

“Blue Yodel (T for Texas)”--Jimmie Rodgers (1927)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Ben Wynne (guest post)*



Jimmie Rodgers

Jimmie Rodgers and “Blue Yodel”

On November 30, 1927, James Charles “Jimmie” Rodgers (September 8, 1897–May 26, 1933) entered an old church in Camden, New Jersey, that the Victor Recording Company had recently converted into a recording studio. A guitar player and singer, Rodgers was also a railroad worker who was struggling to build a permanent career in show business. A native Mississippian, he had been “discovered” by talent scout Ralph Peer in North Carolina several months earlier. Rodgers recorded four songs that day but one stood out above the rest. It would make him a star and launch a brief but memorable career that would later lead country music fans around the world to revere him as “The Father of Country Music.” The song was a blues-based number that Victor released under the title “Blue Yodel” (sometimes referred to as “Blue Yodel #1” or “T for Texas”) as an homage to Rodgers’s yodeling abilities. The first three lines of the song would echo through decades of country, blues, and rock and roll music:

*T for Texas, T for Tennessee
T for Texas, T for Tennessee
T for Thelma, that gal that made a wreck out of me.*

Many people who follow the history of country music—labelled “hillbilly music” in the era that Rodgers recorded—usually refer to “Blue Yodel” as the genre’s first major hit. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the years following its release and established Rodgers as an entertainer who would have a profound influence on future generations of artists and fans. In “Blue Yodel,” Rodgers sang several stanzas, some old reworked blues couplets, about a cuckold husband, a cheating wife, and the desire of the husband for revenge. He punctuated each stanza with his trademark yodel, which caught on instantly with the public. While Rodgers’s yodeling spawned a number of white country imitators—some of whom, like Ernest Tubb and Gene

Autrey, would also become famous—his overall style caught on with some African-American blues artists as well. In 1930, the Mississippi Sheiks imitated Rodgers's yodel on "Yodelin' Fiddlin' Blues" and four years later Tampa Red used the Rodgers yodeling style in "Worried Devil Blues." Still later, blues legends like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf would talk to interviewers about having listened to Rodgers records when they were young. "I was inspired by the records of Jimmie Rodgers," Howlin' Wolf once said. "I took up that idea [yodeling] and adapted it to my own abilities. I couldn't do no yodeling, so I turned to howlin' and it's done me just fine." B.B. King, one of the most commercially successful blues performers of all time, also sang along with Rodgers records as a youngster, later telling an interviewer, "Jimmie Rodgers was one of the first country singers to sing blues that black people liked."

While "Blue Yodel" was a huge commercial hit for Jimmie Rodgers that earned him the nickname "America's Blue Yodeler," it was also much more. The song was an example of the close relationship between early country music and blues, and of how popular music of the period could repeatedly cross the color line with ease. It was a testament to the nature of early popular music recording as a process that many times involved artists both white and black snatching untethered phrases and song fragments from the air and making them their own. Many "new" songs recorded in the 1920s and 1930s borrowed from and built on the past, taking different musical elements and phrasings that had been around for decades in one form or another and crafting them into something worth hearing. Sometimes these songs were innovative in their composition and style, and sometimes they were simply lifted in bits and pieces from other sources. In the case of "Blue Yodel," the first line—in fact, the signature line of the song—"T for Texas, T for Tennessee"--appeared in recordings by Memphis bluesmen Frank Stokes and Jim Jackson around the same time that Rodgers produced his hillbilly standard. A variation of the line also appeared in "Kansas City Blues" by blues and jazz pioneer Alonzo "Lonnie" Johnson. In his version, Johnson tells listeners "I got a gal in Texas, I got two in Tennessee."

Like so many of Jimmie Rodgers's other hits, "Blue Yodel" has been covered for decades by artists ranging from blues players Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon, to country performers Grandpa Jones and Johnny Cash, to the iconic southern rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. As a reflection of its status as an American classic, "Blue Yodel" received a Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1985 and in 2004 the song was listed on the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress. As for Rodgers, "Blue Yodel" made him a celebrity and a much sought after performer, but his career was cut tragically short in 1933 when he died of tuberculosis at the age of 36, leaving behind a recording catalogue of 110 songs.

During the second half of the twentieth century the music industry began recognizing Rodgers's legacy with a string of posthumous awards. In 1961, Rodgers was among the first musicians inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in a ceremony that included the presentation of a plaque reading in part "Jimmie Rodgers's name stands foremost in the country music field as 'the man who started it all.'" In 1970, Rodgers was among the first group of songwriters inducted into the national Songwriter's Hall of Fame alongside Irving Berlin, Woody Guthrie, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, W. C. Handy and Stephen Foster, and in 1986 he was also among the first artists inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in recognition of his status as a musical pioneer. In 1997, Bob Dylan produced a tribute album to Jimmie Rodgers made up of

cover versions of Rodgers's songs—including "Blue Yodel"—performed by a wide range of contemporary artists including Bono, Willie Nelson, Iris Dement, Aaron Neville, Jerry Garcia, Mary-Chapin Carpenter, Dwight Yoakam, and John Mellencamp. In the liner notes for the album, Dylan wrote, "Jimmie Rodgers of course is one of the guiding lights of the Twentieth Century, whose way with song has always been an inspiration to those of us who have followed the path."

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.