

STUDENTS

# The Artists & Personalities of the 1927 Bristol Sessions

RESOURCE DOCUMENT





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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, several record labels were looking for “**hillbilly music**” to record and sell, and in 1926 Victor Talking Machine Company hired producer Ralph Peer to find and record hillbilly songs. Some hillbilly musicians traveled to the Victor headquarters in New York to record, but others performed at “**location recording sessions**,” often near where they lived. For these sessions, the record label would bring their recording equipment with them, set up a temporary recording studio, and invite musicians to **audition** and hopefully record.

Towards the end of July 1927, Peer, his wife Anita, and two Victor recording engineers named Edward Eckhardt and Fred Lynch traveled down to Bristol from New York, setting up a temporary studio in the Taylor-Christian Hat Company building at 408 State Street. Peer put a call out for musicians, and the Victor team conducted recording sessions between July 25 and August 5. The recordings began with Ernest “Pop” Stoneman, an experienced musician who had already recorded numerous hillbilly records, along with his wife Hattie, other family members, and several friends in different configurations. The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were some of the last acts to record during the two-week sessions. In between, a variety of performers, coming from different rural locations, towns and cities, and states, and arriving by a variety of transportation modes – from bus, **horse and buggy**, car, and train – auditioned to make recordings. All were hoping to walk away from these sessions with a recording or two, the related payment (\$50 per song (around \$780 in today’s money) and **royalties**), and perhaps even some level of fame and success. Together, they all contributed to the significance and impact of the 1927 Bristol Sessions, leading to those recordings later being called “the big bang of country music.”

### “HILLBILLY MUSIC”

Term used for early country music, especially by record labels for marketing the records to white rural audiences.

### “LOCATION RECORDING SESSIONS”

Recording sessions that were held “on location” in a certain town or place outside of a formal recording studio

### AUDITION

A trial performance to appraise an entertainer’s merits

### HORSE AND BUGGY

A mode of transport where a horse pulls a specific type of wheeled vehicle behind it

### 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

This resource document provides short biographies for Ralph Peer and each musician or act from the 1927 Bristol Sessions. It is divided into three main sections:

- **The Producer and “Stars” of the 1927 Bristol Sessions**
- **Part 1: Musicians & Acts at the 1927 Bristol Sessions**, for artists who are less widely known, but we still have a good amount of information about them
- **Part 2: Musicians & Acts at the 1927 Bristol Sessions**, for artists where there is much less information about them



## THE PRODUCER AND “STARS” OF THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### RALPH PEER

Born: May 22, 1892, Independence, Missouri

Died: January 19, 1960

Ralph Peer was a **pioneering** producer in the recording industry, and he had a wide-ranging career devoted to numerous **genres** of music.

Peer was instrumental in the first commercial country music recorded in the South – Fiddlin’ John Carson’s “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow” for Okeh Records in 1923. In 1927 Peer came to Bristol where he recorded 19 different acts, including The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers for the first time, along with Ernest “Pop” Stoneman, El Watson, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Baker, Alfred G. Karnes, and Blind Alfred Reed, among others.

Peer was not only an important producer in the hillbilly music genre, but he also made significant contributions in “**race records**,” along with Latin, classical, and pop music. In 1920, he worked with Mamie Smith on her blues recording “Crazy Blues,” the first significant hit recording in the blues genre – it sold over 70,000 copies within its first month of release! Through his Southern Music Publishing Company (established in 1928), Peer also expanded into the Latin American market, including recording songs that were used in Walt Disney’s animated feature *Saludos Amigos*.

Peer also revolutionized the three-part **copyright** system covering lyrics, music, and performance, a practice still in place today. Through his vision and accomplishments, Peer had a huge impact on the music industry, and his **legacy** lives on today in peermusic, the largest independent music publisher in the world.

#### PIONEERING

A characteristic of a person or group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method of technical development

#### GENRE

A category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

#### “RACE RECORDS”

Term used for music made by and for African Americans in the early 20th century; especially used in marketing and distribution of these records

#### COPYRIGHT

The exclusive legal right to reproduce, publish, sell, or distribute the matter and form of something (such as a literary, musical, or artistic work)

#### LEGACY

Anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor (in this context, the impact of the person’s life and work on later history)

## THE PRODUCER AND “STARS” OF THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### ERNEST “POP” STONEMAN

Born: May 25, 1893, Carroll County, Virginia

Died: June 14, 1968

In 1924 Ernest “Pop” Stoneman – a carpenter by trade – wrote to record producers in New York, including Ralph Peer at Okeh Records, asking for the chance to record. His first recording was “[The Titanic](#),” and after re-recording it in 1925 as “The Sinking of the Titanic,” Stoneman achieved his first hit song.

By the time he persuaded Ralph Peer to come to Bristol in 1927 to find the hillbilly music wanted by Victor Talking Machine Company, Stoneman had already recorded around 100 songs for various record labels. At the 1927 Bristol Sessions, Stoneman was the first artist to come into the studio, and along with various family members and friends, he recorded 19 songs, often using different band names. These 1927 recordings included “[Midnight on the Stormy Deep](#),” “Are You Washed in the Blood?,” and “Barney McCoy.” Stoneman – with his friends and family – returned to Bristol in 1928 to record again for Peer.

Despite his early success and the many recordings he made at the 1927 and 1928 Bristol Sessions, Stoneman and his family were hit hard by the **Great Depression** in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The family lost their home in Galax, Virginia, and Stoneman travelled far and wide to look for work to support them. These years of hardship took a toll on the Stonemans, but they continued to play music together for pleasure, and in the late 1940s Stoneman and wife Hattie won a talent contest with a prize of six months of local TV time. Soon Stoneman expanded his performances, inviting several family members, including daughters Donna, Roni, and Patsy, to perform with him. They were celebrated nationally and internationally as The Stoneman Family – on stage, on radio, on record, and on TV – performing on the **Grand Ole Opry**, along with hosting a television series and winning “Vocal Group of the Year” in 1967 from the Country Music Association.

