A&R PIONEERS

ARCHITECTS OF AMERICAN ROOTS MUSIC ON RECORD

BRIAN WARD AND PATRICK HUBER

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ARCHITECTS OF AMERICAN ROOTS MUSIC ON RECORD

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For our families:
Jen and Katie,
and Kate, Genevieve, and William,
with love and gratitude

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Abbreviations Used in Notes

ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS AND JOURNALS

AGP — Archie Green Papers, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CPM — Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro
CMFOHP — Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Frist Library and Archive, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee
DRP — Doc Roberts Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky
GDWC — Gayle Dean Wardlow Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro
JAF — *Journal of American Folklore*
JEMFN — *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Newsletter*
JEMFQ — *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly*
JKMC — John K. MacKenzie Collection, Glick Indiana History Center, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis
JCM — *Journal of Country Music*
OTM — *Old Time Music*
SFC — Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
TMW — *Talking Machine World*

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BW, Newcastle upon Tyne
PH, Rolla, Missouri

A&R PIONEERS

Jack Kapp is the newly appointed head of the Vocalion record division of Brunswick-Balke-Collender Co., in complete charge of sales and recordings. Kapp's promotion follows a concrete survey of the country's musical tastes, particularly the southern and midwestern demands for "hill-billy" and "race" records. These two departments have been chiefly developed by Kapp and have contributed to the Vocalion's financial success. . . . It was Kapp who taught the mountaineer music dealers to capitalize [on] the hill-billy folks' penchant for purchasing from six to 15 copies of the same record. The mountain people don't come down into the valley towns for months at a time, and their chief amusement is the constant repetition of their favorite record, wearing one out and playing a new one.

—"Inside Stuff on Music," *Variety*, March 21, 1928

Introduction

IN THE AMERICAN RECORDING INDUSTRY OF THE 1920S AND 1930s, working in the A&R (Artists and Repertoire) field was a kind of frontier experience. Laws regulating the industry were sketchy and unevenly enforced; individualism and ruthlessness reigned; necessity and ambition propelled technological and commercial innovations; turf wars constantly erupted over patents and copyrights, artists and songs; and despite the best efforts of many individuals within the industry, there were still gaping holes in the boundaries that, in theory, were supposed to separate musical genres and their target audiences. No wonder, perhaps, that A&R work attracted people with almost as many varied backgrounds and beliefs, talents and

ambitions, prejudices and insights, as the nation itself. Collectively, this diverse group of pioneering A&R men, supplemented by a few extraordinary women, helped forge the modern recording industry and profoundly shaped the development of commercially recorded American "roots music." Employed as talent scouts, recording supervisors, musical directors, sales representatives, and in other assorted positions, and sometimes serving as conduits to songwriters and concert promoters, they occasionally made important creative contributions as musicians, songwriters, arrangers, and promoters. In all of these roles, they helped document some of the most treasured and significant recorded music in American history. What's more, whenever inspiration, taste, marketing, and the economy aligned, they sold enormous quantities of these musical recordings to audiences they helped create. This is their story.

By the 1920s, the America these A&R officials inhabited was engulfed in a series of sweeping economic, social, cultural, and technological transformations that, though unevenly felt in different regions, ultimately affected citizens everywhere. This was also the period when, for the first time in the history of the still-fledgling recording industry, its agents began to reach deep into the nation's cities, small towns, and rural heartlands, as well as into its trove of vernacular musical traditions, to find grassroots artists and music that they could record and sell. "That mountain ballad, the old-fashioned gospel songs sung at the arbor camp meeting accompanied by the portable organ that is often carried many long and weary miles, the self-styled country fiddler, ye old-time musicians who made merry for the corn shuckin' and chicken stews at the tobacco barns, have their places in American music, is the opinion of the Okeh Record Company," Winston-Salem, North Carolina's *Twin City Sentinel* reported in the midst of OKeh's local 1927 field-recording sessions. "This statement was made by a representative of the company who states that one desires records of music of this type, as dear to those living in the mountains or the rural districts, as the grand opera, jazz, popular or other types of music are to those living in the city or towns."[1]

In a world of increasing urbanization and consumerism, national advertising and new forms of mass communication, rapid industrial development, and growing corporate power, A&R officials helped fashion and disseminate music that often evoked older, highly romanticized and reassuring visions of a simpler, less frenetic, and more communal past. Much of the black and white roots music with which this book is primarily concerned traded heavily on the kinds of moral certainties and traditional values that were associated in the popular imagination with rural communities, many of them located in the South, bound together by ties of place, family, faith, and history that seemed to be fraying under the pressure from new economic, social, and cultural forces. "Every record," a 1928 Brunswick pamphlet promoting its "Dixie Songs" series proclaimed, "[is] sung with that simplicity and sincerity, which is only found today in the small towns where folks still attend 'meetings' for the good of the soul, and not just to show off a new hat."[2]

Even the titles of record companies' interwar hillbilly series eloquently expressed sentimental nostalgia for a vanishing time and often for particular places. In addition

FIGURE 1. Cover of Victor's *Old Time Melodies of the Sunny South* brochure (1926). Courtesy of Kinney Rorrer.

to Brunswick's "Dixie Songs" series (1927–1933), originally called "Songs from Dixie," there were OKeh's "Old Time Tunes" (1925–1932); Columbia's "Old Familiar Tunes," later "Familiar Tunes, Old and New" (1924–1932); Paramount's "Olde Time Tunes" (1927–1932); Vocalion's "Old Southern Tunes" (1927–1933), among other similar designations; and Victor's "Native American Melodies" (1929–1931), followed by "Old Familiar

Tunes & Novelties" (1931–1934).[3] Coupled with the quaint images of barn dances, log cabins, and mountain pines that often adorned hillbilly record catalogs and advertisements, these marketing labels all evoked a preindustrial rural South—particularly a Mountain South—that retained a great hold on the American popular imagination.[4] "These old tunes rarely get into the cities," explained Victor's 1924 *Olde Time Fiddlin' Tunes* brochure, "but mountain folk have sung and danced to them for generations. . . . Writers of books and plays, of late years, have gone into the mountains and studied the life of the people there, but this is almost the first of their music that has come into public notice."[5] Likewise, a 1927 newspaper ad promised that Columbia's records of "Familiar Tunes, Old and New" could satisfy the musical desires of those record buyers who "get tired of modern dance music—fox-trots, jazz, Charleston—and long for the good old barn dances and the 'Saturday night' music of the South in plantation days."[6]

Not surprisingly, African Americans were often much less sentimental than whites about the alleged bucolic delights of the Old South or, for that matter, of a New South where the combination of segregation, disenfranchisement, and racial violence still curtailed black freedom and opportunity. Nevertheless, for the millions of black migrants who made their way out of the Jim Crow South in search of a better life, and for those who stayed behind—many of them heading for the region's burgeoning cities—their relationship to the rural southern past and its music was complicated. When Paramount released Blind Lemon Jefferson's first record, "Booster Blues" / "Dry Southern Blues" (Paramount 12347), in April 1926, the label advertised the first major star of "downhome" blues to a national black audience as "a real, old-fashioned Blues singer . . . from Dallas" who "strums his guitar in real southern style—makes it talk, in fact."[7]

Substitute "Hillbilly" for "Blues" and this regionally inflected nostalgia remains much the same. Bear down on the word "real" in Paramount's advertising copy, and it is possible to see how recorded roots music, with its claims to authenticity, could help counter a sense of social and cultural dislocation, a deep anxiety about the increasing superficiality and transitory nature of a modern America characterized by disconcerting changes.[8] By overseeing the commercial recording of roots music and stressing, often to the point of fabricating or at least redefining its connections to venerable folk traditions, A&R officials helped create and market music that satisfied what historian T. J. Jackson Lears describes as a national "antimodern quest for authenticity" in an increasingly complex and unsettling modern age.[9]

At the same time, these A&R pioneers were both products and co-creators of a new industry that helped define and provide one distinctive soundtrack for the new age of mass culture and leisure. Working for various record companies and their labels—among them Victor, Columbia, Brunswick, OKeh, Gennett, Paramount, Black Swan, and Decca—most of them headquartered in the New York area, this cohort of cultural gatekeepers were spirited innovators whose lives and livelihoods were inextricably bound up with the new technological developments and commercial opportunities in the world of mass entertainment that helped define modern America.[10] As such, they encouraged experiments in recorded sound that captured the rich promise, as well as

the perceived perils, of this period of intense flux and ferment. In an era characterized by what historian Nathan Miller calls a "perverse duality: innocent yet worldly, sentimental yet dissipated, idealistic yet cynical," A&R officials came to prominence, Janus-faced and eager to make phonograph records and their fortunes, at a transitional moment in the cultural, economic, and musical history of the United States.[11] Embedded in their experience and in the roots music they recorded is the story of a nation trying to navigate between the reassuring, nostalgic, but ultimately diminishing tug of an agrarian, small-town past and the irresistible, exhilarating, but sometimes frightening pull of an increasingly urban, mass-mediated future.

