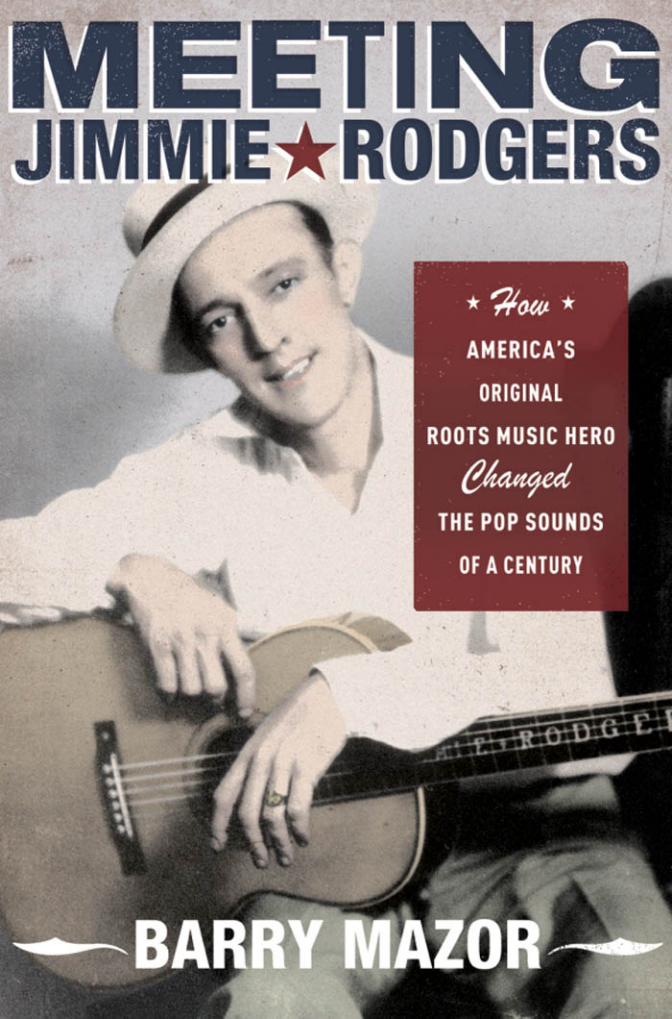
MEETING JIMMIE ★ RODGERS



★ How ★
AMERICA'S
ORIGINAL
ROOTS MUSIC HERO
Changed
THE POP SOUNDS
OF A CENTURY

BARRY MAZOR

Meeting Jimmie Rodgers

How America's Original Roots Music Hero Changed the Pop Sounds of a Century

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This book is dedicated to the musical heirs of Jimmie Rodgers,
the exponents and chroniclers who also have forwarded
his legacy—and to the evidence of your own ears

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contents

Meeting Jimmie Rodgers

Louis Armstrong and Johnny Cash summon the spirit.

Introduction

Meeting Jimmie Rodgers Halfway

Nashville, October 5, 1970.
The most influential, original performer in American music history pushes his way through the swinging doors of the flimsy saloon set, shedding, fast as he can manage—and that is still *fast*—the too-cute fourteen-gallon hat that someone has thought appropriate for this occasion. He grips it in one hand as he waves to the welcoming crowd at the Ryman Auditorium.

Rather dilapidated now, the "Mother Church of Country Music" will still be, for just a few more years, the home of the Grand Ole Opry. The Ryman is home also for these regular tapings of *The Johnny Cash Show*—a fresh prime-time, national TV series whose very existence is evidence of how broadly country music has spread, how far it has come, and how enwrapped with the rest of American pop music it has become by this night.

The guest is Louis Armstrong, the legendary Satchmo, in the last year of his life. He has just cut a country album, working in New York City with Johnny Cash's long-time friend, sometime record producer, and occasional songwriter, the irrepressible Cowboy Jack Clement. Jack recalls phoning the TV show's producer, suggesting that Armstrong might be a perfect, surprising fit for them—then arranging for a brass band to meet the jazz legend at the Nashville airport as he arrived in town.

From the varied numbers that appeared on that *Louis "Country and Western" Armstrong* LP, and a handful of those rehearsed for the show, Satchmo has chosen two to sing that had been introduced by African-Americans—"Crystal

Chandeliers" from the anomalous honky tonk star Charley Pride, and "Ramblin' Rose," early '60s countrified pop from Nat King Cole. Race, it is clear enough in retrospect, is on Louis Armstrong's mind tonight. He has his reasons.

The man was not being perceived in 1970 quite the way he is known today, institutionalized for twenty-first century adults as a universal treasure, the "man who fused the sound of the blues with American popular song and taught the world to swing," as Wynton Marsalis put it in Ken Burns' widely seen 2001 documentary series *Jazz*. Louis is nevertheless often recalled by younger twenty-first century audiences merely as a gravelly-voiced guy who sang "What a Wonderful World" in movies and commercials.

In 1970, Armstrong is an utterly familiar pop star, everywhere, but intellectuals and some blatantly political latter-day jazz practitioners are regularly accusing him of being a clowning, mugging Uncle Tom who kowtows to white audiences too much to win their favor—as if he did not behave exactly the same way with black audiences; as if this powerful desire and aptitude for pleasing whatever audience was in front of him was not the very basis of success in the variety shows and honky tonk dives in which he had started; as if, for all of the art, this were not still show business.

"I never did fit in too well, with the folks you know," he sings to the overwhelmingly white Cash show audience, more pointedly, more sternly than Charley Pride has ever dared sing that opening of "Crystal Chandeliers." "It was plain to see, that the likes of me didn't fit with you." No one in the auditorium—a place in which Armstrong had given a concert in 1957 with enforced racially segregated seating—is noticeably offended.

And so, yes, race is on Mr. Armstrong's mind in this time and place: 1970 in Nashville, Tennessee.

The program's producer and writer, Stan Jacobson, had had doubts about having Louis on the show at all. Today, almost forty years after the broadcast, he recalls that doing so felt like more of the "sore point" booking that ABC and Columbia Pictures TV was forcing on him—jazzier, more swinging artists like Ray Charles, and even Liza Minnelli, whom he saw as all wrong for the Cash show. Among those Jacobson found right for the show at the time were the Monkees, Lorne Greene of *Bonanza*, Neil Diamond, and Burl Ives. But as for jazz and Broadway, *those* sounds were too foreign, too lacking in roots credibility to relate to 1970 country music. Bringing them in, he believes to this day, would have "caused the audience to lose faith in Johnny."

What changed Jacobson's mind in the case of Louis Armstrong was the surprising "discovery" that in Hollywood, California, in the summer of 1930, Armstrong had done a session with the country pioneer Jimmie Rodgers. Over the course of two weeks, Jimmie had recorded everything from

minstrel blackface sketches to Hawaiian-inflected pop, Bing Crosby–style ballads, vaudeville shuffles, hard blues, a gun-toting, macho, sex-laden Prohibition-era gangster boast—and more than a few songs about trains. On the next to last day of those sessions, he collaborated with Armstrong on "Blue Yodel No. 9," which, forty years later, became Louie's safe passage ticket to the *Johnny Cash Show*.

"We did a little research on some of your recordings," Johnny Cash says, on screen, after bringing Louis over to the ersatz "country living room" set. "We find that on July sixteenth, 1930, you played trumpet on a session with the late Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music. What I would love to do is kind of recreate that recording session; I'll try to sing Jimmie Rodgers' lyrics, and you wail like you did on the record. Can we do that?"

And Louis responds: "We'll see. Let's give it to them—in black and white." Which they proceed to do.

