred would often walk the three miles to Hinton in order to perform music in a park or on streetcorners. "Many times he would walk all the way back home without having earned a nickel," Collins remembered; "on more successful occasions he would pick up some groceries on the way back. Six or seven cents was enough to buy a pound of bacon." In 1976 Arville recalled Alfred’s forays to play music in town: "He got around pretty good in familiar places, but you had to lead him whenever he went someplace new. He would play his fiddle in Hinton with a cup alongside. We never knew how much money he would bring home."
All the while, Alfred wrote songs, and eventually his songcraft garnered attention outside his home community. Local officials occasionally commissioned him to create songs for political purposes, such as the time Alfred was asked to compose a protest song against a proposal to relocate the Mercer County courthouse from Princeton to Bluefield. He became quite skilled as a writer of topical songs based on events he heard about while in town or while listening to the radio, or based on newspaper articles his wife read to him. Alfred’s best known topical song, “The Wreck of the Virginian,” chronicled the May 24, 1927, Ingleside (in Mercer County, West Virginia) railroad disaster, when a freight train and a passenger train collided. His compelling retelling of the Virginian No. 3’s crash focused on the tragic deaths of the freight train’s engineer and fireman.

This song, metaphorically speaking, transported Alfred to Bristol. Allegedly, Ernest Stoneman had heard Reed sing “The Wreck of the Virginian” somewhere—perhaps in Bluefield, as Reed was listed as living there in the 1927 Bluefield city directory—and had recommended the blind musician to Peer a few weeks before the start of the 1927 Bristol sessions. Recently hired as an A & R (Artists and Repertoire) producer by the Bristol sessions. Recently hired as an A & R (Artists and Repertoire) producer by the Victor Talking Machine Company (after being affiliated with the Okeh label), Peer was seeking to identify talented musicians who were rooted in a traditional sound and sensibility yet who could record for the Victor label self-composed, copyrightable songs. Alfred, who offered that rare combination of skills, was invited to make some recordings with the authority Alfred provided his own accompaniment, his spare yet haunting fiddling complementing but not overpowering his open-throated, warm baritone voice. Peer, evidently moved by what he heard but seeking perfection, requested a second take of “The Wreck of the Virginian” (this was ultimately the performance released as a record); then Peer asked Alfred to perform other songs. Alfred, a lay Methodo-
dist preacher with a fundamentalist yet idiosyncratic moral compass, sang three sacred songs he had composed—all accompanied by his fiddle and by Wyrick’s rhythm guitar. These three songs, “I Mean to Live for Jesus,” “You Must Unload,” and “Walking in the Way with Jesus,” were different in terms of tone and tempo, but they were all pleas to fellow Christians to remain faithful to old-fashioned, time-proven Christian values and to avoid the pitfalls and vanities of modern life. Despite some admonishments against sin, the three songs were tender, even compassionate. Alfred may have been preaching, yet he wasn’t scrupulous—he stressed redemption. While his message was emphatic and his emotional delivery intense, his lyrics were understated, witty, and brimming with metaphor. Unfortunately yet understandably, Alfred’s sacred songs never became staples in the gospel repertoire. Certainly, it would be difficult to sing these songs with the authority Alfred brings to them.

Blind Alfred Reed’s Bristol records were impressive, indeed, and also modestly successful commercially (especially in Alfred’s home area, where his Bristol releases and some of his later records sold well). Accordingly, Peer kept Alfred under contract. That December (1927), Alfred and Arville traveled by train to Camden, New Jersey—Victor paid travel and lodging expenses—to make recordings in the Victor studio there (in the converted Trinity Baptist Church at 114 North 5th Street). The four songs Alfred had recorded in Bristol were powerful yet were limited thematically, and thus his released Bristol sides only hinted at his talents. These new recordings, made on December 19, were more diverse, revealing the range of his songwriting interests. “Explosion in the Fairmont Mines,” based on the earlier coal mining song “The Dream of the Miner’s Child,” commemorated the December 1907 mining disaster at Monongah, near Fairmont, West Virginia; in Alfred’s song, a young girl, by telling her father of her portentous dream of a mining disaster and thus detaining him at home, saves him from certain death when an actual accident happens at his mine. Alfred then recorded his poignant song “The Fate of Chris Lively and Wife,” which depicted a married couple naively traveling in a horse-drawn wagon across some railroad tracks, unaware of the fast-moving train that will imminently kill them. (This song was based on a true incident, as husband and wife Christopher Columbus Lively and Mary Lively were struck by a train on September 2, 1927, in Fayette County, West Virginia.) Next, Alfred made what one commentator called an “anti-flapper” record, “Why Do You Bob Your Hair, Girls.” Arguing against women in the 1920s exercising their right to wear their hair as they pleased, the song expressed sincere (if, from a 21st-century perspective, paternalistic) concern for women’s moral integrity. Alfred’s sympathies also extended, predictably, to men, and a subsequent recording, “Always Lift Him Up and Never Knock Him Down” acknowledged male struggles in coping with the difficulties of modern life. The sixth and final recording by Alfred from that Camden session was “The Prayer of the Drunkard’s Little Girl,” in which a child yearns for her father to overcome alcoholism and return to the family that loves him.

