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## Old Time Music–New World Business: Bristol 1927 and the Exploitation and Appropriation of Depression Era Southern Folk Music

### Abstract

This article discusses the origins of the commercialization of rural Southern music into the country music genre. It also discusses the way that the music was changed from an oral tradition to something to passively listen to.

## Old Time Music—New World Business: Bristol 1927 and the Exploitation and Appropriation of Depression Era Southern Folk Music

Brendan McCormick

A. P. Carter was a man of many talents. Besides being a farmer, carpenter, and fruit tree salesman, he was also a family man and musician. He worked long hours to provide for his wife, Sara, and his three small children. While the Carters found solace and joy difficult to realize in the midst of their work-driven lifestyle in Maces Springs, Virginia, they were able to find an escape with music. Like other rural Southerners of the time, Carter grew up in a musical home. His father played the banjo and favored religious songs and old ballads, and his mother knew some of the old ballads too. Carter grew to appreciate his parents' music, and when he was a working, married man, Sara and him began playing the "old-time" tunes regularly at rural parties and gatherings in the hills of Virginia.<sup>1</sup> They did this for over ten years before Sara's sister-in-law, Maybelle, joined the duo. Sara played autoharp and sang lead vocals most of the time, Maybelle played guitar and sang harmony, while A.P. "confined his singing to, in his own words, 'basin'in' every once in a while."<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1927, Carter read an advertisement placed in a Bristol, Tennessee newspaper by Ralph Peer, a top producer at the Victor record company.<sup>3</sup> The advertisement was a call for auditions and offered musicians the release of an album under the company's name in exchange for publishing rights to the music recorded at the auditions. Peer had set up a makeshift recording studio in a hotel room and held open auditions for mountain musicians in and around the Bristol area.<sup>4</sup> Carter figured that his group, now reasonably tight with an extensive repertoire of old-time songs, had as good a shot as anyone else of passing the audition. He loaded the group into his Model A Ford and set off for Bristol.<sup>5</sup>

Although Peer, an urban Northerner, was put-off by the Carters' rugged, rural appearance, he was impressed by their easy-going sound and the depth of their folk song repertoire.<sup>6</sup> He later remarked, "As soon as I heard Sara's voice...that was it, you see...I knew that was going to be wonderful. And they had plenty of repertoire...A.P. had been apparently quite a traveler—he'd gone around quite a bit—collecting songs."<sup>7</sup> Peer was impressed enough to sign the trio to a contract whereby he retained publishing rights to the material,<sup>8</sup> while the group received royalty checks of .25% of the retail sales income.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem as if the Carter Family lived out their dream of being able to make a living playing music, but that dream disintegrates when one looks carefully at their harsh experience with the developing folk music industry.

Their first record sold well all over the South. Peer was impressed enough by the sales figures to invite the family up for a second session at a professional studio in Camden, New Jersey, and he would continue to invite them to subsequent recording sessions.<sup>10</sup> The money the group received, though, was hardly enough to support the family. In 1929, Carter had to leave for Detroit to find carpentry work, "and this was during the height of the group's Victor recording career. In fact, the need to keep regular nonmusic jobs often kept the members of the family apart during the Depression years."<sup>11</sup> When they toured with Peer as their manager, the Carters continued to play the small town circuit. They ended up performing at the same informal gatherings and parties they had played when it was just A.P. and Sara entertaining their friends in the mountains. They had to announce themselves on stage and even had to hand out their own programs at the door. The Carters also did not receive fancy accommodations and often ended up staying with families in the towns they played.

As they released more records, the group's popularity extended around the world, including such far away places as Australia, South Africa, and India.<sup>12</sup> Despite their widespread popularity and stylistic influences on other musicians, "the Carters never really enriched themselves as much as they enriched the record companies, the publishing companies, and the radio stations."<sup>13</sup> Although they began playing professionally in the late 1930s, the Carters would not record an album after 1941.<sup>14</sup> The group disbanded in 1943.<sup>15</sup>

The Carter Family was not the first group rooted in southern folk traditions to be recorded and released by a record company, but they did have one of the most successful and influential recording careers of any group from that tradition. The artist holding the distinction of having the most financially successful career from the southern folk tradition is Jimmie Rodgers.<sup>16</sup> It is no coincidence that Rodgers was also "discovered" by Peer or that Peer "discovered" him on the same fateful trip to Bristol in the summer of 1927 that he recorded the Carter Family.<sup>17 18</sup>

Ed Kahn composed the liner notes for the Carter Family collection, *The Original Carter Family—Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*, released on Columbia Records in 2000. An excerpt from the opening paragraph of those notes neatly summarizes the impact that Ralph Peer's Bristol 1927 sessions with The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers had on subsequent generations:

Up until that time, the old music was largely dance music, string bands, and religious material. Peer's Bristol sessions introduced two new talents that changed the course of the music. Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family both became successful and consequently moved the music from a string band orientation. In the earlier string

band music the vocals were often incidental to the string bands featuring banjo, fiddle, guitar and other stringed instruments. The huge success of both Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family moved the focus to vocal styles accompanied by instrumental backing. This set the stage for a whole new generation of rural musicians.<sup>19</sup>

As the two most successful and influential artists of the southern folk tradition, The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers are representative of an important phenomena in American cultural history in which old-world traditions were overtaken by an influx of new-world thinking dominated by technology, progress, and profitability. Men such as Ralph Peer brought this new-world mentality into the southern folk recording industry. From this perspective, the recording sessions in Bristol in 1927 become contradictory and symbolic: contradictory in the sense that the rural, folk traditions embodied by the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were fundamentally at odds with change, progress and urbanization embodied by Peer,<sup>20</sup> symbolic in the sense that the general culture of the South represented by the Carters and Rodgers was becoming more and more urban and business-centered.<sup>21</sup> The clash of ideals inherent in a meeting of common, rural folk traditions with urban, business oriented strategizing proved to have significant negative ramifications for the artistic integrity of a musical scene already filled with conflict. Although the rise of the recording industry helped certain southern folk music artists gain nationwide popularity and importance, it also had significant negative effects on subsequent performers and the art form. Popularized folk artists were exploited for their talent and image by record labels and radio stations, and the rich folk tradition they grew up in was undermined and appropriated by a musical institution.

We must begin, however, by examining the intertwining folk origins that helped give birth to the first influential wave of southern recording artists, and the styles of folk music perfected by Rodgers and the Carters. The purpose of this is to determine whether the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were true folk artists, given their willingness to record for an urban businessman. The story of the success of Ralph Peer and his marketing of hillbilly music will frame the examination of the rise of the recording industry. The success of Jimmie Rodgers and the development of a star formula by the recording industry contributed to the rise of radio and radio stations, culminating in the founding of the "Grand Ole Opry." Although it would become widely popular across the country, the "Opry" would actually represent the tragic end of an important aspect of early southern folk music records. It solidified a formula for what would sell, stole southern folk styles, images, themes and motifs, and centered them in an urban institution. It would be the final blow against a vibrant and multifaceted tradition in the battle of two opposing systems of ideals.

