The 1927 Bristol Sessions and Ralph Peer: A Myth and A Legend Losing Luster in the Cold Light of Recent Scholarship

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The so-called 1927 Bristol sessions—the recording sessions conducted in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia, during July-August 1927 by A&R (Artists & Repertoire) producer Ralph Peer and his employer, the Victor Talking Machine Company—garnered relatively little attention until the 1970s. At that point, a few scholars (notably, music historians Charles K. Wolfe, Bill C. Malone, Tony Russell, and Nolan Porterfield) and some serious music fans began to view this long-ago event in a small Appalachian city as one of the most important recording sessions of all time. As evidence of the distinctiveness of those sessions, these scholars pointed to Peer’s “discovery” in Bristol, while recording amateur and semi-professional musicians from Appalachia during the summer of 1927, of future country music superstars the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Also, observed these scholars, at the 1927 Bristol sessions (Peer would hold additional sessions in Bristol the next year, so one needs to specify the year) Peer introduced an influential music business model that involved song publishing and artist management contracts. According to the emerging narrative, the modern country music industry was thus a direct outgrowth of the 1927 Bristol sessions. Sealing the fate of the sessions were two now oft-quoted phrases that emerged during the 1980s. In the mid-1980s Bristol’s political leaders began referring to their city as the “birthplace” of country music. And in 1988 Porterfield referred to the 1927 Bristol sessions as a “big bang of Country Music evolution.” Eventually people began repeating the two phrases as sobriquets—“the Birthplace of Country Music” and “the Big Bang of Country Music”—and those separate yet related notions, repeated incessantly, soon took on the gravitas of myth and legend.
I too have pondered the Bristol sessions story, having co-authored two books (one with Charles Wolfe, the other with Tony Russell) exploring the subject and having produced the 2011 Bear Family Records box set in which the complete contents of the 1927 and 1928 Bristol sessions—including alternate takes—were first made available publicly. And I have noticed how often the 1927 Bristol sessions and Ralph Peer are mentioned in general conversations about American music, even though such conversations rarely divulge more than skeletal facts about that event or about the man who made the event possible. Indeed, people have tended to speak of both with a kind of rapturous language usually reserved for cultural myths and legends.

Because of ongoing scholarship, though, the mystique of the 1927 Bristol sessions and the centrality of Peer in the music industry he helped to create are being subjected to widespread scrutiny, and this may necessarily alter the narrative. As more people enter the fray of discussions over the significance of this early—but indisputably not the earliest—event in country music history, some will accept the established narrative, while others will invariably challenge it. This will no doubt result from the broader dissemination of facts and the deeper font of knowledge made possible by two recent developments.

The first is the opening of downtown Bristol’s multi-million-dollar Birthplace of Country Music Museum, which celebrates (some might say capitalizes on) the 1927 Bristol sessions. To place that historical event into an approachable cultural framework, the museum attempts to render accessible a narrative previously advanced to a specialist audience by a small cadre of music historians; yet, through this museum’s simplified and sentimentalized presentation of the event, the narrative about the distinctiveness of the Bristol sessions—pitched for a mainstream audience—arguably weakens, with the 1927 Bristol sessions recordings collectively falling short of the expectations placed upon them by the weight of hype and public opinion. Like other location recording sessions in the American South from the 1920s and early 1930s, Peer’s work in Bristol in 1927 yielded some very strong recordings (those by The Carter Family and those by Blind Alfred Reed being arguably the most perfectly realized, with Jimmie Rodgers’ recordings being flawed but, of course, intimating the immense talent about to be unleashed), but the 1927 Bristol sessions also spawned some unexceptional recordings. The Museum’s generalizing, multimedia approach to telling the story of the 1927 Bristol sessions tends to smooth over nuances and ignore subtler, more contextualized interpretations of the event. The informed museum-goer might well wonder what the fuss is all about. One can’t help but wonder if the 1927 Bristol sessions, previously infused with mystique only a few years ago, will soon be viewed not as catalytic, but as a business-as-usual location recording session of the 1920s and 1930s. In the final analysis, that is what that event was—one of many, and not the first, not the last, and perhaps not even the best.