Famous for dying young, still fighting to record with his last tubercular breaths, their subject, take note, is still referred to as "the *late* Jimmie Rodgers," thirty-seven years after his death. Not even a basic, one-line identifying bio is deemed necessary by the show's producer and writers at this point. There had already been *Johnny Cash Show* episodes in which Johnny related Jimmie's history, and Merle Haggard had sung duets with Johnny on Rodgers songs that were appearing on his brand-new Jimmie salute album, *Same Train, A Different Time*. Merle had also performed "Nobody Knows But Me" with a full arm-garter-sporting Dixieland band the previous May, the "too jazzy" rule apparently not applying there. Honky tonk hero Hank Snow had sung "Jimmie's Texas Blues" on the show and would return later with "Train Whistle Blues." John Hartford had raced through Jimmie's "Mule Skinner Blues" in a salute to the 1940 Bill Monroe version—the one that had propelled the birth of bluegrass—even as Dolly Parton's new version of the number was climbing the 1970 country charts. Folksinger Ramblin' Jack Elliott, who some years earlier had recorded an LP mixing a half-dozen Rodgers songs with others by Woody Guthrie, had appeared on the show too—his first prime-time network appearance in decades of performing. While Elliott's one-time folk protégé Bob Dylan did not feature Rodgers songs on his series-opening appearance, he had traded Rodgers blue yodel verses with Cash at the Nashville recording session that was the prelude to the TV appearance. For that matter, Johnny had already celebrated Jimmie in the regular "Come and Ride This Train" segment of the program and would add another salute the following year, as part of a special episode on country music history.

Johnny Cash does not feel the need to spell out who exactly this Jimmie Rodgers was to the general national audience he is reaching, this night in 1970, but not so long before it had been a very different story. In 1962, despite

being in one of the dips in his up-and-down career, Cash had a minor hit with a version of Jimmie's "In the Jailhouse Now" and filled New York's Carnegie Hall with Cash-loving country fans. By his own account, Johnny Cash was then "obsessed" with Jimmie Rodgers' music and image and was collecting a considerable array of related memorabilia. A letter he had written to Jimmie's daughter, Anita, inviting her to the Carnegie Hall show, detailed his efforts to complete the redecoration of the Cash family's California den in a style that might be described as Late Rodgers Renaissance—complete with framed photos, handbills, Jimmie's personal effects, a couple of "tapestries," and one of his hero's own brakeman's lamps hanging from the ceiling. (He had been, he reported, "giving train signals to the neighbors, down in the little town below. No kidding, it really works great, just like new. Caused a lot of train crashes.")

Johnny was also attempting to produce a movie in which he would play Jimmie, to show the world beyond country music his story and to inhabit his persona on screen. The letter is filled with almost frantic pleas for more scrapbook material, clippings, and personal correspondence, more photos, any old interviews. He had been collecting Rodgers stories from Maybelle Carter, Gene Autry, and Ernest Tubb, and he had come up with what seemed a clever idea—to wear Jimmie's actual Singing Brakeman stage outfit onstage at Carnegie Hall, with only that original lantern for lighting, presenting a program exclusively of Jimmie Rodgers songs, in character. The suit had been a gift from Anita's mom, Carrie, Mrs. Jimmie Rodgers herself, as had a satchel in which Cash was then keeping all of his newly written songs, a sample of the kind of bequests with which Carrie had been giving her stamp of approval to selected country singers for years.

But in 1962 that New York audience of Cash fans had not gotten the visual references to Jimmie, or their connection to Johnny, at all. The Carnegie Hall crowd's devastating silence, Johnny would recall much later, was broken only by shouts for his own hits.

The way people viewed Johnny Cash at the time of the 1970 TV duet with Armstrong is not quite how he is most often depicted and understood today. He was decidedly not the singularly cool man of country, the supposed dark and dangerous first cousin to Nine Inch Nails, Soundgarden, and gangsta rappers, not quite the iconic, long-suffering, "man in black" then, either. Cash was at a peak of general popular success, especially with settled adults. He was about to make the on-air testament of personal faith and salvation that would lead to much time working with Billy Graham, the LP *In the Holy Land* (with its 3-D cover), and a reformed, evangelizing sort of public face that would lead the hipster rock critic Nick Tosches to ridicule him as "offensively pious" and "particularly tedious."

But tonight's Ryman and TV audience is quite ready for the duet by *that* Johnny and this Louis Armstrong. Jazz historians had been suggesting that Louis did not even remember the Rodgers session, and had no reason to since it only involved that low hillbilly music anyway. For them, his on-air comments should have been revealing, but his off-air remarks were even more so.

"I'd been knowing Jimmie for a *long* time," Armstrong tells Cash on screen. "We met one morning, and he said 'Man, would you like to sing some blues with me?' And I said, 'Okay, daddy; sing some blues, and I'm gonna play behind you'—and that's the way the record started, you know."

Among the effects discovered in Johnny Cash's vast private audio collection since his death, unheard by the public, is a backstage rehearsal tape in which Johnny and Louis work out this very TV performance. Much of the talk is about when the trumpet starts, when Johnny should come in-about timing. Louis tells Cash precisely when to come in. "That's the way it was written; that's the way *Jimmie* did it," he tosses in, thereby answering any questions about his memory of what had happened in 1930.

In rehearsal, that unmistakable voicelike, beacon-in-the-dark tone of Armstrong's trumpet at first fills the space between Cash's lines, but Louis keeps loosening the rhythm further, pushing Johnny to a place far from the patented, locked-in Tennessee Two beat.

By the time they are making their third try at the opening, after a sobbing Armstrong solo, Cash starts to reach for surprising one-time-only blues notes and finds them, plays with the music, plays in ways he's never been heard doing on record at all. Johnny Cash may rock, swagger, and shuffle, and he always gets his stories told; but right here, uplifted, he *swings*, as if he were Merle or Lefty Frizzell—or Jimmie Rodgers.

Now Johnny invites Armstrong to do something he never did on the original record—to join him on Rodgers' end-of-verse yodels, at first, in this rehearsal, even using Jimmie's original "yodel-AY-dee-o" style.

On air, Cash is not quite as loose as he had been in that moment, but he is certainly looser than usual. The lyrics of the song underscore the special connection to Jimmie Rodgers, the song maker: "Standing on the corner," Cash belts, "I didn't mean no harm; along comes a PO-lice—and takes me by the arm."

In 1970, that might have been taken for a line Jimmie Rodgers wrote, or one more fragment lifted from floating blues verses of unknown origin, from some anonymous wandering minstrel, reaching Jimmie by that famously mysterious "folk process" of oral transmission. By now, however, diligent research into African-American music history by Lynn Abbott and Doug Serroff has uncovered the author of that line, one George Evans. It is from

his 1894 song "Standing on the Corner, Didn't Mean No Harm," which was picked up by professional blackface minstrel outfits, then ragtime piano players. It had even worked its way, no doubt by simple theft, into the structure and melody of "You've Been a Good Old Wagon, But You've Done Broke Down," a song eventually recorded by Bessie Smith. In fact, when recording the number "The Bridwell Blues" with the dimly recalled barrelhouse singer Nolan Welsh in Chicago in 1926, Armstrong, Bessie's sometime accompanist, had used essentially the same "Standing on the Corner" first verse. All of these were out in circulation before Jimmie used the line in this song they were recording.

Jimmie also reused narrative ideas he had recorded in his own lasting version of "Frankie and Johnny," in the verse about the woman showing up with a .44 pistol, raging for revenge. Cash now sings that verse, too; he had already had a hit himself with an updated reading of Jimmie's version of the much-traveled nineteenth-century ballad.

But it is not, in the long run, the words that matter most on the Johnny Cash–Louis Armstrong recreation of the 1930 duet; it is that broadcast moment when they get to the yodel. Cash brings all of the ego and pugnacity and sheer energy Jimmie had to the "yodel-ay-dee, yodel-ay-hee hee"; and Armstrong joins him, not with a matching yodel, but with his own joyous, gravelly, patented "Oh, yeah-ahzzzz." We are privileged to witness these two hyperarticulate nonverbal moans blending into the sound of American music calling across time, out from the Ryman, from TV Land to our house.