Given their importance to the development of the recording industry and American roots music, and their significance as cultural mediators and agents of change, it is striking that the A&R men and women of the 1920s and 1930s have received relatively little collective scrutiny. The silence is not absolute, of course. Historians, musicologists, journalists, and whole communities of dedicated vintage record collectors and roots music enthusiasts have labored hard to recreate the murky origins of the roots music recording industry and track the careers of its seminal artists, producers, technicians, businessmen, and scouts. Thanks to this developing body of scholarly and popular literature, we now know a great deal about pioneering A&R giants such as Ralph S. Peer, John Hammond, Frank B. Walker, Art Satherley, Polk C. Brockman, and H. C. Speir, as well as some of their lesser-known colleagues such as Cliff Hess, Dan Hornsby, Harry Charles, Art Laibly, Don Law, Lester Melrose, Eli Oberstein, Nat Shilkret, and J. Mayo Williams.[12] Williams, along with his protégée Aletha Dickerson, bandleader-pianist Fletcher Henderson, and pianist-songwriters Clarence Williams and Richard M. Jones, were among the few black recording directors to make a sustained impact in the A&R field before World War II. Dickerson's exceptionalism was twofold: very few women were involved in such work. White men dominated the world of A&R.

This short, highly selective list of the A&R representatives who already figure, to a greater or lesser degree, in histories of American roots music and of the interwar recording industry could be extended considerably. At least 125 additional figures, acting as A&R managers or talent scouts, gave much to this field of commercially recorded music. Despite their ubiquity, however, no one has stepped back from the sometimes fleeting and fragmentary glimpses into the lives of individual A&R pioneers to chronicle their collective contributions to the business, technologies, and sounds of the pre–World War II roots recording industry. This book begins to fill that gap. While it is deeply indebted to groundbreaking studies by many discographers, journalists, and scholars, it seeks to extend, explain, and, on occasion, challenge some of the conventional wisdom they have generated.

As those early researchers discovered, primary sources about interwar A&R activities are scattered and varied. This history explores the roles of A&R officials in early roots music through evidence gleaned from phonograph records, trade journals, newspapers and magazines, and the letters and documents of record firms and their executives. Our story also depends heavily on the occasionally scurrilous, frequently

insightful, sometimes barely credible, but invariably entertaining firsthand accounts of A&R managers and scouts, their industry colleagues, and the artists they handled. Such autobiographical testimony can be extremely helpful, but it is also a notoriously slippery and unreliable source of information, especially when the subjects are colorful characters with silken tongues and a rare gift for self-promotion. A&R representatives eagerly claimed credit for things they did. But often they took credit for things they wished they had done, or thought they should have done, or, on reflection, decided that others had hoped they had done. Conversely, they tended to avoid some of the less savory aspects of an industry in which tales of blatant self-interest and greed, as well as of abuse and exploitation, racism and sexism, are legion. Indeed, if there is a weakness shared by many of the roots music scholars and fans who in the 1960s and 1970s sought out and interviewed aging veterans of interwar A&R, it is that they tended to believe too much, too readily, of what their informants told them. New archival discoveries, coupled with sharper analytical perspectives—particularly those that deepen our sense of how race, class, and gender played out in the world of commercial roots music recording—provide a fuller context for the compelling, if often self-serving, accounts of A&R men and women who found artists, brokered contracts, supervised the making of phonograph records, and sold those recordings to new audiences.

We offer three final, interrelated thoughts by way of introduction. The first concerns our definition of "roots music"; the second relates to the chronological scope of the book; the third explains the kinds of A&R personnel we have chosen to include. *A&R Pioneers* deals primarily with the A&R managers and scouts involved in American roots music between World War I and World War II, an era when the commercial recording of hot jazz, blues, gospel, and hillbilly music began in earnest. These musical idioms take center stage in *A&R Pioneers*. However, the interwar years also saw the rise of other American roots-based styles, including Mexican, Cajun, and Hawaiian, as well as an assortment of traditional, foreign-language music popular among the nation's many immigrant communities.[13] Record companies' insatiable desire for hit records meant that A&R men who regularly explored these important region- and ethnic-based genres also often worked in the fields of mainstream popular music and, on occasion, even opera and classical music. Clayton "Jack" Jackson, for instance, was a flamboyant A&R man and assistant sales director at Richmond, Indiana's Gennett Records, with a typically keen eye for a fast buck and an equally typical lack of scruples about how he made it. Although only in his early twenties and hampered by what he described as a "tin ear," Jackson supervised hillbilly and jazz recordings by the likes of Bradley Kincaid and Joe "King" Oliver, respectively. But he also "made a lot of Polish recordings," gamely peddled discs of William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech alongside ones of Hopi Indians made on location at the Grand Canyon, and arranged recording sessions for Ku Klux Klansmen, at least one of them with his understandably reluctant Gennett colleague, chief recording engineer Ezra C. A. Wickemeyer. Wickemeyer was a devout Roman Catholic, and this was a time when the powerful, 250,000-member

Indiana Klan directed its violent attacks and hateful propaganda against Catholics as often as it did against Jews and African Americans.[14]

Many A&R men were similarly eclectic. Nat Shilkret, manager and musical director of Victor's "US Foreign Department," supervised foreign-language recordings for domestic release while sometimes also overseeing sessions in the mid-1920s for the label's "Export, Domestic, Hillbilly, Race and Red Seal" lines. "Foreign artists and their repertoire had to be discovered," Shilkret explained in his memoir. "With other recording companies competing, it was necessary to attend Polish weddings and affairs, Jewish theaters, Italian vaudeville, German cafes, etc.—sometimes meeting immigrants arriving in America for concert tours."[15] As Dallas-based A&R man Don Law recalled, when he worked for the constellation of labels grouped under the American Record Corporation's umbrella in the mid- to late 1930s, he was willing to search out and record "anything that we ran across in any field, whether it was Mexican or Cajun or black or whatever—if it was good talent, then we recorded it . . . as long as you knew you could sell, or thought you could sell, a certain number of records."[16]

In determining the chronological scope of the book, there were several compelling reasons to concentrate on the interwar years as a distinctive phase in the history of recorded American roots music. Although discographies of the various genres that comprise this music sometimes reach back into the final decade of the nineteenth century to include commercially recorded prototypes for later musical styles, it is no coincidence that the most important such reference works for hot jazz, blues, gospel, and country music focus chiefly on the 1920s and 1930s, when the commercial recording of those styles first flourished, or that they end their coverage in the early 1940s, when the recording industry and roots music changed dramatically.[17]

To be sure, like all attempts at historical periodization, there is something unavoidably arbitrary about selecting beginning and ending dates for a study of processes and themes, events and trends, careers and musical forms, that defy the sharp demarcations of the calendar. Convenient temporal phrases like "the interwar years," or "the Jazz Age," or "the Great Depression," or "the World War II era" can obscure origins and legacies, and often oversimplify the complexities of those periods. All of which is simply to say that, while this book focuses on A&R officials and their accomplishments "between the two world wars," confident that this constitutes a distinct, formative period in the development of recorded roots music, it does not try to isolate or homogenize that period, either in the recording industry or in the broader sweep of American history. There were, for example, enormous disparities in how different groups of people in different regions experienced the "Roaring Twenties." Widely perceived as a period of boom and prosperity, the 1920s was actually a decade of widespread and worsening economic distress for many Americans, particularly those living in rural communities. Similarly, not everyone's fortunes dipped—and certainly not to the same degree—during the Great Depression; nor did they rebound with equal vigor when the United States' entry into World War II revived the nation's economy.