That same day in Camden, Arville, who played rhythm guitar on all his father’s recordings after the Bristol sessions, was invited by Peer to make a solo recording; this was “The Telephone Girl,” a charming time-piece (probably adapted by Alfred from an 1880s poem by George Devyr) that showcased Arville’s considerable ability to render documented music talents—his melodious, vibrato-rich tenor voice and his intricate guitar picking. Victor would release the performance and the record label would misspell Arville’s first name as Orville. The younger Reed recorded four additional numbers that same day with fiddler Fred Pendleton (February 24, 1904—December 29, 1972), who had travelled with the Reeds to New Jersey; the duo featuring Arville Reed and Pendleton was credited as the West Virginia Night Owls (the musicians had often performed together back home—sometimes with Alfred). Of the four recordings made by the West Virginia Night Owls in Camden, two—the traditional numbers “Sweet Bird” and “I’m Goin’ to Walk on the Streets of Glory”—were released by Victor; the other two, “Fate of Rose Sarlo” and the intriguingly
titled “Give the Flapper a Chew” (both allegedly Alfred Reed compositions), went unissued and are lost.

Alfred Reed was paid $50 for each song he recorded in Camden. Beyond that, his Victor releases from both of his 1927 recording sessions (Bristol and Camden) collectively generated some royalties. Throughout 1928 and for much of 1929 Alfred remained in West Virginia writing songs and performing locally; he made money playing music on the streets (by 1930 he and his family were registered by census workers as living in Summers County, West Virginia), and Alfred also sold (for 10 cents each) printed sheets (“broadsides”) bearing the lyrics to some of his songs. It was certainly a source of pride to Alfred that through his music-making he could generate an income with which to support his family.

With the collapse of the US stock market in late October 1929 came a subsequent decline in the recording industry. But the latter situation took a few months to manifest itself fully, and in December 1929 Alfred and Arville were summoned by Peer back to the studio for another recording session—this time in one of Victor’s New York City studios. Again, Victor paid the trainfare and lodging, and the Reeds were booked into the Knickerbocker Hotel. During a two-day session that began on December 3, Alfred made 10 recordings that were eventually released (accompanied by Arville on guitar, with Arville sometimes adding harmony vocals); all of those recordings interpreted memorable Alfred Reed compositions, and one—“How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live”—was destined to become a classic of the American song repertoire. Two additional songs recorded by the Reeds during this particular session—“The Railroader,” composed by Alfred, and “Bonnie Little Girl,” apparently written by Arville—went unreleased; that recording of “Bonnie Little Girl” no longer exists, while the recording of “The Railroader” probably survives in some form on metal parts stored in the Sony Music vault.

In New York City, Alfred sang songs exploring gender roles from several perspectives. “We’ve Got to Have ‘Em, That’s All” was engagingly matter-of-fact in asserting the inevitability, despite differences and misunderstandings, of relationships between males and females. “Beware” expressed empathy for women by acknowledging their vulnerability in relationships with duplicitous men. “Woman’s Been After Man Ever Since,” on the other hand, communicated a counterview on male-female interpersonal relationships through a combination of irony and clever wordplay. Alfred also recorded “Why Do You Bob Your Hair, Girls—No. 2,” a humorous reprise of the similarly titled song he had recorded in 1927 at Camden. (Victor mis-titled the new song on the record label as “Why Don’t You Bob Your Hair, Girls—No. 2.”) Another recording from December 3, of Reed’s song “There’ll Be No Distinction There,” offered a hopeful integrated, religiously unified, sinless society. Reed’s lyrics and performance on this recording attained considerable moral gravity, memorably speaking to the spiritual and ethical hypocracies and aspirations of his era. An alternate recorded take of this song allegedly exists in the vault—one of only three alternate takes by Blind Alfred Reed still in existence. (The other two extant Reed alternate takes, of “The Wreck of the Virginian” and “Walking in the Way with Jesus,” were from the 1927 Bristol sessions and were included in 2011 on Bear Family Records’ complete Bristol sessions boxed set.)