In that moment, in that sound, there came Jimmie Rodgers—the transcendent entertainer who understood his audience, understood them not by what he learned or heard *about* them, but by what he shared with them, elementally. Armstrong and Cash had, together, summoned up the innovator who had injected his own wit, rhythm, sexuality, ego, aggression, and love of performing itself into the bloodstream of most every sort of popular American music that might be called "rooted." Whether that music would, over time, come to be labeled country, rock and roll, bluegrass, blues, western, jazz, or American pop, wherever there was space for music of the body and heart, not just of the spirit and the head, Jimmie Rodgers would be there.

If we put on a Jimmie Rodgers record today—and they are all in circulation—experiencing his music directly, without baggage, can seem difficult; we have to make that connection despite time, despite changing fashion, despite countless interpretations since his day exerting their force on how we understand it. Time can be estranging, things can be missed, and the very power of the musical variations Jimmie Rodgers' music has spawned

has, by now, changed our notions of what's "hot" or "cool" or "cheesy" or "edgy" or "smart."

The elements Jimmie Rodgers and his many disciples introduced into the popular music we hear in the twenty-first century are so embedded in our cultural DNA that Jimmie's musical proximity can be obscured. Tracking and reuniting eighty years' worth of the scattered, mutant sequences of that cultural DNA may serve to reconstruct Jimmie Rodgers as the contemporary he is, live and whole and ready simply to be heard. It would be a summoning not unlike that accomplished by the Man in Black and Satchmo on that night in 1970, now as many years distant from us as they were from Jimmie's day—halfway back to Jimmie, halfway home.

Select Soundtrack

- **Jimmie Rodgers, with Louis Armstrong and Lil Hardin:** "Blue Yodel No. 9" (Victor, July 16, 1930).
- **Louis Armstrong:** *Louis "Country and Western" Armstrong* (Avco-Embassy Records LP, 1970; out of print).
- **Louis Armstrong and Johnny Cash:** "Blue Yodel No. 9," video as broadcast October 1970, ABC TV. The video duet itself became commercially available on the DVD compilation *The Best of the Johnny Cash TV Show* (Columbia Music Video, 2007).

Florida, 1925: Above, Jimmie, in his natural habitat, a pool hall/barber shop—and with his mandolin, at lower right, in a traveling show hawking DyanShine boot polish.

one

The Man Who Walked into Southern Show Business

We are dealing with a mystery, a mystery about continuing, transforming power. How could a man who performed so briefly, more than seventy-five years ago, have produced tones, tunes, and themes that have attracted and moved so many people for so long? How did he happen, in that short span, to originate the path for "up from down home" American roots music stardom? How did he become the very model for the way American roots music stars could rise to the level of popular heroes ever since—for Hank Williams, for Johnny Cash, for Elvis Presley and, very likely, for somebody new showing up on your music playlist of choice today?

How could an unwealthy, unhealthy, untrained man seemingly from nowhere create a musical legacy so sturdy and broadly understandable that, as we will see, it has worked its way across the globe? What is it in what he did and the music he made that has caused him to be claimed as "one of us" by schools of American popular music that seem to inhabit different worlds, speaking different languages to mutually exclusive audiences? Jimmie Rodgers is acknowledged as a defining, essential artist by the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the American Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Blues Hall of Fame, and by the musical shrines, museums, and governors of several American states. He has been a source for both '30s showband tunes by the Jack Hylton Orchestra and Lonnie Donegan's '50s skiffle in central London—and for pop cowboy tunes from Sammy Ngako in central Africa. Seventy-five years after his passing, you can find Jimmie

Rodgers claimed as a source of personal inspiration by anyone from a shy, buttoned-down, upright bluegrass picker to a leather-clad psychobilly shock rocker—and both would have their reasons.

With this abundance of acceptance, Jimmie has been identified from his day to ours by a string of avatar-style nicknames as varied as those of the Greek gods—or, somewhat more recently, of that "Hardest-Working Man in Show Business/Soul Brother Number One/Mr. Dynamite," James Brown. He was regularly tagged, if not exactly identified, as the "Singing Brakeman," but you are not alone if you can not say precisely what a brakeman did for a living, or what it meant to his audiences that this singer had been one. He is "America's Blue Yodeler," but, almost from the instant in 1927 that his music first got onto records, appreciation for him was never much hampered by national borders. The "blue" references his connection to Mississippi blues and to hot, syncopated African-American sounds in general—daring and thrillingly new for much of his audience. It also hints at the suggestive, sexual aspect of what his audiences took to be "blue," as in "blue humor," and better still, to be, in that ever-so-loaded American term, "racy." Yet "yodeler" evokes a vocal gargling art that does not suggest a sexy matinee idol to most audiences today, or anything even remotely hep, hip, or hip-hop.

This man Rodgers is also quite often, perhaps most often now, referred to as the "Father of Country Music." Yet there is no evidence that he ever thought of himself as merely some sort of niche genre singer, and he died unaware that he would be deemed pivotal for something called "country music."

So who was this performer who could be so many things for so many?

For decades after his death in 1933, even the most basic facts about Jimmie Rodgers' life before stardom were obscured by many misleading tales about his background, his intentions, and his habits. The truth as we know it today was first seriously researched and brought together in clarifying detail in the late '70s.

James Charles Rodgers was born on September 8, 1897, in Pine Springs, Mississippi, not far from the rising railroad town of Meridian, an increasingly commercial, middle-class hub. His mother died before he was six years old, and his father, Aaron, was often away from home working as a railroad track maintenance and repair "section foreman." Without parents to restrict him, Jimmie led a sort of Huck Finn life in derby-hatted, pre–World War I Meridian, free to explore the young man's playground of barber shops, pool halls, and theaters, and to hobnob with the fast-talking salesmen, politicos, sportsmen, and gamblers that frequented them. He relished the silent cowboy movies of the Bronco Billy Anderson era, the trashy new magazines and newspapers, the wax cylinder recordings of ragtime songs, the passing medicine shows, and the "tent rep" traveling theatrical productions.

Under circus-style canvas tents, these theater companies journeyed all across the country and were now bringing, even into culturally conservative southern towns, sentimental melodramas of life's misfortunes and perilously sexual enticements, especially as seen in the interplay between rural and city folks. Tent rep shows had only lately begun to combine those dramas on their playbills with the pizzazz of up-to-date vaudeville specialty acts. Live southern shows were clearly broadening their scope beyond the strictly uplifting and purportedly educational lectures about mother, home, and heaven, which had for so many years been staples of the pious and popular Chautauqua circuit.

This thrillingly varied pre–World War I popular culture, imported from the big cities via the early mass media, was central to the forming of Jimmie Rodgers' sensibility and the music he made. In the words of a Tin Pan Alley number he would perform from early in his career, and eventually persuade the famously domesticated Carter Family to join him in singing on a 1931 recording, there could be, and probably often was, "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

By the age of twelve, Jimmie had attempted to stage a tent carnival of his own, and even took it on the road locally. He won first prize in an amateur contest for singing "Steamboat Bill" and "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home," commercial Tin Pan Alley songs. Both had been on hit records, and they concerned—somewhat prophetically, given what was to come—a hero of transportation and a footloose entertainer, respectively. Soon after, he ran away from home with a medicine show, having convinced the management, based on his amateur "experience," that he was a professional performer. He was already busy picking up ample numbers of girlfriends as a traveling showman, but also found time to pick up several stringed instruments: strumming mandolin and banjo in particular and, only secondarily, guitar. At that point, with the attractions of the show business life so clear to him, his father announced that Jimmie would be coming along with him to learn a legitimate, less frivolous trade, the rail-tending section crew work that he supervised. Jimmie's show business efforts were mostly put aside for the time being.