#### GREAT DEPRESSION

A severe worldwide economic depression that took place mostly during the 1930s, beginning in the United States

**GRAND OLE OPRY** Radio show that started as the WSM *National Barn Dance* in Nashville in 1925; the show continues today from its own venue in Nashville



## THE PRODUCER AND “STARS” OF THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### THE CARTER FAMILY

**A. P. Carter** (b. December 15, 1891, Maces Spring, Virginia; d. November 7, 1960)

**Sara Dougherty Carter** (b. July 21, 1898, Copper Creek, Virginia; d. January 8, 1979)

**Maybelle Addington Carter** (b. May 10, 1909, Nickelsville, Virginia; d. October 23, 1978)

The Carter Family was made up of A. P. Carter, his wife Sara, and Maybelle, Sara's cousin who was married to A. P.'s brother Ezra (known as Eck). The Carters first recorded at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and Ralph Peer quickly saw their talent and potential as a “hillbilly” music act, especially with Sara's clear, strong voice and Maybelle's guitar playing. Their first records from the Bristol Sessions had immediate impact, Peer invited the Carters to make more records with Victor in the following years, and A. P. worked hard during this time to find songs to record and copyright, often traveling throughout the region with his friend [Lesley Riddle](#), an African American musician he met in Kingsport, Tennessee, who helped him with the music.

Despite the Great Depression, The Carter Family continued to find work, and in the late 1930s they traveled out west to become [a regular act on “border radio.”](#) It was these radio appearances that cemented the group's popularity. Along with their children, they appeared on XERA, a radio station with a high-power antenna on the Mexican side of the border, for three years. The Carter's one-hour segment included their theme song, “[Keep on the Sunny Side.](#)” Thousands of people heard these broadcasts, creating a strong connection to the Carters and their music.

The Carter Family disbanded in the early 1940s, but Maybelle continued performing with her daughters Helen, June, and Anita as Mother Maybelle and The Carter Sisters. Performing on the radio and continually touring for live shows, they developed a **repertoire** of comedy, traditional Carter Family songs, and newer country and popular music, which proved very successful. By the 1950s, the group had been invited to Nashville for a segment on WSM's *Grand Ole Opry*, and they became regular show performers. This period led to commercial success, public appearances, and a host of recordings.

Those first recording sessions in Bristol in 1927 set the stage for the Carter's later success, leading to nearly 250 further recordings, radio appearances, and numerous paid performances in the years that followed. The Carter Family took familiar songs and made them their own; their songs often touched upon personal and private joys and pain. This music spoke to their audience and kept the demand high for the Carters in both the recording studio and on the performance stage – and has been a huge part of why they are still so important and influential to country music today and why they are known as “the first family of country music.”

#### BORDER RADIO

Radio stations found on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1930s; these stations had much larger transmitters than were allowed in the United States and thus could broadcast much further

#### REPERTOIRE

A list or supply of dramas, songs, operas, pieces, or parts that a company or person is prepared to perform





## THE PRODUCER AND “STARS” OF THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### JIMMIE RODGERS

Born: September 8, 1897, Meridian, Mississippi

Died: May 26, 1933

Jimmie Rodgers started entertaining when he was just a teenager, twice starting his own traveling shows until his father brought him back home and got him working on the railroad. His time as a water boy and later as a brakeman brought him into contact

with other, often **itinerant**, musicians, along with the African American railroad workers, which exposed him to types of music and singing that became influential in his own musical style. In 1924 Rodgers was diagnosed with tuberculosis, making it more difficult for him to continue in the hard work of a railroad job, and he soon turned back to entertainment for his career.

In April 1927 Rodgers was in Asheville, North Carolina, where he performed on a local radio station, including a regular spot with a band from Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia, the Tenneva Ramblers – together known on the show as The Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers. They traveled to Bristol to audition for Ralph Peer, but ended up recording as two separate acts: the Tenneva Ramblers as a group and Jimmie Rodgers as a solo performer. One of Rodgers’ recordings in Bristol was “[Sleep Baby Sleep](#),” which included his signature stylistic device: the Blue Yodel. Rodgers’ **yodel** became hugely influential in hillbilly music – he showcased it on many of his recordings, and it was copied and imitated by contemporary musicians. After the 1927 Bristol Sessions – Rodgers’ first recordings of his career – Peer invited him to Camden, New Jersey, to record more sides, including his first great hit “[Blue Yodel No. 1 \(T for Texas\)](#).”



#### ITINERANT

Traveling from place to place

#### YODEL

To sing by suddenly changing from a natural voice to a falsetto and back

#### INDUCTED

To be admitted as a member

While Rodgers’ career was short – only lasting from 1927 until his death from tuberculosis in 1933 – it was huge in impact and success. He recorded over 100 songs during this short period, appeared in [a film short as “The Singing Brakeman,”](#) performed for live audiences, and recorded with artists like Louis Armstrong (a hugely influential African American jazz musician). Rodgers is known as “the father of country music,” and many artists who followed him began their careers as Jimmie Rodgers imitators, covered his songs, or produced tribute albums to mark his legacy. However, his impact goes beyond the country music genre – he has been **inducted** into the Songwriters Hall of Fame (1970), the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1986), the Alabama Hall of Fame (1993), the Blues Hall of Fame (2013), and the Blue Ridge Music Hall of Fame (2018). In 1961, he was the first performer to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, underlining his “father of country music” status.



