

RECORDING REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS D'ENREGISTREMENTS

Hearing Place in "Location Recordings"

The Bristol Sessions: The Big Band of Country Music (BCD 16094). 2011.

Five compact discs and accompanying book by Tony Russell and Ted Olson. Bear Family Records, Holste-Oldendorf. 120 pp.

The Johnson City Sessions: Can You Sing Or Play Old Time Music? (BCD 16083). 2013. Four compact discs and accompanying book by Tony Russell and Ted Olson. Bear Family Records, Holste-Oldendorf. 136 pp.

Old Time Smoky Mountain Music.

2012. Compact disc. Liner notes by Michael Montgomery and Ted Olson. Great Smoky Mountains Association, Gatlinburg, TN.

On Top of Old Smoky: New Old-Time Smoky Mountain Music. 2016. Compact disc. Liner notes by Ted Olson. Great Smoky Mountains Association, Gatlinburg, TN.

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This essay considers the Bristol, TN/VA (1927-1928) and Johnson City, TN (1928-1929) Sessions recordings released by the Bear Family label, as well as recordings, made by linguist Joseph Hall in the 1930s, of musical performances by residents of the Smokies in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. I also consider here a

collection of performances, by contemporary artists, of songs that Hall recorded in the 1930s. This essay is informed by my experience as a musician who has listened to, played, and written about the string-based vernacular music often called "old time music." Like others who style themselves connoisseurs of this music, I have paid careful attention to the content and context of recordings like those I consider here. I am particularly interested in these recordings since they are part of my current local environment; I currently live near the sites of these recordings, my work as a performer and teacher involves using these recordings, and I work with people who were involved in the production of these collections. I chose these four collections because I am curious about what sense of place they afford other aficionados of old time music. My experiences with these recordings lead me to consider the larger question of how contemporary audiences and producers of old time music consume, engage, and create a sense of place through their music-making (listening, performing, mediating, etc.). As a participant-observer in old-time music-making circles, I have observed that we seem very concerned with place.

In addition to collections of recordings that are grouped by performers, there are many collections valued by music-makers in old time revivalist circles that bear geographic labels such as "Traditional Fiddle Music of Missouri," "Kentucky Mountain Music," etc. What role do these place identifications play? How does a title like "The Bristol Sessions" signal a geographic territory, and how might it establish a sense of

difference from other places and performances? How do we use elements drawn from these recordings to conjure a sense of place through our own musical efforts?

The Bear Family compilations of recordings made in Bristol, TN/VA and Johnson City, TN are significant research and production efforts made by a team intent on including all relevant facts and media (including advertisements, newspaper articles, photographs, etc.). The Bristol Sessions set compiles 124 recordings made in 1927 and 1928 by the Victor Talking Machine Company onto five CDs; The Johnson City collection includes four CDs with 100 separate recordings made in 1928 and 1929 by representatives of the Columbia Phonograph Company. Included as part of each box set is a book ("liner notes" is a significant understatement, each book is hardcover and more than 100 pages in length) in which Dr. Ted Olson (professor at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, TN) and veteran discographer Tony Russell provide interpretive text to accompany the recordings.

The producers' notes balance celebratory and critical tones in discussing the people, sounds, styles, locations, and recording processes involved. They provide careful readers with a complicated set of place-signifiers as we read, listen, and form a sense of "genius loci" for these sounds and the people who made them. Place of birth is a common way to create a context for an old time performer, for example as a "Kentucky fiddler" or a "Piedmont North Carolina blues guitarist." The musicians recorded in our current slate of four collections were not always *from* the place where they were recorded. For example, Russell and Olson explain that many of

the performers who made recordings in Johnson City in 1928 and 1929 travelled extensively to do so, giving the example of a cadre of performers who travelled from the Corbin, KY area.