And so, for those track workers—who especially in the South were almost exclusively black—he would sometimes be that "little water boy" of his "Mule Skinner Blues." The novice, legend has it, would learn a range of songs from those African-American railroad men, the rail-adjusting "gandy dancers," though it is far from clear exactly which songs those might have been. To his first cousin Virginia Shine Harvey, a professional songwriter herself, Jimmie did describe learning instrumental skills from those coworkers, but examples researchers have had of gandy dancers' work chants seem

to be predecessors of the U.S. Army's "I don't know, but I've been told" marching drill shouts rather than any sort of popular song of the era.

As we will see, as Jimmie came to work on the trains, as a brakeman and in other capacities, and traveled between railroad jobs, hobo-style, himself, he inevitably encountered black hoboes along the way, as well as in the so-called hobo jungle encampments near the stations where hoboes of all races slept, ate, talked—and traded blues verses. But beyond these generalities, which he repeatedly discussed with interviewers in his own day, we can only speculate about what tunes Jimmie might have learned working on the railroad, whether they were blues, jug band–style folk jazz, ragtime, lowdown story song, or any other style. The very romance of the song-trading scenario may well have led to some exaggeration over the years about how many songs he learned in that place and from those amateur, some would say "folk," sources.

For the next few years he was employed in increasingly tough and challenging rail work, filling mainly short-term jobs as a flagman, a mechanic, a baggage man, and sometimes, indeed, as a brakeman, often on the run between Mississippi and New Orleans. On that musically rich run he also met and married his first wife, the eye-catching humdinger and alleged femme fatale Stella Kelley, when he was nineteen. The marriage would be short-lived, however, as Jimmie showed no signs of being able to support her in the manner in which she plainly intended to become accustomed. The couple did produce a daughter, Kathryn. For years, Jimmie would not even know of her existence, but Stella made sure to introduce father and long-lost daughter once he had achieved stardom, considerable income, and a new family.

During one of his stays back home in Meridian in 1920, Rodgers met and wed Carrie Williamson. She was the relatively innocuous daughter of a highly respectable, music-loving couple; her father was a fairly liberal, lighthearted local preacher. Carrie would alternately support Jimmie's pursuits and harangue him for his indulgences for the thirteen remaining years of his life. She was by his side from the very lean, even desperate years immediately following their marriage to the time of his recognition on the world stage and relative, if rapidly consumed, wealth. Carrie and Jimmie had two daughters: Anita, born in 1921, was a considerable focus of Jimmie's attention, heart, and, occasionally, his songs, particularly after the devastating sudden death of their second child, June Rebecca, only six months after her birth in 1923.

The Roaring Twenties, it should be recalled, hardly roared ahead with equal financial vigor everywhere; in the rural and small-town South, there were unmistakable signs of the oncoming Depression well before the 1929

stock market crash. Jimmie had a hard time finding railroad work, or any sort of work at all. In infrequent tent show appearances during this time, he would strum a banjo and feature Tin Pan Alley chestnuts like "The Man on the Flying Trapeze." To keep cash trickling in, he would often ride a train, hoboing to the end of the line, perhaps as far away as Texas, where temporary train work might be found again.

He lived in such unhealthy, unstable conditions for years, exacerbating a history of pulmonary illnesses that went back to age fifteen. In 1924, a weakened Jimmie was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a disease that was then quite common, widespread, and often fatal. Since his family members were fearful of infection, there were times Jimmie resided in a sanitarium, even when back in Meridian.

He never stayed in any sanitarium for long. To the characteristic wanderlust he had always demonstrated and to that constant search for work were added frequent trips made in hopes of aiding his own recuperation. Jimmie would take off to places, with or without the family, following the accepted (but, in fact, mistaken) medical wisdom that dry or high places were best for recovering—first west to Arizona, then northeast to the resort town of Asheville, North Carolina.

As time went on, he increasingly sought work as an entertainer, the work he had always favored, and which was his only real alternative to the train jobs so detrimental to his health. Out West, his railway bosses had started to complain about the time off he was taking to perform here and there, and yet he didn't really know how to turn show business into a full-time career. For a spell, he led a jazzy, pop-oriented working act that included horns in the band and Carrie's sister, Elsie McWilliams, at the piano. At dances just outside of Meridian, the group would play Charleston numbers like Gene Austin's "Why Do You Do Me Like You Do Do Do?" Rest, the one treatment likely to extend the life of a T.B. sufferer at the time, Jimmie would neither find nor pursue. His musical career was about to take hold.

Early in 1927, while working odd jobs in Asheville and performing briefly with some local musical acts, he met the Grant Brothers, the hard-driving core of an Eastern mountain-style string band, the Tenneva Ramblers. Jimmie talked his way into becoming their lead singer, and newly dubbed the Jimmie Rodgers Entertainers, the group performed at dances and made some well-received radio appearances over the ensuing months. They heard of a call from a Victor Records executive who was recording new talent in the Tennessee/Virginia border town of Bristol, the Grants' home territory, and headed there. At Bristol, that record executive, Ralph Peer, separated Jimmie and his Entertainers, recognizing them as two very different sorts of acts.

At those now-famed Bristol sessions, the once-again solo Jimmie recorded two songs with guitar for Peer on August 4, 1927. This recording of an old lullaby and a freshly concocted, vaguely antiwar song about a young woman's loss of her soldier sweetheart did not have the instant life-changing effect Jimmie had hoped for. It did not even elicit the excited response from Victor that he had expected. So, in November, Jimmie took Carrie to New York City, checked into a fine hotel, went to the label's offices, and announced that he was ready for his next big session. Peer was so impressed with the sheer boldness of the demand that he set up a session for just a few days later, down at Victor's studios in Camden, New Jersey. It was there, on the last day of the month, that Jimmie Rodgers of Meridian, Mississippi, recorded the tough, suggestive, even murderous twelve-bar blues he had been saving up for this moment. "T for Texas" featured infectious, propulsive guitar runs and surprising, audience-pleasing line-ending "oh-de-lay" yodels; Peer duly retitled the song "Blue Yodel." It was an immediate smash. In that day, sales figures were tightly guarded, and those that were announced were often exaggerated for effect but, by some informed estimates, "Blue Yodel" sold a million copies—indisputably many hundreds of thousands. Jimmie Rodgers was suddenly, in an instant, among the top recording stars of his day.

According to Carrie's memoir, she had begged him, and begged producer Ralph Peer, too, to record that breakthrough blue yodel at the first session at Bristol, but Jimmie had held the song back. Thinking strategically, he had figured that some decision-makers would find the lyric about "poor Thelma," whom the singer casually informs us he has shot "just to see her jump and crawl," a bit too rough—distracting attention from his singing qualities and solo instrumental fills, the talents he wanted to make sure they noticed.

Vocally, Jimmie could hardly have been mistaken for any of the acts that were under contract at Victor Records, or other important record labels, in 1927. Yet, from the first, he showed himself to be a performer of his time, absorbing into his singing, whether consciously or not, elements from a wide range of sources. Jimmie had a substantial record collection, Carrie later told us in her memoir, no doubt including popular hits and jazzy blues that he had studied and analyzed in detail. She reported specifically that he had not been very fond of much material then being put out for the fledgling hillbilly market.

His own singing on-mike was loose and comfortable, closely akin to the way he spoke. At times it was nearly conversational, and he would take it further, breaking in with spoken asides of the "Play it, boy!" variety. His style contrasted sharply with the old school, declamatory style of vocalizing that was still holding on in pop operetta, early Broadway shows, and revues but

was rapidly being washed away in popular recordings. A growing number of record buyers, and, at the same time, of radio and sound film audiences, too, looked for something that seemed to stem more directly from the American vernacular—and that sounded more intimate, not designed to be boomed across a concert hall.