Too often in historical and cultural accounts of the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, and southern folk music, facts and details about the exploitation of artists are overlooked. If they are included, they are mentioned in passing without further analysis or explanation. Ralph Peer is often portrayed as a sympathetic figure that deserves praise for "discovering" a style and guiding it to national prominence. In reality, he was a life-long businessman with a knack for scheming who stumbled upon a musical style from which he could profit. It seems as though many of the musical and cultural historians of southern folk music write from the perspective of a "fan" of the music. They would rather emphasize the positive aspects of the recorded legacy of the folk tradition in the South, rather than focus on the unfair treatment the folk artists received. These authors do a great disservice to the talents of the folk artists and the struggles they had to endure during their recording careers. The "fan" authors often claim that the first wave of southern artists to be recorded were the originators of a new style. The subject, however, is much more profound when viewed through another lens. The Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were not culturally important because they were originators of a new style. Their true significance lies in the fact that they were some of the only survivors of a style. As much as musical historians would like to cast this in a positive light, the fact remains that Ralph Peer and other company men made a conscious effort to profit from the hard work of genuine folk artists and exploit them for their efforts.<sup>22</sup>

### **Origins of Recorded Southern Folk Music**

A.P. Carter collected songs wherever he could and whenever he could. One of the benefits of the Carter Family lodging with neighborhood families while on tour was that after the show was done, A.P. could sit down with the family during their nightly sing-along. It was common for families in the rural South to invest money in a family piano. For families that could not afford a piano, fiddles, banjos, guitars and other relatively cheap instruments served the same purpose.<sup>23</sup> The family would sing songs they all knew by heart or pull out "old songbooks, handwritten ballets, or old sheet music" to look off of.<sup>24</sup> A.P. participated in the sing-alongs and added the old folk songs of the family to his own group's stock. This was an easy way to collect new material, and A.P.'s dedication to gathering folk songs did not stop there. Once the group began recording regularly, the need for new material increased. A.P. would take trips back into the hill country of the Appalachians, around the area where the family lived, to collect new material. He sometimes brought along a family friend, Leslie Riddles, a black guitar player. The two had a convenient system for remembering new songs. While they listened intently to whoever was playing, A.P. would copy down the words, and Leslie would remember the melody line.<sup>25</sup>

Families, musicians and groups all over the south had their own list of common folk songs originating from a variety of different sources. There was such an abundance of folk material that even a group as studied in the tradition as the Carters could still discover new tunes. Leslie Riddles provides an example of how interest in folk material extended across racial barriers, even in the face of Jim Crow laws and fierce segregation. In an era devoid of television and radio, music was the primary source of entertainment for rural people from all backgrounds—black and white.<sup>26</sup> A musician could come up with his own interpretation and selection of common folk material to best reflect his life. Many separate and distinct styles formed, including what some derogatorily label “hillbilly,” from which the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers rose to stardom. However, “hillbilly” was just one of many styles that formed out of the deep, cultural reservoir of southern musical culture.<sup>27</sup>

The term folk music itself is a term that has come under some controversy. What exactly is folk music; what is a folk artist? Samuel L. Forucci defines the term in his book, *A Folk Song History of America*:

There has been much discussion over the years regarding the origins of folk song. It is generally agreed that they are the songs of the people and that they are the creation of one or more persons working singularly or in groups. They are the songs created by common people who use this medium of human expression to describe their way of life. Folk songs tell about human experiences and for this reason we have many varieties of folk songs. There are work songs, love songs, cradle songs, drinking songs, war songs, play songs, songs of mourning, and on and on. They vary in mood reflecting the patterns of life in a particular area and within a particular society.<sup>28</sup>

Using this definition of “folk song,” it is possible to characterize The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers as genuine folk artists. Though their styles were very different, their folk repertoires each fit within Forucci’s definition. The Carters and Jimmie Rodgers also represent different aspects of the folk music culture of the Southern states. The Carters and Rodgers were interested in learning as many different songs as they could, but they performed and stylized the songs they found in many different ways. While the Carters were able to form an original sound largely from the regional folk music of the hills of Virginia, Rodgers formed his style by drawing from as many different cultural sources as possible, including the North. His repertoire was so large that it has been said, “He had a song for everyone.”<sup>98</sup>

Rodgers is representative of a concept further described by Charles Joyner in his book, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture*. Joyner depicts the South as a region where innumerable streams of culture combined

to create a brand new turbulent, individual, definite, and ultimately revolutionary culture. He says,

Southern folk culture is multicultural, the product of the intermingling of Europeans of various ethnic backgrounds with Africans of various ethnic backgrounds and Native Americans of various ethnic backgrounds in one of the world's great epics of cultural transformation. That cultural transformation is perhaps best revealed in southern music.<sup>30</sup>

Joyner emphasizes the interaction between different cultures rather than the separate cultures themselves, and Rodgers certainly embodies this concept. He followed his father into the railroad business at the age of fourteen, an occupation that whisked him across the South and back innumerable times. Of course, Rodgers was also a budding musician, and his banjo accompanied him on his trips.<sup>31</sup> As he traveled, he collected as much material as he could, much like A.P. Carter. But unlike A.P., who concerned himself mostly with the common songs of other families, Rodgers was not afraid to expand his repertoire into unfamiliar styles, which are evident in his recordings.<sup>32</sup> Many attribute the subsequent popularity of Rodgers to the fact that he modeled much of his style after African-American country-blues artists he came in contact with working on the railroad in the Delta region of Mississippi.<sup>33</sup> Rodgers, however, did much more than copy these artists. Somewhere along his travels, he developed the yodeling, a Swiss folk tradition that became his trademark. With a strong emphasis on singing and song structure, Rodgers combined concepts from the American folk-blues tradition, rural white folk music, and European folk traditions to form a genre that was nearly exclusive to him at the time, "blue yodels." This stylistic fusion was perhaps Rodgers' greatest feat; there are overtones of it in every tune he croons.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Carter Family's style is more "homey" than Rodgers, they were still able to create their own unique sound from folk elements, just as Rodgers did. As Cecil Sharp, an authority on English folk dancing, indicates in his book, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, a strong British-ballad tradition persevered in the Appalachian hill country where the Carters' ranch lay.<sup>35</sup> Sharp published his book in 1932 after several trips to the region from 1916 to 1918.<sup>36</sup> Historian Bill C. Malone summarizes part of Sharp's findings as follows:

Sharp suggested in his commentary that folk singing in the mountains was far from being an archaic practice confined to a few old-timers. Such singing was common among both the young and old and was a vigorous, living force indeed...The region was indeed a land of preserved ancient values, and it was a cultural outpost of England.<sup>67</sup>



The Carters blended this English-influenced aspect of their heritage with strong Protestant ideals represented in the clear messages of their songs. A common poster for a Carter Family show read as follows: "Admission 15 and 25 Cents. The Program is Morally Good."<sup>38</sup> The Carters' were also influenced by church music, represented by strong three-part vocal harmonies likely derived from the popular gospel quartet format of the time.<sup>39</sup> Like Rodgers, the Carters' music focused on song and singer.

Even though they were folk artists, the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were familiar with playing for a variety of audiences and for a number of different occasions. As working musicians, it was necessary to know as many different songs and styles as possible in order to please as many people in the audience as possible. Rodgers experienced the necessity of having a large song repertoire after joining a minstrel show, an extremely popular form of entertainment in the South. Minstrel showman performed in blackface make-up and provided entertainment for a medicine show or other traveling sales-pitches. Performers would play a guitar or banjo and were often accompanied by a string band with banjos, guitars and fiddles. Often, acts were deliberately racist, playing renditions or parodies of old slave melodies with race-oriented humor scattered in the lyrics and in skits between songs.<sup>40</sup> Despite its negative aspects, the minstrel show represents an important folk element in the South. Performers also played versions of popular ballads, including professionally written tunes, that became common material for folk artists. White musicians played versions of black tunes. Sometimes black and white musicians would play together, providing opportunities to learn new songs. Again, Bill C. Malone summarizes the important role of the minstrel show in southern folk culture:

Folk styles so often interacted in America that it is difficult to determine the ethnic origin of a piece of folklore. Minstrel music was an amalgam of all the rural folk styles (Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, German, African) and urban popular forms to which the minstrels were exposed, plus the original creations they were busy producing.<sup>41</sup>

Southern musical culture during the upbringing of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers was a culture of music and musicians that stretched across racial barriers and barriers of tradition and heritage. Although there were artists who confined themselves to a strict style and racial barriers, from the beginning of colonial settlement, musical cultures from Europe and Africa intermingled to form new American music. While traditional roots were still visible, even completely intact for years, never before had so many vastly different musical cultures shared the same region of the world. The first place where cultures directly clashed was the plantation. African slaves were not allowed to play their native music, so they played on their bodies after hours in their quarters.

Their masters heard their rhythmic, improvisational shouts; likewise, slaves heard their owner's music wafting across the fields from the front room and in the Christian church they were originally forced to attend. They began singing their own versions of hymns and spirituals, and may have even picked up strains or couplets from folk ballads and other "parlor" music.<sup>42</sup> As they worked in the fields, they developed call and response work songs and field shouts, stringing together different common lines and common feelings.

