

TEACHERS

The 1927 Bristol Sessions Story

RESOURCE DOCUMENT





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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1920s, record labels and producers began to see the commercial potential for country music, known as “hillbilly music” at that time. Hillbilly music had been around for a long time – played and shared on front porches and in churches, at dances and gatherings of friends and family for many generations. However, while there were earlier recordings of other types of music such as opera, hillbilly tunes weren’t etched onto cylinders or discs and then marketed and sold until the 1920s.



Record labels for the Victor Talking Machine Company, OKeh Records, and Brunswick. Credit: www.discogs.com

At this time, A&R (artists & repertoire) representatives from record labels like Victor, Columbia, OKeh, and Brunswick were on the search for a variety of different genres of music that would sell well, inviting artists to their studio headquarters or, with a host of technological advances making recording equipment more portable, bringing the recording experience direct to the artists through **location recording sessions**. Producers began to travel away from the studio to search for regional talent – by doing so, they were able to record a large number of artists at the same time and lower the costs of this recording work. As a result, the creation of a profitable new market quickly emerged.



Promotional photograph of Eck Robertson, circa 1922. Credit: Public domain image from [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eck_Robertson.jpg)

The first hillbilly recording is attributed to fiddler Eck Robertson, who traveled to New York in 1922 and recorded several **sides** for the Victor Talking Machine Company, including “Turkey in the Straw” with Henry Clay Gilliland and his masterpiece “Sallie Gooden” as a solo number. “**Sallie Gooden**” was released in April 1923, making it the first country record, and it found a ready audience, soon becoming a bestseller. Many other significant recording sessions

took place at the major recording studios before 1927 – for instance, Fiddlin’ Cowan Powers (1924), Ernest Stoneman (1924), Dave Macon (1924), The Hill Billies (1925), and Charlie Poole and The North Carolina Ramblers



Fiddlin’ John Carson playing a fiddle tune. Credit: From the [Guthrie T. Meade Collection, #20246](https://www.guthrie-t-meade.com/collection/20246), Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

(1926) – though none reached the same level of commercial success of the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Soon Victor Talking Machine Company, along with other major companies such as Gennett, Brunswick, OKeh, and Columbia, began to set up location recording sessions in the South. These companies searched for places where they were sure to find a large variety of acts specializing in “hillbilly music.” Fiddlin’ John Carson, an old-time fiddler from north Georgia, played “**The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane**” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow” on June 14, 1923 for OKeh Records in Atlanta, Georgia, and this record became the first commercial country music recorded in the South. Ralph Peer, who later became the producer for Victor at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, was one of the supervisors at this recording session.

THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

By 1927, Columbia and Okeh had successfully released hillbilly records, while the Victor Talking Machine Company (later RCA Victor) was aiming for its own success in this new market. Victor hired producer Ralph Peer in 1926 to build their hillbilly catalog – Peer later recalled:

“I had what they wanted. They couldn’t get into the hillbilly business and I knew how to do it.”

Through his friendship and professional relationship with Ernest Stoneman, he soon settled on Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia as the place to record – chosen because it was located in an area known for distinctive music traditions and thus ripe with possibility. After traveling to Bristol with the latest recording technology, Peer and two Victor recording engineers named Edward Eckhardt and Fred Lynch set up a temporary studio in the Taylor-Christian Hat Company building at 408 State Street on Friday, July 22, 1927.

Peer conducted the Sessions between July 25 and August 5. The recordings began with Stoneman, an established professional musician who had already recorded numerous hillbilly records. Stoneman – along with his wife Hattie, other family members, and several friends in different configurations – recorded 16 songs over two days. A variety of performers traveled to Bristol for the Sessions. Some of these performers, such as the Johnson Brothers and Henry Whitter, knew or had worked with Peer already, while others were inspired to audition in the hopes of a recording or two after seeing newspaper ads and articles about the Sessions. Peer noted:

“[A story in the Bristol News Bulletin] worked like dynamite and the very next day I was deluged with long-distance telephone calls from the surrounding mountain region. Groups of singers who had not visited Bristol during their entire lifetime arrived by bus, horse and buggy, train, or on foot.”

**Can You Sing or Play
Old-Time Music?**

Musicians of Unusual Ability ---
Small Dance Combinations---
Singers --- Novelty
Players, Etc.

Are Invited

To call on Mr. Walker or Mr. Brown of the Columbia Phonograph Company at 334 East Main Street, Johnson City, on Saturday, October 13th, 1928--9 A. M. to 5 P. M.

This is an actual try-out for the purpose of making Columbia Records.

You may write in advance to E. B. Walker, Care of John Sevier Hotel, Johnson City, or call without appointment at address and on date mentioned above.

This advertisement appeared in the *Johnson City Chronicle* on October 3, 1928.

Credit: *Johnson City Chronicle*

That article told interested readers that Stoneman had made around \$3,600 (equivalent to \$54,802 today) in **royalties** that year through his previous recordings, an inspirational sum to many at that time.