A technology-driven vocal revolution was taking place, and Jimmie was not alone in offering this new lower-key style. The better of the contemporary white crooners were singing "relaxed American" as well, singers like Nick Lucas, "Ukulele Ike" (Cliff Edwards, later known as the voice of Jiminy Cricket), and Rodgers' friend-to-be Gene Austin. Those hit-makers, too, knew how to sing into the microphone with intimacy in their phrasing. They knew, to some degree, the musical traditions and "heart songs" left over from the minstrel show and early parlor song publishing days. And, like Jimmie, they could add distinctive, vaudeville-derived idiosyncrasies and gimmicks to their vocal lines. None of those pop singers, though, happened to use yodels, or train whistle noises, or, more importantly, had digested as well as Jimmie had the sounds and attitudes from the growing professional and amateur blues world.

Jimmie differed crucially from those other raccoon-coat-era pop stars in that vocally, you always knew—literally—where he was coming from. The speech from which his singing extended was Mississippi speech, not just in references, but also in sound. On record, his accent is particularly light, sweet, and most of all present—not diluted or eradicated. In popular music, a legitimate, place-derived accent would be basic to the very notion of "rootedness"; and a rooted pop star Jimmie would be. When in "T for Texas" he rather charmingly loses a few middle-of-the-word *r*'s to rhyme a very liquid *barrel* with *gal*, you can no more miss that Jimmie Rodgers is from the humid, small-town Deep South than you could miss that Paul Simon was a guy from urban New York when he dropped a final *r* to rhyme "naked light I saw" with a jagged "maybe more" on a hit of forty years later.

The contents of Jimmie's lyrics, tied to his own history, his home region, and his working-class experiences, were also fundamentally different from those of his competitors in the middle-class-oriented pop market. His chosen references were important in that they spoke directly to the traditional, downhome, downscale segment of his audience, even as he sought broad popular appeal. You will not find his less-rooted competitors fitting mentions of *lard* into their songs. From that starting point, defined as much by who he was as what he was aiming to be, began the making of a pop roots music performer.

Perhaps most important, Rodgers' performing style was about emotional immediacy. He sang the lyrics of a song—whether tough or sentimental,

comic or sad, narrative or mood evoking—according to the meanings of the lines and verses, communicating the drama of the story as it unfolded, word by word. This set him apart from most all pre-Bristol southern rural singers, and from most of the acts recorded at those celebrated sessions themselves.

Southern rural singers generally came out of church, ballad-singing, and fiddle band traditions in which singing the set meter of a song was preferred to any dramatic interpretation of the lyrics. In these stylistic traditions, a singer virtually never "broke" a line just to emphasize some point or moment in the narrative. In addition, those same early hillbilly acts were often uncomfortable in the newfangled recording situation, which resulted, in many cases, in the sort of stiff, affectless singing that Greil Marcus would famously describe as the sound of an "old, weird America." It was that lack of narrative drama and emotional clarity that Jimmie would tell his wife he so disliked about many of those early hillbilly records, not their regional references. His own records would sound very different.

In his 1974 overview of great, innovative American popular singers, the classically-trained jazz enthusiast and musicologist Henry Pleasants considered Jimmie Rodgers in the same terms as Bing Crosby and Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole, and compared his ability to sing "wistfully" to that of Billie Holiday, Judy Garland, Édith Piaf, and Hank Williams. Pleasants also singled out Rodgers' speech-derived singing for special comment. Jimmie's "range is short," he elaborated, "hardly more than an octave and a third," but he praised Jimmie's ability to swoop beyond that range with his falsetto yodels, staying on pitch through the leaps. "What grew on me was not so much the voice as what was being done with it—the phrasing, the coloring, the gentle slurring, the lightest and briefest of grace notes. Jimmie wanted the listener to get not only the words in the story they told, but also the feel of the story, [and to do so he would take] rhythmic liberties that are the very essence of *jazz*."

More recently, in contrasting Jimmie's vocals to those of others captured in the Bristol sessions, music analyst and theorist Thomas Townsend found that in his approach to "The Soldier's Sweetheart" and "Sleep Baby Sleep," "in addition to employing an ornamented singing style, Rodgers incorporated drama by altering the melody slightly as the song unfolded, overriding the predictable repetitions typical to the traditional old-time style. In fact, Rodgers never sang any two verses with exactly the same melodic line." In general, Townsend added, "Rodgers frustrates expectations of a cyclic pattern, upsetting listener expectations," generating real drama and, he concluded, beginning the altering of what would be the country music vocabulary, right there, on his very first sides.

Roy Acuff, the "King of Country," who expressed decidedly mixed feelings about Jimmie Rodgers and his music throughout his own storied career, commented succinctly on Jimmie's vocal impact in country music: "I think Jimmie was the first one on record that ever really went *commercial* with voice." In this 1972 conversation with the historian (and latter-day singing cowboy) Doug Green, Roy was addressing two of Jimmie's innovations: his refocusing of what is important when you sing—bringing the emotional heart of the song home to the audience, not just relating the words of the story—and his putting the solitary singer up in front of the group. It would take some time for the Grand Ole Opry, with singing stars such as Acuff himself, to feature acts that would do both.

From Jimmie's day to this, you can encounter listeners and players who take him to task for some of these very musical attributes—going "off rhythm," adding a syllable, or inserting an instrumental phrase—often with the suggestion that he did not know how to sing and play the song straight ahead. These sorts of critiques tend to emanate from journeyman dance band, ensemble-oriented players—sidemen in Texas swing bands, or pyrotechnic-picking-oriented bluegrass bands, for example. Of course, you could find precisely the same sort of griping about Jimi Hendrix and Charlie Parker as instrumentalists, or about unpredictable singers from Mac Wiseman to Bob Dylan, in interviews with backup band members who did not understand what the groove-breakers were up to.

Nobody puts Jimmie Rodgers' guitar playing, his instrumental focus once he turned to recording, in the class of the instrumental innovation of Hendrix or Parker. He did, however, introduce surprisingly bold flat-picking chords and runs in both his occasional longer breaks—see the original recording of "Blue Yodel No. 8 (Mule Skinner Blues)," for instance—and, most characteristically, between lines, verses, and phrases, inserted and used for emphasis, much like his yodels.

Doc Watson, one of the most subtle and most envied of acoustic flat-picking guitar players, responds today to such critiques of Jimmie's sense of time: "Jim played the best he could, because he hadn't studied music and timing . . . but I'll put it this way: some of the first guitar licks I learned were what he was doing. I may have added a few more notes in the runs, but I loved what he was doing with the guitar. He wasn't a Chet [Atkins], or somebody like that, but he played *what* he played and he played it well. His funny way of putting a bunch of chords in, in certain songs, even between the lines sometimes, which he'd then get back on, to sing and pick—I kind of liked that. He was one of the fellahs who laid down some groundwork in guitar playing; most people never realize that—those basic runs and things,

and also some of the things he did later in his career—because he got better, you know, on the guitar."

And there are some telling 2007 comments on Rodgers' sense of time from Hoyt "Slim" Bryant, too. Back in the day, Slim himself added sophisticated, jazz-influenced, Eddie Lang–like single note guitar runs to some of Jimmie's best records, including the lush "Miss the Mississippi and You," the vaudeville-like "Peach Pickin' Time Down in Georgia," and the proto-country "No Hard Times." Slim also served as a sort of translator between Jimmie and chart-bound, trained orchestral players during a 1932 session in New York. At age one hundred as these words are written, he still plays, the last one known to be with us who played with Jimmie Rodgers.