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### UNCLE ECK DUNFORD

**Born:** May 30, 1875, Ballard Branch, Virginia (He actually has two recorded birth dates – 1875 and 1878 – reflecting the challenge of dealing with old records, but 1875 is the date on his tombstone.)

**Died:** June 26, 1953

Alex Dunford, often called **Uncle Eck Dunford**, was known for his skills as a fiddler, guitarist, and storyteller. He married into the Stoneman family and recorded for the first time alongside Ernest and Hattie Stoneman at the 1927 Bristol Sessions. He also recorded individually, most notably performing the first commercially available recording of the well-known children's tune "**Skip to Ma Lou, My Darling**."

#### COMIC MONOLOGUES

Also known as comic skits or novelty songs, these pieces were comical or nonsensical renditions, often parodies, and they sometimes focused on contemporary events or topics; they were especially popular in the early 20th century

#### SHOE COBBLER

A mender or maker of shoes and often of other leather goods

After Uncle Eck's performances at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, Ralph Peer invited him to Atlanta later that year to record four **comic monologues**, including two that were listed as original compositions. He returned to Atlanta to record two other comic skits with Stoneman in February 1928. He also came back to Bristol in 1928, recording with the Stonemans, along with a few more solo performances. His 1928 solo performances are well-known and recognized as important recordings today – "Old Shoes and Leggings" was later featured on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and "Angeline the Baker" is an Appalachian standard. In the 1920s and 1930s, Uncle Eck also played fiddle and guitar with other local groups, including the Bogtrotters and the Grayson County Railsplitters.



Besides being a musician, Uncle Eck was also a **shoe cobbler**, a talented amateur photographer, and a farmer.





## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### JOHNSON BROTHERS

**Born:** Unknown

**Died:** Unknown

Most likely, Paul and Charles Johnson were professional musicians, possibly with a background in vaudeville. They were multi-instrumentalists, able to play the guitar, steel guitar, and banjo.

Before they came to Bristol in 1927, they had already recorded with Peer on the Victor label earlier that year. At the 1927 Bristol Sessions, they recorded six songs, representing a variety of different types of music – from the sentimental favorite “I Want to See My Mother” to British ballad “The Soldier’s Poor Little Boy” to the **vaudeville** tune “A Passing Policeman.” They went on to record seven more songs with Peer in Camden, New Jersey, in May 1928, including a song focused on the story of a railway robbery in 1923 called “The Crime of the D’Autremont Brothers.” They also recorded again in 1930 for the Gennett record label in Richmond, Indiana, their last recording session.

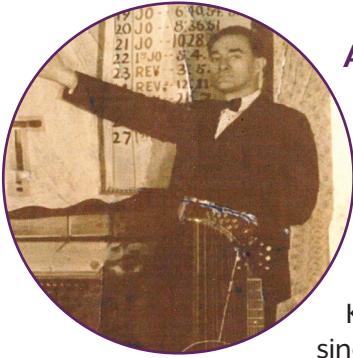
#### VAUDEVILLE

Stage entertainment consisting of various acts (such as performing animals, comedians, or singers/musicians)

Despite this recording history, we don’t know much about their origins or early lives. In fact, multiple locations have been put forward as their place of birth or hometown – including Boone, North Carolina; East Tennessee (they did sing a song called “[Two Brothers Are We \(From East Tennessee\)](#)”); Johnson City, Tennessee; and Tuco, Kentucky – though none are certain.



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### ALFRED KARNES

Born: February 2, 1891, Bedford County, Virginia

Died: May 18, 1958

Though Alfred Grant Karnes was born in Bedford County, Virginia, he later relocated to Corbin, Kentucky, where he was a preacher and gospel singer. He served in the U.S. Navy as a young man and was later ordained as a Methodist minister. He converted to the Baptist faith soon after. He also turned his hand to **patent medicine**-making, creating “Relax Rub,” a cream for muscle soreness.



At the age of 36, he responded to an ad by Ralph Peer looking for artists to record on the Victor Talking Machine Company label. He drove to Bristol, Tennessee, where he auditioned and quickly made his mark at the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Karnes was well known for his distinctive and powerful singing voice and as a skilled rhythm guitarist, and with these talents he became one of Peer’s favorite performers at the Sessions. With his strong gospel background, Karnes exclusively recorded sacred music with six songs, including “Where We’ll Never Grow Old,” “[I Am Bound for the Promised Land](#),” and “To the Work.” His talent and the success of his recordings led Peer to invite him back to Bristol for another recording session in 1928 where he performed seven more songs.

Karnes was known for playing the rarely used harp guitar: a large-body guitar that holds an extra set of strings that are **unfretted**, allowing for the sound of two separate guitarists when played. Karnes often enhanced this two-guitar sound by playing the **fretted** strings with a slap. Some scholars believe that Karnes played his Gibson harp guitar on some of the 1927 Bristol Sessions tracks, in particular “Called to the Foreign Field.” However, this claim has been debated – the harp guitar is difficult, if not impossible, to hear when played in an ensemble.

#### PATENT MEDICINE

A product (such as an elixir, tonic, or liniment) that was marketed as a medicine in the U.S. during the 1800s and early 1900s but was typically of unproven effectiveness or questionable safety

#### FRETTED/UNFRETTED

A fret is one of a series of ridges fixed across the fingerboard of a stringed musical instrument (such as a guitar) so a fretted instrument has frets, while an unfretted one does not



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### ERNEST PHIPPS & HIS HOLINESS QUARTET

**Born:** May 4, 1900, Kentucky

**Died:** April 17, 1963

Before coming to Bristol in 1927 to record with Ralph Peer and the Victor Talking Machine Company, **Ernest Phipps** was a preacher and gospel singer in Kentucky. He also worked as a coal miner and coal truck driver, and even owned his own small coal operation. But religion – and the expression of his faith through preaching and music – were his life’s work.