As was noted above, other recording sessions of hillbilly music took place before and after the 1927 Bristol Sessions, including the 1928 Bristol Sessions, the 1928 and 1929 Johnson City Sessions, and the 1929 and 1930 Knoxville Sessions. However, there were three factors that came together in Bristol in 1927 that contributed to the significance and impact of those recording sessions, leading them to be called “the big bang of country music.”

**MOUNTAIN SONGS
RECORDED HERE
BY VICTOR CO.**

**Notable Performers Of This
Section At Work At Station
In This City**

Intensely interesting is a visit to the Victor Talking Machine recording station in Bristol, located on the second floor of the building formerly occupied by the Taylor-Christian Hat company in Bristol. There each day can be witnessed notables of this mountain country doing their best stunts for the microphone, turned into records, and spread at home and abroad.

This morning Earnest Stoneman and company from near Galax, Va., were the performers and they played and sang into the microphone a favorite in Grayson County, Va., namely, “I Love My Lulu Belle.” Eck Dumford was the principal singer while a matron, 26 years of age, and the mother of five children, joined in for a couple of stanzas. Lulu Belle is nothing like the production witnessed on the New York stage during the past year. It is a plaintive mountain song, expressing wonder over what the singer will do when his money runs out. The synchronizing is perfect: Earnest Stoneman playing the guitar, the young matron the violin and a young mountaineer the banjo and the mouth harp. Bodies swaying, feet beating a perfect rhythm, it is calculated to go over big when offered to the public.

An Old Favorite

Probably a number with which the citizens of this city and territory are better acquainted with is entitled, “Skip to Ma Lou My Darling” by the same quartette. It has been one of the favorites at every country dance held in this section for half a century, vying with “Cripple Creek,” and “Old Dan Tucker,” “Sourwood Mountain,” and other square dance numbers. This morning the management gave the number, following a rendition by the quartette, back over the record and it was a palpable hit.

“Yonder she comes, how do you do,” and the ladies were honored all; “You’ve got money, and I have too,” as the rights and lefts were exchanged; “All around the house and the pig pen too,” as the birds flew into the cage and out again; “Pretty as a red bird—prettier too,” as the ladies do, and gents you know—through the entire gamut of the figures came trooping out of memory’s hall and were re-enacted again as in the halcyon days of yore.

The quartette costs the Victor company close to \$200 per day—Stoneman receiving \$100, and each of the assistants \$25. Stoneman is regarded as one of the finest banjoists in the country, his numbers selling rapidly. He is a carpenter and song leader at Galax. He received from the company \$3,600 last year as his share of the proceeds on his records.

Right: Article from the *Bristol News Bulletin*, Wednesday, July 27, 1927, page 1.

Credit: <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/80539554/the-bristol-news-bulletin/>, accessed June 30, 2021



TECHNOLOGY

A major change in technology in the mid-1920s was instrumental to the success of the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Before, the production of a 78rpm record involved **transferring a music performance to a master disc by means of an acoustic horn**. This method was flawed in two major ways. First, the resulting recorded music was compromised by a limited dynamic range. Second, a balanced sound on recordings depended heavily upon the precise placement of performing musicians in front of the horn. This made capturing the sounds from multiple singers and musicians with different instruments a real challenge.

Shortly before the Bristol Sessions, a new type of technology was developed by Bell Laboratories and Western Electric – an **electric microphone** that soon replaced the acoustic recording process. The records produced with the electric microphone were characterized by a more nuanced and balanced sound. Thus, the 1927 Bristol Sessions recordings were recorded at a higher quality, resulting in a better product that would sell well and potentially reach a larger commercial audience.

At the same time, the easy portability and reliability of the electric microphone – along with the related recording equipment – made it possible for record producers to bring their “studios” out of New York City and other large cities to locations that were in the midst of the musical traditions they wanted to record. Therefore, they were able to acquire music for their hillbilly catalogs that might not have been discovered or accessible if the artists had needed to travel to them.



Acoustical recording session with a large band or orchestra, circa 1920s. Credit: [Library of Congress](#)



This Western Electric microphone is like the one used at the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Credit: Birthplace of Country Music Museum Collection; photograph: [Hillmann & Carr](#)



VISION

Ralph Peer was a pioneering producer, not only in hillbilly music but also in other genres. In 1920, working for Okeh Records, he produced the first blues recording by an African American artist – [Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues."](#) In 1923 Peer was responsible for the first commercially released recording of southern white music, the 78rpm record featuring old-time musician Fiddlin' John Carson, again on the Okeh label. In January 1928 Peer's newly formed company – the Southern Music Publishing Company – began to do business; this company grew to eventually become [peermusic](#), the largest independent music publisher in the world today.



