

## THE JOHNSON CITY SESSIONS: A STORY WHOSE TIME HAS COME

WAYNE WINKLER



Cover of the Johnson City Sessions box set. Photo courtesy Bear Family Records.

They say lightning rarely strikes in the same place twice, but in the fall of 1928, Columbia Records hoped to catch a bolt or two of the voltage found by the competing Victor Talking Machine Company in northeast Tennessee the previous summer. In July and August of 1927, Victor producer Ralph Peer conducted the first of the legendary “Bristol Sessions” in the state line town of Bristol, Tennessee. Widely hailed as “the Big Bang of Country Music,” these recording sessions, held in a hat warehouse using regional musicians, yielded the first superstars of country music, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, and proved the commercial viability of what was then known as “hillbilly” music. Columbia wanted a piece of the action.

By the time Columbia producer Frank B. Walker arrived in Johnson City, Tennessee, Peer was already preparing to make a second trip to Bristol. So Walker got busy scouting out the talent that Peer had missed—or that had missed Peer. And what Walker found is in many ways more eclectic and interesting to modern ears than those historic and influential Bristol recordings.

The latest box set collection from Germany’s Bear Family Records, *The Johnson City Sessions, 1928 – 1929*, documents the work of Walker and is as meticulously produced and documented as its predecessor, *The Bristol Sessions, 1927 - 1928*. Dr. Ted Olson of East Tennessee State University’s Department of Appalachian Studies, who initiated and produced *The Bristol Sessions*, has done the same for the lesser-known Johnson City recordings. As with the Bristol set, he and British country music scholar Tony Russell have composed a lavish 136-page book detailing every aspect of the sessions, including background, biographies of the performers, a day-by-day session log, lyric sheets, and discographies. And, of course, photographs—of the performers, of Walker, and of Johnson City in the 1920s.

“I had worked with Charles Wolfe, the esteemed country music historian, on a book called *The Bristol Sessions*,” Olson recounts. “Charles and I included a short chapter on the Johnson City Sessions at the end of the book called ‘The Rest of the Story’ because in some ways the Johnson City Sessions are the rest of the story

of the Bristol Sessions. After that chapter was put in the book, some people became more interested in this other part of the Bristol Sessions saga. At first, people focused on the Bristol Sessions proper because they’re so important, so legendary. They produced the Carter Family,

as a producer, he brought blues singer Bessie Smith to the label and produced the first commercial recordings of Cajun music. But his first love was country music, and he worked with performers including Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett, Charlie Poole, and Vernon Dahlhart.

would take modern communication to spread the word about the sessions and modern transportation to get the musicians to the studio.

Walker placed an ad in the *Johnson City Chronicle* on October 3, 1928, with the headline “Can You Sing or Play Old Time Music?” The

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Jimmie Rodgers, and many other country music greats. The Johnson City Sessions, on the other hand, didn’t produce musicians with that kind of public name recognition, so people tended to overlook them at first. But once the *Bristol Sessions* box set was put out in 2011, that same label expressed an interest in releasing this ‘rest of the story,’ *The Johnson City Sessions*.”

Olson and Russell had to start from scratch; practically no research had been done previously on these sessions or on the musicians. “We really had to get creative to find out who these people were, where they came from, why they came to Johnson City, and how their records sold. What were the rest of their creative lives like? Did they continue to play music after they disappeared into obscurity?”

The least obscure figure connected with *The Johnson City Sessions* was the producer, Frank Buckley Walker. Raised on a farm in Fly Summit, New York, he left a career on Wall Street to serve in World War I. After the war, he took a job with Columbia Records, first learning the technical aspects of record-making, then branching off into artist management with acts like Enrico Caruso and Arturo Toscanini. Returning to Columbia

Walker later left Columbia for RCA, where he created the budget Bluebird label and released classic jazz and swing recordings by Glenn Miller (“String of Pearls”), Coleman Hawkins (“Body and Soul”), and Duke Ellington (“Take the ‘A’ Train”). But Walker is probably best remembered for an artist he signed after moving to MGM Records: Hank Williams, dubbed by Walker “the hillbilly Shakespeare.” Walker retired in 1958 and died in 1963.