The next day—December 4, 1929—Alfred recorded two songs that he had composed and that had grown, like “There’ll Be No Distinction There,” from his complex social vision. These songs, “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live” and “Money Cravin’ Folks,” were critical of capitalism, castigating American society for its tolerance of injustice. It is perhaps not coincidental that Alfred recorded these two songs in New York City, the belly of the economic beast; he was possibly intentionally making a statement about the world around him (and Victor, no doubt unintentionally, underscored that statement by releasing these two hard-hitting songs on the same 78 RPM release). “Money Cravin’ Folks” pulled no punches in blaming the international financial system for the economic woes that he and his contemporaries were experiencing.

But the song that delved deepest to expose the roots of that era’s problems was “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live.” Like many of his fellow West Virginians (frankly, like many of his fellow Americans), Alfred had known hard times before the Wall Street crash, and “How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live” should not be interpreted strictly as a Depression-era song; indeed, the song’s continued popularity into the 21st century is testament to its universality. “How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live” was among the more socially conscious records released during the Great Depression. That the song was not immediately embraced as an anthem during that era says less about the record’s merits and more about the distractions and desperations that people were confronting at the time of its release. The song’s exposure of social inequality reinforced by a rigged economic system was likely simply too true for many people to hear and bear.

The other recordings that Alfred made on December 4 were “Black and Blue Blues,” a gritty song about a relationship gone wrong; “The Old Fashioned Cottage,” a sentimental rural idyll (Arville’s nimble guitar work and graceful harmony singing are perhaps most movingly captured here); and “You’ll Miss Me” (not to be confused—as some commentators have done—with the Carter Family’s “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?”). Given its position as the penultimate recording of Alfred’s career in music (his swan song was the fingerpointing “Money Cravin’ Folks”), “You’ll Miss Me” seems prophetic today, as Alfred was effectively silenced by the Depression; upon their release the records featuring his New York City recordings from December 1929 did not sell well (by 1930 the entire music industry was feeling the sting of the economic collapse),
and Alfred’s Victor contract was not renewed. As with many of his peers, Alfred struggled economically during the Great Depression; the 1930 Census listed him as unemployed, whereas in earlier official documents he had generally been listed as a music teacher. Thereafter, Alfred’s music could only be heard on hard-to-find 78 RPM records—or, for those fortunate few who happened upon him during the Depression’s early and middle years, performing live in public spaces. In 1937, even his live appearances were curtailed when a local ordinance banned “street performances” by blind musicians. (A few citizens in southern West Virginia today can still recall hearing this talented blind performer on the streets.)

Musician-songwriters infused by authentic and wise social visions have always been rare, and the close of Alfred’s recording career certainly left a void. Simply put, few if any of the acts who continued to make commercial hillbilly records during the 1930s had the ability, interest, and audacity to confront the kinds of themes that Alfred had explored in the late 1920s. A decade would pass before another musician-songwriter would emerge within the hillbilly music scene possessing a similarly intense and fearless social vision—and that younger visionary, Woody Guthrie from Oklahoma, likewise did not really fit in the mainstream commercial music world. But that is another story for another day.

Alfred Reed died at the age of 75 on January 17, 1956, in his home at Cool Ridge in Raleigh County, West Virginia. He was buried beside his wife Nettie (who had died in 1948) at Elgood in Mercer County. During the late-1950s and early-1960s urban folk music revival, a rumor circulated among some younger musicians that suggested that Alfred had died from privation and hunger, a literal starving artist. The Reed family, however, has long insisted that in his last years Alfred was comfortable and contented, a revered patriarch taken care of by a close-knit family. Alfred’s grandson Denny Reed acknowledged in 2014 that “my grandfather, given his situation, was always a happy person.” And clearly the death certificate for Alfred Reed confirms that he died of natural causes. Family members, such as Denny Reed and Alfred’s great-granddaughter Debi Hunter Fraley, have related with pride that Alfred—relying upon his music talent, his unwavering faith, and his willingness to work hard—was able to help his family through some exceptionally difficult times. “My grandfather had a brain,” said Denny, “and he used it to take care of his family.”

