

## Masters of Bluegrass Lecture #2 – The Recorded Era

The birth of the recording era is part of a larger technological development that can be called “the birth of repeatable experience.” Photography, motion pictures and sound recording combined to create an ability to re-experience the look, movement and sound of events in the recent and not so recent past. Pictures of your great, great grandmother in the old country, family videos or home movies of your first baby steps, film of the Hindenburg disaster, audio recordings of your first words, a speech by President Kennedy - these experiences were one time events unavailable before the invention of the technologies that support them.

Paintings, drawings and sculpture capture their subjects with the artist’s artful impression of the truth, but technology does not lie. Beginning in the 1820s, photography allowed people to see people, places and things as they were yesterday Thomas Edison invented the Edison Cylinder in 1877 and by 1888 it was being marketed as a music media. In 1894, the world’s first commercial motion picture exhibition was given in New York City, using Edison’s Kinetoscope.

The first recordings were often the spoken word such as political speeches or poetry but music quickly proved to be more popular. Brass bands, orchestras, opera singers and the like were the first to be featured.

Radio developed in the teens and became increasingly important in the South throughout the 1920s. Large stations such as Atlanta’s WSB periodically featured live rural music including that by Fiddlin’ John Carson.

In 1922, an Amarillo Texas fiddler named Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland, a fiddling Civil War veteran from Altus, Oklahoma traveled to Richmond, Virginia to play at a Confederate Soldier’s Reunion. For reasons unknown, the pair then traveled to New York City to the RCA Victor recording company and asked to be recorded. An oft-told story relates that Robertson appeared in Texas cowboy gear and Gilliland wore his Confederate uniform. The image of the duo arriving unannounced and requesting to be recorded must have caused a stir. Surprisingly, RCA did record the duo and Eck by himself when he returned the next day. These recordings were not released initially but are still considered the first recordings of country music. [sallie gooden]

“In the spring of 1920, Ralph Peer, recording director for Okeh records, recorded a black blues singer Mamie Smith. [Mamie] This recording generated a boom for blues music and launched Okeh into a ranking position as a record company. A market for black music was found to exist among the blacks themselves. This resulted in an explosion of recording of *race records* – 1920s code for records designed for the black audience featuring black talent. This was music produced in the cities and by city people. When recording executives learned that Southern rural blacks desired to purchase recordings by members of their own race, such enterprising recording men as Ralph Peer determined to venture into the South to find native singers in their own habitats. Through this kind of scouting activity the white hillbilly recording industry came into being.

All this is to say that the concept that rural blacks would buy recordings by rural black musicians had never occurred to these people. The next step was that rural white people would buy recordings.

In 1923 in Atlanta searching for local black talent, Ralph Peer recorded Fiddlin’ John Carson playing and singing “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane.” [Carson] When a small

local pressing this record sold out quickly, the execs realized there was gold in this music.

The advent of electrical recording in 1925 vastly improved the sound quality of records. Also in 1925 WSM radio began broadcasting a weekly country music program from Nashville. Dave Macon is an example of the type of talent they featured. [macon]