Wherever the two cultures met, their music met as well, and not just on the plantation or at church. Bill C. Malone says, "The South was a land where social functions were an important part of everyday life. Besides camp meetings and traveling shows, there were town and family gatherings of all kinds: revivals, picnics, carnivals, and dances."<sup>43</sup> Music provided entertainment at these social gatherings and would take on a new importance in the years after the Civil War and emancipation.<sup>44</sup>

Providing entertainment at social gatherings meant finding someone to play, and communities often had their own A.P. and Sara Carter's to sing or play the fiddle to fill the billing. Musicians that were hired or that just volunteered to play, would take requests from the audience. People danced, and often new styles of music were created around a dance beat. Musicians needed to know a lot of songs or be able to figure out how to play a song in a short amount of time in order to satisfy the requests they received.

This aspect of the gatherings, in combination with the minstrel shows, played a significant role in the development of a common stock of songs. Tony Russell discusses the common stock of songs in his book, *Blacks, Whites and Blues*:

The traditional music of the countryman was a repertoire shared by black and white; a common stock. Some tunes or songs might be associated by some of their users with one race rather than the other, but most would have no racial connotations...Pieces from the common stock could be performed equally comfortably by the solo singer with any kind of instrument or none; by duet, trio or quartet, or a combination of any size...This adaptability is itself linked with the function of the music: group entertainment, particularly at dances.<sup>45</sup>

Russell continues at length by listing the categories he derived for cataloguing the "common stock" songs and gives examples for each category: songs about heroes or antiheroes such as "Casey Jones," "John Henry," or "In the Jailhouse Now;" and songs of gamblers and "...low life generally," such as "Ain't Nobody's Business" and "Mama Don't Allow." Other categories include melancholy tunes, songs with themes of "separation, loneliness and

homesickness," the "powerful appeal of the locomotive," hymns and spirituals, and songs with instrumental similarities, such as fiddle and banjo tunes.<sup>46</sup>

Russell further implores his readers to take a broad look at the common attitude toward music shared by southern folk musicians:

Consider the landscape. A musician would be open to sounds from every direction: from family and friends, from field and railroad yard, lumber camp and mine; from street singers and traveling show musicians...from dances and suppers and camp-meetings and carnivals; from fellow prisoners in jails, from fellow workmen everywhere.<sup>47</sup>

This common attitude of the rural southern musician that Russell describes is indicative of why the business community selected regional southern music from which to profit. In a culture where music is ingrained in everyday life, why not market to common people the very same songs they play at home around the fire and hear at social gatherings on the weekends? The business community's marketing strategy, though, would prove to be costly for the musicians and the tradition that nurtured them.

Unlike other folk artists, the Carters and Jimmie Rodgers were able to persevere through "commercial channels"<sup>48</sup> and to maintain their status as folk artists. Musicians cannot undo their native culture, and the recordings of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers display the roots of their Southern cultural heritage. Rather than be called genuine folk artists, The Carters and Rodgers have been called "Country Music's First Family" and "The Father of Country Music," respectively.<sup>49</sup> While it does nothing to split hairs over this point, the Carters and Rodgers were able to form their own styles largely without the aid of recordings. Since "country" would form largely from what a younger generation heard from the recordings of other artists, The Carters and Rodgers should be considered contemporaries of other folk artists that did not receive the same amount of recognition.

Despite the Carters' and Jimmie Rodgers' tremendous talent and musicianship, they were selected on the 1927 trip to Bristol because Peer heard a marketable sound. It was a sound focused on song, melody, singer and a warm but clear sound that would transmit nicely out of phonograph and radio speakers in households across the country. Who were the Carters and Rodgers to complain? Who were they to refuse any money, no matter how small the amount, to do what they loved to do anyway? After all, had they not played out of love, without money, for years?<sup>50</sup>

### Ralph Peer and Regional Recordings

The introduction of the phonograph into the American marketplace had a strange yet profound impact on southern folk music culture. Hand-wound phonographs were on the consumer market by the late 1880s, and by the 1920s, electric phonographs with loud, clear sound were widely available in furniture stores across the U.S.<sup>51</sup> Little by little, as they became more mass marketed and less expensive, record players started appearing in people's living rooms, along with records of what was being recorded at the time—"vaudeville songs, band music, light classics" and even early jazz.<sup>52</sup> Record players were less expensive than pianos, and much easier to move. It was also a new piece of technology, a gadget and object of intrigue that was now available to a group of people that could never afford such an item before. Rural southerners always had music in their homes; what could possibly be the harm in splurging on something new, exciting, and musical?

Sitting around the phonograph after meals or to pass the time after work began to replace the group singing that had been such an important facet of the southern rural household. While this was important in that it introduced styles of music southerners may not have heard before, it also destroyed an important part of what made southern folk music unique. Rather than relying on an oral tradition to pass songs along from generation to generation and a community atmosphere to create music, "Now an evening's entertainment might well mean sitting around listening to the old wind-up Victrola," as Bob Artis, author of the book *Bluegrass*, succinctly explains.<sup>53</sup> The very nature of music became passive, something to listen to rather than create. If they did not completely replace folk music traditions, recordings were a newfangled rival ready to influence a new generation of musicians. Musicians would turn to what they heard from their record collection for new musical ideas rather than relying on family and past traditions as they once did. Artis explains the negative impact recordings had on the folk tradition as follows:

The march of technology brought the winds of change...Country artists themselves [started] looking toward[s] one another's recordings as a means of picking up new techniques and learning new songs...The result was a more unified sound in country music. A mish mash of individual family and local styles marked the earliest records. Now a single style emerged....<sup>54</sup>

Ralph Peer excelled at developing marketing strategies for recorded music and furthering "the march of technology." His marketing to a selective, regional audience was inventive and trend setting, but like many other decisions by record companies, had a negative impact on the art and artists of which they

claimed to be proponents. Peer would become a leading figure in the business of “hillbilly” music, a derogatory term he coined for his newest musical exploit.

Ralph Peer was born in 1892 in Kansas City. He grew up “helping his father manage a store that sold sewing machines, pianos, and the then-new home phonograph machines.” Peer was an ambitious young man, and he went to work for Columbia Records before World War I. By the end of the war, he had moved on to a position with the General Phonograph Corporation, a new company that had started a record label, Okeh. Peer came to the company at a strange time in the record business. A depression in 1921 hurt the entertainment industry, and by 1922, radio was already rapidly gaining popularity. Record sales dropped off drastically, by as much as 50% for rival label Columbia. Okeh needed to increase sales and create competition for radio in the musical market.<sup>55</sup>

Peer would come up with the solution. He was inspired by the success of a record he helped supervise in 1920 called, “Crazy Blues,” sung by the black female blues singer Mammie Smith. The success of the record was due mainly to Peer’s strategy—marketing the record to a black audience. The success of the record prompted Okeh to add a “race series” of recordings to their lineup.<sup>56</sup> Faced with a question of how to bring more revenue into his company, Peer pressed forward by developing a similar strategy for another folk style—the string band, fiddle music, and ballads played in the rural hills of Appalachia and elsewhere across the South. Soon, this rural folk style became the new product to profit from not for just Peer but for other companies that followed his lead, much as they had with “race records.”<sup>57</sup>

In order to sell specific styles of music to specific regions, Peer felt he must go directly to the source. Thus, the idea of doing on sight commercial field recordings was born. Using newly designed, electrical recording equipment, Peer could rent a hotel room or space in a warehouse, take a few days to set up a studio, put an advertisement in the paper asking for local talent to audition, and pick out who he wanted to record. It was a crafty strategy, one that gave Peer nearly complete control over the artists he would “discover.” Often, Peer’s only help on these trips was his own assistant, Robert Gilmore.<sup>58</sup> What budding musician could resist the idea of being able to make a record? Only afterwards would they discover that Peer was more interested in selling a product than furthering a musical culture.