He recorded six gospel pieces in 1927 with his Holiness Quartet, including “**Do, Lord, Remember Me**” and “I Want to Go Where Jesus Is.” These songs were very different from other gospel recordings, and they have been recognized as the first-ever recordings of **Holiness** music. This music is characterized by highly expressive performances full of spiritual emotion; the strong rhythms of the songs are accompanied by instruments and with foot stomping and hand clapping from the singers. Today the Phipps recordings are celebrated as **pioneering** Southern gospel tunes. Phipps returned to Bristol in 1928 to record with Peer again, this time with a larger group known as His Holiness Singers. Their record of “If the Light is Gone Out of Your Soul” / “Bright Tomorrow” sold over 11,000 copies, making it one of the bestsellers of the 1928 Bristol Sessions.

After recording music at the 1928 Bristol Sessions, Phipps returned to Kentucky and continued to preach in the area until his death in 1963.

#### HOLINESS

The Holiness movement began as branch of Methodism in the mid-19th century and continues today as an offshoot that emphasizes a personal experience of the Holy Spirit and exciting and emotional worship services

#### PIONEERING

A characteristic of a person or group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method of technical development



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### BLIND ALFRED REED

Born: June 15, 1880, Floyd, Virginia

Died: January 17, 1956

Blind Alfred Reed was born in Floyd, Virginia, though he spent most of his life in West Virginia. Born blind, Reed learned fiddle at a young age, and he supported his wife and six children by playing music at social gatherings, giving music lessons, selling paper copies of his original **compositions**, and **busking** on the streets; his family also grew their own food. He was well-known in his area as a talented fiddler and songwriter, and Ralph Peer personally invited Reed to record at the 1927 Bristol Sessions because of the regional popularity of "[The Wreck of the Virginian](#)," a song Reed wrote about a train wreck that occurred in May 1927. This song was one of the more successful sellers from the 1927 Bristol Sessions.

Reed **recorded several more songs** for Peer and the Victor label in 1928 and 1929, including the 1930 release "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?," a song that outlines the challenges of those living in poverty and thus was especially appropriate to the hard times of the Great Depression. Because of the **socio-political commentary** in many of his original songs, Reed is considered one of the early protest singers of the 20th century.

After his Victor recording session in December 1929, Blind Alfred Reed didn't record again. He kept playing music locally and also worked as a Methodist lay preacher.



#### COMPOSITION

An intellectual creation, such as a written piece of music

#### BUSKING

To entertain in a public place for donations

#### SOCIO-POLITICAL COMMENTARY

An expression of opinion on social and political matters



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### **THE SHELOR FAMILY / DAD BLACKARD'S MOONSHINERS**

Joe Blackard (b. 1859, Stuart, Virginia; d. unknown)  
Clarice Blackard Shelor (b. March 24, 1900; d. August 17, 1989)  
Jesse Shelor (b. December 27, 1894; d. January 1985)  
Pyrhus Shelor

This family string band – all from Meadows of Dan, Virginia – consisted of Joe Blackard on banjo and lead vocals, his daughter Clarice on piano and harmony vocals, her husband Jesse on fiddle, and Jesse's brother Pyrhus on fiddle. While Joe Blackard worked as a musician, performing on his own and with the family group at various local events and venues, he also supported his family through farming and being a mail carrier. Both Jesse and Pyrhus worked in the cotton mills of North Carolina for a while; Jesse started working in this trade when he was only 12 years old.

The group came to Bristol by truck, recording four songs on August 3: “Big Bend Gal” and “Billy Grimes” under The Shelor Family name, and “[Suzanna Gal](#)” and “Sandy River Belle” under the name Dad Blackard's Moonshiners.



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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### B. F. SHELTON

Born: 1901, Clay County, Kentucky

Died: February 28, 1963

Benjamin Frank Shelton was a talented banjo player, who also played guitar and harmonica. Living in Corbin, Kentucky, Shelton knew another Bristol Sessions musician, Alfred Karnes, and it is thought that they traveled to Bristol together to audition for Ralph Peer and the Victor label. Shelton recorded four songs at the 1927 Bristol Sessions: “Pretty Polly” and “[Darling Cora](#),” both **murder ballads**, and “Oh Molly Dear” and “[Cold Penitentiary Blues](#),” both described as “stark mountain blues” songs. Peer was very impressed by Shelton’s banjo playing and singing. A man named Frank Shelton recorded two songs for the Columbia label in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1928, and it is probable that this was B. F. Shelton. Sadly, neither of those recordings were released. When not playing and singing, Shelton worked as a barber.

#### MURDER BALLADS

A type of ballad that focuses on a crime or an often gruesome death



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### TENNESSEE MOUNTAINEERS

**George Massengill** (b. January 7, 1891; d. December 24, 1979)

**Georgia Warren** (b. November 8, 1915, Bluff City, Tennessee; d. March 6, 2016)

**Roy Hobbs** (b. unknown; d. unknown)  
And others

The Tennessee Mountaineers came to Bristol from Bluff City, Tennessee, to audition to record on August 5, 1927. Made up of 20 singers and musicians from a congregational choir, the group, which was named by Ralph Peer on the day of their recording, was led by George Massengill and included A. P. Carter's brother-in-law Roy Hobbs and Massengill's young daughter Georgia Warren, only 12 years old at the time. The group recorded two songs: "Standing on the Promises" and "[Shall We Gather at the River.](#)"



**Georgia Warren** later provided an oral history recounting her memory of that day in August.

She said that she was really nervous as they came to the **makeshift** studio in the Taylor-Christian Hat Company building – it was dark and hot inside, with blankets and old rugs hung around the space to muffle outside sound during the recordings. These also blocked the singers' view of the recording equipment. Warren was the last surviving artist who recorded at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and she acted as one of the official ribbon cutters at the grand opening of the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in August 2014.