In 1971, the founders of Rounder Records (Ken Irwin, Marian Leighton Levy, and Bill Nowlin) interviewed Arville Reed—they were gathering information for the notes to be included in How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?: The Songs of Blind Alfred Reed, the 1972 LP compiling 14 long-unavailable 78 RPM records by Alfred. Arville at this time asserted that, shortly after Alfred’s death, Ralph Peer’s publishing company (Peer International Corporation) sought to renegotiate the family’s rights to Alfred’s songs; the Reed family obliged, said Arville, but Peer International never paid the family the dollar promised in the new contract as renegotiation payment. (Denny Reed has a copy of this 1958 document.) Clearly Arville was reflecting his family’s lingering sense of frustration at a publishing company and a recording industry that had given up on Alfred and Arville after 1929 and that had not kept Alfred’s songs or his recordings in circulation after that time.
Arville Reed grew up playing music in a musical household, and he thrived in that environment, becoming a skilled guitar player and an expressive singer with a gift for harmony vocals. He performed semi-professionally from the mid-1920s into the Great Depression as a solo musician and as part of the West Virginia Night Owls (his duo with Fred Pendleton), and, perhaps most crucially, he provided guitar and vocal accompaniment for his father on many of the latter's landmark recordings of the late 1920s. Yet by the late 1930s Arville was playing music solely for himself and his family. Arville fought in World War II, then returned to Princeton, West Virginia, and worked in a brick plant. Two decades later, retired, he moved to Pipestem, West Virginia, but never resumed his music-making. He told a *Sunday Gazette-Mail* reporter in April 1976, "I probably couldn't even tune a guitar now. My hands aren't right." Arville added, "I can't think of any occasion that I would try to play for," and then confessed, "I don't really miss playing. We moved around a lot in those days and never stayed put much. Things are quieter now."

During that same 1976 interview, Arville casually admitted that he did not own any of his father's—or his own—records: "They got so scratched and broken we couldn't play them so we got rid of them. I don't even have a record player anymore." Arville's distancing himself from his music-making past is particularly surprising when one considers that by then Alfred's recordings had been rediscovered by a new generation. In 1972, Rounder Records, as one of that independent label's earliest offerings, had released the previously mentioned LP compilation of Blind Alfred Reed's recordings. Perhaps Arville's seeming indifference late in life to his 1920s and 1930s music career reflected painful memories of those years—including the indignity of having had his first name consistently misspelled as Orville on Victor's record labels and in newspaper ads promoting his and his father's releases. Be that as it may, Arville was a talented musician who possessed considerable charm as a performer. He died in 1994 at the age of 89, and is buried in Mercer County, West Virginia.
Alfred Reed’s Legacy

Granted that he was powerful, inimitable performer, Alfred Reed’s songwriting is arguably his signature contribution to American music. Certainly, his songs are the primary reason he is remembered today. Arville recalled the process by which his blind father wrote songs: “He would hear about events over the radio and compose the songs [in braille] in the house in front of his family. We would stay down there [in Camden, New Jersey, or in New York City] one day and record all the songs my father had.” Arville underrepresented his father’s output, as Alfred composed but never recorded other songs, and one of those unrecorded compositions—“The Blind Man’s Song”—survives in the form of lyrics printed on a broadside. Preserved on a manuscript are the lyrics, typed in 1920, for another song, “The Lightning Express” (probably adapted by Reed from a song by J. Fred. Helf and E. P. Moran entitled “Please, Mr. Conductor, Don’t Put Me Off the Train,” originally recorded in 1899 by Byron G. Harlan).

Many of the songs that Alfred did record continue to be sung today. Diverse musicians over the years—rock legends like Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen, and David Lindley, respected popular music acts like Murray Head, the Del-Lords, and UB40, and roots music icons like the New Lost City Ramblers, the Red Clay Ramblers, and Old Crow Medicine Show—have reinterpreted Alfred’s songs for new generations. And in 2008 a host of musicians with West Virginia connections—from Little Jimmie Dickens and Connie Smith to Tim O’Brien and Kathy Mattea—teamed up to honor Alfred’s songcraft for the album Always Lift Him Up, issued by the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame and released to coincide with the induction of Blind Alfred Reed into that Hall of Fame.