Peer’s field recordings were not meant to document authentic folk styles, although strangely he managed to do just that. Unlike the fieldwork of the Lomaxes that meant to document cultural heritage, Peer’s motive was to make money for himself and his company.<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Filene, author of *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory in American Roots Music*, explains Peer’s and other record executives’ business logic in the following passage:

As the case of Peer illustrates, the record producers recognized that hillbilly music's popularity depended on its connection to a sense of tradition, but they preferred to leave this tradition murkily defined. On his field trips, Peer portrayed himself as looking for old-time traditional singers...Primarily he wanted to record artists who were comfortable enough with traditional music to sing songs in the older *styles* that attracted hillbilly music's audiences. Rather than insisting that his performers sing specific songs from a certain period, Peer focused on getting singers who generated a certain sound that he felt would be popular.<sup>60</sup>

Peer's marketing ideas for hillbilly music proved to be financially successful. A record by Fiddlin' John Carson, "Little Old Log Cabin," would become "the first real 'country' record, the first real 'country' hit," and further influence Peer to pursue other "hill country music" acts.<sup>61</sup> Fiddlin' John got lucky one day in June of 1923 because Peer was in Atlanta recording a church singer as a favor to furniture storeowner and record distributor, Polk C. Brockman.<sup>62</sup> As Peer himself tells it, "This [church singer] had quite a good reputation and occasionally worked on the radio. So, we set a date with this fellow...and he just couldn't make the date. So to take up that time, my distributor brought in Fiddlin' John Carson." Peer was not at all impressed with Fiddlin' John, who "...sang in a rather formal, hymn-singing style that seemed archaic to twentieth-century urbanites, and in a dialect that came straight out of the redneck South."<sup>63</sup> Peer would later call John's archaic folk style singing "plumperfect awful."<sup>64</sup> But, Fiddlin John had built himself a significant following from playing at various festivals and fiddling contests over the years. He brought copies of his first record to contests when he played, and Brockman sold the audience recordings of the songs they had just heard John play.<sup>65</sup>

There was money to be made in this style of music, and Ralph Peer would try to make as much as he could, supervising a slew of more hit "hillbilly" records through the mid-1920s. The songs recorded at the time varied in content and style—"old sentimental songs, old popular songs—old vaudeville tunes," and "event songs."<sup>66</sup> An event song was a popular style of song that told a story of a major, often tragic, true-life event.<sup>67</sup> The term "old-time music" was then dubbed to describe the new but "old," popular recordings.<sup>68</sup> The relationship between the style and label was typically one-sided, however, and further demonstrates the lack of respect from Peer and company men for the folk styles from which they were profiting.<sup>69</sup> It was Peer who coined the term "hillbilly" after calling a nameless group that recorded for him "The Hill-billies." The rather derogatory name, equivalent to the word "nigger" as Patrick Carr says,<sup>70</sup> stuck to the group and style.<sup>71</sup> If Peer truly supported the art form, why did he give it such a degrading title? The term was used mostly by northerners,

even though southerners despised the label.<sup>72</sup> As Patrick Carr says, "Its frequent use by northern recording executives in the early days reflects the fact that they looked down on the music and endured it only because it made money for them."<sup>73</sup> Bill C. Malone summarizes the polar relationship between the folk tradition and the business world profiting from it and places the relationship in a social context:

...Given the social context of the twenties, [a decade characterized by national progress and social change], it is not surprising that such a label would be popularly affixed to a rural-derived music coming out of the South...The people who produced the Scopes monkey trial, the Ku Klux Klan, sharecropping, and prohibition had also produced hillbilly music. The music thus began its commercial evolution laden with negative connotations...It was presumed by many to be the product of cultural degenerates and a projection of their demented values.<sup>74</sup>

Peer's contractual obligations with the artists he found were exploitive and demonstrate further disrespect for the art and artists. He designed his contracts so he would retain as much control as possible over the artists, who received the bare minimum in financial returns. Most of the time, artists did not even sign contracts, but rather received lump sums, especially if they only had one recording session. Lump sum reached upwards of \$50.<sup>75</sup> But even \$50 did not last long in the hard life of the rural South. For acts that had subsequent recording sessions, a royalty agreement was more likely to be created with returns for the artist paltry at best, "\$.0015 per record on a release that retailed for \$.75."<sup>76</sup> In the cases of many groups, Peer became their manager, a position that would give him even more control over the artists on his roster.<sup>77</sup>

While at Okeh, Peer had come up with crafty strategies for finding talent and exploiting it for his own personal financial gain. In 1926, Peer tried to quit the record making business but soon found himself accepting a job at Victor in 1927. In his new position, he pushed forward with another crafty idea that he later claimed was well-intentioned. Peer requested that he be allowed to develop new copyrights for the old folk songs his artists were recording. Later in his life, Peer explained his reasoning:

I sat down and wrote a three paragraph letter [to Victor] and said that I had considered the matter very carefully and that essentially this was a business of recording new copyrights and I would be willing to go to work for them for nothing with the understanding that there would be no objection if I controlled these copyrights.<sup>78</sup>

From a business standpoint, it was a bold and profitable move. After splitting the capital with Victor, Peer founded the United Publishing Company, later the Southern Publishing Company, in a move that gave him control of virtually every aspect of the artists that recorded for him—publishing, copyrights, royalties, contracts and sometimes management.<sup>79</sup> He later admitted that he made as much as 75% of the total royalties from a record, leaving the remaining 25% to be divided among the record company and the artist.<sup>80</sup> Peer would become a multimillionaire by the 1930s, while most of his artists had a hard time making a living from the work they did for him.<sup>81</sup>

The publishing rights and copyrights Peer controlled for the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were especially profitable because the sheet music for the two groups sold very well.<sup>82</sup> With his two top moneymakers, it seems as if Peer was even more adamant about retaining rights, as a Carter Family song illustrates. While Patrick Carr claims that the Carter Family's trademark song, "Keep on the Sunny Side" was a cover version of "an old 1906 pop song,"<sup>83</sup> the notes for the collection, *The Original Carter Family—Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*, credit the song as being written by A.P.<sup>84</sup> Could Peer have been sneaky enough to secure A.P. writing credit for a song that he did not actually write? He would later do the same thing for Jimmie Rodgers. On the RCA collection *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, "In the Jailhouse Now" is credited to Rodgers but Carr says the tune was "recorded by blues singer Blind Blake before Rodgers recorded his version."<sup>85 86</sup>

Peer concerned himself mostly with the rights to songs and the publishing business. Profits came not from traditional arrangements but from original compositions.<sup>87</sup> Peer was clever enough to ensure that all his investments profited from one another; it was Rodgers' tremendous success that helped establish Peer's United Publishing Company.<sup>88</sup> Benjamin Filene comments on a statement given by Peer that reveals his true motives in the southern folk industry:

Peer saw the riches of the popular field as his ultimate goal. 'I was always trying,' he recalled, 'to get away from the hillbilly and into the legitimate music publishing field...What I was doing was to take the profits out of the hillbilly and race business and spend that money trying to get established as a pop publisher.'<sup>89</sup>

Peer's business practices raise an interesting question. Nobody forced southern folk artists into contractual obligations with shady businessman. It is difficult to argue that southern folk artists were exploited when they brought the situation upon themselves by agreeing to lopsided terms and copyright agreements. To address this problem, I contacted David Evans, a widely



respected author, ethnomusicologist, and professor at the University of Memphis.<sup>90</sup> He lent his expert insight in an e-mail response:

There probably were some exploitative individuals and companies. Some would say that the entire system was exploitative...One thing to keep in mind is that everyone (artists and company people) probably had in mind only immediate short-term gain from the whole enterprise. Nobody thought that there would be a revival of interest years later or that the recordings or song copyrights would produce long terms income. This is why so many songs were not even copyrighted or the copyrights weren't renewed and why so many masters were destroyed. Keep in mind also that a song had to have a 'publisher' in order for mechanical royalties to be paid by record companies, and that the copyright registration had to be submitted in written form (a lead sheet). Virtually all artist-composers were incapable of writing a lead sheet or setting up their own publishing companies.<sup>91</sup>

The folk artists in the South thought in the short term out of economic necessity, since many of them had to hold outside occupations to supplement income. The company men thought in short term out of concerns of profitability, and they were the only ones who knew the process of securing publishing rights. Rural southerners knew little about the technicalities of publishing rights in the new, burgeoning industry.