"As a guitar player," Slim says, Jimmie did well what he did. If you heard him strum just a few bars before he started to sing, you'd know it was *him*, and when he started to sing, he did it in his own way. If you had played with him a little bit, you would look out for that. I wouldn't say it was a disadvantage to him [his timing], because it was his style. If he wanted to stick in an extra bar or something—which he did—then you had to be conscious of that, and play along with him. I've backed up some of the better musicians and singers—and what you do is, you go with *them*. If he sticks in an extra two beats or something, you'd just better be in there with him."

So Jimmie Rodgers showed up at recording studios, plucked from obscurity, with considerable, identifiable, usefully idiosyncratic performing talents. But an inventory of his skills no more explains the breadth of his impact than do the details of his early life. What we need to explore is how Jimmie Rodgers came to be understood as he was by both his listeners and his many admiring interpreters. What chords did he strike that kept on striking? What did he seem to them to be and say? What, in short, did they see in him that would make him a prototypical pop roots music star and, for many, even a hero?

The modern concept of popular stardom was just taking hold at the time Rodgers reached his public. Systems of mass communication were swiftly developing that would enable a Charles Lindbergh, a Babe Ruth, a Rudolph Valentino, or an Albert Einstein to become famous in ways in which nobody had ever been famous before; they could become household names. For one thing, with newsreels, newspaper and magazine photos, movie appearances, and faster travel that made possible more, better-publicized live shows, you could *see* them.

Almost every description of Jimmie Rodgers given by those who knew him or simply saw him perform mentions his star-quality, how people's attention inevitably went right to him. Rodgers' personal electricity and even sex appeal may puzzle some as they encounter his old photos, here in another

century. Clearly, a good deal of that power was based on his winning, grinning, backslapping charm, but he was sharp and even-featured enough to be considered attractive in his day. Especially when photographed with the right hat, he seemed just the sort of laid-back, smirking type that was considered rakish and sexy through the early '30s. Think Fred Astaire or even Bing Crosby—and Jimmie was a southern variation, at that.

Scarce photos of Jimmie in his natural state—small and frail, balding and with studious-looking glasses—such as the early shots taken with the Entertainers, show that his more familiar hail-fellow-well-met photos, let alone any that suggest a rougher and rowdier side, required some preparation. Jimmie paired the instincts of a showman with an understanding of the newfound importance of public image and the benefits of being able to take on and adjust to a variety of roles. He would deliberately add to the array of nicknames he was given still more popular images with which to face the public: a bowler-hatted, man-about-town rounder; a decked-out cowboy; a working stiff; a wealthy, successful recording star; and more. As both Frosty the Snowman and the actor–film director and country star Dwight Yoakam found out, there can be some very useful mojo in donning the right hat.

Jimmie Rodgers showed remarkable ease and interest in moving through an array of public images and sounds. This protean, shape-shifting quality, and the ways it could be put to work, would be marks of pop superstars decades later. For Johnny Cash, there would be a series of themed "working man" or "cowboy" or "prison-bound" albums. For Elvis Presley, there would be movies that placed him in the very settings created in Rodgers records—from the jailhouse, to the army, to New Orleans, Hawaii, and beyond. Eventually, there would be the virtually album-by-album visual and aural makeover of Bob Dylan—or even, if you will, David Bowie. But these transformations for novelty and appeal were working for and tested by Jimmie Rodgers *then*.

The multiple hats he donned were precisely right for the time, and surely deliberately so. There is a telling scene in a popular, classic comedy shot in fledgling Hollywood just as Jimmie arrived at Bristol to record—Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Junior*. In fact, the entire film works as an excellent introduction to the transitional, volatile world in which Jimmie Rodgers succeeded. The hero's girlfriend is a flapper in a fast new roadster, but his dad is still a working steamboat captain—named, of course, for "Steamboat Bill," the hero of the very song Jimmie first sang in public.

In a sequence of particular interest to us, Keaton, as the ukulele-playing, duded-up, overurbanized, northern-educated Junior, has been taken to find a replacement for the beret his dad will not abide; he looks for headgear that will be more fitting back home down here in Mississippi. So Junior checks out a series of alternatives—a cap with a big visor, a straw boater, a derby,

a cowboy hat, a rakish Panama—a collection that might accurately be labeled "image-building headgear of Jimmie Rodgers in review."

The culturally estranged father and son in the film find common ground when Dad lands in the jailhouse (now) and the son attempts to spring him—while singing the most well-known part of the early country music hit "The Prisoner Song," the part that goes "If I had the wings of an angel." (The lyrics have been conveniently posted on the wall outside the cell so we can watch Keaton sing along with them in silence!) Steamboat Bill and Junior will soon be brought back together by a natural disaster, a tornado in which no sports car or steamboat is spared. Jimmie Rodgers' career takes hold in that starkly transitional time and place, where the distance between rural subsistence and living securely, in style, and with full modern conveniences is not great—and new middle-class security flimsy enough that a single act of nature can blow it away.

Keaton, like Rodgers, a vaudevillian with a great fondness for trains, as was well demonstrated in several famed feature films, built his basic world-beloved character on two attributes—stoic resilience and surprising reserves of inventiveness in the face of real trouble. Keaton had his own whistling past the graveyard sensibility. One dark comedy short ended with him dead, his most celebrated, characteristic hat, the flattened porkpie, left on his gravestone, a cold-blooded image that always evokes a final laugh. It certainly invites comparison with such startling, vivid, wisecracking descriptions of death by tuberculosis in Rodgers' songs as "they plant you in the ground" and "put you on your back and throw that mud down in your face."

It would be oversimplifying matters—and underestimating Jimmie Rodgers' potential impact with audiences—simply to note that he could be Keaton-like. His music and image were just as readily comparable to the other two great silent clowns of that time, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd.

There are certainly enough songs about hoboes and lonesome wanderers in Jimmie Rodgers' repertoire (and derived from experience, at that), to evoke Chaplin's "Little Tramp," the down-and-out, often homeless, yet resilient outsider. There is the undiluted sentiment in Rodgers' story songs to evoke a sentimental Chaplin masterpiece such as *The Kid* as well.

And yet, as stardom struck, Jimmie would show himself to be, in image and song, *also* an ambitious, sometimes cocky, small city up-and-comer, a man who went for big cars and big houses—and let you know he owned them. That was precisely the screen persona of the young American go-getter, and eventual real-life multimillionaire and Shriner potentate, Harold Lloyd. Rodgers, too, would happily be made an honorary Shriner and Texas Ranger in real life, and in those photos where he has his glasses on, he even looks like the very comfortable Lloyd.

These were three differentiated, competing personas with which three world-class movie comics competed against each other, each winning affection and acclaim and building a celebrated career. It says much about the potential universality of Jimmie Rodgers that in him we can easily detect the themes and attributes of all three at once. Casual, natural-seeming inclusiveness, even of traits that can seem outright contradictory, is a special and unusual capability, but Jimmie Rodgers had it. The way he made use of it would have consequences for his acceptance by audiences and by other performers, both in his day and in ours. Yet a musical performer's sheer range, inclusiveness, and adaptability did not—and do not—automatically make for lasting impact and broad acceptance.

Consider Jimmie's contemporary Carson Robison, a singer of considerable talent and charm, who knew how to genre-hop but never achieved Jimmie's level of traction. Robison recorded "old southern favorite plantation ballads," then moved on to pop, blues, and jazz, adapted himself to '40s cowboy harmonies in the style of the Sons of the Pioneers, and lived long enough to take stabs at rock 'n' roll. But he never was closely associated, in fact or in the public imagination, with the lifestyles and history implied by any of those genres and never discovered a strongly identifiable vocal or instrumental style to bring to them. No one would say of any later singer, "Boy, he reminds me of Carson Robison."