The second 2014 occurrence to force a reassessment of the 1927 Bristol sessions was the publication of a book that reveals the man behind the myth. While receiving less fanfare than the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, this book—Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music (Chicago Review Press), written by music journalist Barry Mazor—has made the deeper contribution toward expanding our collective understanding of the 1927 Bristol sessions and their ultimate influence. The first biographical study of a seminal figure in commercial recording history, Mazor’s book positions Ralph Peer as the founding father of the commercial music industry and the linchpin of American roots music. Some of the book’s justification for placing Peer on such a pedestal hinges on the old narrative of the perceived superiority of the 1927 Bristol sessions as a singular historical event. Mazor writes: "If anyone, even then, saw broader potential or musical power in the down-home roots music being skipped over so cavalierly, they certainly weren’t doing anything about it... And then Ralph Peer came along. He saw as much potential in passed-over, under-explored, professionally neglected music, and did as much to make something of it, as any one person has" (page 3).

As such, Mazor’s book arguably overreaches, as Peer was not the only recordist during this era to seek out and make commercial recordings of talented amateur and semi-professional musicians representing various folk and popular music genres. Indeed, other recording industry pioneers—other A&R producers for other companies—proved similarly dedicated to seeking out and finding audiences for "down-home roots music." And at least one such producer, Columbia Records’ Frank B. Walker, was a figure more or less equal to Peer in terms of accomplishments and impact. While Peer recorded the first vocal performance by a blues act, a 1920 record featuring "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith, Walker three years later signed Bessie Smith, who would prove to be the most influential and popular performer among the many early blues acts.

Peer may have "discovered" the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in Bristol in 1927, but Walker had by that time already signed and recorded such iconic 1920s-era "hillbilly music" acts as Riley Puckett, Gid Tanner, Charlie Poole, and Vernon Dalhart. Decades later, these acts would not matter as much to the Nashville country music industry because they did not compose the kinds of songs readily reinterpreted by subsequent recording acts, yet Walker’s mid-1920s "hillbilly music" signees were undeniably influential (Poole, in particular, has had a lasting impact). Peer’s location recordings in Bristol in 1927 may have become the catalyst for a legend, yet Walker oversaw recording sessions in 1928 and 1929 in nearby Johnson City, Tennessee, that rivaled Peer’s Bristol work in terms of yielding powerful, even iconic recordings; less focused on finding potential "hits" or publishable songs than Peer’s Bristol sessions, Walker’s Johnson City sessions were more wide-ranging, generating records that represented a broader overview of regional music sounds and styles associated with Appalachian whites of that era (the story of Walker’s Johnson City sessions is documented in a 2013 boxed set I co-produced with Tony Russell for Bear Family Records). The 1929-1930 Knoxville sessions for Brunswick/Vocalion, conducted by A&R producer Richard Voynow, yielded recordings by a more diverse array of Appalachia-based musicians—jazz, blues, and black gospel acts, as well as "hillbilly" acts of every variety—that heard in Bristol and Johnson City combined (this exceptional diversity of Appalachian regional music is now documented on the 2016 Bear Family Records boxed set that Russell and I produced in order to complete the trilogy of East Tennessee location recording sessions).

Mazor’s book describes how, by the late 1920s, Peer spread the net of what might be commercially recorded through championing Latin American music. Walker was simultaneously making a similar effort to record and commercially distribute another ethnic music, Cajun music. While Peer’s signings in Bristol made him wealthy through the lucrative contracts he arranged with the Carters and Rodgers,
his work within country music after World War II was primarily focused on song publishing; Walker’s postwar activities included both record company management and new artist development—and Walker’s final signing, to his last label affiliation (MGM), was perhaps the greatest in country music history: Hank Williams, Sr.