Peer kept up his shady business practices and kept making regular trips into the South for field recording sessions and for the opportunity to bring artists up to New York to record in a real studio. Only artists with proven appeal were given an invitation, the Carter Family for example.<sup>92</sup> On the same recording journey to Bristol in the summer of 1927 that he discovered the Carter Family, Ralph Peer discovered another southern artist whose recordings would become another significant step in the way record companies sold and exploited southern music. That artist was Jimmie Rodgers, the originator of the "singing star."<sup>93</sup>

### **"The Singing Brakeman": The Life and Legacy of Jimmie Rodgers**

Jimmie Rodgers was born the son of a railroad man on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1897 in Meridian, Mississippi. Work was difficult to find in the South, so when Jimmie was of age, he followed his father into the railroad business. By the time he reached his late twenties, though, Jimmie was too weak to continue working. At some point during his tenure working for the railroads, Rodgers had contracted tuberculosis; life riding the rails proved to be too stressful and fatiguing. TB was another obstacle in a life full of stepping stones. By this time, Jimmie had two failed marriages under his belt, a growing debt, and several

different railroad occupations to his credit: brakeman, baggage master, flagman, call boy, yard worker, etc.<sup>94</sup> At a young age, Jimmie was faced with the question of how to earn a living free of hard labor, in a time and place where such labor was the norm for poor, rural, southern men.

But like so many other working class southerners, Rodgers found solace in music. He sang and also played the guitar and banjo. His hobby was well served by an occupation that had him riding trains all over the south, and his banjo accompanied him on his trips.<sup>95</sup> At every stop, Rodgers encountered different musicians—black and white—with different playing styles and different folk traditions from which to draw. He absorbed as much of it as he could. He played with musicians at parties, barn dances, on street corners, and a number of different social events. He increased his catalogue of songs, and his wisdom of how to please audience.<sup>96</sup> Making a living playing guitar for audiences across the country was an attractive option for Rodgers after he was unable to perform hard manual labor.<sup>97</sup>

Playing music was a dream he was willing to pursue. After quitting his job, he began playing as much as he could. He took a job playing in blackface in a traveling medicine show in 1924. Later, he would form his own group, a guitar and banjo group called the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers that worked out of Asheville, North Carolina.<sup>98</sup> Like the Carters, Rodgers heard of Ralph Peer's auditions in Bristol. After speaking with Peer on the phone, the group arrived in Bristol the night of August 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day before they were scheduled to audition. But after a heated disagreement over how the group would bill itself, Rodgers had to show up to audition by himself.<sup>99</sup>

As was the case with many artists that came to his field recording sessions, Ralph Peer had reservations about Rodgers, but they did not revolve around his abilities as a musician. Not surprisingly, Peer's concerns centered on profitability and his ability to copyright and publish Rodgers' material. He describes this problem in an article for *Billboard* magazine, reprinted by Patrick Carr in *The Illustrated History of Country Music*:

We ran into a snag almost immediately because, in order to earn a living in Asheville, [Jimmie] was singing mostly songs originated by New York publishers—the current hits. Actually, he had only one song of his own—"Soldier's Sweetheart"—written several years before...<sup>100 101</sup>

Again, it is easy to tell from Peer's comments that his primary concern in finding artists was to exploit them for as much money as possible. Because of his lack of originals and the fact that his record "Soldier's Sweetheart" was only a modest hit, Rodgers would not receive a call from Peer asking him for a follow-up session. He received a token sum for his song, and Peer packed up

and left Bristol after two more days of recording. Rodgers, however, would not be dismissed as easily as other artists, and his perseverance would pay off. He went to New York and personally asked Peer to give him another shot. When Peer agreed, Rodgers proved himself with his next record. "Blue Yodel (T for Texas)" would become an instant hit upon release, and soon Peer was asking Rodgers to come back for more sessions. He would go on to record such legendary songs as "Waiting for a Train," "In the Jailhouse Now," "Brakeman Blues," and a series of more "blue yodels."<sup>102</sup> He was an unlikely phenomenon; a musician with deep roots in southern folk music that was able to string together enough hit records to make a considerable amount of money in royalties. Within six months of his initial recordings, Rodgers was making over two thousand dollars a month.<sup>103</sup> Of course, Peer insisted on becoming his manager and added a considerable amount to his already large savings as well.

With other artists, Peer, other company men, and record labels made a little amount of money at a time. As ethnomusicologist David Evans says in his e-mail, "The music business people who profited from all this generally did so in a cumulative sort of way (i.e., from the music of many artists and songwriters.)"<sup>104</sup> But with Rodgers, Peer had stumbled upon a one-man hit-machine. As Rodgers' popularity grew, Peer was careful to market his new star in a way that facilitated increased profits. Peer emphasized his clean-cut image; he was careful to make sure that Rodgers did not look like a "typical" old-timey artist.<sup>105</sup> In later recordings, Rodgers was accompanied by other instrumentation besides the common guitar or banjo—"Waiting For a Train" found Rodgers playing in front of a small jazz ensemble with a prominent clarinet part. Later he would even play with famed jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong.<sup>106</sup> Whether these arrangements were Rodgers' or Peer's idea is impossible to determine, but, as Patrick Carr states, Peer had an uncanny "ability to package and merchandise the music."<sup>107</sup> The question arises: Was Peer forcing his folk star to play other styles in order to cater to a wider, more urban audience?

As a result of Rodgers' success, Peer and other executives kept a similar strategy in mind when looking for new talent. Peer had always been a trendsetter, and other companies saw what he had done with Rodgers' talent. If a company wanted to continue to profit, it had to find other artists who could duplicate Rodgers' success. The selection process became geared toward finding singing stars and recognizable, charismatic personalities like Rodgers whose appeal extended into households across the country. Artists without the polish or charisma of Rodgers, but whom may have had good material were now much more likely to be disregarded.<sup>108</sup>

Rodgers was a rarity among southern folk artists. He played the system right and was able to make money while achieving nationwide fame. He became the most successful artist of this first generation of southern folk artists to

interact with the music industry. Unlike the Carter Family, it is difficult to argue that Rodgers was the victim of exploitation while he was alive. However, it is possible for an artist to be exploited posthumously. After his death in 1933, the legacy of Rodgers' enormous talent and success further contributed to the undermining of the folk culture of which he was a part. This is not Rodgers' fault but rather the fault of record companies who looked to duplicate his success at the expense of the tradition. Artists had been exploited for their music. Creative and monetary control now lay in the hands of businessmen, rather than in the hands of the artists. The introduction of phonographs and recordings had taken attention away from the oral tradition that gave southern music such a rich sense of heritage. Now, a formula for success had been stumbled upon.

Two authors have neatly summarized Rodgers' impact on the growing industry and on the rising stars who duplicated his formula for success. Bob Artis neatly summarizes the legacy of Jimmie Rodgers to the music business:

When [Jimmie Rodgers] died of tuberculosis in 1933, he had become the closest thing country music ever had to a 'king,' and immediately an heir was sought. The very fact that people in the business realized Rodgers had established the pattern of the single singing star and wished to continue it marked a big step in the maturity of the country music industry...It was a step toward maturity, but it was also a step away from the [folk] tradition.<sup>109</sup>

Nolan Porterfield, author of the liner notes to the Jimmie Rodgers collection, *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, describes his impact on the next generation of musicians:

The ultimate testament to Jimmie Rodgers' originality lies in the fact that in the beginning he had very little to imitate—there were no 'big names' doing what he set out to do, no established styles, not even a clear definition of what it was—yet in his wake he left a herd of imitators who took what he had begun, consolidated it, and popularized it into a dominant...industry.<sup>110</sup>

It would be these "imitators" that would carry the folk tradition further and further away from its roots in order to cater to the business that controlled them and to become successes in the new medium of musical communication, the radio.