#### MAKESHIFT

Serving as a temporary substitute



## PART 1: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### HENRY WHITTER

**Born:** April 6, 1892, Fries, Virginia

**Died:** November 17, 1941

Henry Whitter worked in a textile mill, but in a search for a better life, he switched his **vocational** focus to music and started playing guitar and harmonica in his hometown of Fries at social gatherings such as barn dances. In 1923 Whitter traveled to the General Phonograph Corporation in New York for an audition, and soon he released his first song, [“The Wreck on the Southern Old 97,”](#) an early “hillbilly” success that is considered one of the most influential recordings in early country music history.

#### VOCATIONAL

Of, relating to, or concerned with a career, job, skill, or trade

#### FIDDLERS' CONVENTION

A festival and playing competition focused on old-time and traditional music

By 1927 Whitter was an experienced performer in the music industry, having recorded over 60 numbers. Peer had worked with Whitter before and invited him to come to Bristol in 1927 where he recorded two harmonica solos – “Rain Crow Bill” and [“Henry Whitter’s Fox Chase.”](#)

Whitter recorded and performed with many musicians and singers over the years, but his most notable collaboration was with Appalachian fiddler G. B. Grayson. They met at a **fiddlers’ convention** in 1927 and made over 40 recordings together, including Appalachian standards like “Tom Dooley,” “Handsome Molly,” “Nine Pound Hammer,” and “Banks of the Ohio.” Many of their recordings have influenced a variety of country and bluegrass musicians.







## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### ALCOA QUARTET

John Edgar Thomas (b. November, 17, 1886, Sevier County, Tennessee; d. unknown)

James Herbert Thomas (b. May 5, 1891, Sevier County, Tennessee; d. unknown)

William Burrel Hitch (b. April 10, 1890, Maryville/Alcoa, Tennessee; d. January 1972)

John Leonard "Lennie" Wells (b. January 3 or 5, 1889, Maryville/Alcoa, Tennessee; d. March 1974)

The Alcoa Quartet was a white gospel singing group who performed **a capella**, in other words, without instrumental accompaniment. They took their name from Alcoa, Tennessee, where a large aluminum smelting plant was located and near to where they all lived; two of the quartet's members – John Edgar Thomas and William Burrel Hitch – both worked at the plant. The four singers performed professionally, recording with Columbia in 1925, appearing at funerals and other religious gatherings, and even singing with Roy Acuff on a Knoxville radio station. The Alcoa Quartet recorded two songs in Bristol in 1927: "**I'm Redeemed**" and "Remember Me, O Mighty One," both of which came out of popular **shape note** songbooks of the period.

#### A CAPELLA

To sing without instrumental accompaniment

#### SHAPE NOTES

A system of seven notes showing the musical scale degree by the shape of the note head



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### MR. AND MRS. J. W. BAKER

Mr. James Wiley Baker (b. 1893, d. 1956)

Mrs. Flora Baker (b. 1895, d. 1986)

The Bakers were from Coeburn, Virginia, and were cousins of the Carters. Mr. Baker played the fiddle and guitar, while Flora was skilled on the autoharp. They recorded two songs at the 1927 Bristol Sessions: [“The Newmarket Wreck”](#) and “On the Banks of the Sunny Tennessee.” The first song told the true story of a train wreck at New Market, Tennessee, which happened in 1904 and resulted from a switching error by a Southern Railways employee – contemporary accounts record different totals of those who died in the tragedy, but the number was high.



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### BULL MOUNTAIN MOONSHINERS

Charles M. McReynolds (b. February 19, 1873; d. 1952)  
 William McReynolds (b. September 18, 1898; d. unknown)  
 Howard Greear (b. July 18, 1908; d. December 28, 2000)  
 Charles Greear (b. unknown, d. unknown)  
 Bill Deane (b. May 25, 1883; d. ?)

The Bull Mountain Moonshiners were a square dance band who hailed from Wise, Virginia. Bill Deane heard about the Victor recordings in Bristol, and a friend then drove the band to Bristol so that they could audition. They came up with their band name on the drive down to Bristol – according to Howard Greear, the trip ended up taking two days due to bad roads and getting stuck behind an unmotorized wagon hauling pigs for many miles!

#### WAX MASTER

The wax version of a 78rpm record, which is cut at the recording and then used to create the commercial versions of the record

#### PRESSING PLANT

A factory where records were produced

On August 1, they recorded two songs – [“Johnny Goodwin”](#) and “Sweet Marie” – though only the former was released in the end (perhaps because the **wax master** version of “Sweet Marie” got damaged in transit back to the Camden **pressing plant**).



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### J. P. NESTER AND NORMAN EDMONDS

J. P. Nester (b. November 27, 1876, Laurel Fork or Hillsville, Virginia; d. April 1967)  
 Norman Edmonds (b. February 9, 1889, Wythe County, Virginia; d. November 1976)

J. P. Nester and Norman Edmonds played banjo and fiddle together, recording four songs at the 1927 Bristol Sessions: [“Train on the Island”](#) and “Black-Eyed Susie,” along with “Georgia” and “John My Lover,” both of which were never released. These first two recordings exemplify typical early Appalachian string band music, which consisted only of banjo and fiddle in the time before the guitar made its mark on hillbilly music. Edmonds also played fiddle in the “old-time” way where he held it against his chest rather than underneath his chin. Peer was impressed with the duo’s talent and knew their old string band sound would sell, and so he invited them up to New York City to record again, all expenses paid, but Nester refused to leave his Blue Ridge Mountains home.