The selection of Johnson City as a recording site was inspired partly by its proximity to Bristol as well as the hope that the region might have yet other undiscovered stars of the caliber of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. But in 1928, Johnson City had surpassed the older, more established Bristol in population; by 1930, Johnson City would be home to more than 25,000 people, making it the fifth largest city in Tennessee. Three railroads intersected there: the Clinchfield, the Southern, and the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. Johnson City was becoming a manufacturing center; it was also a hub for the distribution of illicit whiskey, earning the city the title “Little Chicago.” Johnson City was modern. And while the goal of the Columbia recording sessions was to collect traditional country music, it

ad was repeated in the *Chronicle* and in another local paper, the *Staff-News*, over the next several days. On October 12, the *Staff-News* printed a press release about the auditions which would be held the next day. The ad was rediscovered in the early 1970s by Russell when he was editing the pioneering British-based magazine *Old-Time Music*. But another forty years would pass before the significance of that ad and the full story of the Johnson City Sessions would be told.

The 1928 sessions were held at the Marshall Brothers Lumber Company, 312-314 East Main Street. Today, that site is Colonial Way, a street between Nelson Fine Arts and WJHL-TV. An historical marker commemorating the sessions was erected on WJHL’s front lawn at a ceremony in the spring of 2013.

The book included in the box set documents the chronology of the sessions, for which Olson credits the late Charles Wolfe, who had investigated what remained of the Columbia recording logs and field notes for the sessions.

“Some of that information was recorded incorrectly by Columbia,” says Olson. “So part of our task was sifting through the bare bones minimum information we had about the Johnson City Sessions and determin-





The Roane County Ramblers promotional photo, circa 1929 (left to right): Luke Brandon (guitar), Jimmy McCarroll (fiddle), Howard Wyatt (banjo), John Kelly (mandolin). Photo courtesy David Freeman.

ing which of the names were accurate and which had been inaccurately transcribed. Once we had the name, we had to locate the family members and work through secondary sources, namely family members who remembered people, because the last living participant, Pauline Bowman, had died in 2003. And to find these people wasn't easy. But we put ads and articles in papers all over the Appalachian area, in eastern Kentucky, western North Carolina, and of course, East Tennessee. And lo and behold, people started calling us and writing us from out of the blue, saying "We saw this article in the paper and we'd like to tell you about our ancestors who played at the Johnson City Sessions." So Tony Russell and I just started to gather the stories over the last fifteen months based on this very rudimentary technique of getting the word out, and we were able to get some wonderful stories."

Some of the performers at the Johnson City Sessions had recorded for Ralph Peer at the Bristol Sessions.

The Grant Brothers, Jack and Claude, had, along with Jack Pierce, been Jimmie Rodgers' backing band, but Peer separated them and recorded the band as the Teneva Ramblers. Walker recorded Jack and Claude Grant, Pierce, and Claude Slagle as the Grant Brothers. Their recording "When a Man is Married/Tell It to Me" was the first disc Columbia released from the Johnson City Sessions, in January of 1929. McVay & Johnson, B. F. Shelton, and Ellis Williams had also recorded for Peer in Bristol before coming to Johnson City to record for Walker; neither Walker nor Columbia had a problem with that. Nor did they mind recording performers who had previously recorded for other labels, like Clarence Ashley, Charlie Bowman, and Byrd Moore.

None of the performers at the Johnson City Sessions lived in Johnson City. The closest were Charlie Bowman and other members of the Bowman family, who had lived near- by in Gray Station but had moved to

Bristol by 1929. Uncle Dick Decker was also more or less local, from Washington County, Tennessee. The Grant Brothers were from Bristol. Most of the performers were from nearby counties in East Tennessee or western North Carolina, but some performers traveled a considerable distance to be there. The Proximity String Quartet and the Greensboro Boys Quartet at the 1928 sessions and the Bentley Boys at the 1929 sessions came from the Burlington-Greensboro area of North Carolina. Southern West Virginia musicians at the sessions included Richard Harold from Princeton and Roy Harvey, Leonard Copeland, Vernal Vest, Robert Hoke, and the Weaver Brothers from the area around Beckley. And a sizable contingent of musicians was rounded up by Dewey Golden, a music store owner and performer in Corbin, Kentucky. The contingent included B. F. Shelton, George Roark, McVay & Johnson, The Hodges Brothers and Quartet, Bailey Briscoe, The Garland Brothers & Grinstead, and The Holiness Singers.