A young Ralph Peer. Credit: Courtesy of [peermusic](#), Peer Family Archives

In 1926 Peer began working for the Victor Talking Machine Company, and soon after he planned his first recording project for the label, a trip to Bristol; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia. For this location recording trip, Peer implemented a new **business model** where he signed many of the artists he worked with to three separate contracts:



Mamie Smith. Credit: Collection of Marshall Wyatt, courtesy of [Old Hat Records](#)

- A Victor recording contract that included \$50 (around \$784 in today's money) per side up front, as well as a modest royalty on each record sold
- A song publishing contract with his Southern Music Publishing Company
- A personal management contract with Peer himself

This business model produced **lucrative returns** for both Peer and Victor, especially in their business relationship with The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. It was also significant to the new and growing country music industry – and beyond – creating a lasting influence in the business side of the music industry.

While there were many important record producers working at this time, Peer was particularly adept at finding, marketing, and distributing music that would sell well and appeal to a paying audience. His role as the producer of the 1927 Bristol Sessions was a significant factor in their success and impact.



Postcard of the Victor Talking Machine Company Works in Camden, New Jersey. Credit: Birthplace of Country Music Museum Collection



TALENT

The third factor in the success and far-reaching impact of the 1927 Bristol Sessions was the talent that was captured in these recordings. While there were several artists who produced important recordings at the Sessions, three acts stand out, two of which had never recorded before.

Ernest Stoneman encouraged Ralph Peer to set up the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and he was the first to be recorded over the two-week period. Stoneman was already a recording veteran when he came to Bristol—he began recording in 1924, and by 1927, he had produced over 100 sides for Victor and other labels. Along with family and friends in a variety of configurations, Stoneman recorded 16 songs at the Sessions. He returned to Bristol in October 1928 to make more records for Victor and Peer. While the Great Depression hit Stoneman’s family hard, and he recorded very little during that time, he returned to performing after World War II with The Stoneman Family act featuring several of his children.



Ernest Stoneman with various other musicians, including his wife Hattie standing behind him with the fiddle. Credit: From the [John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001](#), Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



The Carter Family promotional photograph. Credit: Courtesy of Dale Jett, descendant of the original Carter Family

The most influential recordings to come out of the 1927 Bristol Sessions were by The Carter Family from Southwest Virginia: A. P., his wife Sara, and Sara’s cousin Maybelle (only 18 at the time). They recorded six songs on August 1 and 2—[“Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,”](#) “Little Log Cabin By The Sea,” “The Poor Orphan Child,” “The Storms Are On The Ocean,” “Single Girl, Married Girl,” and “The Wandering Boy.” These recordings set the stage for the Carters to become the most important singing group in country music history – their sound, songs, and musicianship were foundational to the music we hear today, and their influence has been far-reaching. Joe and Janette (A. P. and Sara’s children) and June, Anita, and Helen (Maybelle’s children with her husband Ezra) – along with their descendants – have continued to bring The Carter Family’s musical traditions and sounds to future generations.

Jimmie Rodgers was another famous and hugely important “discovery” at the Bristol Sessions. While Rodgers came to Bristol as part of a group, the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers, he ended up recording as a solo act with two songs – “The Soldier’s Sweetheart” and [“Sleep Baby Sleep.”](#) Even though these recordings were not commercially successful when they were released in October 1927, Peer saw something special in Rodgers’ and in his singing style, and so he invited him to record further at the Victor studios in Camden, New Jersey, in late November 1927. One of the songs recorded then, [“T for Texas \(Blue Yodel\),”](#) immediately made him a national star upon its release. Rodgers soon became known as “America’s Blue Yodeler,” and later as “the father of country music.”



CONCLUSION

Ralph Peer's primary goal during the 1927 Bristol Sessions was to produce compelling recordings that sounded modern and would sell well – a goal he certainly accomplished. However, the impact of these recordings reached far beyond that original intent. They continue to influence musicians today, especially in bluegrass, revivalist folk, Americana, country, and even rock music. And in 1998, the United States Congress, in recognition of the significance of the 1927 Bristol Sessions, designated Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia as [“the Birthplace of Country Music.”](#) And when the Library of Congress announced its [newly created National Recording Registry in 2002](#), they ranked the 1927 Bristol Sessions among the 50 most significant sound recording events of all time.



VOCABULARY LIST

* The majority of these definitions are taken from Merriam-Webster.

Acoustic Horn

The acoustic horn looks like a large megaphone (cone or birthday hat shape!). Musicians and singers would sing into the horn to record their voices and sounds onto cylinders or records for playback.

Business Model

A model outlining how a business should operate

Electric Microphone

A device that captures vibrating sound waves and converts them into an electrical current. In relation to music, the electricity then flows out to an amplified speaker, broadcast console, or sound recording device such as a record cutting lathe.

“Hillbilly Music”

This is the term that was used for early country music, especially by record labels for marketing and selling the records.

Location Recording Sessions

Recording sessions that took place outside of studio headquarters, often set up for multiple performers in a temporary studio in areas well-known for music

Lucrative

Producing a lot of profit/money

Returns

Money made (or lost) on an investment over a period of time

Royalties

A payment to an author or composer for each copy of a work sold OR to an inventor for each item sold under a patent

Side

Either surface of a thin object – for example, a record has two sides, and early records called 78s held only one song per side, thus it was often referred to as “recording a side.”