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'Can You Sing Or Play Old-Time Music?': The Johnson City Sessions

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"CAN YOU SING OR PLAY OLD-TIME MUSIC?" THE JOHNSON CITY SESSIONS

By Ted Olson

In a recent interview, musician Wynton Marsalis said, "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." Johnny Cash (who was not entirely unbiased, since he had married into the famous family group "discovered" in Bristol) once referred to the 1927 Bristol Sessions as "the single most important event in the history of country music." Scholar Nolan Porterfield went so far as to suggest that, "As a sort of shorthand notation, [the Bristol Sessions have] come to signal the Big Bang of country music evolution."

As important as Victor Records' 1927 Bristol Sessions were (and are), the attention paid to their impact has led to a general neglect of the larger phenomenon of "location recording sessions" in Appalachia. The most noteworthy location recording sessions to be staged in Appalachia after the 1927 Bristol Sessions were those held by Columbia Records in October 1928 and in October 1929, only 25 miles away from Bristol in Johnson City, Tennessee, then a boomtown and a bustling railroad hub. Though they did not uncover musicians of the caliber of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, who first recorded in Bristol, the sessions in Johnson City generated many fascinating recordings. Indeed, Columbia's Johnson City Sessions, taken as an entire corpus, are as worthy of our attention today as the recordings made in Bristol for Victor.

The Bristol Sessions, conducted by Victor Records producer Ralph Peer in July - August 1927, yielded memorable recordings by influential Appalachian musicians, including such often-overlooked old-time music luminaries as Ernest Stoneman, Blind Alfred Reed, Henry Whitter, Ernest Phipps, and Alfred G. Karnes, as well as artists who would change the direction of country music—Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Experiencing commercial success with the recordings and management contracts he had generated in Bristol that summer, Peer returned the next year to make additional recordings by Stoneman and his group, Ernest Phipps and his quartet, Karnes, and other musicians. The location recording sessions Peer conducted in Bristol became legendary for having marked the emergence of the modern country music industry and, equally important, for continuing to inspire musicians working in a range of other

genres, including old-time, Americana, alt-country, bluegrass, and rock.

For several years before the Bristol Sessions, record companies had been setting up recording sessions on location near the places where Southern musicians actually lived. This practice began in such major Southern cities as Atlanta and Memphis, where A&R (Artist & Repertoire) scouts (in contemporary parlance, record producers) sought out traditional and professional musicians in the effort to create commercially viable records. By the early 1920s, A&R scouts focused on finding black musicians to perform blues and jazz numbers, as such records were proving popular to a broad record-buying audience. In June 1923, Ralph Peer, then working for Okeh Records, cut and released the first commercial record of Southern vernacular music by a white musician, Fiddlin' John Carson. The record's success proved that there was an audience for the new commercial music genre, which would be referred to by several names, including "hillbilly music," and which would eventually be termed "country and western" and then "country music."

There was one location recording session in Appalachia before the Bristol Sessions: Peer's 1925 recording visit for Okeh Records to Asheville, North Carolina. In late August and early September 1925, Peer 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 also traveled to Appalachia to make noncommercial documentary cylinder recordings of regional music.)

The idea of transporting recording equipment to Appalachia was, to record companies, a shift from their previous practice of depending on Appalachian musicians to leave the region to make records in the large Southern cities, or up North. While these 1925 recordings from Asheville were hampered by the limited dynamic range rendered by analog recording, Peer realized that there was more talent to be mined in the mountains. After accepting a position with Victor Records in 1926, Peer began to speculate as to where his next recording foray in Appalachia should be. Working with Ernest Stoneman, who was by that time already a successful "hillbilly" recording artist, and who hailed from southwestern Virginia, Peer selected Bristol, a small yet modern city situated on the border between Virginia and Tennessee, and a crossroads for rail and automobile transportation.

The Bristol Sessions recordings of 1927-1928 were dramatically superior to those made at the 1925 Asheville Sessions. Whereas the sessions in Asheville had made use of low-fidelity acoustic horn microphones, for the Bristol Sessions Peer utilized the recently-introduced electronic carbon microphone system, which made it possible to capture a fuller, more natural dynamic range of sound. The commercial success of many of Peer's Bristol Sessions records for Victor led A&R scouts from competing record companies to set up location recording sessions in and near Appalachia. Other such occasions included a September 1927 session by Okeh in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; a February 1928 session by the Brunswick label in Ashland, Kentucky; two sessions, in August 1929 and in April 1930, by Brunswick in Knoxville, Tennessee; and Columbia Records' Johnson City Sessions in October 1928 and October 1929.

Peer's Bristol Sessions recordings were revolutionary in their influence, of course, but the Johnson City recordings, overseen by Columbia's pioneering A&R scout Frank B. Walker, reflect Walker's more eclectic tastes and keener sense of humor. Indeed, the recordings from the Johnson City Sessions provide a distinctly different portrayal of Appalachian music. Peer was interested primarily in capturing vocal performances of sacred material or secular



courtesy of Dave Freeman



Roane County Ramblers

songs with concisely-structured lyrics projecting generalized emotions—ostensibly to reach the broadest possible audience. For his part, Walker maintained an open-minded approach, which led him to make recordings that would not have interested Peer. And by the sheer happenstance of who showed up to make records for Walker, the Johnson City Sessions also documented some different regional sounds and styles from those recorded during the Bristol Sessions. Walker recorded a wide range of Appalachian musicians, primarily from Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and North Carolina. In Bristol, Peer had recorded musicians from the first three of those states plus Virginia, but had not attracted North Carolinians.