Within the world of commercial music, a whirlpool of equally complex currents and countercurrents provided an important context for A&R activities. Structurally, the period between 1920 and 1929 was one of phenomenal expansion for the American phonograph and record industry. Since at least 1905, Victor, Columbia, and Edison had dominated the field through their stranglehold on fundamental patents. During World War I, however, as those patents began to expire and the demand for phonographs and records swelled dramatically, dozens of new companies had entered the market. In 1914, there were eighteen phonograph manufacturers in the United States; by 1918, that number had soared to 166 firms, many of which also manufactured their own lines of records. During that same period, the value of the industry's products skyrocketed from $27 million to $158 million.[18] Among the new entrants were the General Phonograph Corporation of New York, with its OKeh and Odeon labels; the Starr Piano Company of Richmond, Indiana, with its Gennett label; and the New York Recording Laboratories of Port Washington, Wisconsin, with its Paramount label.[19]

One way these fledgling firms gained a foothold in the fiercely competitive post–World War I recording scene was by cultivating the growing market for foreign-language records. Since the 1890s, American phonograph companies had been releasing and selling these recordings domestically to immigrants. Over the next two decades, as the nation's foreign population swelled, selections of Old World folksongs and dances, performed in an extraordinary array of languages, came to form a sizable part of these companies' recorded output. During World War I, these recordings enjoyed a surge in sales. Fueled by "the feelings of nostalgia and patriotism stirred by the fighting," Richard K. Spottswood writes, "domestic production and sales assumed a new priority," a trend, he adds, that "continued unbroken until the Depression."[20] The headline of a June 1922 *Talking Machine World* article about promoting foreign-language records declared: "An Almost Untouched Record Selling Field with Millions of Prospective Customers." The article enthusiastically reminded phonograph and record dealers that

> the foreign-born elements of the United States have the same purchasing power as the natives, and do their share in purchasing records from the regular monthly supplements. To offer them records in their native tongues, or in the native tongues of their parents, means simply to create an additional demand. There is no more logical field right now for the talking machine dealer, especially in the larger industrial centers and in districts where there are thousands of foreign-born, than to concentrate somewhat on the foreign record catalogs suitable for his particular location.[21]

Victor and Columbia, each of which issued records in more than two dozen languages, continued to dominate this field, but new firms did carve out market shares for themselves. By 1923, for example, the Odeon label, a leader in the ethnic records field, was catering to speakers of Arabic, Bohemian (Czech), French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Slovenian, Spanish, and Turkish, among

others.[22] Some new firms specialized in particular ethnic recordings. The Panhellenion Phonograph Record Company of New York (organized in 1919), the Polonia Phonograph Company of Milwaukee (founded in 1920), and the Gaelic Phonograph Record Company, also of New York (established in 1921), produced Greek, Polish, and Irish recordings, respectively.[23] These, along with other firms formed during and after World War I, created an increased demand both for recording artists and for A&R officials to locate, sign, and record them.

Another way these new enterprises competed in the crowded postwar market was to explore entirely new fields of commercial music. Since longer-established and better-financed companies such as Victor and Columbia had already signed most of the best-known classical and vaudeville stars to exclusive contracts, upstart firms were forced to concentrate on different kinds of artists and cultivate new audiences. In particular, they developed markets among Americans at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, audiences that industry giants had long ignored. As a result, smaller labels such as OKeh, Paramount, and Gennett spearheaded intensive programs of recording American roots music, including material issued on what soon became known as "race records" and "hillbilly records," aimed at specific racial and regional audiences. By 1927, record companies were releasing an estimated 675 new titles of hillbilly music and five hundred of blues and gospel music (although the same selection might appear on multiple releases and labels). Depending on the specific label, each of these categories accounted for somewhere between 15 and 25 percent of all popular releases for that year.[24] The recording of American roots music opened up new markets and provided a windfall to many firms. But during the 1920s, A&R managers, their recording department staffs, and their regional networks of talent scouts still grappled with a host of thorny challenges in locating artists, signing them, recording their music, promoting the discs, and helping distributors and retailers stock and sell them.

Just as race and hillbilly records began to flourish, the Great Depression dealt the recording industry a devastating blow, sending phonograph sales plummeting from 987,000 in 1927 to just forty thousand in 1932. Meanwhile, record sales plunged from 104 million to only six million.[25] The dire financial crisis precipitated a massive shake-up in the industry. Collapsing sales bankrupted many record companies, while other struggling firms were swallowed up, either through buyouts or mergers orchestrated by larger, more solvent record, radio, and film corporations. The interwar years had begun with three giants standing astride the recording industry; it also ended that way. By 1923, for instance, no fewer than eleven companies were issuing blues recordings; by 1935, however, the economic crisis had driven nearly all of these firms out of business and left what remained of the market for blues and other roots-based styles to just three major firms: RCA Victor, the American Record Corporation—which leased the Brunswick and Vocalion labels from Warner Bros.—and newly formed American Decca, co-founded by British Decca's Edward R. Lewis and former Brunswick executive Jack Kapp.[26]

During the interwar period, important technological changes also affected the work of A&R officials. The era began with double-sided 78-rpm disc recordings and, in the case of Edison, cylinder recordings that captured performances via the acoustical method, which had been in use since the advent of the commercial recording industry in the late 1880s. In this process, performers directed their voices or their music into a large horn connected at its narrow end to a cutting stylus. In response to the vibrations of the air in the horn, the stylus cut tiny grooves into a slowly rotating wax disc or cylinder that reproduced, more or less, the frequency and amplitude of the vibrations created by the music. The interwar period ended with only disc records still being produced commercially. Moreover, from the mid-1920s, those discs were made using the improved, higher-fidelity electrical recording method, in which performances were captured by a microphone and amplifier, and then transferred to a master record spinning on an electrically driven disk-cutter. During the mid- to late 1920s, the growing popularity of radios, jukeboxes, and talking motion pictures further altered the dynamics of roots music record production and dissemination, shifting the ground for many A&R representatives and their artists.[27]

Another important change in recorded roots music during the interwar years involved the hardening distinction between "race" and "hillbilly" recordings, itself a marketing division for which A&R men were largely responsible. Two trade journal articles published in the mid-1920s reflected that trend well. "Naturally, it is to be assumed that the negro is so much a definite part of our native population that he is expected to find his music desires completely fulfilled in the regular domestic catalogs," a 1924 *Talking Machine World* editorial explained. "But through the medium of 'race' records he is given something that is distinctly his own." Even so, the editorial stressed the cross-racial appeal of this material, noting "that some hundreds of thousands of whites might be expected to, and as a matter of fact do, purchase these records for their peculiar melodic value."[28] Two years later, a *Talking Machine Journal* article titled "Steppin' High with This Hot Blues Business" described the remarkable sales that "race" records enjoyed, but emphasized the relatively discrete, segregated nature of the race records field and the need for specialized marketing expertise to court and serve African Americans: "The Negro trade is a business in itself, an enormously profitable occupation for the retailer who knows his way about. . . . In a number of . . . cities the segregation of the Negro population has enabled dealers to build up a trade catering to this race exclusively."[29]

Increasing market segmentation notwithstanding, these kinds of stylistic and marketing divisions appear to have remained much less rigid than some industry insiders, trade journals, and subsequent scholars once claimed. *A&R Pioneers* is far more sympathetic to the arguments of recent commentators who, to borrow from one of the most perceptive among them, Erich Nunn, understand the history of American popular music "in terms of hybridity and reciprocal interracialism." Nunn is particularly attentive to how, at the level of enjoyment, emotion, and emulation, "sounds constantly leak through the racial barriers" that the recording industry, mass media, and society-at-

large have attempted to construct around particular musical forms.[30] Although Nunn has little to say about the role of A&R in the construction and partial deconstruction of the racially circumscribed canons of interwar roots music, A&R men and women played a crucial, if ambiguous, part in the process he describes. Paradoxically, A&R officials created and policed the racial barriers between "race" and "hillbilly" music, but they also sometimes worked to subvert and transcend those barriers in their zealous pursuit of hit records.