With the 1927 Bristol Sessions as his only foray into the music industry, Nester continued to farm and later worked as a **switchboard operator**. However, while Edmonds may not have gotten another chance to record in the 1920s and 1930s, his fame as a fiddler saw him become a local star in his later years. He performed at the Galax Old Fiddler’s Convention (amongst others), played on several LPs made in Galax and also one for independent label Davis Unlimited, and had his very own radio show called *The Old Timers*.

#### SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR

A person who operates a telephone exchange, a piece of equipment with electrical switches arranged so that different circuits (for telephone lines) can be connected



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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### RED SNODGRASS & HIS ALABAMIANS

Thomas P. Snodgrass (b. unknown; d. unknown)

Ralph Campbell Snodgrass (b. unknown; d. unknown)

And others

Red Snodgrass & His Alabamians was working as the house band at the Bristol Hotel at the time of the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and it is thought that Ralph Peer and his wife may have stayed there during their time in Bristol. They recorded one song – “Weary Blues,” a jazz number with several instruments not seen on any other recording in Bristol, including **cornet**, clarinets, trombone, and trap drums – though it was never released. In all probability, this recording was done as a favor or for the sake of vanity. The band was led by Thomas P. Snodgrass, a son of a wealthy Bristol family, and included his brother Ralph Campbell Snodgrass.

#### CORNET

A valved brass instrument resembling a trumpet in design and range but with a shorter conical tube and less brilliant tone



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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### TENNEVA RAMBLERS

Jack Pierce (b. 1908; d. March 1950)

Claude Grant (b. April 17, 1906; d. October 1975)

James R. "Jack" Grant (b. June 14, 1904; d. October 1967?)

Claude T. Slagle (b. May 1895; d. unknown)

Jack Pierce and brothers Claude and Jack Grant were from Bristol, though they came with Jimmie Rodgers from Asheville, North Carolina to audition for Ralph Peer in 1927. They had been playing with Rodgers on an Asheville radio station as the Jimmie Rodgers' Entertainers, and all four originally planned to record together in Bristol. However, in the end, Rodgers recorded as a solo act, and Pierce (on fiddle) and the two Grant brothers (on guitar and mandolin), along with banjoist Slagle, recorded three songs as the Tenneva Ramblers. One of their 1927 songs – ["The Longest Train I Ever Saw,"](#) now also known as "In the Pines," "Where Did You Sleep Last Night," and "My Girl" – has been performed by numerous later musicians and used in soundtracks for podcasts, television shows like *American Gods*, and a *Walking Dead* video game. Peer invited them to record again in Atlanta in February 1928, and the group also recorded in Johnson City in October 1928 for Columbia Records.



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### EL WATSON

Born: unknown  
Died: unknown

On July 28, 1927 Victor Talking Machine Company producer Ralph Peer recorded two sides with harmonica player El Watson, the only African American to record on the 1927 Bristol Sessions.

Unfortunately, little is known about Watson himself – there are no known photographs or records of him beyond what we have access to related to his Victor recordings. A laborer with a similar name was noted in the 1927 Johnson City **directory**, and so some scholars speculate that this is the same man, but it is difficult to confirm.

#### DIRECTORY

An alphabetical list (for example, of names and addresses)

#### INTEGRATED

Bring people or groups with particular characteristics or needs into equal participation in a group, institution, or activity

Music-wise, however, we do know that he recorded two harmonica solos in Bristol in 1927 – **“Narrow Gauge Blues,”** a tune meant to sound like a train, and the bluesy “Pot Licker Blues” – both of which were distributed as “race records” rather than “hillbilly” records. He also played the harmonica, along with the bones, on several Johnson Brothers tunes – including “Two Brothers Are We” and “The Soldier’s Poor Little Boy” – while Charles Johnson played guitar on Watson’s recordings. These records are among the very first **integrated** country or blues recordings; in other words, recordings that included white and Black musicians performing together. Peer liked what he heard in Watson’s recordings and invited him to record in Victor’s New York City studio in May 1928. This resulted in four more sides: “Fox Chase,” “Sweet Bunch of Daisies,” “Bay Rum Blues,” and “One Sock Blues.”

There was one African American musician – Ellis Williams – recorded at the Johnson City Sessions in 1929, and scholar Tony Russell believes that he is the same man as El Watson due to very close similarities in the harmonica and bones playing on both recording sessions. Russell thinks that Watson might have used a different name on the Columbia label recordings in Johnson City because he was still under contract to Victor (a not uncommon practice for musicians recording with different labels).



## PART 2: MUSICIANS & ACTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS



### WEST VIRGINIA COON HUNTERS

W. B. (Wesley “Bane”) Boyles (b. August 8, 1905; d. April 1975)

Joe Stephens (b. unknown; d. unknown)

Fred Belcher (b. unknown; d. unknown)

Vernal Vest (b. December 8, 1898; d. January 1953)

Clyde S. Meadows (b. unknown; d. unknown)

At the 1927 Bristol Sessions, the [West Virginia Coon Hunters](#) string band was made up of five musicians, though this Bluefield, West Virginia-based group sometimes included several other players including Fred Pendleton. With Boyles on fiddle, Stephens on banjo, Belcher on guitar, Vest on ukulele, and Meadows singing, the group recorded two songs: [“Greasy String”](#) and “Your Blues Eyes Run Me Crazy.”

