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A Survey of the AMRC's Hillbilly Record Collection

Editor's note. The author completed her Ph. D. dissertation, *Hillbilly Music and its Components: A Survey of the University of Colorado Hillbilly Music Collection*, in May, 1991.

One division of the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder, is the Early Country Music Collection. The original collection was compiled by Professor William Kearns and record collector Joseph Bussard, Jr., of Frederick, Maryland, in 1970. They selected 681 performances from Bussard's collection of over 10,000 original commercial issues of country music before 1940. Bussard then recorded forty-eight reel-to-reel tapes of music and interviews with recording artists, preceded by his own fifteen-minute narration on the first years of the country music industry. Other scholars have supplemented the basic collection: Master of Music Literature candidate Nancy Ziglar contributed recordings of the country music duo, Ray and Ina Patterson, and Professor Alan Luhning added recordings of the Carter Family.

The first 544 items of the Early Country Music Collection consist of recordings made by so-called hillbilly performers; the remaining recordings are by cowboy and cowgirl performers of the 1920s and 30s. In 1988 and 1989 I completely revised the original catalog of the hillbilly section only, correcting errors and rearranging the sequence. The new ordering lists recording artists in chronological order by first recording dates, and their recordings chronologically within each performer's career (as best could be determined from discographies and producer's notes; many recordings have incomplete documentation). The tapes are being remastered and transferred to digital audio tapes, from which cassette tapes may be copied. Only the music is transferred; the commentary and radio interviews are available only on the original reel-to-reel tapes.

Eighty percent of the recordings and fifty-three percent of the performers in this collection came from four states: Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia (Figure 1). This regional distribution agrees with Carney (1987), who found that two-thirds of country music notables (performers, composers, publishers, and executives) born before 1900 (the generation recording in the 1920s) came from these four states. Within those states nearly all the performers came from the mountains (Uncle Dave Macon, from near Nashville, is an exception). Carney (1987) also found that all the hillbilly music professionals he traced came from areas defined by the U. S. Census Bureau as "rural," that is to say, from cities with fewer than 50,000 residents.

Lornell (1989) blamed such regional biases on the talent scouts who hired

the musicians in the 1920s and 30s. These scouts tended to return to areas where they had already hired musicians, not looking in other towns for new talent. Certain areas, therefore, were disproportionately overrepresented. In Lornell's study of Virginia performers, eighty percent came from southernmost Virginia, from Lee County in the west to Norfolk in the east. In the AMRC collection, one-quarter of the performers came from southwest Virginia, and another twenty-five percent came from the mountains of east Tennessee and west North Carolina. Musicians lived in all parts of the South, but only a few local styles appear on recordings.

Figure One: States of Origin of Performers in the Hillbilly Portion of the Early Country Music Collection.

| State | Performer | Number of Pieces |
|----------------|--------------------------------|------------------|
| Virginia | Ernest Stoneman/Eck Dunford | 75 |
| | H. Whitter/G. B. Grayson | 29 |
| | Kelly Harrell | 23 |
| | Hillbillies/Buckle Busters | 18 |
| | Fiddlin' Powers | 16 |
| | Dykes Magic City Trio | 10 |
| | Blue Ridge Highballers | 8 |
| | Dock Boggs | 8 |
| | Crockett Ward | 4 |
| | Jack Reedy | 2 |
| | Wise String Orchestra | 2 |
| | Bull Mountain Moonshiners | 1 |
| Tennessee | D. Macon/McGees | 106 |
| | Grant Brothers | 10 |
| | H. Bate/Possum Hunters | 9 |
| | Tennessee Ramblers | 8 |
| | Uncle Bunt Stephens | 4 |
| | Crook Brothers | 4 |
| | Vance's Tennessee Breakdowners | 2 |
| North Carolina | Bascom Lamar Lunsford | 13 |
| | B. Jarrell/D. C. Woltz | 13 |
| | S. Bumgarner/E. Davis | 10 |
| | Carolina Night Hawks | 1 |
| Georgia | Skillet Lickers | 43 |
| | Fiddlin' John Carson | 19 |
| Texas | Eck Robertson | 14 |
| Kentucky | Buell Kazee | 15 |
| | B. F. Shelton | 4 |