In the early decades of the recording industry, musical styles were forever evolving, and as a result, boundaries and distinctions within, as well as among, musical genres were often far from clear. In the race records field, for example, consumers initially favored "vaudeville blues"—an urban-centered blues idiom sparked by the success of Mamie Smith's 1920 record "Crazy Blues" / "It's Right Here for You (If You Don't Get It 'Taint No Fault O' Mine)" (OKeh 4169), and usually performed by female vocalists backed by piano players or small jazz combos. By the mid-1920s, rawer "downhome blues" recordings made primarily by self-accompanied male singer-guitarists began to eclipse the popularity of the vaudeville blues recordings that had been ubiquitous since the start of the decade. Simply identifying these kinds of broad trends within recorded blues obscures a multitude of regional and stylistic subdivisions that were often complicated by connections to other musical forms, including jazz, Tin Pan Alley pop songs, and even hillbilly music. Consequently, it is perilous to generalize about A&R work in the "blues" between the world wars, because the "blues" was such a diverse and protean commercial music form with numerous subcategories.

Moreover, the blues in its myriad forms represented only a portion of the musical fare available on race records before World War II. Jazz instrumentals, spirituals, Tin Pan Alley hits, traditional ballads, sermons, and even some comedy skits, classical pieces, and operatic arias—along with a smattering of performances by white artists—were also among the selections to be heard on these records.[31] A similarly eclectic hodgepodge of sounds appeared on hillbilly discs, often shepherded into existence by the same A&R directors responsible for overseeing the production of race records. Ultimately, one aim of this book is to reveal the critical contributions that A&R managers and scouts made to an enormous range of commercially recorded blues, hillbilly, and other American roots music forms, without undervaluing the artistry and creativity of the singers, musicians, and songwriters involved.

Our emphasis on commercial recordings highlights the most basic characteristic shared by all the A&R personnel we discuss. *A&R Pioneers* examines those A&R officials who sought artists who could record hit records and, in many cases, who could write "original" songs (original at least according to the lax copyright standards of the day). But our story also differentiates among various kinds of A&R officials based upon the nature of their affiliations and their roles within the recording industry. *A&R Pioneers* is primarily concerned with what we call "A&R managers" or, alternatively, "A&R directors": men and women who, as full-time record company employees, not only "discovered" talent but who also supervised recording sessions and were often

CRAZY BLUES

By PERRY BRADFORD

Get this number for your phonograph on Okeh Record No. 4169

PUBLISHED BY
PERRY BRADFORD
MUSIC PUB. CO.
1547 BROADWAY, N. Y. C.

FIGURE 2. Sheet music cover of “Crazy Blues” (1920), featuring a photograph of Mamie Smith & Her Jazz Hounds. Songwriter Perry Bradford, a pioneering black A&R man, composed the words and music for this landmark blues song, which was published by his firm, the Perry Bradford Music Publishing Company. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

involved in choices about which titles to issue commercially and how to market them. At the same time, though, it explores the pivotal roles of record store owners and salesmen such as R. T. Ashford, Paul I. Burks, Harry Charles, Jesse Johnson, H. C. Speir, and Van H. Sills, who acted as important regional or local talent scouts, and, to a lesser degree, of recording artists such as Big Bill Broonzy, Cow Cow Davenport, Doc Roberts, Ernest V. Stoneman, and Roosevelt Sykes who, though not strictly A&R men themselves, also passed on recommendations about prospective new talent to record companies and their A&R representatives.

This semiformal, commercially oriented network of A&R managers and scouts differed from another group of pioneers who were also eagerly pursuing American roots singers and musicians in the interwar years. Several important folklorists and song collectors, among them Howard Odum, Guy B. Johnson, Dorothy Scarborough, and the father-and-son team of John and Alan Lomax, were also hot on the heels of similar, sometimes the same, talent. Broadly speaking, however, these scholars and collectors sought out roots musicians to record in order to preserve folksongs and idioms that they feared were disappearing amidst the rapid pace of social, economic, cultural, and technological change then engulfing America, not least as represented by the growth of the commercial recording industry and the mounting sales of phonographs and records in the nation's small towns and rural heartlands. The divisions between "ballad hunters" and A&R officials were far from absolute, however. By 1931, for example, John Lomax explicitly invoked the mass popularity of hillbilly and race music when trying to secure funds from the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song for his folk music recording projects. The success of hillbilly and race records, he argued, confirmed the centrality of rural musical idioms to American culture and, therefore, the pressing need to chronicle and preserve them.[32]

With John Lomax, there was always a sense that what he really wanted to do was to "save" America's traditional folksongs from the corrupting influence of the recording industry, although this agenda did not prevent him or his son from copyrighting many of the songs they "discovered," nor from accepting the royalties generated from commercially recorded versions of those songs. By 1938, though, his son Alan Lomax was beginning to revise his own attitudes toward commercially recorded vernacular music. Over the next couple of years, as assistant in charge of the Archive of American Folk Song, the younger Lomax abandoned the conventional folklorist wisdom that all such recordings were inherently debased, inauthentic mechanical reproductions of some pure folk spirit. Instead, he praised the vitality and innovation he often heard on hillbilly and race records. After working his way through the roots music catalogs of Decca, Vocalion, and RCA Victor's budget-priced Bluebird line, and meeting with key A&R men such as Jack Kapp, Art Satherley, John Hammond, J. Mayo Williams, and Frank Walker, Lomax admitted to his boss Harold Spivacke, chief of the Library of Congress's Music Division, that "the commercial recording companies have done a broader and more interesting job of recording American folk music than the folklorists and that every single item of recorded American rural, race, and popular music

that they have in their current lists and plan to release in the future should be in our files."[33] Many of the recordings made by folksong collectors eventually did see commercial release after World War II, often on Moses "Moe" Asch's Folkways label, and several artists initially recorded on location throughout the United States as part of the Library of Congress's song-catching expeditions went on to enjoy long careers that brought them into the world of commercial recordings, among them the now-legendary figures Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) and McKinley Morganfield (Muddy Waters).[34]

Occasionally, there were even uneasy collaborations between A&R officials and ballad hunters. One striking example involved the Victor Talking Machine Company and Alan Lomax's predecessor, eminent folksong scholar Robert Winslow Gordon, first archivist of the Archive of American Folk Song. In April 1929, only months after its purchase by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), Victor hired Gordon, largely at the behest of the label's foremost roots music A&R manager Ralph Peer, to assist in the firm's defense against a copyright suit concerning "Wreck of the Old 97." Six years earlier, hillbilly singer Henry Whitter had made the first recording of this by-then traditional ballad for OKeh, under the title "The Wreck on the Southern Old 97" (OKeh 40015), ironically with Peer directing the session for his former paymasters. Within ten months, four cover versions by other artists on competing labels had hit the market.[35] The most famous proved to be Vernon Dalhart's rendition (Victor 19427), which, coupled with the sensational hit "The Prisoner's Song," became the first hillbilly record to sell more than one million copies and helped popularize this new musical genre nationwide.[36]

