

blues. The coming of radio in the 1920s and 1930s helped boost its audience. Its first great recording star, now called the "Father of Country Music," was Jimmie Rodgers.

"My Time Ain't Long"

James Rodgers was born in Meridian on September 8, 1897. He grew up around the freightyards where the railroad men worked. At fourteen he got a job carrying water for the work gangs, and the black workers taught him how to play the banjo and guitar and sing work songs and blues.

He continued working on the railroad. Christmas of 1923 found him in New Orleans, out of work and broke. He rode a boxcar to Meridian, only to learn that his youngest daughter was dead. Then, during the next year, he developed tuberculosis. Railroad work now was impossible. He toured Tennessee in blackface with a minstrel show. Then he did a local radio show in North Carolina. Finally his big break came.

Ralph Peer, a scout for Victor Records, had set up auditions in Bristol, Tennessee. Rodgers went to see him in 1927, and Peer liked what he heard. Gradually Jimmie's records started to sell, and during the Depression they reached millions of people. In her biography of Jimmie, his wife Carrie told why: "The poverty-stricken, gripped by sickness and troubles almost more than they could endure, knew that here was a fellow who understood, who had 'been there.' Far, lonely cabins on Western plains, on the high ranges, knew that this boy knew them too."

In 1933, he went to New York for a final recording session. He was so weak that Victor provided him a cot in the studio, and he lay down on it between numbers. Two days later, he died in his hotel room. His widow and



This memorial in Meridian stands near the thing Jimmie Rodgers loved most—a steam locomotive.

many friends went to the station in Meridian to meet his funeral train. This is how she described the scene: "Then—like a part of the night itself, a low mellow train whistle. Not the usual whoo-who-oo, but a whistle that was not a whistle. A long continuous moaning that grew in volume as the train crept toward me along the silver rails." The train crew had remembered how Jimmie Rodgers loved train whistles.

He has not been forgotten. He was the first person to be honored in the Country Music Hall of Fame. His records are still popular all over the world. And his mixture of cowboy music and blues styles has lived on to influence folk singers and bluesmen as well as country music itself.

Another early country-music star was Rod Brasfield from Monroe County. Bobbie Gentry, who has lived in both the Delta and the Flatwoods, has sung of Mississippi in songs like "Ode to Billie Joe." Two of the best-known country singers, Charley Pride and Conway Twitty, were born within a few miles of each other in the Delta.

Elvis Presley started as a country singer, also influenced by gospel music. In the late 1950s, he began to popularize a new development in music, rock-and-roll. His first Victor record, "Heartbreak Hotel," sold more than 1,500,000 copies. Its success, and his famous guest appearances on television, helped pave the way for the developments in popular music in the 1960s.

Themes of Country Music

Like the blues, country music tells of the troubles and hopes of the people who sing and listen to it. Rodgers sang of poverty, of trains and "moving on," and of TB and other troubles.

The audiences for country music and for blues are almost completely different—one mostly white, the other mostly black—but the themes and elements of the musical traditions are the same. Rodgers and Broonzy both knew this. Broonzy once wrote:

Of course, we know it ain't just Negroes that play and sing the blues, because there's some hillbillies and 'cowboys that sing the blues, too. They sing it their way, and we sing it our way, and we know and love our way, and they know and love their way.

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