A further challenge to a simplistic or monolithic "hearing" of place in these sets is the wide range of geographic places about which the performers sing. The verses of Clarence Green's "Johnson City Blues" take listeners to Chattanooga, Memphis, and back to Johnson City, using a well-worn place-based narrative model used by many performers in the 1920s and 1930s, including the Allen Brothers in their lyrically similar "Chattanooga Blues." The Bowman Sisters, although they were one of the local groups from the Johnson City area, performed material that ranged far afield, including Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Swanee River." They were clearly aiming to participate in a music industry that was paying attention to the wide range of rural imaginaries that were a part of the growing "hillbilly music" industry of the late 1920s.

Clarence "Tom" Ashley's recordings made in Johnson City in 1929 provide a more concentrated sense of place through limitations. His distinctively rural and non-cosmopolitan vocality, focused banjo style, and mode of storytelling might have been absorbed through his childhood in Bristol, TN and his youth outside Mountain City, TN. On the other hand, they also might have been something that Ashley picked up from traveling minstrel or medicine show troupes.

In any case, Ashley's recordings evoke a sense of rural, pre-modern existence, sketching a drama of simplicity with extremes of bliss and tragedy juxtaposed. In an interesting twist, Ashley's "Coo Coo Bird" is one of

the recordings in this set that has had the most active circulation. This is especially due to its inclusion in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a compilation (organized by theme and function, not location of recording) released by Folkways Records in 1952 which was a key inspiration and source of material for folk revival figures, including Bob Dylan. Olson and Russell inform us that Ashley's musical work put him, not in idyllic wilderness locales, but at the heart of the full-throttle industrialization of the Tri-Cities region around Johnson City, surrounded by factories, mines, and the ubiquitous call of passing trains. In Ashley's recordings, we hear an absence of the modernization in which he lived, and to which his sounds were a balm, if not an antidote. When old time music fans today listen to his records without this context, we don't hear this part of Ashley's actual place and time — the modern element that (per T. J. Jackson Lears) is often entwined with the anti-modern.

One further note about technology: the sound quality of the Bear Family releases is exceptional. Much care seems to have been taken to preserve extant sounds and to provide the cleanest and most listenable example of what was performed into the microphones used by Victor and Columbia in the late 1920s. The recordings — as they are processed for this collection — are in better shape than many historic recordings due to sophisticated, tasteful clean-up processing that has made them sound more like part of the sonic universe of the 21st century.

Consider another way to experience the sounds on these Bear Family collections: navigate to the YouTube channel of a record collector like "Columbia1930" who has posted a high-quality video of the

playing of the record "Lindy" (Columbia 15533-D) by the Proximity String Quartet (made in Johnson City in 1928), in which you hear not the traces of a modern mastering studio, but the sound of this record collector's listening room.¹ While this video posting includes the "room noise" of this unprocessed modern video recording, it also includes the sounds and motions of the phonograph's stylus coasting through the grooves as the spinning slows. These are the sounds that ignited this person's passion for and connoisseurship of these records. Unlike the conventions of "box set" collections, a different balance of technology, marketing, and experience is audible (and visible). In the past, Bear Family sets might have provided the only access audiences would have had to rare historical recordings; now, a huge number of such recordings are available on YouTube and other social media sites. On these newer, networked media spaces, the recordings seem to have a different role, one bound less to commercial consumption and more to individual engagement with these recordings.

Bear Family is not the only institution constructing larger narratives that purposefully connect sets of recordings to locations where they were made. The Bear Family's Bristol set, in codifying location and sound, has supported a number of initiatives, such as a Bristol museum that names the city as the "Birthplace of Country Music" and is dedicated to preserving the legacy of the 1927 recording sessions.² In addition, a separate Bear Family release of recordings made in Knoxville, Tennessee provided leverage for the "Knoxville Stomp: Festival of Lost Music" in 2016.³