Most of the musicians who recorded at the 1927 Bristol Sessions had other occupations that helped them make a living and support their families. For instance, the railways were major employers in the early 20th century: Clyde S. Meadows was an engine cleaner for the Norfolk & Western Railway, Vernal Vest worked on the railroad as a fireman, and Fred Pendleton was a railroad repairman on steam trains. However, not all occupations were legal, especially during the **Prohibition** era – family members remember Wesley “Bane” Boyles as a **moonshiner**, and he was arrested for making and transporting illegal liquor soon after he recorded in Bristol. Sadly, this transgression ended his career as a West Virginia Coon Hunter though he did continue to make music throughout his life. After he got out of prison, he worked a variety of jobs, including as a barber, an electrical worker, and a mechanic.

#### PROHIBITION

The period of 1920–1933 in U.S. history when the production, transportation, and sell of alcohol was not allowed

#### MOONSHINER

A maker or seller of illicit whiskey





## CONCLUSION

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The people who came to Bristol in 1927 made an impact on the history of country music – whether they were producer Ralph Peer; one of the “star” acts like Ernest Stoneman, The Carter Family, or Jimmie Rodgers; or a less widely known musician or group like Alfred Karnes or the Tenneva Ramblers. Not only did the 1927 Bristol Sessions launch the careers of The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, and further cement the career of Ernest Stoneman, but it also saw the first recordings of Holiness music – an important facet of Southern gospel music – with Ernest Phipps & His Holiness Quartet; some of the first integrated country music recordings with El Watson and the Johnson Brothers; excellent examples of traditional Appalachian music with B. F. Shelton and J. P. Nester and Norman Edmonds; an influential original “disaster song” composition by Blind Alfred Reed; the beginnings of Ralph Peer’s independent music publishing company that still stands – and influences music – today; and so much more.

Despite the impact on early commercial country music, most of the musicians who recorded in Bristol went back to their everyday lives as farmers, **sawmill** workers, preachers, railroad employees, homemakers, etc. Some recorded again, some did not, but most continued to make music in and around their communities and region. And that local impact and the musicians’ local stories are as interesting as the larger ones made through the 1927 Bristol Sessions. These musicians are often remembered within their communities, and frequently their legacy is carried on by their families – through their own music making, the oral histories they have shared with scholars, and with the wonderful photographs and artifacts that they’ve chosen to share with the museum.

**SAWMILL**  
A mill or machine for sawing logs



## VOCABULARY LIST

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*\*Most definitions taken from Merriam-Webster*

### **Audition**

A trial performance to appraise an entertainer's merits

### **Border Radio**

Radio stations found on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1930s; these stations had much larger transmitters than were allowed in the United States and thus could broadcast much further

### **Busking**

To entertain in a public place for donations

### **Comic Monologues**

Also known as comic skits or novelty songs, these pieces were comical or nonsensical renditions, often parodies, and they sometimes focused on contemporary events or topics; they were especially popular in the early 20th century

### **Composition**

An intellectual creation, such as a written piece of music

### **Copyright**

The exclusive legal right to reproduce, publish, sell, or distribute the matter and form of something (such as a literary, musical, or artistic work)

### **Cornet**

A valved brass instrument resembling a trumpet in design and range but with a shorter conical tube and less brilliant tone

### **Directory**

An alphabetical list (for example, of names and addresses)

### **Fiddlers' Convention**

A festival and playing competition focused on old-time and traditional music

### **Fretted/Unfretted**

A fret is one of a series of ridges fixed across the fingerboard of a stringed musical instrument (such as a guitar) so a fretted instrument has frets, while an unfretted one does not

### **Genre**

A category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

### **Grand Ole Opry**

Radio show that started as the WSM National Barn Dance in Nashville in 1925; the show continues today from its own venue in Nashville

### **Great Depression**

A severe worldwide economic depression that took place mostly during the 1930s, beginning in the United States

### **"Hillbilly Music"**

Term used for early country music, especially by record labels for marketing the records to white rural audiences

### **Holliness**

The Holiness movement began as branch of Methodism in the mid-19th century and continues today as an offshoot that emphasizes a personal experience of the Holy Spirit and exciting and emotional worship services

### **Horse and Buggy**

A mode of transport where a horse pulls a specific type of wheeled vehicle behind it



## VOCABULARY LIST

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*\*Most definitions taken from Merriam-Webster*

### **Inducted**

To be admitted as a member

### **Integrated**

Bring people or groups with particular characteristics or needs into equal participation in a group, institution, or activity

### **Itinerant**

Traveling from place to place

### **Legacy**

Anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor (in this context, the impact of the person's life and work on later history)

### **Location Recording Sessions**

Recording sessions that were held "on location" in a certain town or place outside of a formal recording studio

### **Makeshift**

Serving as a temporary substitute

### **Moonshiner**

A maker or seller of illicit whiskey

### **Murder Ballads**

A type of ballad that focuses on a crime or an often gruesome death

### **Patent Medicine**

A product (such as an elixir, tonic, or liniment) that was marketed as a medicine in the U.S. during the 1800s and early 1900s but was typically of unproven effectiveness or questionable safety

### **Pioneering**

A characteristic of a person or group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method of technical development

### **Pressing Plant**

A factory where records were produced

### **Prohibition**

The period of 1920–1933 in U.S. history when the production, transportation, and sell of alcohol was not allowed

### **"Race Records"**

Term used for music made by and for African Americans in the early 20th century; especially used in marketing and distribution of these records