Like Peer, Frank Walker was a pioneer of the commercial recorded sound industry. Born in 1889 and reared in Fly Summit, New York, Walker when young played music in a string band and ultimately considered rural white vernacular music as his “first love” (his own words, taken from his interview with Mike Seeger). After World War I Walker promoted concerts for Italian opera singer Enrico Caruso, then left to work for Columbia Records. By 1923 he was successfully recording Bessie Smith and other blues performers. (By his own recollection, Walker had already begun recording rural white music by 1922. He claimed that his label, believing such music was commercially unprofitable, refused to release these earlier recordings.) By January 1925, he had convinced Columbia to launch a series of commercial records that eventually featured performances by such white musicians as Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett, and Charlie Poole. As was the industry standard at the time, Walker initially worked in temporary studios set up in lowland Southern cities. After Peer’s success at Bristol in 1927, Walker decided to set up his own temporary studio in nearby Johnson City.

A few of the 78 RPM records made in Johnson City in 1928 sold well when released by Columbia in early 1929. One record by the duo of Earl Shirkey and Roy Harper, “Steamboat Man” backed with “When the Roses Bloom Again for the Bootlegger,” sold nearly 75,000 copies. Walker decided to return to Johnson City the following October to make additional recordings. His timing was unfortunate, to say the least, coinciding with the Wall Street Crash; in fact, the last day of recording in Johnson City in 1929 took place on October 24, 1929—“Black Thursday.” As a result, the 1929 Johnson City

courtesy of the Charles K. Wolfe Collection



Byrd Moore and his Hot Shots (Byrd Moore, Clarence Greene, Clarence Ashley)

courtesy Richard Blaustein



Tennessee Ramblers (Grant Brothers with Jimmie Rodgers), 1927.

Sessions recordings, despite their overall excellence, sold poorly upon their release in early 1930.

Few of the recordings from Johnson City are widely known today. Three records—"Old Lady and the Devil" by Bill and Belle Reed, "The Coo-Coo Bird" by Clarence Ashley, and the Bentley Boys' immortal "Down On Penny's Farm"—were reissued in 1952 on the influential *Anthology of American Folk Music*. "Down On Penny's Farm" would lend a thematic and stylistic backdrop for not one but two Bob Dylan songs, "Hard Times in New York Town" and "Maggie's Farm." Other outstanding recordings from the sessions include, from 1928, "Johnson Boys" by the Grant Brothers, "Southern Number III" by the Roane County Ramblers, "Johnson City Blues" by Clarence Greene, "Lindy" by the Proximity String Quartet, and "Roll On Buddy" by Charlie Bowman and His Brothers; and from 1929, four classic recordings by Clarence Ashley, "I'm Just a Black Sheep" by Jack Jackson, "Beckley Rag" by Roy Harvey and Leonard Copeland, "West Virginia Hills" by the Moatsville String Ticklers, and "Powder and Paint" by Ira and Eugene Yates.

Frank Walker's inspired work on the Johnson City Sessions may not have garnered much scholarly attention, yet his peers certainly bestowed respect upon him for his subsequent roles in the recorded sound industry. For his work for RCA Victor, producing recordings by Bill Monroe, Glenn Miller, Coleman Hawkins, and Duke Ellington, and for MGM Records overseeing the career of Hank Williams, Sr., Walker acquired the sobriquet "The Dean of the American Record Industry."

Columbia Records' Johnson City Sessions have long merited an in-depth examination, and that examination is now here, in the form of a four-CD box set and book released by Bear Family Records. Developing a story begun in the 2011 box set *The Bristol Sessions, 1927-1928: The Big Bang of Country Music*, this new collection, entitled *The Johnson City Sessions, 1928-1929: Can You Sing Or Play Old-Time Music?*, continues Bear Family Records' commitment to tracing the larger story of the location recording sessions conducted in Appalachia in the late '20s and early '30s. *The Johnson City Sessions* compiles all 100 extant recordings made during those 1928 and 1929 Columbia sessions—the first time that they have been collected in any form. The recordings and accompanying book chronicle the presence in Johnson City of all the musicians who heeded the invita-



Charlie Bowman




The Bowman Sisters

courtesy of Bob L. Cox

tion of a widely disseminated October 1928 newspaper ad, calling upon area musicians to participate in "an actual try-out for the purpose of making Columbia Records."

In April 2013 the State of Tennessee erected an official historical marker to commemorate this compelling if overlooked event in early country music history. In October 2013, Johnson City will host several public activities focused on the Johnson City Sessions, including the dedication of the Bear Family Records box set.

Today, the Johnson City Sessions recordings are deemed by those who know them best (scholars and record collectors, if not yet the general public) as a strong, distinctive cross-section of old-time Appalachian music made at the cusp of the Great Depression. Indeed, they might arguably constitute the second-most important recording sessions ever conducted in Appalachia. If the 1927 Bristol Sessions can be considered "the Big Bang of Country Music," then the Johnson City Sessions were a major aftershock. 

Ted Olson produced and wrote liner notes for two box sets for Bear Family Records, The Bristol Sessions, 1927-1928: The Big Bang of Country Music (with Christopher King and Tony Russell) and The Johnson City Sessions, 1928-1929: Can You Sing Or Play Old-Time Music? (with Tony Russell).

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