



The Bristol Sessions

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Today a commercially successful, internationally appreciated genre of American music, country music was first commercially recorded in the early 1920s. Since then, it has been strongly influenced by traditional and popular music genres from several regions of the United States—by gospel and blues from the South, cowboy music from the West, and Tin Pan Alley music from the North. Granted these influences, Appalachian music and Appalachian musicians have played a central role in the creation and evolution of country music.

Shortly after World War I, technological developments in sound recording led to the proliferation of commercially distributed disks, which showcased opera, Tin Pan Alley pop, marching band, and dance music. African-American audiences preferred recordings of blues music (generally referred to by the record industry at the time as “race music”). The first recording sessions of country music were conducted in the early 1920s, in such cities as New York and Atlanta. Country music was then known as

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“hillbilly music,” a catch-all term for much of the white folk and popular music composed and performed in the Southern United States during that era. Musicians from across the South—including many from Appalachia—traveled to those cities, for the experience of making records and the possibility of financial reward. The music recorded at these studios, incorporating essentially the same repertoire then being performed on front porches and at other community events in the South, sold far more copies than record companies and producers had anticipated. Looking for additional musical talent to make more “hillbilly” records, producers transported equipment to the countryside where the musicians lived. While some of the recordings sold reasonably well, their sound quality was often poor.

Two of the major record companies of the 1920s, Columbia and Okeh, had successfully promoted commercial recordings of “hillbilly music,” while another important label, the Victor Talking Machine Company (later renamed RCA Victor Records), was seeking to tap deeper into the new market. In 1927, Victor hired producer Ralph Peer, who had been responsible for the first commercially successful “hillbilly” records (by Fiddlin’ John Carson, made in Atlanta and released on Okeh). Peer identified an ideal place for making some new recordings: Bristol, a small city straddling the Tennessee/Virginia state line. He knew that some of the finest musicians who

A mural by Tim White, in Bristol, Tennessee, depicts scenes from the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and serves as a backdrop to regional performance groups. Photo courtesy the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance.

had appeared on “hillbilly” records were from this region. On July 22, 1927, Peer and his two engineers set up a temporary studio on the Tennessee side of State Street in downtown Bristol; and on Monday, July 25, the now-famous “Bristol Sessions” began, showcasing a well-known local musician, Ernest Stoneman (from the nearby Virginia Blue Ridge, Stoneman had already enjoyed several “hillbilly” hit recordings). By their completion on Friday, August 5, the Bristol Sessions yielded 76 recorded performances by 19 separate musical acts. Utilizing what was then state-of-the-art equipment, Peer and his engineers ensured that the recordings exceeded all previous “hillbilly” recordings in sound quality. Equally significant was the high quality of the performances that Peer coaxed from the musicians—including two renowned acts “discovered” in Bristol: Jimmie Rodgers, of Meridian, Mississippi, and the Carter Family, from nearby Maces Springs, Virginia.

Although Peer was primarily interested in producing records that would sell, his meticulous attention to quality at Bristol produced definitive recordings of lasting merit. Those recordings continue to influence musicians around the world—perhaps not many contemporary mainstream country musicians, but certainly numerous musicians in the contemporary bluegrass, revivalist folk music, Americana, and rock music scenes. Also remembered within the region that hosted them, the Bristol Sessions are celebrated by such local organizations as the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance in Bristol and at such performance venues as the Carter Family Fold in nearby Hiltons, Virginia.