One of the musicians on Always Lift Him Up was John Lilly, who in recent years has been one of leading preservers and promoters of Alfred Reed’s legacy. Beyond performing songs from the Alfred Reed repertoire, Lilly has befriended the musician’s descendants and has written movingly about the lasting impact of Alfred’s music for Goldensoul, a magazine Lilly formerly edited for the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. When asked in 2014 about Reed’s impact, Lilly said that Alfred was both a man of his time and a man ahead of his time:

Reed was a man apart. He lived a rewarding and successful life on his own terms with the hand he had been dealt. Reed’s performance style includes elements of the late 19th-century parlor tradition alongside the emerging country or hillbilly musical stylings of the day. His plaintive, melodic violin playing reflects his highly religious, church-based background, in which the songs are intended to deliver a higher message and not performed for show. His vocal delivery, however, is at times reminiscent of Jimmie Rodgers, Frank Hutchison, Ernest Stoneman, or other topical singers from that time period, who projected an emotional if restrained narrative delivery in their songs.

We understand from family members that Alfred possessed a broad repertoire of traditional and popular music. His recorded output, however, paints a picture similar to that of the performing songwriters of a more modern age. His stance in favor of the common man and his protests against greed and corruption align him with such popular and populist figures as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, among others. His sense of humor, particularly with regard to the “battle of the sexes,” reflects an openness about domestic life and personal relationships rare in his day.

During that 2014 interview, Lilly also observed that Alfred’s songs have outlasted the times in which they were created:

Reed’s original songs ring with the excitement and tension of the late 1920s, and his recordings reflect the turbulent times during which he lived. In many respects he stands at the crossroads of old and new, tradition and innovation, rural and urban. We will never know what went through his mind as he wrote songs, made recordings, and sold his music on the streets of southern West Virginia, but it is doubtful that he could have envisioned the impact his songs and recordings would have. We are fortunate to have his recordings and to be able to see the world through his surprisingly keen eyes.

Reed’s influence on traditional musicians such as The New Lost City Ramblers and The Red Clay Ramblers is obvious as they recorded and performed his songs in a traditional style. Reed’s influence on rock artists such as Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen and others might be less direct but perhaps more profound. By addressing social issues in a simple country-music style, Reed set the wheels in motion for a later generation of banjo players, harmonica blowers and guitar strummers who helped to change the world with their songs.

Alfred’s songs should live on in the repertoires of musicians who value songs with a conscience—songs that seek to venture beyond the shadowy world of injustices, hypocracies, and lies in an effort to identify and characterize timeless and empowering images of truth, however hard that truth may be to see.

Alfred Reed’s Fiddle

Alfred Reed’s fiddle bears inside it a label stating the instrument was made in 1695 by violin-maker Giovanni Paolino Maggini of Brescia, Italy; the stated year of its construction does not correspond to Maggini’s lifetime (c. 1580—c. 1630), and most likely Reed’s fiddle was made in a German factory during the latter part of the 19th century. Nonetheless, that fiddle was an expressive instrument that endured some tough times, like its former owner. Once while Alfred was playing at a dance, that fiddle was knocked out of his hands by a rambunctious dancer, and the head came off the instrument; Alfred glued it back together. Another time the fiddle fell out of a boat; it was quickly fished out of the water, and, as Arville recalled years many later, “the only change was a better tone.”

Alfred’s fiddle is currently in the possession of his grandson Denny Reed, who has safeguarded the cherished instrument since the early 1950s. Alfred “would get out his fiddle and play and sing for us kids,” Denny related in 2014, “with Aunt Rose rocking in her chair to the music.” Denny was so moved by the formative experience of hearing his grandfather’s music that he became a musician in his own right.

No doubt some people who lived near the Reed family in the old days thought of the fiddle as an instrument that accompanied (and encouraged) sin, and no doubt some of them referred to the fiddle as “the Devil’s instrument.” But that fiddle was assuredly a force for the good, guiding Alfred Reed, one of the greatest musicians to hail from Appalachia, from the darkness into the light. Today, we—by listening to these powerful recordings that feature Alfred’s voice and his fiddling—can follow this Appalachian visionary into the light and, like him, stand such times and live.
In early 2016 Alfred Reed's great-granddaughter Debi Hunter Fraley found this set of handwritten lyrics tucked inside the family's copy of "The Holston Annual," a publication, dated 1917, containing the minutes of an annual meeting of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. These lyrics, from Alfred's unrecorded song "A Change in Business," were dictated to someone in the Reed family, and Alfred clearly continued to revise the lyrics after they had been transcribed.