### Radio, The "Grand Ole Opry", Formula Stars and Aftermath

Although developed nearly twenty years after the phonograph, it would take radio a much shorter time to make an impact on American music. By the early 1920s, it was already beginning to compete with recordings to become the dominant communicative force in the rising national music scene. Radio defeated other media forms due to its relatively low cost and wide variety of entertainment it beamed across the country.

At first, radio stations and broadcasts served experimental purposes, but on November 2, 1920, station KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcasted the results of the presidential election. The first federal license to broadcast was given to station WBZ in Springfield, Massachusetts on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1921. Soon, entrepreneurs all over the country were applying for licenses and starting radio stations. By 1922, there were already 510 radio stations across the country, 89 of which were in the South. The "Golden Age of Broadcasting" began in 1925 and continued until around 1950, when the television set made its debut. For 25 years, it was a common pastime for a household to gather around the radio and listen for hours.<sup>111</sup>

There were many different kinds of radio programs: comedies, dramas, President Roosevelt's famous "fireside chats," and of course musical reviews.<sup>112</sup> During the Great Depression, the radio became the primary source for a family's music; many people simply did not have enough money to spend on records. The recording industry lost huge amounts of money. Many dropped all but their biggest stars, cut whole series of recordings, or went out of business all together.<sup>113</sup> The damage had been done; radio was the new, dominant source of musical entertainment in the U.S.

Southern folk artists first came in contact with radio broadcasting in the early 1920s. A mere sixteen months after Pittsburgh's KDKA broadcast, station WSB in Atlanta began putting old-timey music on the air.<sup>114</sup> According to *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, WSB station director Lambdin Kay "explained his rationale by arguing that 'hillbilly or country music talent appeared on the station, since this was a folk music of the region and was both popular and was available at little or no cost.'"<sup>115</sup> Not surprisingly for Kay, cost was the primary concern. The stations would rarely, if ever, pay folk artists for the live broadcasts they would put on. Doing a radio show was comparable to doing a record for southern folk artists. It was an opportunity to play music for people and gain a following, since stations would allow artists to announce where they would be playing next.<sup>116</sup>

There was a clash of ideals inherent in the meeting of radio broadcasts with folk music, just as there had been with record companies. Kay's comment about folk music clearly focuses on profitability and popularity. Like Peer, Kay was not interested in the documentation of folk art, or even concerned with the damage he was doing to the tradition. Like the record player before it, the radio

further engrained in southern families the idea of music as distant entertainment and not a participatory art form. It is ironic that radio began to replace the oral tradition and group singing present in many Southern, rural homes, it began to broadcast shows that appropriated the folk custom of the family sing along. The shows creating this folk atmosphere for their broadcasts were called "barn dances."<sup>117</sup> These shows would consist of a group of musicians playing a variety of old-time material in an informal and unstructured way that depended on participation from the audience, since performers would take requests on the air.<sup>118</sup> As Patrick Carr writes, "It was a warm, folksy show format, and it served to personalize the new-fangled piece of technology, the radio, and to offer rural Americans an oasis of normalcy in a desert of strange accents and stogy announcers."<sup>119</sup> Perhaps rural southerners did not realize that they were slowly abandoning their traditions by making a routine of listening to others play folk songs on the radio, rather than playing the songs themselves.

One barn dance show that would eventually establish itself as the nationwide authority on country music was "The Grand Ole Opry," founded by George D. Hay. After announcing for WLS, a Chicago station that boasted the leading barn dance program of the 1920s and 1930s, "The National Barn Dance," Hay was asked by the National Life and Accident Insurance Company to become station director for the newly formed WSM in Nashville. Noting the popularity of old-time music in and around Nashville, Hay searched for talent and began a regular Saturday night broadcast in 1925 of old-time music to appeal to the Nashville audience. Soon, he had 25 regular acts, and the show's length stretched to three hours. After strengthening and clarifying its signal, WSM was able to become an affiliate of the newly formed National Broadcast Corporation in 1927.<sup>120</sup>

The tremendous amount of national attention and influence Hay's "Grand Ole Opry" brought to southern music cannot be overstated. But again, it is disheartening to examine events and discover what was happening to the music under the command of businessmen. Radio stations mirrored record company men in terms of treatment of the artists on their roster. Not surprisingly, Hay's artists did not receive their share of the credit for the success of the show; many of them had to hold other occupations in or around Nashville in order to make a living.<sup>121</sup> Hay also did not treat his artists with any respect for their art form. Hay was more concerned with emphasizing the homey, rustic image of the show than the actual music. While Ralph Peer favored artists with new songs because he could profit from the rights, Carr says, "[Hay] rejected innovations and new tunes," simply because they were too progressive for the image of the show.<sup>122</sup> Carr's passage continues as follows:

[Hay] wrote press releases that emphasized the rustic backgrounds of his performers; in 1929 he was arguing that "every one of the 'talent' is from the back country"...He posed his musicians in overalls,

in corn fields with coon dogs, even in pigpens; he gave the bands colorful names like the Gully Jumpers, the Possum Hunters, and the Fruit Jar Drinkers.<sup>123</sup>

Even the name "Grand Ole Opry" was an attempt to conjure up an image. The name stuck after Hay made an "off the cuff" remark on the air one night, and he kept the name in order to "...enhance the hayseed image of the show."<sup>124</sup>

Despite Hay's attempts to focus on image rather than music, the show was accidentally successful in broadcasting "authentic folk music" that touched on a wide variety of folk styles. One of the first stars of the Opry during its first decade was Uncle Dave Macon, an exuberant, well-traveled man in his mid fifties whose knowledge of old-time music extended even further back than The Carter Family's or Jimmie Rodgers'. But Uncle Dave also shared something with Jimmie Rodgers; he had a definite, recognizable personality. His popularity was due more to his presence on the air and on stage than to his extensive knowledge of old-time material. The message sent by the huge success of the recordings of Jimmie Rodgers was loud and clear; stars and songs make the most money, not rural string bands. If the "Opry's" popularity was to extend even further across the country, Hay needed strong personalities to do it for him. He did not need to be clever or develop a new money making scheme as Peer did. He simply began broadcasting singers who were nearly identical replicas of Rodgers' image. They were clean cut, knew how to smile, and could sing; they may have even had some background in old-time material. But unlike the artists before them, the new generation of stars was much more influenced by popular recordings, and they looked to duplicate the success of their forbearers. The tremendous success of "Opry" star Roy Acuff solidified the change in direction of vocal stars. Acuff, and other handsome, popular stars such as Gene Autry, who crossed over into commercial success in the movie industry, would begin to dominate the show towards the end of the 1930s.<sup>125</sup> It was a move that helped the music on the show appeal to a wider audience. The move was financially successful, since the show eventually eclipsed the WLS "National Barn Dance" as the most popular in the country. Hay had borrowed Peer's formula for success in the old-timey market. The Opry rose to prominence as the authority in the country music industry, but the music being broadcasted was becoming more and more a perversion of the regional folk music that gave the show its initial success.

The journey of southern folk music through the rapidly changing cultural landscape of America in the 1920s and 1930s America reaches its end at this point. A rich folk tradition possessed by the working rural people of the southern United States had been exploited and transformed into a commercial institution run by businessmen stressing the selling of an image over musicianship. Some could argue that the music naturally progressed toward a song-oriented format

through artistic originators like Jimmie Rodgers, and that musicians were influenced by him, regardless of what company men were looking for. While certainly is the case, it is important to keep in mind who had creative control over the music that was released. Could it have been that artists moved toward this format because recording companies and radio stations only released what was a proven seller? This is a question that is impossible to answer for certain, but the facts line up in a way that shows that artists were not controlling what was being released.