While Russell, Olson, and the Bear Family production team have tried to

preserve, illustrate, and (perhaps) elevate these sounds, they have also made them into something different. Instead of discrete discs, or even record sides, they are now tracks that are part of a larger project and the “Sessions” become framed as the work of a single producer. Columbia A&R representative Frank Walker is listed as “producer” of the Johnson City set — a somewhat symbolic move by the Bear Family producers. This attribution makes some sense, as Walker ran the sessions. However, this homage seems misplaced, since Walker is not responsible for the representation of these recordings as a set — he sought to produce individual records. In the Bristol set’s liner notes, Olson and Russell state clearly that RCA Victor rep Ralph Peer’s vision was not one of documentation. In recruiting artists to record for Victor in 1927 and 1928, he was trying to cut profitable records, not represent Bristol through these recordings. Labeling the recordings “The Bristol Sessions,” however, creates a marquee place-label that overshadows Olson and Russell’s careful work to describe the individual origins of artists. While a single place designation for these sets is much easier to understand (and is perhaps more marketable), this kind of simplification doesn’t tell the whole story.

This “Catch-22” of place representation plays out differently in the two sets related to the Joseph Hall recordings. These were initially made not as commercial efforts (as was the case with those cut in Bristol and Johnson City), but as field recordings in the Smoky Mountain area that lies on the North Carolina-Tennessee border. The 2010 collection “Old Time Smoky Mountain Music” presents a selection of 34 recordings made by Hall in 1939, with liner notes by linguist Dr.

Michael Montgomery and the above-mentioned Dr. Ted Olson. The producers have included a variety of musical material, ranging from solo sung ballads, instrumental performances, and voices accompanied by stringed instruments, including guitar and fiddle.

The recordings are short (some shorter than a minute) but give brief access to the music of the people who would be ousted from communities like Cataloochee, Cade’s Cover, and Allens Creek with the founding of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934. Joseph Hall was hired by the National Park Service to record nuances of dialect, vocabulary, and folklore that would be lost as human communities within Park boundaries were removed.

Hall collected musical material incidentally, as part of his engagement with individuals and families over several long recording trips to the region. The rapport between Hall and the musicians is evident in performers’ relaxed (if somewhat nervous) introductions. These prefaces also include place of residence information that the collection’s producers include in multiple places in the CD’s notes. In contrast to the Bristol and Johnson City collections in which the place of recording is paramount, the actual places where the recordings were made, while doubtless noted by Hall, are not in the liner notes. The places to which the performers were connected through their (soon-to-be dissolved) communities are of more symbolic importance here.

The musical material in these performances, however, is seldom as tied to place as the performers might be. The notes consistently show that many of these performances are of material that circulated as commercial “hillbilly” music of the sort recorded and released by Victor and

Columbia. For example, the notes inform us that while Hall credited the composition of “That’s How I Got My Start” to its singer, Bill Moore of Waynesville, NC, it was actually written and performed by cowboy-singer Gene Autry. Zeb and Winifred Hannah’s singing of “Conversation with Death,” the notes state, resembles the widely circulating 1920s commercial recording by Vernon Dalhart, implying that this couple learned their version from this recording. This realization, rather than dis-authenticating the musicality of these people or their environment, calls for reconsideration of how listeners might perceive them. Hall’s expedition hoped to capture the linguistic practices of communities that were being dislocated and whose voices were being changed. The music he recorded indicates that these people were already linked to a widely circulating network of media (in written texts and melodies as well as recorded and broadcast media). This collection shows that in the musical part of his work, Hall found not isolation, but connectedness.

“On Top of Old Smoky: New Old-Time Smoky Mountain Music” was released in 2016 by the Great Smoky Mountains Association, the foundation that also backed the 2012 compilation of Hall’s recordings. This set of newly recorded music (23 tracks) draws, for the most part, on material from the Hall recordings, with a few others included as representative pieces of regional repertoire. This release casts these songs as part of both old and new sonic, natural, and social environments. The inclusion on the disc of the song “Man of Constant Sorrow,” for instance, could be seen as a bid for the attention of potential record buyers familiar with the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000).

