

STUDENTS

The 1927 Bristol Sessions Story

RESOURCE DOCUMENT





SUMMARY OF CONTENT

This document introduces students to the early years of “hillbilly music,” what happened at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and why those recording sessions are so important to the history of early commercial country music.

Important vocabulary words are shown in bold in the text, and the majority of their definitions have been taken from Merriam-Webster.

INTRODUCTION

In the Appalachians, music plays an important role in people’s lives, and in the 1920s record producers wanted to capture this music and sell the recordings. The old-time and traditional music of the Appalachian Mountains and valleys was called “**hillbilly music.**” This type of music included string band tunes; gospel and sacred songs; old English, Scottish and Irish ballads; current events and story songs, and musical numbers influenced by African American traditions.

During the 1920s, several record label companies, such as Victor Talking Machine Company, Columbia, Okeh, and Brunswick, started recording and selling “hillbilly music.” Musicians would travel to New York and other big cities to record in the studios, or the companies would travel to places where the musicians lived and played – these were called “**location recording sessions.**” Some early studio and location recordings include Eck Robertson in 1922, Fiddlin’ John Carson in 1923, Ernest Stoneman in 1924, and Gid Tanner & His Skillet Lickers in 1926.

“Hillbilly Music”

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

“Location Recording Sessions”

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



THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

In late July 1927, Ralph Peer of the Victor Talking Machine Company came to Bristol with two recording engineers. His friend Ernest Stoneman had told him that he would find musicians who made and played the types of “hillbilly” tunes that the Victor label wanted to sell in the area around Bristol. Peer set up a studio in the Taylor-Christian Hat Company building on the Tennessee side of State Street – rugs and blankets were hung up around a large room to soundproof the space and the important recording equipment was kept hidden behind these so that no one could see 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

Through invitations from Peer, word-of-mouth, and newspaper advertisements and articles, musicians came to Bristol to audition and hopefully be chosen to record – kind of like today’s *American Idol* or *The Voice* shows! One article in particular made people want to be part of the recording sessions – it reported that Ernest Stoneman had made around \$3,600 (equivalent to \$54,802 today) in **royalties** that year through his previous recordings, an inspirational sum to many at that time. Over a two-week period, Peer and the engineers recorded 76 songs by 19 acts or performers. Victor started releasing records from these sessions in late 1927 and 1928.

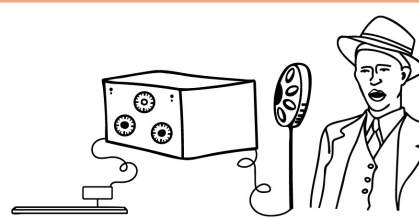
There were “hillbilly music” recordings before and after the 1927 Bristol Sessions, so what made these sessions so significant and led them to be called “the big bang of country music”? Three factors made a difference:

- **A change in technology** – Not long before the 1927 Bristol Sessions were recorded, the Western Electric microphone was invented. The previous technology – recording by **acoustic horn** – produced decent recordings, but the sound wasn’t as balanced or vibrant as that of the live performance. With the **electric microphone**, the sound was more balanced and of higher quality, and records that sounded better sold better! These new recordings were called “Orthophonic,” which means authentic or reproducing sound correctly.



Acoustic Horn

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



Electric Microphone

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



- **A producer with vision** – There were a lot of really talented record producers at work during the 1920s, but Ralph Peer was a true pioneer in the business. He knew the kind of music that would sell well, and he was very good at marketing and selling it. Peer also used a business model of multiple contracts for the recording, song publishing (in other words, **copyright**), and personal management, and he paid up-front fees and royalties. This model brought in a lot of money to the Victor company and to Peer himself, and it also became a common model used in the music industry in the future. The company that Peer started in the 1920s to publish music is still thriving today as the largest independent music publishing company in the world.

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

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

- **Ernest Stoneman** from Galax, Virginia, had been recording since 1924 with around 100 records to his name when he came to Bristol in 1927. Stoneman and his family were one of the most important acts of early and later country music, performing into the 1960s and beyond.
- **The Carter Family** from Maces Spring, Virginia, recorded for the first time in Bristol, and their records became immediate successes – they continued to perform and record together until 1943, even finding success during the hard times of the Great Depression through their time on **border radio**. Many of their children and grandchildren have followed in their footsteps within the music industry. The Carters are now known as “the first family of country music,” and their sound had a significant impact in early country music.
- **Jimmie Rodgers** from Meridian, Mississippi, also recorded for the first time in Bristol, and while his first recordings weren’t as successful as expected, he recorded his break-out hit “T for Texas (Blue Yodel)” later that year in New York and immediately became a national star. Like the Carters, he is viewed as hugely influential on the country music sound and is known as “the father of country music.”

Border Radio

During the 1930s, The Carter Family had a show on border radio station XERA. This station – and others like it – were located on the Texas-Mexico border, and they had much larger transmitters than were allowed in the United States. As a result, they could broadcast from Mexico all the way up to Canada. The radio signal was so strong it was rumored you could pick it up in Texas by hanging a tin can on a barbed wire fence.