While it had negative effects on the folk tradition, many have stressed the positive impact radio had on early country music. Radio introduced a newly "discovered" style of music onto the national scene. As a result, more and more regional styles emerged across the country with strong old-timey-hillbilly-country influences. This new diversity can be seen initially in the popularity of stations near the Texas-Mexico border that played the newly formed subgenres of tex-mex and western swing.<sup>126</sup> While it can be argued that this was a positive development—a progression of the music into other styles—it can also be argued that the border stations were merely copying the success of the "barn dance" format: tap into a regional scene and find a way to expand the market. Besides, with the intermingling of folk cultures in the southern states, which birthed an incredible list of influential American musical styles—blues, jazz, gospel, zydeco, and many others—who knows how many more styles and subgenres would have formed with old-time influences without the intrusion of radio's selective bias.<sup>127</sup>

Again, it is nearly an impossible task to prove what really took place. A folk tradition is a difficult enough concept to define as it is; the transformation of a folk culture by another cultural force is even more difficult because it is not something that happens drastically or even completely. Records and radio did not completely eradicate all oral, folk music traditions in the South. Surely there were some families and musicians that carried on with their ways and refused to let new, strange technology and pushy businessmen influence their rich musical heritage. It is hard to determine for certain how many rural artists persevered with their tradition without recognition through the 1940s and beyond simply because genuine Southern folk artists were not given the same opportunities to record commercially as earlier folk artists. Peer, Hay and others had always viewed the music as "archaic," and now that they had control of the commercial production of the music, they could shape its progress in a direction that pleased their urban ears and make them the most money.<sup>128</sup>

At the time of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II, the United States was a nation undergoing rapid development. In the new United States, progress was favored over tradition, urban life over rural life. For a musician to attract a record label, he had to make it money, which meant eventually appealing to the urban market. Money and accumulating wealth



was increasingly becoming a dominant cultural force. Radio, controlled by advertising, served as the primary source of entertainment. Eventually, the influence of television would be even stronger. More and more musicians would rely on the artists they heard and saw on the radio or television—both controlled by urbanites with capital—as sources of inspiration and influence, rather than looking at their cultural heritage and surroundings as their forebears once did. It would be a struggle for folk traditions to exist in a country that suddenly seemed to be more interested in power and finance than in preserving its cultural heritage.

### Conclusion

In February of 2002, the soundtrack album to the Coen Brothers' film, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* won the Grammy Award for Album of the Year.<sup>129</sup> The film is a tongue-in-cheek retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* set in the Depression-era South. The soundtrack to the film uses folk recordings from the era, modern versions of old-time songs, and new songs in the tradition of old-time material as a musical backdrop. Along with critical acclaim and recognition within the music industry, the soundtrack also, as of the week ending March 23<sup>rd</sup>, claimed the number one spot on Billboard's Top Fifty Albums chart, sixty-two weeks after first debuting.<sup>130</sup> To date it has sold over five million copies.<sup>131</sup>

The inner-industry success of old-time music is ironic. While newfound attention to the music is certainly a positive in an age where music is viewed even more so as a consumer product than it was during Ralph Peer's era, it seems as though the music industry continues to treat the genre as a cash cow to wring dry. The success of the music today comes at a much different time than the initial success of the music in the 1920s. The music industry and entertainment industry are nearly one in the same. It is sad to think of how the cultural property of a specific group of people is used today as a backdrop to a film with George Clooney. Today, this style of music that was deliberately exploited is heaped with accolades by the very same industry that committed the original crime some 80 years ago. The conception of the music today is nothing like what it was in the 1920s and 1930s when people needed to sing after work with their families to find consolation or needed it to dance to at parties and picnics on the weekends. After the initial exploitation of the artists, even the audience of the time needed those recordings much more than the audience of today does. In the 1920s and 1930s folk artists shared a much closer relationship with their audience; as folk artists they were singing about the very lives of the people they played for. What they played developed from the input of their very own community; it was the community's property as much as the artists', and it deserved to be kept sacred.

The folk traditions of old-timey music have long been discarded by popular music. Historians who would like to think that hillbilly and old-timey simply

evolved on their own progression into country music are mistaken; hillbilly and old-timey were steered into country by businessmen. True, radio helped old-timey reach other regional audiences and apparently "nationalized" the music. But, how does music that was once a regional folk style suddenly become national through its own inevitable progress? As Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss clearly state in their book *Anglo American Folksong Style*, "Folk society and folk art do not accept, reflect, or value change."<sup>132</sup> Southern folk music, cultural property of the folk community that created it, was nationalized because it was stolen through exploitation, and reconceptualized through appropriation at the hands of businessmen with capital to burn.

July 1927 in Bristol, Tennessee is a definitive moment in the history of American musical culture and American culture in general. The actions of the business community, to purposefully exploit a vibrant, regional folk tradition and the artists that developed from it, are simply despicable. In Bristol, Peer "discovered" the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, two artists that would become the most popular old-timey artists to emerge from common folk traditions. Even as the most popular artists, they are still representative of the treatment of folk music by the business community because they were genuine folk artists that happened to have a marketable sound. They were not, as Ralph Peer considered them to be, marketable stars that had the misfortune to develop from rural, folk traditions. The exploitative and appropriative treatment by Ralph Peer of his two most popular artists brings into question how badly Peer must have treated artists that did not receive the same amount of fame and attention as the Carters' and Rodgers'. Peer's motives can be seen clearly in his statements, and in the history of his work as a leading figure within the music industry during the important 1920s and 1930s. As much as music lovers would like to put a positive spin on what occurred by focusing on the positive aspects of Peer's talent scouting trips and recording sessions, attention must be paid to what actually happened to the artists. When viewed in light of the despicable manner in which they were treated by the music industry, the Carter Family's message of perseverance in "Keep on the Sunny Side," and Jimmie Rodgers' whimsy in the face of captivity on "In the Jailhouse Now" become all the more poignant:

There's a dark and a troubled side of life.  
There's a bright and a sunny side too.  
Though we meet with the darkness and strife,  
The sunny side we also may too.

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side,  
Keep on the sunny side of life.

It will help us everyday, it will brighten all the way,  
If we'll keep on the sunny side of life.<sup>133</sup>

*-First Verse and chorus from the Carter Family's "Keep on the Sunny Side."*

I had a friend named Ramblin' Bob,  
Who used to steal, gamble and rob,  
He thought he was the smartest guy in town.  
But I found out last Monday,  
That Bob got locked up Sunday,  
They've got him in the jailhouse way downtown.

He's in the jailhouse now,  
He's in the jailhouse now.  
I told him once or twice,  
To quit playing cards and shooting dice.  
He's in the jailhouse now.<sup>134</sup>

*-First verse and chorus from Jimmie Rodgers' "In the Jailhouse Now."*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Old-time music" was a label given to the music played by The Carter Family, and to southern folk music generally, by the record companies during this period. Historical and cultural literature about southern folk music similarly uses the term. This type of music would later be called "old timey," which originated from the term "old time favorite" songs. The terms "hillbilly" and "country" would also later be used to describe the style of The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

<sup>2</sup> Carr, Patrick, ed., *The Illustrated History of Country Music* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Peer, Ralph, reprinted, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, Carr, Patrick, ed., (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1979), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Carr, Patrick, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>14</sup> Ed Kahn, liner notes, The Carter Family, *The Original Carter Family—Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*, Columbia/Legacy CK 65707, CD.

<sup>15</sup> Carr, Patrick, 52

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>18</sup> I put the word "discover" in quotes because although it is the common term for what Peer did when he recorded groups, I don't agree with it. It gives Peer too much credit. Who was he to "discover" a folk tradition that had been thriving for years without his knowledge?

<sup>19</sup> Ed Kahn.

<sup>20</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, George Foss, *Anglo American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 11.

<sup>21</sup> In his book *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, George Pullen Jackson has a chapter entitled "Struggle For Existence" that discusses outside influences on folk traditions, such as the general cultural shift towards urbanization.

<sup>22</sup> As heavily as I rely on Patrick Carr's expansive history of country music, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, for stories and accounts of the Carters, Rodgers and Peer, Carr seems scared to delve into the issue of exploitation, perhaps because the book is from the editors of *Country Music Magazine*. This book, although informative, does the Carters and Rodgers injustice by simply glazing over Peer's exploitive practices.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Artis, *Bluegrass* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1975), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Carr, 51

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>26</sup> Bill C Malone, *Southern Music—American Music* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 14.

<sup>27</sup> For a survey of the growth of separate styles from common Southern folk origins, see Bill C Malone's *Southern Music—American Music*.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel L. Forcucci, *A Folk Song History of America: America Through Its Songs* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Bob Artis, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Joyner, Charles, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 193-194.