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| | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|----|
| West Virginia | West Virginia Coonhunters | 2 |
| Unknown | Bill Chitwood | 16 |
| | Earl Johnson | 13 |
| | Land Norris | 10 |
| | George Walburn | 6 |
| | R. Stanley/W. Patterson | 5 |
| | Warren Caplinger | 3 |
| | Cedar Crest Singers | 3 |
| | A. A. Gray | 2 |
| | Flora Noles | 2 |
| | Albert Bellson | 2 |
| | Dixie Crackers | 2 |
| | R. B. Smith/S. J. Allgood | 1 |
| | Fisher Hendley | 1 |
| | J. D. Harris | 1 |
| | Ernest Helton | 1 |
| | Alphus McFayden | 1 |
| | Charlie Prescott | 1 |
| | Ewen Hall | 1 |

Figure One, con't:

Summary

| State | VA | TN | NC | GA | TX | KY | WV | Unknown | Total |
|------------|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|---------|-------|
| Perf/bands | 12 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 18 | 47 |
| Recordings | 196 | 143 | 37 | 62 | 14 | 19 | 2 | 71 | 544 |

The time scope of the AMRC collection (Figure 2) appears skewed, but it does reflect the heyday of hillbilly recordings. One-third of the collection was recorded in 1927 and 1928, and three-quarters between 1924 and 1929. Hillbil-lies were recorded as early as 1899 (Bronner 1979), and commercial hillbilly music did not lose its identity until the early 1940s (Wilgus 1970). The hillbilly music industry was most successful, however, between 1924 (when Fiddlin' John Carson's "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane"/"The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" and Vernon Dalhart's "The Wreck on the Southern Old 97"/"The Prisoner's Song" amazed recording executives with their instant popularity) and 1929, after which the Depression nearly shut down the music industry.

Figure Two: Recordings Grouped by Year

| Year | Number of Recordings |
|------|----------------------|
| 1922 | 6 |
| 1923 | 8 |
| 1924 | 48 |
| 1925 | 45 |
| 1926 | 79 |
| 1927 | 174 |
| 1928 | 89 |
| 1929 | 44 |
| 1930 | 15 |
| 1931 | 2 |
| 1934 | 4 |
| 1935 | 4 |
| 1937 | 3 |
| 1938 | 8 |
| 1956 | 7 |
| 1958 | 1 |

The few recordings in the collection made after 1930 are continuations of the careers of hillbilly musicians who recorded in the 1920s: Bascom Lunsford, Ernest Stoneman, and the Skillet Lickers. Their styles of performance changed little, so they were still playing “hillbilly” music.

The distribution of artists within the collection is not representative of their relative popularity as performers. Uncle Dave Macon (87 sides, 16 percent of the collection) is greatly overrepresented, and other important performers (for example, Bradley Kincaid, who had a successful career performing traditional songs, and Uncle Am Stuart, who was born in 1851 and left recordings of fiddling in an antebellum style) are absent. Also absent of the early stars of country music, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. The compilers believed that reissues of Rodgers and the Carters made their inclusion in this collection unnecessary. Rather Kearns and Buzzard intended to have several recordings of a few performers and groups and a sampling of many others from that era.

These performances recorded before the Depression are valuable anthropologically as well as musicologically. They are as representative of Southern Appalachian culture as the non-commercial field recordings made by such collectors as the Lomaxes, Cecil Sharp, and Maud Karpeles. Besides their historical significance, they are the earliest recordings representative of country music, a type now performed and enjoyed by many people in the United States and abroad.

REFERENCES

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