Jimmie Rodgers was a man who tended to say "yes" to opportunities, and he had an unmistakable style to imprint on everything he sang. But he was not working to become a pop everyman for everybody. There were places his sensibility, his style, and his song content could not appropriately go, and he was more effective with his audiences for knowing it. This trainman knew where to get off.

Crooner Gene Austin was southern-raised like Jimmie and had been, by all measures, poorer to begin with. Then, from the mid-'20s through the early '30s, he had enormous popular success with his records of "My Blue Heaven" and the self-penned "(Look Down That) Lonesome Road." By all reports, Austin certainly drank as much as and probably substantially more than Jimmie did and appears to have had more fleeting amorous adventures than Jimmie ever did. When Jimmie was away from home without explanation, as would often be the case, "I was out with Gene Austin" was, according to a bemused Gene himself, a regular cover story that he offered to Mrs. Rodgers.

Parts of each man's repertoire were interchangeable: Austin's hit "Carolina Moon" and Jimmie's "Mississippi Moon," or Austin's "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" and Jimmie's "My Blue-Eyed Jane" bore easy comparison, as did, thematically at least, Austin's suburban smash "My Blue Heaven" and

Jimmie's atypically domestic "Home Call." All of these songs were contemporary pop, but their makers' careers and audiences were tellingly different.

Though quite often explicitly southern, Austin's songs consistently referenced the modern world of the New South, tending to target a more urban, increasingly upscale audience. Once Gene Austin hit it big with those golf sweater audiences across the country and had opportunities to work in the movies singing and appearing with Mae West and to explore other enticing mainstream endeavors, he virtually never looked back. He had headed uptown as fast as he could and stayed there, performing from the early '20s until his death in 1969, most familiarly in top hat and tails.

Jimmie was by no means antimodern or antiurban, as many in country music would eventually be, but his own sounds and lyrics remained varied enough and determinedly rooted enough that they never cut him off from where he had come from, or from whom he had been. The folks back home were not forgotten, never became "them" to him, no matter how high he would rise. As adventurous as it would get, Jimmie's music would always be about and for this original "us."

He would also carefully avoid appearing to be so backwoods that it limited him. For contrast, there is the case of Charlie Poole. A hit on his own terms, Charlie and his hot, talented, jazz-influenced stringband, the North Carolina Ramblers, always sounded rural and always assumed and found a rural audience. Charlie got hold of old Tin Pan Alley songs and shaped them for contemporary country folk, driving the songs harder and faster. He would modernize old minstrel and "coon" songs and old rural fiddle and banjo tunes and, in doing so, sold a lot of records in the 1925–30 period. He came up with such songs as "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down," "White House Blues," and "If I Lose, I Don't Care" that would last, picked up by bluegrassers in the '40s and a few countrified rockers later on. In Poole's modernization of roots material in ways that gave them staying power, there are certainly grounds for comparison with Jimmie Rodgers.

But Charlie Poole's musical attack and sound only scored with the southern rural segment of the '20s musical audience. He was confined to a niche in his time, and his music has survived primarily in the old-time music field, which came into its own during the '60s folk revival, taking hold among a limited, specialized audience looking for stringband music older and simpler than modernized bluegrass. Charlie was not exactly born to reach out beyond where he started—and he sounded that way.

Volatile and even violent, Poole may have made as many enemies as Jimmie Rodgers made friends, allies, and advocates. He may well have had

the talent and originality to become a sort of darker foil to the superstar Jimmie—a Jerry Lee to Jimmie's Elvis, a Rolling Stones to his Beatles—but Charlie's response to the broader world his music had tentatively begun to reach was disastrously in character for him.

Faced with a motion picture contract, Jimmie Rodgers' style would no doubt have been to offer a few suggestions for incorporating songs into the script, to check out his costume options, and to cooperate with producers' plans for the picture. He would, in fact, go on to star in an unusual, widely distributed musical short of his own in 1929.

In 1931, Charlie Poole, digesting the news that he, too, had been offered a chance to be in a film, responded characteristically—drinking himself to death in a binge that went on, as Hank Sapoznik has detailed, for thirteen weeks. Prodigious, yes, and a dramatic ending for a sort of country outlaw model, no doubt, but probably a poor move for extending and broadening a musical legacy.

If Jimmie was not the ultimate self-destructive outlaw, there are also important, defining ways Jimmie's music and career differed from those of the domesticated and nearly as famed original Carter Family. The two acts recorded together a little, and both, reasonably enough, would eventually be deemed progenitors of commercial country music. The sentiment in their songs, as in Jimmie's, was directly expressed, without reservation, and the lives of rural people were reflected in their lyrics. With A. P. Carter leading the way in developing their material, the Carters, like Jimmie, introduced new songs and updated and reshaped older ones from varied sources for their own time. And in the rhythmic, elegant, and highly adaptable guitar accompaniments of Maybelle Carter, the act found its most important, most influential element of musical modernization. Her driving accompaniment made their records not just slight variants on traditional folk sounds, but also a basis and starting point of a whole strain of guitar-driven commercial roots music ever since.

There were crucial differences between the Carters' music and Jimmie's, however—and between the two acts. The Carters were not the act Roy Acuff would deem "the first to go commercial" with *their* singing. There remained in their rural harmonies much of the old-style tone, derived from the church and the front porch. The Carters offered the striking lead vocals of Sara Carter and Maybelle's instrumental inventiveness, but their records would not feature the more urbane stress on by-the-lyric vocal phrasing and varied instrumentation that Jimmie's would. Their music would eventually, quite understandably, be claimed by the preservationist folk world as much as by commercial country music.

The Carters' material did evolve and respond to market trends; their records would include blues, a share of far-from-domesticated outlaw and hobo songs, and even new, popular country hits such as "You Are My Sunshine" on their mass-audience-seeking Border Radio broadcasts. Yet the central attraction of their music was its familiar, particularly domestic, and domesticated sound, perfectly reflective of the family's own impulse to stay close to home.

While Jimmie Rodgers hit the road to play shows and extend his fame in commercial venues of notable size and impact, with press accounts covering his moves along the way, the Carters, as their biographers Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg have recounted, rarely ventured far from their home except to record. Their hit records notwithstanding, they were still playing in church socials and school auditoriums. Later in the '30s, virtually national Border Radio broadcasts would establish them more widely, but those were still live, on-the-radio rather than in-person performances, which kept the Carters at more than an arm's length from their audience.

What particularly distinguished the Carters' music from Jimmie's was the substantial and unremitting presence of downhome religion in their sound and attitude. Their appearances at those small, local venues were preceded by a celebrated announcement that their program would be "morally good." Jimmie Rodgers made no such promise, and the songs he performed almost entirely avoided moralizing themes. He eschewed hymns and religious material almost entirely and regularly ventured into material that spoke frankly of sex, violence, crime, divorce, and other facts of the listeners' lives, pushing well past the period's limits of church-defined propriety.

With Sara and A. P.'s separation and their divorce in 1936, the Carters were living a much more complicated and modern life than their public recognized, but the central public identity of the family, like their sound itself, remained fixed, domesticated, and self-constrained. Jimmie Rodgers and the Carters were both commercial acts, and wildly successful with the audience for what was later termed "hillbilly" and then "country" music, but Jimmie was fundamentally freer, and fundamentally different. You could decide to cut a risqué vaudeville number like "Everybody Does It in Hawaii" with Jimmie, and it would be funny and sly and terrific—but that was as far outside the Carters' range as hymn singing was outside of his. By comparison, Jimmie looked, sounded, and behaved like a hellion.

Asked once to sing before a Bible study group in Florida, Jimmie offered even that assemblage not a hymn, but one of the songs he performed most regularly, the then often-censored, disreputable, cold-blooded murder ballad "Frankie and Johnny." Jimmie's lasting version of the storied "gutter

song," as the genre was known, concluded with the comment "this story has no moral; this story has no end," borrowed from the recording by vaudevillian Frank Crumit, but all the more provocative in such a context. It was daring to be singing the thing in front of polite mixed company down South at all, let alone before that audience.

