

Mountain Music Roundup

By John Lilly



The Golden Era of old-time country music, the late 1920's through the 1930's, was punctuated by some illustrious remote recording sessions sponsored by major commercial record labels and run by legendary producers. Ralph Peer and the 1927 and 1928 Bristol Sessions loom large, due primarily to the discoveries of singing stars Jimmie Rodgers and the original Carter Family for the Victor label. [See "Mountain Music Roundup," by John Lilly; Winter 2011.]

But there were others. Ralph Peer went to Asheville, North Carolina, in 1925. Okeh Records conducted field recordings in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in September 1927. The Brunswick label did likewise in Ashland, Kentucky, and Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1928, '29, and '30. Among the most significant and eclectic of these expeditions, however, were two that took place in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1928 and 1929 for Columbia Records with producer Frank Walker.

The Johnson City Sessions 1928-1929: "Can You Sing or Play Old-Time Music?" is a new boxed set from Bear Family Records that documents these Johnson City Sessions in grand style. Featuring 100 tracks on four CDs and a 135-page book, the collection is detailed,

well-designed, and substantial. Produced by Ted Olson and Tony Russell, this attractive package includes informative notes, biographies of all of the musicians, lyrics to all of the songs, discography, chronology, bibliography, and vintage photographs along with digitally remastered tracks from 37 recording artists from across the Appalachian region.

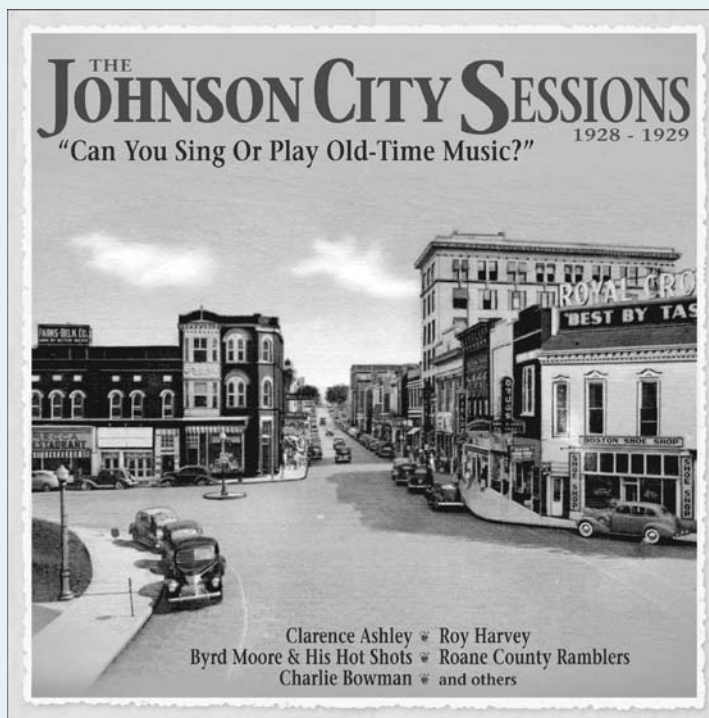
West Virginia is very well represented. While at the earlier Bristol Sessions only two West Virginia acts participated (fiddler/singer Blind Alfred Reed and the West Virginia Coon Hunters string band), there were six at Johnson City. They included singer Richard Harold, guitar duo Roy Harvey and Leonard Copeland, vocal and

yodeling duo Earl Shirkey and Roy Harper, guitar/mandolin duo Robert Hoke and Vernal Vest, and string bands the Weaver Brothers and the Moatsville String Ticklers. All but one of these came from the Beckley area; the Moatsville group hailed from Barbour County. Eighteen of the 28 tunes or songs they cumulatively recorded included the talented, ubiquitous Roy Harvey — Roy recorded as both Harvey and Harper, and as a member of the Weaver Brothers.

Richard Harold, the first of these to record, was a blind street singer from the Princeton area, who was often associated with Blind Alfred Reed. [See "The Blind Man's Song: Recalling Alfred Reed," by John Lilly; Winter 2008.] On one song,

"Sweet Bird," an uncredited fiddler is presumed by Olson and Russell to be Mercer County fiddler Fred Pendleton — to my ear it could just as likely have been Alfred Reed, though Pendleton is an equally strong possibility.

Roy Harvey recorded more than 200 songs in a five-year period for a variety of labels and in any number of bands. [See "'Daddy Loved Music': Recalling Guitarist Roy Harvey," by Matt Meacham; Winter 2007.] In Johnson City he recorded with guitarist Leonard Copeland, yodeler Earl Shirley, and the Weaver Brothers





The Moatsville String Ticklers. From the left are Floyd Frye, Zel Frye, Doyle Shaffer, Harold Ritter, Brooks Ritter, Gordon Frye, Marshall Summers, and Cecil Frye. Photographer and date unknown.

band. The four guitar instrumentals with Leonard Copeland were spirited and precise — “Beckley Rag” is a highlight. Using the thinly veiled pseudonym Roy Harper, Harvey recorded 10 songs with yodeler Earl Shirkey — far more than any other artist. Yodeling was all the rage at the time, and Shirkey possessed the skill and the tonality to yodel full choruses between Harvey’s verses. Their collaboration resulted in the runaway bestseller of the two Johnson City Sessions — “When the Roses Bloom for the Bootlegger,” a 1928 parody of a popular sentimental song that sold an amazing 72,545 copies, eclipsing the next best-seller fourfold. Invited back in 1929, the pair cut six more songs, including another parody, this time a swipe at West Virginia’s be-

loved anthem, “The West Virginia Hills” — a comic takeoff called “We Have Moonshine in the West Virginia Hills.”

A straight-ahead reading of “The West Virginia Hills” was recorded later the same day by the Moatsville String Ticklers — one of the highlights of the collection for any West Virginian and among the most satisfying recordings of that song ever made. The flip side, “Moatsville Blues,” is also well worth a listen. Two other titles recorded that day went unreleased. The Moatsville String Ticklers were guitarists Floyd Frye, Doyle Shaffer, and Marshall Summers; banjo players Brooks Ritter and Zel Frye; fiddlers Cecil Frye, Gordon Frye, and Harold Ritter; and an unnamed vocal chorus.

Roy Harvey joined Vance and

Wiley Weaver and fiddler Odell Smith to record two numbers each as the Weaver Brothers and the Weaver Brothers String Band. Only two of their four songs were released.

Neither of the two songs recorded by Robert Hoke and Vernal Vest was released. None of the unreleased titles is included in this collection, unfortunately; they are presumed to be lost.

For fans of early country music, especially those interested in early country music from West Virginia, *The Johnson City Sessions 1928-1929: “Can You Sing or Play Old-Time Music?”* is a trove of little-known and seldom-heard recordings. The boxed set is available through County Sales; phone (540)745-2001 or online at www.countysales.com.