In the wake of that success, David Graves George, a Virginia railway telegrapher, came forward to claim that he had written the lyrics to "Wreck of the Old 97" and to recover his rightful portion of the royalties from the Victor disc's phenomenal sales. Victor, though, believed it owned the rights to the song, having settled a similar copyright infringement suit in 1926. When the company refused to negotiate with George, he promptly filed a lawsuit. Victor, in turn, reached out to Gordon for assistance. Over the next two years, Gordon spent more than a thousand hours reconstructing the history of the ballad and establishing its rightful authorship for Victor, which, by the time the case eventually came to trial in 1931, had been reorganized as RCA Victor. According to folklorist Norm Cohen, "The results of Gordon's labors formed the basis of RCA Victor's defense" in *George v. Victor Talking Machine Co.* The lawsuit meandered its way through the court system for nine years, at one point even reaching the United States Supreme Court, before finally being resolved in 1940. In the end, due in large part to Gordon's meticulous research, RCA Victor prevailed, and George was denied any share of the royalties.[37]

This was not the first time Gordon had interacted with the Victor Talking Machine Company. In 1925, while on a Harvard University fellowship, he had approached the company about funding his upcoming song-collecting expedition to North Carolina and about the possibility of his serving as a folksong consultant to the firm. In particular, Gordon believed he could be helpful in the complicated areas of copyright and royalties within the field of traditional music. As he explained in a letter to Victor

FIGURE 3. Sheet music cover of "The Wreck on the Southern Old 97" (1924), with a photograph inset of Henry Whitter. Authors' collections.

executive James E. Richardson, "The company was treading on very dangerous ground in certain instances where copyright was, to say the least, extremely questionable. I knew that in a number of cases the firm was paying royalty to unscrupulous pretenders who had no [vestige] of right in the texts they sold; and I knew that in other cases there were ample grounds for suit for infringement if only the facts happened to fall

into the hands of the right parties." Although Gordon was highly qualified for such a consultancy position, Victor initially declined his proposal as well as his request for funding.[38] Even so, as the protracted legal wrangling over "Wreck of the Old 97" makes clear, Gordon's concerns about song copyrights and royalties in the murky, freewheeling world of commercially recorded American roots music were well founded. A&R officials were, in fact, intimately, sometimes infamously, involved in defining and exploiting the economic possibilities of controlling copyrights and royalties in the roots music recording and song publishing industries.

In at least one instance, academic song collectors and record company A&R officials cooperated in recording American roots music. In 1926, Gennett sent a crew to make recordings of Hopi Indians in Arizona, under the direction of John O. Prescott, a "phonograph expert," with chief engineer Ezra C. A. Wickemeyer handling the technical end. Supervising the actual sessions was Dr. Jesse Walter Fewkes, head of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnography and a pioneering ethnomusicologist who in 1890 had made the first field recordings of Native Americans among the Passamaquoddy in Calais, Maine. Working from its base at the El Tovar Hotel near the Grand Canyon, and reportedly using a special truck rigged up with equipment, Fewkes and the Gennett team recorded twelve sides of tribal songs and chants. The "master records," *Music*

FIGURE 4. Gennett recording truck (1934). Photograph by Harry Gennett Jr. Courtesy of Linda Gennett Irmscher and the Indiana Historical Society (M0428).

Trade Review reported, were "sent to the Smithsonian Institute for preservation," but copies of the records were released commercially by Gennett and "placed on sale all over the United States, particularly through the Southwest," where they were marketed principally to tourists through Fred Harvey's chain of resort hotels.[39]

As historian Rick Kennedy wryly observes, "Such Hopi numbers as 'Tacheuktu [*sic*] Katcina' and 'Tuwina'Av' [*sic*] were not exactly hits with the general public." *Talking Machine World* concurred but in an editorial noted the historical significance of the records: "In this country, the music of the Indians of various tribes has been faithfully recorded for the generations that are to come, for no interpretation of any printed music could give to these tribal songs the fire and meaning that they carry when sung by the Indians themselves." The editorial continued, "Records of this sort do not appeal strongly to those who are interested chiefly in record sales volume, but they have importance from a historical standpoint that should not be underestimated." Jack Jackson, who, as Gennett's assistant sales director, was forced to try to sell these records, remembered this unusual venture quite differently. Decades later, in a comment that underscored the tensions that beset collaborations between preservation-minded academic song collectors and commercially driven record company officials, Jackson described Gennett's Hopi expedition as "a bucket of shit!"[40]

Jackson's scatological summary indicates why such cooperative ventures were rare and often ill-fated. Early A&R officials were seldom concerned with cultural heritage or preservation; commercial success was their aim. If at first that agenda led to recordings of "old familiar tunes," it quickly encouraged A&R personnel to find, facilitate, and occasionally force the recording of new, copyrightable, and profitable music. Although this original fare was often deeply indebted to older musical traditions, the new styles proved to be more diverse, more dynamic, more suited to a new age and, in the final reckoning, more popular with a much broader audience. These developments served both the financial ambitions of individual A&R officials and the economic interests of the record companies and publishing firms for whom they worked. At the same time, those commercial priorities, as they played out in the creative process of making phonograph records, shaped important trends in the history of American roots music. The vexed, sometimes exploitative, but often highly creative relationships among A&R managers, talent scouts, recording artists, musical directors, songwriters, arrangers, and fellow label executives helped create the stylistic canons and the business and marketing protocols of the recording industry.

In terms of structure, *A&R Pioneers* begins by exploring the origins and meanings of the term "A&R," and then goes on to describe its main characteristics and identify certain similarities in the backgrounds and motivations of the motley crew who were involved in interwar A&R work. Chapter 2 examines the ingenious and occasionally unscrupulous methods that A&R managers and scouts used to locate recordable talent, especially on southern field-recording expeditions, while also revealing how aspiring artists sometimes came a-knocking, literally as well as figuratively, on the doors of

grateful A&R men and women. Chapter 3 explains the messy, sometimes sordid world of contracts, copyrights, royalties, and remuneration to show how A&R representatives managed their business relationships with artists, other label executives, talent scouts, songwriters, and music publishers. In the process, they established lasting precedents for how the entire American recording industry operated, in both fiscal and organizational terms. Chapters 4 and 5 reevaluate the nature and extent of the creative contributions that A&R officials made to recorded American roots music between the two world wars, suggesting that some of them had far more impact on the scope, content, and sounds of those recordings than conventional wisdom usually allows. More specifically, Chapter 4 shows how A&R managers decisively shaped roots music repertoire, while Chapter 5, in turn, examines how they worked within recording studios, temporary and permanent alike, collaborating not only with singers and musicians but also with musical directors, arrangers, and recording engineers to create the sounds that were ultimately committed to disc. After those recordings were put on wax, A&R managers and their staff members often made or otherwise influenced decisions about which recordings and, in particular, which "takes" of those recordings would be released commercially and how they would be advertised and marketed. These post-production aspects of A&R work, crucial in constructing what have come to be thought of as the normative canons of American roots music, are the principal concerns of Chapter 6, which focuses on A&R managers' and scouts' roles in the selection and series assignment of discs for commercial release, and Chapter 7, which explores these officials' central place in promoting and retailing those recordings. The book concludes with a final chapter that summarizes the changing roles of A&R representatives during and immediately after World War II. This period marked the beginnings of a new chapter in the American roots music story. But it was also an era when the legacy of those prewar A&R men and women who had built the industry was still keenly felt.