Only recently, Mae West had tried to resurrect the old song up North on Broadway in her musical show *Diamond Lil* and been arrested multiple times for performing it. Ms. West's regular portrayals and personifications of the retro-sexy Gay Nineties and Jimmie's regular use of musical allusions to that same era were not, finally, such different strategies. The nostalgic package was supposed to make the daring less threatening—and, at least sometimes, it did.

"Frankie and Johnny," sung by Jimmie Rodgers throughout the South, was also being employed as a provocation on the more experimental end of the New York stage, as adapted by celebrated writer-critic Edmund Wilson in a surreal, freak show of an avant-garde musical, *Him*. The show's book was by poet e. e. cummings, and the song was functioning for its more-or-less bohemian audience as an example of unleashed and, unsurprisingly, specifically African-American passion—interrupted and shut down on cue every night by representatives of the Society for the Contraception of Vice. This is some indication of the transgressive, undomesticated musical company Jimmie was keeping circa 1928, knowingly or not, and it was not company the Carter Family could or wanted to share.

Jimmie Rodgers could venture successfully at will into the strikingly varied territories of Gene Austin, Charlie Poole, and the Carter Family—as drastically different as those acts were from each other and as distinct as he was from all three. He broke through boundaries, working both sides of fences the marketplace worked to raise, but he also tempered his rule-breaking tendencies with a natural inclination toward moderation. He seemed neither too hot and threatening nor too remote and cold, but just right for the growing, modernizing audience still based down home—and from that well-placed, distinguishing home base he could reach out to charm broader audiences.

In one engaging performing package, Jimmie, in effect, split the difference between two archetypal, if seemingly contradictory, sorts of frisky southern boys. He could seem by his very nature a rambling rounder-to-be, a genuine outsider and antihero in the Huck Finn mold; "a stranger in your town," as one of his songs had it, radically estranged from the polite, middle-class society around him in real ways and ready to "take off for the territories" out West rather than be forcibly civilized. But there was Tom Sawyer in him, too; the essentially harmless town rascal destined to grow up to be the

local auto dealer, civic booster, and vice president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, well married to the judge's daughter with, perhaps, an eye for the ladies—naughty, but no outlaw.

Representing himself as both of these at once was to propose a brand-new public model, a new synthesis. Jimmie Rodgers showed up, in his day, as the sort of popular roots music hero Kris Kristofferson described so many years later in his song "The Prophet," "a walking contradiction, partly truth, partly fiction"—at once an edgy outsider antihero and an ambitious successful star, an insider mastering show business. And so, too, did Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley, and Hank Williams, and Bob Dylan.

Jimmie Rodgers sang convincingly of both poor little orphan children and vamps; from the standpoint of drifting hoboes and of the enforcers who would generally toss them from the trains; of sexual conquests and personal defeats; of the shackled and of the freewheeling; of women who were tough, rough mistreaters and others who were the sweetest girls in the world; of lonesome strangers riding the blinds (or horses) and of happy dads returning to a happy nuclear family; of the possibilities of life and of impending, looming death.

Sometimes he did so with sounds that titillated yet scared some of his audience, sometimes with the sentimental sounds of old parlor sheet music. He found a new way to evoke the freedom in the blues while still deploying the safe, old "Hot Town" sounds that had been daring a generation before—employing anything from his guitar to fiddles and horns. And he would be accepted doing all of that.

Through him, vicariously, you could identify things you wanted in your own life, perhaps furtively, things that somebody was finally singing about. You could go places you could never quite dare or afford to go, hear of worldly things (with a grin attached) with which you would like to appear to be familiar—and all without leaving the safety of your own home. As the monument erected in his home town of Meridian would eventually say so eloquently, "We listened. We understood."

He walked into southern show business not only as one man stepping out from among his own audience to make good, "one of us" writ large, but as an amiable, available magnet for his audience's hopes, fears, and fantasies. Rodgers was equipped to spotlight personality elements as varied as the hats he donned, as catchy as the musical phrases, lyric lines, and riffs he provided. Seemingly from out of nowhere, he had scored an enormous early hit with "Blue Yodel," in an explosive meeting of audience desires and what this unknown performer had brought to the show. Jimmie Rodgers was on his way to becoming a roots music pop star.

Select Soundtrack

(Note: throughout these soundtracks, all albums/compilations are CDs unless otherwise noted.)

Original and Fundamental Jimmie Rodgers Recordings

The recordings of Jimmie Rodgers, both the original releases and the often important alterative takes, are heard at their cleanest and most complete in the six-CD box set *Jimmie Rodgers: The Singing Brakeman* (Bear Family, 1992), accompanied by a book with bio-essay and detailed discography by Nolan Porterfield.

The 1991 career-spanning Rodgers set on Rounder Records, sold as eight individual, chronological CDs, is of slightly inferior sonic quality, though derived from the same sources; it is no longer officially in print but can readily be found on the used CD market, and offers the possibility of picking and choosing which CDs interest you. The five-CD set *Jimmie Rodgers: Recordings 1927–1933* (JSP, 2005), is a reasonable lower-cost, near-completist alternative. There are numerous shorter Jimmie Rodgers hits compilations, and many of his most familiar sides are also available individually online.

The Bristol Sessions (Country Music Foundation, 1991) remains the best way to hear the first Rodgers recordings in context, alongside the Carter Family, Ernest Stoneman, the Tenneva Ramblers, and others recorded in that summer of '27 and fall of '28 by Ralph Peer. The Rodgers cuts are also included in the shorter *RCA Country Legends: The Bristol Sessions*.

Let Me Be Your Sidetrack: The Influence of Jimmie Rodgers, a unique six-CD set (Bear Family Records, 2008), traces Rodgers' musical influences from his day to ours by bringing together versions of his songs as performed by others from a variety of genres and nationalities.

Tenneva Ramblers: "The Longest Train I Ever Saw" is on *The Bristol Sessions* CD; "If I Die a Railroad Man" is on the Juneberry Web site.

The Grant Brothers: "Tell It to Me" is on *Good for What Ails You: Music of the Medicine Shows* (Old Hat, 2005). All three are among a dozen Tenneva Ramblers/Grant Brothers sides on the box set *Worried Blues* (JSP, 2005).

Key Contemporary Alternatives to the Jimmie Rodgers Style

- **Charlie Poole:** The box set *You Ain't Talkin' to Me: Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music* (Columbia/Legacy, 2005) includes Poole's songs as interpreted by earlier artists and comprehensive history and commentary by the knowledgeable annotator Hank Sapoznik.
- **Gene Austin:** Three more or less available collections of crooner Austin's southern-identified pop are *Gene Austin: Singer and Songwriter* (Collector's Choice Music, 2002), *The Voice of the Southland* (ASV/Living Era, a now deleted 1996 UK issue), and *A Time to Relax* (Take Two Records, 1995). Two of Austin's 1924–25 country recordings with Blind George Reneau, "Railroad Blues" and "Lonesome Road Blues," have surfaced on *Country Pioneers on Edison* (Document, 2006). Someone ought to release more of Austin's several dozen early country sides.
- **The Carter Family:** As with Jimmie Rodgers, the cleanest-sounding, most deeply annotated complete Carter Family set is on Bear Family records, *In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain* (2000). There is a less elaborate version of the complete works, broken into two sets, *The Carter Family 1927–1934* (JSP, 2001) and *The Carter Family 1935–41* (JSP, 2003). And there are many compilations and online downloads available of their hits.
- **Carson Robison:** Far more of his recordings are out of print than in, but there is a cross-era sampling of his music on the CD *Blue River Train and Other Cowboy and Country Songs* (Jasmine, 2007).