<sup>31</sup> Nolan Porterfield, liner notes, Jimmie Rodgers, *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, RCA 07863 67500-2, CD.

<sup>32</sup> Here is a quote from Bill C. Malone from page 66 of *Southern Music—American Music* that addresses Rodgers' abilities in experimenting with other styles of music: "While the Carter Family was a repository of nineteenth century popular music, Rodgers was more responsive to the currents of his own day, and his recordings were important vehicles by which such forms as the yodel and dixieland and Hawaiian sounds moved into country music."

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Carr, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Bill C. Malone, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Carr, 51.

<sup>39</sup> See the following reference for information on white spirituals and gospel music: George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (New York:

Dover Publications, Inc., 1965).

<sup>40</sup> Bill C Malone, 18-20.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>42</sup> Bill C. Malone, "Folk Origins of Southern Music," *Southern Music-American Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 4-17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 28.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>48</sup> Patrick Carr uses the term "commercial channels."

<sup>49</sup> "Country Music's First Family" taken from the title of a Carter Family collection on Columbia/Legacy records: *Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*; "The Father of Country Music" taken from the title of the liner notes by Nolan Porterfield from the Jimmie Rodgers collection *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers* on RCA records.

<sup>50</sup> Background information for origins of Southern folk music taken mostly from Bill C Malone's *Southern Music—American Music*.

<sup>51</sup> *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1980), s.v. "Phonograph."

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Carr, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Bob Artis, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Carr, 33.

<sup>56</sup> This "race series" is an important development, and like many other topics touched upon in this paper, deserves more space than is allowed. "Race" records were so called because they were recordings of black artists, as if an artist's race determined what style of music he played. As was shown earlier, the color barrier did not create styles of music. Just because an artist was black did not automatically make him or her a "blues" singer. Blacks, like all southern folk artists played all different styles of music, from ballads and other common songs, all the way to banjo string and jug bands. There were even blacks that played so called "country" songs. The decision to create a series of records just because they are easy to market and make money from, while disregarding the damage done by lumping different styles together under one heading, shows the callousness of Peer and the short sightedness of his decision making. For more information on the history of blues and blues recordings, see the following reference: Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1981). For more information on "race series" of recording see the following chapters from Samuel B. Charters' book *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1959): "The Crazy Blues," "The 14000's."

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Carr, 33.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1959), 89.

<sup>59</sup> The term "field recording" can be misleading. While Peer was concerned with the profitability of field recordings, professional folk archivists such as John Lomax and his son Alan were concerned with *documenting* folk traditions, not profiting from them. Funded by New Deal grants and the Library of Congress, they made trips all over the south, looking for folk artists to record. Their extensive catalogue of field recordings

of southern folk music of all styles for the Library of Congress and folk labels such as Rounder, Smithsonian Folkways, and New World Records, is quite remarkable.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 36-37.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Carr, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 33-35.

<sup>63</sup> Bill C. Malone, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Carr, 35.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>69</sup> Another influential company man, who worked for Columbia, was Frank Walker. He supervised the successful "hillbilly" recordings of Vernon Dalhart and the Skillet Lickers. Dalhart however was not a genuine folk artist. In a genuine lack of respect for a tradition, he was a studio musician from the north who jumped on the hillbilly bandwagon to make money for Columbia. The Skillet Lickers represent a pick up band whose folk style was actually influenced by the new recording medium. (Patrick Carr, 39-41)

<sup>70</sup> Patrick Carr, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Bill C. Malone, 62.

<sup>72</sup> Patrick Carr, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick Carr, 38.

<sup>74</sup> Bill C. Malone, 62-63

<sup>75</sup> Patrick Carr, 57.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>78</sup> Ralph Peer, a quote from an article he wrote himself for Billboard magazine in 1953, reprinted by Patrick Carr in *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, 48.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc. 1959), 89.

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Carr, 48.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel B. Charters, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Patrick Carr, 50.

<sup>84</sup> The Original Carter Family, *Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*, Columbia/Legacy CK 65707, CD.

<sup>85</sup> Jimmie Rodgers, *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, RCA 07863 67500-2, CD.

<sup>86</sup> Patrick Carr, 55.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin Filene, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Patrick Carr, 54.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Filene, 38.

<sup>90</sup> David Evans is a contributing writer for the book *American Roots Music*. In the back of that book is a short biography of him which reads as follows: "David Evans is a professor of music at the University of Memphis, where he directs the Ph.D. program in ethnomusicology with a focus on Southern folk and popular music. He has been

involved in blues research since the mid-1960s and produced many albums of field and studio recordings of blues. He is the author of *Tommy Johnson* (1971) and *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (1982) and the editor of the American Made Music series of books for the University Press of Mississippi."

<sup>91</sup> David Evans, E-mail interview by author, 25 March 2002, E-mail response.

<sup>92</sup> Patrick Carr, 54.

<sup>93</sup> Bob Artis, 11.

<sup>94</sup> Nolan Porterfield, liner notes, Jimmie Rodgers, *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, RCA 07863 67500-2, CD

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Patrick Carr, 53.

<sup>97</sup> It was common for southerners who had handicaps of some sort to turn to a career in music because they couldn't work at other jobs. They would join traveling shows, or play at parties and on street corners for tips. This is a recurring theme in southern folk music, and other such artists were often given a namesake that reflected their disability, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, and many others.

<sup>98</sup> Patrick Carr, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>101</sup> The fact that Jimmie Rodgers was singing popular, professionally written songs does not mean that he was not a genuine folk artist, as is discussed in Section I of this paper. There were certainly some artists who fashioned themselves to be folk artists even though they did not have the roots, but Rodgers had the roots. He had traveled all across the South, picking up as much common, regional folk music as he could. Besides, the question falls apart since origins of many folk songs are not well known. Many of them may have been "professionally" written, and it is not impossible, or contrary to the term folk music, for professionally written songs to become folk songs. Also, artists were likely to play whatever songs they knew to fit occasions. In Asheville, Jimmie played professional songs. When Peer was in charge, he made Rodgers record originals because he could copyright them. He also may have been the one that made Rodgers experiment with sounds and styles that he was not familiar with, though that can never be known for certain.

<sup>102</sup> Patrick Carr, 54.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>104</sup> David Evans.

<sup>105</sup> Patrick Carr, 55.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>108</sup> Bob Artis, 11-14.

<sup>109</sup> Bob Artis, 11-12.

<sup>110</sup> Nolan Porterfield, liner notes, Jimmie Rodgers, *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, RCA 07863 67500-2, CD.

<sup>111</sup> World Book Encyclopedia (1980), s.v. "Radio."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Patrick Carr, 33.

<sup>114</sup> The broadcasts of old-timey music preceded Ralph Peer's successful series of field recordings. The radio attention may have prompted Peer to apply the regional

marketing concepts he had from the "race series" to hillbilly and old-timey.

<sup>115</sup> Patrick Carr, 59.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 62-64.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>125</sup> Jimmie Rodgers himself had some experience in the film industry; a short feature film starring him, "The Singing Brakeman," was made in 1929. (Patrick Carr, 55).

<sup>126</sup> See the chapter "Expanding Markets: Hillbilly, Cajun, Gospel," from Bill C. Malone's *Southern Music—American Music* for a closer study of "border stations."

<sup>127</sup> For an in depth look at these individual styles, see the following reference: Robert Santelli, Holly George-Warren, Jim Brown, eds., *American Roots Music* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 2001)

<sup>128</sup> Bill C. Malone, 62.

<sup>129</sup> [www.grammy.com](http://www.grammy.com) (This is the official website of the Grammy Awards.)

<sup>130</sup> "Billboard Top Fifty Albums Chart," reprinted, *Rolling Stone*, 25 April 2002, 92.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, George Foss, 11.

<sup>133</sup> The Original Carter Family, "Keep on the Sunny Side," *Can the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music's First Family*, Columbia/Legacy CK 65707, CD.

<sup>134</sup> Jimmie Rodgers, "In the Jailhouse Now," *The Essential Jimmie Rodgers*, RCA 07863 67500-2, CD.

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