

### Masters of Bluegrass Lecture #3 – The Carter Family and Jimmie Rogers

When Ralph Peer took his recording equipment to Bristol, Tenn. in 1927, he could not have known that he was about to record two acts that would change the history of country music. Peer advertised his 10-day stay in local newspapers in advance of his visit. He recorded as many as 20 different acts during his stay including Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. This was the beginning of Rodgers' 6 year recording career during which he became country music's biggest selling artist and set the stage for many of the standard features of country music.

The Carter family consisted of A.P. Carter, his wife Sara and his sister-in-law Maybelle. A.P. was one of the first to realize the value of the copyright and therefore his name appears on many songs from the oral tradition that he obviously did not write as well as Carter family originals. Consequently, some observers demonize Carter for "ripping off" tradition by protecting songs he didn't write under his own name, while others praise him for saving songs that otherwise may have been lost to obscurity.

The Carter Family recorded over 300 sides in a career that lasted into the mid 1940s. In the 1950s Maybelle formed a second Carter Family group featuring her daughters. One of the daughters, June, went on to even greater fame as wife of country singer Johnny Cash. Maybelle stands out as an early female instrumentalist in country music. Her style combined melody notes with rhythm strums and produced a complete musical statement. The style became known as the "Carter style" and became a requisite for any developing country guitarist.

The Carter family legacy includes 100s of standard religious and secular country songs including "Wildwood Flower," "The Sunnyside of Life," and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." Their many radio broadcasts throughout the South made them household names to thousands of fans. The themes of their songs reflected 19<sup>th</sup> century interest in sentimental and sometimes maudlin subjects including death of loved ones, orphans, blind children and departed mothers. The Carters' music was reassuring to a conservative southern population that feared the relentless march of progress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Jimmie Rodgers became the first country singing star. During his all too short career he recorded 111 songs. He combined blues music with yodeling to become known as "The Yodeling Brakeman" a reference to the railroad man persona that he promoted early in his career. With his recording of "Blue Yodel #1" (T for Texas) he quickly became the biggest star in hillbilly music. He is said to have earned \$600 a week during traveling show performances in the early 1930s. When he died of tuberculosis in 1933, it was estimated he had sold 20 million records and was earning more \$100,000 per year. Jimmie Rodgers influence cannot be over estimated. Later country stars such as Earnest Tubb began their careers as Rodgers imitators. After his example, children in the south could dream of a career as a country music singer – something that had never existed before.