In the cow towns of the Southwest, in the honky-tonks of Memphis, in mountain hamlets in the Blue Ridge and the Cumberlands, a perennial visitor for 25 years has been a lean, loquacious man, with a slight British accent and a portable recording apparatus. Grey-haired Arthur Edward Satherly [*sic*] is paymaster, musical coach, father confessor to the blues singers, hillbilly fiddlers, guitar-strummers, jug-players, washboard-slappers who make Columbia's Okeh records by the dozen.

— "September Records," *Time*, September 2, 1940

1

Defining A&R

INTERWAR RECORD COMPANY OFFICIALS AND THEIR WORK

A&R MEN WERE AT THE HEART OF IT ALL. AT LEAST THAT IS what Bob Thiele reckoned. In 1939, at age seventeen, Thiele founded Signature, his first jazz record label, and, with this small company, launched an illustrious A&R career that spanned nearly six decades, including a long tenure as an executive at Decca (for whose Coral and Brunswick subsidiaries he recorded Buddy Holly & the Crickets in the 1950s) and later, in the 1960s, as manager of Impulse!, a jazz specialty label. Looking back on his formative years in the music business before World War II, Thiele explained just how much the recording industry had once depended on A&R

officials like him. "It was all left up to the A&R guy in those days as to who to record, when to record, how much to spend," Thiele recalled. "Then you worked closely with the sales department. But the A&R guy was the important guy. Everyone relied on the A&R guy to have hit records."[1]

Malcolm Rockwell, son of OKeh recording manager Tommy Rockwell, was close to the truth when he quipped that A&R men like his father were often a "combination of talent scout, producer, promoter, bottle washer & nursemaid in one person."[2] Indeed, perhaps one reason why music historians have shied away from attempting a collective biography of interwar A&R officials may be the sheer variety of people and contributions that might reasonably be gathered together under the A&R umbrella. Not surprisingly in a relatively new industry that was then rapidly evolving, job descriptions and titles were often improvised, fluid, and imprecise, leaving latter-day fans and scholars with a series of definitional and interpretive conundrums. Not least among these puzzles is the basic question of when the term "A&R" and the original phrase from which it derived, "Artists and Repertoire," first came into use.[3] That etymological riddle is as good a place as any to start to reconstruct the multifaceted world of interwar A&R.

A&R ORIGINS

Predictably, the origins of "Artists and Repertoire" and the initialism "A&R" are shrouded in mystery and further cloaked by layers of misinformation. On July 15, 1924, *Talking Machine World*—the nation's premier trade journal of the phonograph and record industry—reported that Eddie King, manager of Victor's "New York artist and repertoire department," had recently organized a series of recordings for the label in Los Angeles, California. Art Hickman's Biltmore Hotel Orchestra and Vincent Rose's Montmartre Café Orchestra, along with "a number of locally famous Hawaiian and Mexican instrumentalists and orchestras," were among those recorded on "a special recording apparatus" installed in the Hotel Alexandria, according to King's instructions.[4] Although the sessions produced nothing particularly memorable in terms of either music or sales, celebrated folklorist Archie Green, a giant in the development of serious scholarship on interwar roots music recording, once identified this brief article as "the earliest usage" of the term "A&R man" that he had discovered in print.[5] Contrary to Green's claim, however, neither the title "A&R man" nor the term "A&R" actually appear in this article.

In fact, the initialism "A&R" probably did not enter regular usage until after World War II, when it may have been coined by *Billboard*, one of the nation's oldest music trade magazines.[6] The magazine was certainly using the term by January 1946, when it was featured in a headline ("Palitz Number 5 in Decca's A&R with Dave Kapp") for an article about the expansion of Dave Kapp's "a. and r." division at Decca to five men with the hiring of Morty Palitz.[7] The inconsistent punctuation ("A&R"; "a. and r.") suggests a neologism being hatched, with several variants still in play before the standard "A&R"

became part of accepted industry "slanguage."[8] Indeed, in the early 1940s, there were many experiments with the long-form terminology to describe those record company officials most closely involved in spotting, signing, and recording musical talent. According to *The Billboard 1943 Music Year Book*, at Capitol Records, David Shelley served as "Talent & Tunes Manager"; at Beacon Records, the brainchild of Joe Davis—a singer, musician, recording artist, songwriter, music publisher, manager, and former freelance A&R man for Ajax, Gennett, and Edison, among other labels—Fritz Pollard acted as "Talent Manager"; at the tiny Standard Phono Company, which specialized in Greek and other ethnic recordings, Harold M. Kirchstein occupied the post of "Repertoire Director"; at the Columbia Recording Corporation, Art Satherley, one of the most important A&R men in the roots music field between the wars, held the position of "Manager of Country Dance, Folk Song and Race Artists and Repertoire."[9] If there was a curious mix of breadth and precision in Satherley's designation, it nonetheless served to distinguish his roots-based fiefdom from Columbia's classical and popular music empires, overseen by quite different A&R teams. By the end of the 1940s, though, the term "A&R" had become an instantly recognizable part of the music industry's lexicon. Thus, we shamelessly use it anachronistically throughout this book as convenient shorthand for pre–World War II artists and repertoire officials and their work, fully aware that the initialism did not enter into widespread circulation until later.

Although the short-form "A&R" is a relatively late linguistic innovation, the actual concept of an "artist(s) and repertoire" division within the music industry had a much longer lineage, stretching back to nineteenth-century grand opera companies.[10] Within the commercial recording industry more specifically, the Victor Talking Machine Company proved particularly innovative in this area. By at least 1910, the firm had organized an "Artists' Department," which was still operating under that title in February 1916, when Calvin G. Child, longtime recording manager, took over as its director.[11] Sometime during the next six years, the terminology at Victor changed. In January 1923, *Music Trade Review* reported that former sales manager John S. Macdonald had been promoted to associate director of the company's "Artists and Repertoire Department."[12] Eight and a half months later, on October 1, Macdonald was appointed director when Child resigned due to poor health. That *Talking Machine World* considered Macdonald's latest promotion newsworthy enough for its front page indicates how important A&R work had already become within the recording industry.[13]

The very next day, October 2, just as Macdonald assumed control of the Artists and Repertoire Department, Victor introduced an additional layer of A&R bureaucracy by creating a new "Artists and Repertoire Committee," whose membership was drawn from managers and executives throughout the company.[14] While the *department* was responsible for finding talent, matching that talent with suitable material, and supervising recording sessions, the *committee* was responsible for determining which of those recordings met Victor's high standards of artistic and technical quality for commercial release. This was a rather unusual arrangement. At most other labels, decisions about

releases fell primarily within the purview of artists and repertoire departments, which at smaller labels might consist of only a few employees.

One of the men drafted onto Victor's new Artists and Repertoire Committee in October 1923 was superintendent of recording Harry O. Sooy, a machinist turned recording engineer who had worked for the company's founder, Eldridge Johnson, since 1898, before the Victor Talking Machine Company had even been officially incorporated. Following a two-year apprenticeship, Sooy became what he called a "full-fledged recorder." Over the next two decades, in addition to his duties in the firm's permanent studios, he made a number of international recording expeditions, among them, trips to Havana in 1907 and, later that same year, to Mexico City. On both excursions, Sooy recorded native artists and essentially functioned as an A&R man. He also handled several important domestic sessions on location, away from Victor's main studios, recording William Jennings Bryan at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1908; William Howard Taft at a hotel in Hot Springs, Virginia, in 1908; Theodore Roosevelt at a hotel in Emporia, Kansas, in 1916; and Warren Harding at the White House in 1922.[15] Meanwhile, upon Calvin G. Child's promotion in 1916, Sooy was named manager of Victor's recording departments and placed in charge of all the mechanical aspects of recording.[16] In the summer of 1924, shortly after his appointment to the company's newly created Artists and Repertoire Committee, Sooy was among the staff members who accompanied Eddie King, Victor's New York A&R chief, to Los Angeles in search of fresh West Coast talent. That basic task, to search out musicians and music that could generate hit records, was already well established by 1924; it helps explain why A&R managers were so vital to the recording of American roots music.