The biggest commercial hit of the Johnson City Sessions was a tune by Roy Harvey, who had worked with Walker since 1926 when Harvey had joined Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers. Changing his name slightly to Roy "Harper," he teamed with Earl Shirkey to record "Steamboat Man/When the Roses Bloom for the Bootlegger," which sold over 70,000 copies and made the entire Johnson City project profitable.

Another song from the 1928 sessions that is well known today is "Johnson City Blues" by Clarence Greene, from Cranberry in what is now Avery County, North Carolina. Greene had recorded

for Columbia in Atlanta in 1927. "Johnson City Blues" is essentially a re-working of Ida Cox's "Chattanooga Blues." Two weeks after recording this number in Johnson City, Greene would record for Ralph Peer and the Victor company in Bristol. By 1931 Greene would be recording in New York City for the Brunswick label.

Charlie Bowman and his Brothers' "Roll on Buddy" would become a future bluegrass classic, while Bill and Belle Reed's version of the British ballad "The Old Lady and the Devil" would be chosen by folklorist Harry Smith for his landmark 1952 LP collection *Anthology of American Folk Music*. And the Grant Brothers' take on the Civil War song "Johnson Boys" was transcribed in the influential 1960s publication *The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book* and covered by several groups, including Flatt and Scruggs and the Weavers.

Frank Walker returned to Johnson City in October of 1929 for more recordings. Olson was able to confirm the location of that session by talking to Bob Cox, a Johnson City historian and member of the Bowman family. After talking with family members and discussing evidence, Cox and Olson determined that the sessions took place in a utility building that today is part of the West Main Street Christian Church.

For the October 21-24, 1929, sessions, no newspaper announcements were made; Walker apparently relied solely on established contacts. Two of the performances recorded that week were included in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*: Clarence Ashley's "The Coo-Coo Bird" and "Down on Penny's Farm" by the Bentley Boys.



Byrd Moore & His Hot Shots, circa 1929 (left to right): Byrd Moore (guitar), Clarence Greene (fiddle), Clarence Ashley (guitar). Photo courtesy Charles K. Wolfe Collection.

Clarence Ashley had recorded as a member of Byrd Moore and His Hot Shots earlier on that Wednesday, October 23, but proved to be more memorable as a solo performer. Born in Bristol, Virginia, Clarence "Tom" Ashley grew up in Johnson County, Tennessee, learned the banjo, and began playing in a medicine show at the age of sixteen. (Later, he would be asked to train a newly-hired medicine show employee, future country music star Roy Acuff.) By the mid-1930s he no longer recorded, but in the 1940s and '50s sometimes worked with Charlie Monroe and the Stanley Brothers. The folk music revival of the 1950s revitalized his musical career, and folklorist Ralph Rinzler produced two LPs of informal concert recordings featuring Ashley and some of his friends, one of whom was a then-unknown blind guitarist named Arthel "Doc" Watson. Ashley continued to perform until his death in 1967. "The Coo-Coo Bird" was his signature song, and it has been performed and recorded by countless musicians.

The Bentley Boys are an obscure group. Frank Walker, interviewed by Mike Seeger in 1962, could not remember anything about the group. Olson and Russell tracked down a possible member, Clement Bentley of Greensboro, North Carolina, but nothing is definitive. The song "Down on Penny's Farm" recounts the difficulties of sharecroppers and was also included on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, where it was heard by a generation of folk musicians. The song served as the obvious model for an early Bob Dylan song, "Hard Times in New York Town," as well as his later "Maggie's Farm."

Other notable recordings from the 1929 sessions include the Moatsville String Ticklers' version of a West Virginia state song, "West Virginia Hills"; the Bowman Sisters' "Lonesome Blues" featuring accordion by Fran Trappe; and a guitar duet with Roy Harvey, this time teamed with Leonard Copeland for "Beckley Rag." "Buttermilk Blues" is one of two harmonica tunes done by the only African American partici-



pant in either Johnson City session, Ellis Williams.

As Olson writes, "The Johnson City Sessions were well-timed in terms of documenting certain musicians and regional sounds—and ill-timed in that they were unknowingly conducted on the brink of the Great Depression." Unfortunately, the final day of the Johnson City Sessions, October 24, is remembered as "Black Thursday," when stock prices plummeted and 12.9 million shares were sold, double the previous record. Prices recovered that afternoon and the market closed on an upswing. But four days later, on Monday, October 28, prices dropped again as investors tried to get out of the market. This time no one came in to save it. The next day is infamous as "Black Tuesday," October 29, 1929, the worst day in stock market history. Many investors lost their entire savings, companies were ruined, and the Great Depression began.