Mazor’s book briefly mentions Peer’s main competitors in the quest to find and record America’s “roots music” heritage—Columbia’s Walker, Paramount Records’ Art Satherly, and, on the documentary front, John and Alan Lomax. Yet the book would have been stronger had Mazor examined Peer from a more contextualized perspective. The depth and breadth of Peer’s competition was considerable, and the emerging recording industry benefitted greatly by the presence of multiple efforts to travel the countryside to record, document, and ultimately transform American roots music. The recording of America’s roots music legacy was certainly a collective effort.

Still, it is illuminating to know about Peer’s activities and to understand his motives, and for these reasons alone Mazor’s book is invaluable. To be sure, Peer recorded many influential acts and was enormously successful in implementing new music business approaches. One take-away from Mazor’s book, though, is that Peer, while profoundly shaping the trajectory of the American roots music business, was at a fundamental level more interested in business than in the people who made the music. This approach manifested itself in odd and unpleasant ways, such as his and his company’s marginal treatment of Blind Alfred Reed. After “discovering” the West Virginia-based singer-songwriter/fiddler at the 1927 Bristol sessions, Peer and Victor contracted Reed for follow-up recordings; but though a subsequent 1927 session in Camden, New Jersey, and a 1929 session in New York City yielded excellent (if poor-selling) records, Peer quickly lost interest in this talented, even visionary artist, who was thereafter relegated to singing for the pocket-change of passersby on the streets of Hinton, West Virginia (until the town’s mid-1930s ordinance, meant to eliminate the presence of blind street-singers, ended that option for Reed). In 1938, not long after Reed’s death, Peer’s company pressed the still-grieving Reed family to secure future rights to Reed’s then-seemingly-inconsequential song catalog for the fee of one dollar, which, according to Reed’s relatives (in both written and orally communicated statements) was never paid despite the family’s compliance with Peer’s request.

Thereafter, some of Reed’s songs proved popular among a post-urban folk music revival generation, inspiring versions by a range of popular recording acts—including Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen, UB40, and Old Crow Medicine Show. Reed receives just one mention in Mazor’s book (on page 93), and on that page Reed’s songs are marginalized as having been “topical.” (Reed, in fact, wrote all manner of songs, a few of which were indeed topical, but most of which—whether sacred or secular—were thematically timeless and lyrically adventurous, as can be heard in a new release I produced for Dust-to-Digital exploring Blind Alfred Reed’s life and music.) It is a shame that Peer’s self-serving evaluation of Appalachia’s 1920s-era music talent—his promotion of certain acts because they and their songs were marketable and his neglect of other acts because they and their songs were not—should continue to hold such a stranglehold on the contemporary assessment of Appalachia’s music heritage.

“Knowledge is power,” wrote English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon in 1597. With new knowledge generated by recent research and by the reissuing of previously hard-to-find recordings on historically-minded record companies committed to setting the documentary record straight, the current generation of music historians can and must reinterpret the story of early country music. Music historians brought the story of the 1927 Bristol sessions to the public’s attention, and Mazor researched and wrote the first study of the man who made those particular sessions happen. Now it is imperative that we continue to examine Appalachia’s, and by extension America’s, music legacy, even if that means that the narrative changes in the telling and in the showing. And if the 1927 Bristol sessions and Peer’s role in America’s music history ultimately seem a little less central in the narrative than they seemed only a year or two ago, that is inevitable—generally speaking, myths and legends lose luster under the cold light of fact-based analysis.

Now that the 1927 Bristol story has been claimed by non-scholars for supposed public benefit (with the city of Bristol turning the location recording sessions that happened there in 1927 into a central facet of local tourism), the public needs to participate in a factually accurate, contextualized discussion about those sessions and their role in Appalachia’s and America’s cultural history. And that discussion should be guided, now as then, by scholars.