But first, a cautionary note. The diversity of interlocking responsibilities assumed by or imposed on A&R officials, who served in various capacities at a disparate group of record companies, makes it hard to generalize about what, exactly, they did. Writing a comprehensive job description for early A&R personnel, replete with a coherent set of "key performance indicators," would have been a nightmare for any human resources department. Nat Shilkret recalled that Eddie King originally hired him in 1915 as "an arranger and conductor" at Victor. Shortly after, Shilkret became involved in A&R work in the firm's Foreign Department, which then "recorded for thirty-two languages," the most prominent being "Italian, Jewish, Russian, German, Greek, Polish, and Scandinavian." As Shilkret explained, "Engaging talent, picking the music, orchestrating, recording, listening to masters and picking the best rendition, translating the title and write-ups for the catalogues, and contracting each artist became my full-time occupation."[17] If often-mundane tasks like evaluating masters, cataloging, recordkeeping, and negotiating contracts were frequently handled by low-level A&R officials who toiled away in record company trenches, their A&R superiors juggled a more important, if no shorter, list of responsibilities with the assistance of those lieutenants. In 1928, when Jack Kapp, head of Vocalion's race record division, was promoted to manager of the label's sales and recording departments, *Talking Machine World* announced that

among his many new duties would be to "direct the supervision of releasing [records], development of talent, directing of recording, merchandising of records and the planning of sales campaigns."[18]

Some A&R officials were clearly more autonomous than others, exerting various degrees of influence in locating and signing talent, selecting salable material, and then recording, releasing, and marketing records. But whether these A&R personnel were official company employees or independent contractors, their contributions were all shaped by complex relationships with record company presidents and senior executives, advertising and sales department staff, recording artists, musical directors, recording engineers, music publishers, distributors and retailers, theater owners, radio executives, jukebox operators, lawyers, and other A&R representatives. The fact that some A&R officials also filled some of these other roles complicated matters even further.

Ralph Peer, probably the single most influential A&R man in interwar roots recording and music publishing, and a towering figure in the history of the larger American popular music industry, illustrates this complexity well.[19] The same July 15, 1924, edition of *Talking Machine World* that chronicled Eddie King's Victor recording trip to

FIGURE 1.1. Ralph Peer in Havana, Cuba (1931). Courtesy of the Peer Family Archives.

Los Angeles also described a recent West Coast trip undertaken by Peer. Described as "director of record production for the General Phonographic Corp.," Peer was in California to broker a statewide distribution deal for the firm's OKeh and Odeon labels through San Francisco's Walter S. Gray Company. "Mr. Peer spent the month of June in California and other points in the Far West," a related article in that same issue reported, "visiting the jobbers in this important territory and arranging for an intensive sales campaign for the coming Fall."[20]

Peer had already enjoyed major coups as an A&R man. In 1920, he had helped the hustling Perry Bradford—a singer, composer, and song plugger—and OKeh's musical director Fred Hager bring Mamie Smith into the studio to wax her first record, "That Thing Called Love" / "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" (OKeh 4113), followed by "Crazy Blues" / "It's Right Here for You (If You Don't Get It 'Taint No Fault O' Mine)" (OKeh 4169), whose spectacular sales sparked the "vaudeville blues" (sometimes called "classic blues") boom of the early 1920s.[21] Three years later, Peer traveled to Atlanta to supervise the label's first location recording sessions and cut what is commonly considered the first commercially successful hillbilly record, "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" / "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" (OKeh 4890), by local favorite Fiddlin' John Carson.[22] Sometime in mid-1926, Peer moved to Victor. There he focused less on sales, per se, than on A&R work, talent management through Ralph S. Peer Inc., and, most lucrative of all, accruing copyrights of original songs recorded and often written by the artists he signed. Peer published songs by many of these entertainers through his Southern Music Publishing Company. Between 1920 and 1934, he established a reputation as an A&R man of the first order, recruiting and recording a galaxy of roots musicians, including bluesman Blind Willie McTell, jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton, and country music's first superstar, Jimmie Rodgers.[23] Like many of his leading A&R contemporaries—though with considerably more success than most—Peer always combined his core talent-scouting and recording duties with multiple other roles.

Despite such overlapping responsibilities, several key functions united most recording managers and talent scouts active in recorded roots music during the interwar years. First, regardless of whether these agents were record company employees or ad hoc freelancers, they had to scout, recruit, sign, and develop singers and musicians who could record and perhaps even write commercially viable songs or instrumental numbers. Second, A&R men were often responsible for finding or selecting the material that those musicians recorded, working closely with musical directors, arrangers, songwriters, and composers, sometimes writing or arranging songs themselves. Third, although the activities of some A&R officials, especially talent scouts, ended with recommending promising artists to recording companies, others regularly organized and supervised recording sessions. Sometimes A&R men helped set up the studios, be they makeshift or permanent, and in at least a few cases, they even operated the recording equipment. Occasionally, they offered musical direction. In these various capacities, A&R officials

laid the foundations for a new position that fused technical, commercial, and creative functions. The "record producer" did not fully emerge until after World War II—when the development of magnetic tape allowed for new levels of sound manipulation during and after recording sessions—but some A&R men were trailblazers in this sense. They shared with artists and technical staff the chief responsibility of capturing or, in some cases, creating the sounds that were committed to disc. During the 1920s, this usually required at least two, or sometimes more, "takes" of the same selection. Finally, once the performances from a session had been satisfactorily recorded on usable masters, the fourth major role for many A&R men, especially recording managers, consisted of working closely with upper-level company executives and advertising and sales managers to decide which, if any, takes would be issued commercially and sometimes to determine how those releases would be marketed.

To fulfill these multiple roles effectively, A&R officials ideally needed to have "good ears"—that legendary, elusive ability to identify major star talent and prospective hits among the hundreds of musicians and songs they heard or heard about. They also needed to cultivate a keen sense of potential audiences, tastes, and markets. Within their four principal functions, there were enormous variations of emphasis and expertise. Even so, these duties gave A&R representatives enormous power within the interwar recording industry.

BACKGROUNDS

Offering useful generalizations about who A&R decision-makers were, where they came from, and how they got into the recording industry is every bit as challenging as trying to describe the precise nature of their A&R duties. Some A&R officials were mavericks—occasional, even accidental talent scouts whose contributions were random, short-lived, and without a discernible pattern. In this regard, the case of celebrated African American writer Richard Wright is especially revealing. In 1940, Wright befriended Clinton Brewer, a convicted murderer then serving a life sentence at Trenton State Prison in New Jersey for killing his wife. Brewer had begun exchanging letters with Wright after reading the author's best-selling novel *Native Son* and enrolling in a correspondence course in harmony and counterpoint to hone his songwriting and arranging skills. Wright heard the results of Brewer's studies when he visited the prison and an inmate band performed Brewer's "Stampede in G Minor." Impressed, Wright alerted his friend, Columbia's iconoclastic A&R man John Hammond, who, in turn, showed the arrangement to prominent bandleader Count Basie. By the end of the year, Wright joined Basie and Hammond in Columbia's New York studios as Basie and his orchestra recorded what the *Pittsburgh Courier* described as "discs of swing selections [penned] by a race convict." Following the success of "Stampede in G Minor" (OKeh 5987) and thanks to the lobbying efforts of Wright, Hammond, and Basie, New Jersey Governor Charles Edison (son of inventor Thomas

A. Edison) granted Brewer early parole in July 1941. Hammond had "no hesitation in predicting a splendid career for him" as Basie's musical arranger. Hammond had made better predictions, though. Just three months after his release, Brewer stabbed a woman to death for refusing his marriage proposal. He escaped the electric chair only through the intervention of acclaimed psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, who, at Wright's behest, helped Brewer's attorney present a convincing insanity defense.[24]