Of course, the recordings made during the 1929 sessions did not sell well; indeed, many were not even released. But this had nothing to do with the quality of the music. The bottom had simply dropped out of the market.

Ralph Peer's historic sessions in Bristol proved the commercial viability of country music and created

its first two superstars, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Music historian Nolan Porterfield coined the term "The Big Bang of Country Music," and Johnny Cash went further, calling the Bristol Sessions "the single most important event in the history of country music." But Ted Olson contends there is much about the music on *The Johnson City Sessions* that has been overlooked by the impact of the Bristol Sessions. Indeed, as *The Bristol Sessions* box set proves, there was much in the Bristol Sessions themselves that had been overshadowed by the fame of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

But Olson contends that while Peer was interested primarily in capturing vocal performances of sacred and secular songs with an eye toward attracting the broadest possible audience, Frank Walker had a more "hands-off, open tent approach," one which reflected his eclectic tastes and his sense of humor. As a result, the Johnson City recordings may reflect more of the music that could be heard in that time and place.

"The Johnson City Sessions are important because, in my opinion, they show Appalachian music in the widest possible variety at the cusp of the Great Depression," Olson writes. "And I think that's important because the music that sold during

the Great Depression tended to be more commercial—music done by higher caliber musicians who had just a singular sound that could be marketed during lean times, such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, and then of course the western singers, the cowboy singers: Gene Autry, the Sons of the Pioneers, who came on strong in the 1930s. That music is very professional, and some would say slick, on some level. The music on *The Johnson City Sessions* is that last bastion of traditional music finding voice in a mass media environment, marketed through commercial apparatus, through record stores and such."

Certainly, as the Great Depression was followed by World War II, Appalachia and its music would never be the same. Frank Walker's recordings give us that final glimpse of Appalachian music before the changes came. As Olson points out, "Three of the strongest recordings on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* were recorded in Johnson City in 1928 and 1929."

"It's a quieter story," says Olson. "It's a story that has gotten a lot less attention than the Bristol Sessions. But it's a story whose time has come." ❖

## A RADIATOR SHOP TRANSFORMED: SITE OF 1929 JOHNSON CITY SESSIONS SPEAKS OF ERA'S RACE RELATIONS

JEFF KEELING



West Main Street Christian Church annex (center), formerly Rowe Radiator Shop. This building is considered the site of the 1929 Johnson City Sessions. Photo by Randy Sanders.

Like the strings and harmonies in the music itself, the undertones surrounding Frank Walker's recording sessions of "hillbilly music" in Johnson City in 1928 and 1929 are complex and varied. Those complex undertones were evident eighty-four years after the final recording, when music historian Ted Olson and church member Jerome Manuel sat talking in the annex of West Main Street Christian Church on a steamy August afternoon. The annex had been constructed in 1928 by Roland Arwood, a white laborer. By the 1930s it was home to Rowe Radiator Shop, a well-known auto landmark on West Main up through at least the mid-1940s.

Olson is convinced that within those walls—where today songs of praise and acts of service to the community emanate from the historically African-American but now integrated church—Columbia Records producer Frank Walker recorded roughly five dozen songs, more than half the total output of the

Johnson City Sessions. Olson didn't reach his conclusion about the 1929 recording location until early 2013, as part of research for the Johnson City Sessions box set. Along with revealing the recording site, which at the time was a separate building not affiliated with the church, his research provoked thoughts about race, music, and Appalachian culture, and whether the late 1920s music scene may have been, at least informally, ahead of its time when it came to race relations.

"The very last performer in 1929 at this particular site was the only African American performer of either year in the Johnson City Sessions—kind of a subtle irony," Olson said, referring to a man who played harmonica and "bones" under the name Ellis Williams at the 248 West Main Street location.

The musical similarities between "hillbilly" style and blues, the probable willingness of performers of different races to make music together, and even the location in a section of town that was far from lily white all suggest to

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Olson that, at least subtly, the power of music was working in unexpected quarters.

"It seems to underscore at the very least that there was a lot of cultural borrowing and musical respect back and forth, even if the official culture was one of Jim Crow segregation."