### **Repertoire**

A list or supply of dramas, songs, operas, pieces, or parts that a company or person is prepared to perform

### **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

### **Sawmill**

A mill or machine for sawing logs

### **Shape Notes**

A system of seven notes showing the musical scale degree by the shape of the note head

### **Shoe Cobbler**

A mender or maker of shoes and often of other leather goods

### **Socio-Political Commentary**

An expression of opinion on social and political matters



## VOCABULARY LIST

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*\*Most definitions taken from Merriam-Webster*

### **Switchboard Operator**

A person who operates a telephone exchange, a piece of equipment with electrical switches arranged so that different circuits (for telephone lines) can be connected

### **Vaudeville**

Stage entertainment consisting of various acts (such as performing animals, comedians, or singers/musicians)

### **Vocational**

Of, relating to, or concerned with a career, job, skill, or trade

### **Wax Master**

The wax version of a 78rpm record, which is cut at the recording and then used to create the commercial versions of the record

### **Yodel**

To sing by suddenly changing from a natural voice to a falsetto and back



## CAPTIONS AND CREDITS TO IMAGES

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### Page 4

Ralph Peer in the 1950s. / Credit: Courtesy of peermusic, Peer Family Archives

### Page 5

Top: Hattie and Ernest Stoneman in their later years; he is holding his autoharp. Credit: From the Mike Seeger Collection, #20009, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Middle: Record labels for Stoneman's two Titanic-themed songs, one on the Okeh label and the other released by Edison.

### Page 6

Top: The Carter Family. Credit: From the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Middle: The record label for The Carter Family's border radio favorite, "Keep on the Sunny Side."

### Page 7

Top: Portrait of Jimmie Rodgers. Credit: Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum

Bottom: Jimmie Rodgers with The Carter Family in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1931. Credit: Courtesy of Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum

### Page 8

Top: There is some speculation that this picture of Uncle Eck Dunford was a self-portrait. The portrait highlights his musical instruments, including a guitar he bought in 1912 from Sears Roebuck and which he played on most of his recordings. Credit: Courtesy of Doris Brown

Bottom: Uncle Eck Dunford's guitar on display in the Hometown Stars special exhibit. Credit: © Birthplace of Country Music

### Page 9

From the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### Page 10

Top: Alfred Karnes with his harp guitar and standing in front of signage listing out different Biblical verses. Credit: Image from the Hometown Stars special exhibit, courtesy of the Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College

Middle: A portrait of Alfred Karnes as a young man in the U.S. Navy, along with another sailor. Credit: Courtesy of Debbie O'Shea

### Page 11

Ernest Phipps with his second wife Zola, possibly a wedding photograph. Credit: Donated to the Birthplace of Country Music Museum by Teresa Phipps Patierno in the memory of her grandfather, Ernest Phipps, a coal miner & Holiness preacher from Kentucky, a simple man who loved his Lord



## Page 12

Top: Blind Alfred Reed holding his fiddle and standing before a sign advertising his music performance. Credit: Courtesy of Goldenseal Magazine

Bottom image: The museum is lucky to know several family members related to the 1927 Bristol Sessions artists, which gives us the chance to hear stories about the musicians who recorded in Bristol, see old photographs of them, and sometimes even get a glimpse of one of their instruments! This is the fiddle played by Blind Alfred Reed at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, brought to the museum by his relatives in 2017. Credit: © Birthplace of Country Music

## Page 13

The Shelor Family. Credit: From the liner notes by Ted Olson and Tony Russell, *The Bristol Sessions, 1927–28: The Big Bang of Country Music*, 2011

## Page 14

B. F. Shelton after a successful day of fishing. Credit: Courtesy of the Charles K. Wolfe Collection

## Page 15

Top: Victor label for the Tennessee Mountaineer's recording of "Standing on the Promises." From [www.rateyourmusic.com](http://www.rateyourmusic.com)

Middle: Georgia Warren, last surviving artist from the 1927 Bristol Sessions, signed the museum's Green Board at the 2014 grand opening. Credit: © Birthplace of Country Music; photographer: Angela Freese

## Page 16

Top: This promotional photograph of Henry Whitter underlines his identity as a recording "star" as he formally poses with some of his records and his guitar. Credit: From the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Bottom: G. B. Grayson and Henry Whitter. Credit: From the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## Page 17

The Alcoa Quartet. Credit: From the liner notes by Ted Olson and Tony Russell, *The Bristol Sessions, 1927–28: The Big Bang of Country Music*, 2011

## Page 18

J. W. and Flora Baker with their sons. Credit: From the liner notes by Ted Olson and Tony Russell, *The Bristol Sessions, 1927–28: The Big Bang of Country Music*, 2011

## Page 19

Charles McReynolds of the Bull Mountain Moonshiners and his daughter Maggie. Credit: From the liner notes by Ted Olson and Tony Russell, *The Bristol Sessions, 1927–28: The Big Bang of Country Music*, 2011

## Page 20

Norman Edmonds. Credit: Courtesy of Mark Sanderford



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**Page 22**

Jimmie Rodgers (standing with banjo) is seen here with Jack Pierce and Claude and Jack Grant of the Tenneva Ramblers. Credit: From the John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records, #20001, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**Page 23**

The Victor record label for El Watson's "Pot Licker Blues."

**Page 24**

The West Virginia Coon Hunters, standing left to right: Fred Belcher, Clyde S. Meadows, Jim Brown, and Vernal Vest; seated left to right: Dutch Stewart, Wesley "Bane" Boyles, Regal Mooney, Fred Pendleton, and Joe Stephens. Only five of the musicians seen here recorded at the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Credit: From the Birthplace of Country Music Museum Collection, gift of Denise Smith