It would be hard to extrapolate a model of commercial A&R practice from the singular circumstances in which Richard Wright discovered Clinton Brewer. But finding musical talent among prisoners was not uncommon in the early decades of roots music recording, at least among the nation's ballad hunters. Folklorists John A. Lomax and his son Alan routinely combed southern prisons in search of "authentic" singers and supposedly unsullied folksongs to record for the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song. In the process, they famously discovered Lead Belly in Angola, Louisiana's forbidding state penitentiary. "Negro songs in their primitive purity can be obtained probably as nowhere else from Negro prisoners in state or Federal penitentiaries," the elder Lomax contended. He was largely mistaken, however, in his belief that African American inmates, "especially the long-term prisoners who have been confined for years," were isolated to the extent that they "have not yet been influenced by jazz and the radio," and, as a result, still sang "distinctive old-time Negro melodies."[25] Even in highly secure, segregated prisons, inmates were keenly aware of evolving musical trends; despite nearly two decades behind bars, Clinton Brewer was steeped in the latest jazz and swing idioms. Commercially recorded music and the mass media had a long reach that regularly foiled or at least compromised the purist aspirations of the Lomaxes and many like-minded folksong collectors. Yet there was one important way in which Wright's dalliance with musical talent-spotting was entirely typical of contemporary A&R practices. Just as Wright had told John Hammond about Brewer's songwriting skills, casual and part-time scouts often steered promising performers to more experienced and better-placed A&R men. Hot tips from local talent-spotters were routinely forwarded to salaried company A&R officials or to others on semipermanent retainers who supervised recording sessions when needed.

Notwithstanding Richard Wright's idiosyncratic involvement, African Americans were sorely underrepresented in the world of interwar roots music A&R, despite their major contributions as singers, musicians, arrangers, songwriters, music publishers, and consumers. Nevertheless, a handful did manage to break into the A&R field and play a significant role in roots music recording. Clarence Williams, a pianist, composer, arranger, and prolific recording artist in his own right, entered A&R work chiefly through music publishing and served as a race records director for OKeh between 1923 and 1928. Born in 1894 in Plaquemine, Louisiana, Williams first became involved in music publishing in New Orleans in 1915. He continued to develop that side of his career under the wing of self-declared "Father of the Blues," W. C. Handy, and later, in 1922, formed his own Clarence Williams Music Publishing Company in New York. Williams

used his professional contacts to recruit and record new talent, initially at Columbia and later at OKeh, chiefly as a way, like Perry Bradford, to promote his publishing firm's songs and gain mechanical royalties. Among the artists Williams recorded for the first time were jazz pianists Fats Waller and Willie "The Lion" Smith. In addition, Williams, who has as good a claim as most to having "discovered" the "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith, accompanied her on several of her early sides and even wrote her first Columbia release in 1923, "Gulf Coast Blues" (A3844), one of nearly five hundred songs he had a hand in writing.[26]

Another leading African American figure in interwar A&R was Richard M. Jones, a fellow Louisianan who was born in 1892 in Donaldsonville, some twenty miles southeast of Clarence Williams's birthplace. A gifted jazz pianist, composer, and recording artist who counted the perennially popular "Trouble in Mind" among his dozens of songwriting credits, Jones managed much of OKeh's race records operation in Chicago during the mid- to late 1920s. Prior to assuming that position, he had worked for the Chicago branch of Williams's publishing house before opening his own music shop on East 39th Street. Meanwhile, beginning in 1923, Jones recorded for a series of labels, including Gennett, OKeh, Victor, and Paramount, both as a solo artist and as the leader of the Three Jazz Wizards and later the Chicago Cosmopolitans. As an A&R man for OKeh, Jones produced sessions, as well as supplied the piano accompaniment, for several vaudeville blues singers, among them Sara Martin, Bertha "Chippie" Hill, Blanche Calloway, and even actress Hattie McDaniel. However, he was chiefly involved with jazz and gospel recordings, including overseeing approximately a dozen sides by Juanita "Arizona" Dranes, a blind gospel singer-pianist he had discovered in 1926 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In addition, Jones may have organized and perhaps even supervised some of the historic OKeh recordings by Louis Armstrong's highly influential Hot Five and Hot Seven ensembles. Eventually, Jones moved on to similar A&R assignments, first at Decca in the mid-1930s and then at Mercury shortly before his death in 1945.[27]

Aletha Dickerson, the only African American woman known to have served as an A&R manager in the interwar period, was a native of Chicago, where her Tennessee-born father worked as a café musician and her Kansas-born mother, a music teacher. In 1923, she became a secretary for J. Mayo Williams at Paramount's Chicago offices and for the label's Chicago Music Publishing Company. She also ran a local music store, Dickerson's Record Shop, at 31st and State Streets, with her husband, Alexander J. Robinson, a guitarist, piano player, and future recording artist. When Williams resigned from Paramount in 1928, Dickerson served as a Paramount recording manager and talent scout in her own right, albeit a "reluctant one," according to historian Alex van der Tuuk. "I had no desire to or expectation of being what was then called [a] 'recording manager' for Paramount," Dickerson later admitted. "I was neither asked whether or not I wanted such a position, nor even informed until three months after the fact. . . . Except that I could read music, play piano, arrange music, I was wholly unqualified for such a job." Her duties mainly consisted of replenishing Paramount's race records

catalog by recruiting new talent such as the Hokum Boys (which included her husband), Laura Rucker, and Arnold and Irene Wiley, and recording them alongside established artists such as Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Meade Lux Lewis. In addition, Dickerson played piano on numerous sessions she supervised and sometimes composed songs for artists. For example, she provided the accompaniment on Blind Blake's August 1929 session that yielded "I Was Afraid of That" (Paramount 12882). Dickerson also claimed—and, unlike some A&R officials who made similar claims during the period, probably merited—a share of the songwriting credits for a number of songs, including Ida Cox's "Coffin Blues" (Paramount 12318), waxed four years earlier under J. Mayo Williams's direction.[28]

Considering the examples of Perry Bradford, Clarence Williams, Richard M. Jones, and Aletha Dickerson, it is tempting to generalize that musical ability was more important, proportionately, as a point of entry into A&R work for the relatively few African Americans involved than it was for their white colleagues. One conspicuous exception to that trend, however, was the most influential of all African American A&R managers during this period: Dickerson's onetime boss, J. Mayo "Ink" Williams. Born in 1894 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and raised in Monmouth, Illinois, Williams won fame as a football and track star at Brown University before moving to Chicago in 1921 after graduation. There, despite no experience in the recording industry, he landed the job as A&R manager for what would become Paramount's extensive race recording program. Meanwhile, Williams moonlighted for several seasons as one of the first African Americans in the newly formed National Football League with the Hammond (Indiana) Pros and several other teams. During his tenure at Paramount between 1923 and 1928, Williams supervised an estimated seven hundred recordings with race recording stars such as Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Papa Charlie Jackson, Blind Blake, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Like many of his white A&R colleagues, Williams had no particular musical ability. He did, however, respect the cultural, as well as the financial, value of black roots music, even though his personal tastes leaned toward classical music and pop balladry, rather than toward the blues, gospel, and hot jazz performances he mainly oversaw. After resigning from Paramount, Williams went on to work in a similar capacity for Jack Kapp at Brunswick beginning in 1928, and then, after a short stint coaching football at Morehouse College in Atlanta, for Kapp again at Decca between 1934 and 1945. Williams built, in the words of historian William Howland Kenney, "the longest-running and most productive career of any African American in the phonograph business before World War II."[29]

While the relative paucity of African Americans in interwar A&R reflected the racial prejudice and discrimination pervasive in the United States, in other ways, the field was remarkably diverse. This was mainly due perhaps to the chief mandate of the job, namely to find and record talent and music that would appeal to as many consumers of as many different ethnicities and cultures as possible. Whatever the reason, the roots music A&R world was populated by dozens of men (and a few women) from