These 2016 notes, much more so than those of the 2010 project, acknowledge the problematic histories of community displacement during the founding of the Park in the 1930s, as well as the more traumatic removals of Native Americans from this area a century earlier. The producers also make a statement about the socio-historical context of the music with regards to race. Although all the performers recorded by Hall seem to be white, “New Old-Time Smoky Mountain Music” in 2016 includes performances by African-Americans as well. The presence of Amythyst Kiah and Dom Flemons here aligns this project with narratives that seek to highlight the cultural diversity in American country music. The track notes provide a vague sense of where some of the performers hail from but always list the recording location: the campus of East Tennessee State University, a top-of-the-line studio in Nashville, a resort in Wyoming, a home in rural western North Carolina, and a town hall in England. This globalized recording process turns the idea of field recording on its head: the place-bound material is celebrated but also refracted through performances that range far from the Smokies.

In all four of the releases reviewed here, contemporary production teams work to capitalize on the connections that bind a set of recordings to a particular place. In the case of the Bristol and Johnson City Sessions, the place is perhaps not important in and of itself, but the grouping of the recordings can serve as a spatializing move that creates significance through the process of place identification. All four collections include songs laden with sentimentality, with wistful themes alongside those that, with frank bluntness, ache with the pain of loss. Through them, we enter a

historical soundscape as we listen to songs about modernity and change, including imitative performances of sounds endemic to urban work environments and to a landscape laced with trains and their calls. We see maps of growing urban centres like Bristol and Johnson City, and hear about how the Smokies were connected to the globalized industries of popular music. These recorded traces of place and music reveal not a performance of an isolated and fixed rurality, but of a culture on the move.

Re-release projects can reinforce romanticized, ambiguous accounts of place; they can also provide more nuanced and critical context of places, sounds, and people. These painstakingly researched and carefully contextualized recordings don't avoid all problems of representation, but provide facts, figures, stories, and other context essential to opening discussions (like this one!) that foreground the importance of considering place in music-making, especially in country music. 🍷

NOTES

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNNJo2C7_b8 (accessed January 12, 2018).
2. <https://www.birthplaceofcountry-music.org>.
3. <https://www.visitknoxville.com/event/knoxville-stomp%3A-festival-of-lost-music/2622>.

Roumanie : Musique du Maramureș, Goupe Iza. 2017. Disque compact. VDE-Gallo VDE CD-1497 / AIMP CXIV. Enregistrement (2013) : Renaud Millet-Lacombe. Livret, 39 pp., avec texte par Fabrice Contri, traduction d'Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff, photos par Fabrice Contri.

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Avec le disque *Roumanie, Musique du Maramureș* de Groupe Iza, les Archives Internationales de Musique Populaire (AIMP) renouent avec les origines roumaines de leur fondateur, Constantin Brăiloiu, en présentant la musique du Maramureș, région située aux limites septentrionales de ce pays. C'est à l'écoute des 14 pièces de l'album enregistré par Renaud Millet-Lacombe, ainsi qu'à la lecture des 40 pages du livret bilingue signé Fabrice Contri et Speranța Rădulescu, que l'auditeur est amené à la découverte d'un univers musical surprenant. En effet, c'est dans les vallées carpatiques du Maramureș, que l'on peut entendre l'une des plus originales musiques de Roumanie. Cette originalité résulte en partie d'un contexte historique et géopolitique ayant contribué à l'isolement des habitants du Maramureș et à la conservation de certaines de leurs traditions musicales relativement anciennes. Au centre du projet de l'AIMP se retrouve la figure emblématique de la culture musicale de cette région, le musicien Ioan Pop, que l'on retrouve accompagné de son ensemble : le Groupe Iza. Le choix de présenter un corpus musical entier par les productions d'un seul ensemble découle de la double orientation que l'AIMP a souhaité donner au présent projet soit de « rendre compte