Several factors reinforce the idea that racial lines may have been blurred during the hillbilly recording sessions of the late '20s. Some songs from the 1929 recordings found their way back into circulation during the folk music revival that began in the 1940s. That movement included a strong element of racial integration. Additionally, Clarence Greene, a fiddler from North Carolina who played in the 1929 sessions (and who is alleged to have once bested Jimmie Rodgers in a guitar-picking contest) may have picked up a lick or two from native Texan Blind Lemon Jefferson, an African American country blues guitarist. One of Greene's contemporaries, Walter Davis, recollected that he and Greene both advanced their guitar skills by watching Jefferson play on the streets of Johnson City in the early 1920s.

Whatever degree of truth there may be in the notion that the music scene subtly subverted the race-based mores of the day, Jerome Manuel was just pleased to hear that his home church has one more piece

of history surrounding it. West Main Street Christian is Johnson City's oldest standing church. Its founder, Hezekiah Hankal, was a prominent African American Johnson Citian who worked as an attorney, a doctor, served on the city council, and—also on church property—started the first primary school for African American children in Johnson City. Today, the church has a white minister and a racially mixed congregation, having integrated sometime in the 1980s, according to Manuel. Congregants serve meals and spread God's love to the less fortunate (mostly white) who attend the weekly "Loaves and Fishes" program on Saturdays.

The numerous back stories leave ample opportunity for conjecture about music, race, and culture in Johnson City circa 1929, something Olson finds appealing.

"These things we've learned explain the context of the recording. There was this kind of myth that African American and white music were quite segregated in the 1920s, and a story like this suggests there was a lot of intermingling of performers, and perhaps active sharing."

Olson said the two songs by the African American harmonica player Ellis Williams that Walker recorded on West Main Street were issued as "race" records (marketed to African

American audiences) "but don't sound that different from a couple of blues recordings that were done by whites and marketed as 'hillbilly' [targeted toward white audiences]." Additionally, Tony Russell is convinced that "Ellis Williams" is the same musician as an "L. Watson" who was the only African American musician to record at the Bristol Sessions.

In Bristol, Watson/Williams "played a harmonica tune that sounded very similar to a solo by a white performer, Henry Whitter." And, Olson said, a number of the songs recorded by "hillbilly" artists at the Johnson City Sessions were influenced by African American musical styles. A few had the word "blues" in their titles, notably Clarence Greene's "Johnson City Blues," which Olson said is particularly influenced by African American blues guitar style.

"Knowing about this site for these important hillbilly sessions and its connections to Johnson City's African American community really underscores that things were more nuanced than they may have seemed on the surface.

"It's also very important for community pride today that we know as much as we can about these sessions, because they suggest that all Johnson Citians played a part in them." ❖

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## VIRGIL AND RAYFORD: CREATING LOCALLY GROWN MUSIC FROM ORGANIC INGREDIENTS

JULIA WATTS



Virgil (left) and Rayford (right) pose for the camera. Photo courtesy author.

It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to claim that I grew up in a bilingual home. I can't truly make this claim, however, because the two languages I absorbed as a child were both forms of English. The first language, the one my parents grew up with and my grandparents still spoke, was the language of the hills and hollers, of the cow fields and coal mines, a language full of "aint's" and double negatives that sometimes became triples and homeruns. The second language was the one my parents had learned as readers, as citizens of the larger world, and as first-generation college students. This was the language of the literature textbooks that were always lying around the house and of the novels Mom and I would check out during our weekly trips to our little local library.

In our house, these two Englishes were never framed in terms of wrong and right. They were both valid forms of expression. Which one you used depended on the story you needed to tell. For example, Papaw Queener's

story about how his grandmother ended up riding a cow after falling over it in a dark field definitely lent itself best to mountain English. A story by James Agee, however, was best expressed through "book-smart" English.

With these vivid languages and stories—both oral and written—swirling around in my young brain, it's no wonder I grew up to be a writer. What is a wonder is that on his sixty-ninth birthday, my dad, Rayford Watts, became a writer, too.

He had dabbled in writing before—a poem here, a short story there—but his job as the chair of the English department at Cumberland College (now the University of the Cumberlands) demanded a great deal of his time, and his primary creative outlet was Paint Creek Pottery, the successful business he still shares with my mom. But retirement turned into his creative renaissance. A lifelong fan of traditional country and bluegrass music, he was able to devote more of his time to guitar lessons with longtime family friend Virgil Bowlin, a former member of