

Jimmie Rodgers: Father of Folk Rock

Let us at last recognize one of modern music's truly great recording artists: James Frederick ("Jimmie") Rodgers: poet, musician, folk-rock pioneer, and possessor of one of the purest, most natural and mellifluous voices ever set to vinyl. In the annals of popular music, no artist risked more, achieved as much, acquired so little, was granted less time, and suffered greater injury than this heroic and yet largely unheralded figure.

Indeed, considering Rodgers' immediate impact and pioneering accomplishments during rock 'n roll's nascent period of eclectic musical development, the fact that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame failed to include him among its founding inductees and continues to ignore one of the most popular and important contributors to the genre during its incipient era of widely assorted styles, diminishes its credibility, exposing how myopic and mythical is its collective revisionist memory.

For the facts are manifest and unmistakable: in a brief airtime period of less than a thousand days - from July of 1957 to February of 1960 - before being blacklisted by music's equivalent of the Black Hand mob - Jimmie Rodgers became one of popular music's elite pentad of artists scoring a dozen or more Top 40 singles. In less than three years, Rodgers charted more hits and sold more records than pop balladeer Johnny Mathis and only slightly fewer than Elvis Presley and two young singers aided by their weekly television series, pop phenom Ricky Nelson and crooner Pat Boone - the latter three being, with minor variations, mainstream rock 'n rollers.

Rodgers was different - a musical storyteller, a singer of folk songs, and yet, uniquely, the founder of a new, more evolved and enlightened version of the traditional genre via a fresh, rhythmic, uptempo electric sound that would become known a decade later as "folk-rock." More than a decade before Bob Dylan would be credited with (and to some degree, discredited for) "plugging-in" the folk world to rock's wired sound during the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, Jimmie Rodgers was electrifying audiences with his folk-rock fusion of amped guitar and ample talent as originator of this new sub-genre of popular American music.

To some purists of the musical genre, the notion of volt-driven folk was revolting. Folk artists like The Kingston Trio, The Limelites, and Peter, Paul and Mary emerged on the eminence of Jimmie Rodgers' iconic status, even as they eschewed his plugged-in popular style.

That elitist snobbery has, unfortunately, extended over a half-century as performers, critics, journalists and historians, with rare exception, have flagrantly ignored Rodgers, let alone failed to properly attribute to his sire, the birth of folk rock music. To the dissenters, however, go credit and appreciation for their clarity of vision and credence to historical truth.

Pastor and popular Nevada radio DJ, Dr. Karl Haskins, of station KTPL, billed as "The Rockin' Rev," transcribed for his 2007 book, Reminiscing with Music Legends, an interview with Rodgers in which he prefaced a question to the singer-songwriter with the observation, "*You were a little different from most of the artists at the time who were either doing rock and roll or perhaps pop standards. You were one of the early folk-rock artists with a softer rock than rockabilly.*" In acknowledging Dr. Haskins' discernment, Rodgers was careful to add, "*I always considered myself a singer of folk songs, not necessarily a folk singer.*" It is an important distinction, because Rodgers' writing, compositions, arrangements, background styling, and vocal delivery often included various elements of many musical genres above and beyond the narrow single-category classification most music business minds found useful in marketing product. Kudos to Dr. Haskins for his astute recognition of folk rock's true artistic roots.

Another perceptive eye belongs to Gary Theorux of WEHT.com, author of several rock histories, and for almost 40 years, Senior Music and Entertainment Editor for *Reader's Digest*, producing its massive multi-million-selling collection of more than 30 folk box sets. In taking the measure of artistic innovation across the annals of modern music, Theroux observed, "Regarding Jimmie Rodgers, it is important to note that he was a folk rock pioneer 50 years ago - well before Bob Dylan, Judy Collins, The Kingston Trio or any of the other leaders of the folk-rock boom that really began with Rodgers' string of more than two dozen '50s and '60s hits. . . this folk-rock pioneer . . . debuted eight years before Bob Dylan scored his first hit."

Even more emphatic is Dr. Maury Dean, America's premier professor of rock 'n roll and author of Rock 'n Roll Gold Rush: A Singles Un-encyclopedia, who states unequivocally: "*Folk Rock begins with Jimmie Rodgers II. Jimmie Rodgers II (born 1933) no relation, pioneered folk rock seven years before Bob Dylan or*

The Byrds: 'Honeycomb' (#1, 9-57) and Weavers 1951 anthem, 'Kisses Sweeter Than Wine' (#3 11/57), about a multi-generational love affair with his own wife."

Historians like Haskins, Dean and Theroux deserve praise for their insight and integrity. For Jimmie Rodgers' pioneering folk-rock trail parallels the route traceable back to rock 'n roll's roots in that revolutionary year of 1954 when rural poverty's ex-plantation primitive "hollers" and hillbilly's down-home plaintive sounds were joined in a guttural wail of "White Negro" angst and amped guitar wattage within modern music's twin Meccas of inspired innovation: Memphis and Nashville. In the former, young unknown Elvis Presley was melding hillbilly ballads to the pulsing backbeat insistence of black rhythm and blues to form "Rock 'n Roll," while 200 miles away, in a little nightclub in Nashville's "Printer's Alley," (aptly named "Club Unique") another young singer was packing them in using a hard body Epiphone and small corduroy Fender Tube Amplifier to produce a hip, new, hybrid sound that merged traditional guitar-stringed rural folk music storytelling with a new non-acoustic hot-wired wave of white-version African-American rhythm.

Aside from updating "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" from the Weavers' dirge-like derivative of a Huddie Leadbetter song, Rodgers adapted a hopeful little folk ditty called "Honeycomb," from songwriter Bob Merrill's original creation to his own uptempo interpretation and soon became a local sensation.

The performance popularity was welcomed, contrasting with his reception among some fellow airman on base. Stationed in the South, Rodgers' racial attitudes were decidedly different from those of most of his peers. While in Korea, the young airman had befriended fellow servicemen of all races, believing skin color to be superficial and insignificant. Although having poor eyesight since childhood, the young singer saw no disadvantage to remaining colorblind his entire life. For Jimmie Rodgers, only character counted, for it formed the basis for trust, friendship, and interrelated tales. And as a folksinger, intent on musically telling stories, he felt no reservation in making friends with people of any race or ethnic origin. He believed that the "Divine Image" in which all humans were created, was a diverse representation of a single God having a hundred names and love equal unto all his children. Race, religion, ethnicity, and culture, were all aspects of the rich and varied melting pot from which derived a mélange of new and interesting meaning for musical communication. That enlightened outlook had helped him form fast friendships with several blacks, and influenced by their cultural tales and musical tastes, he had penned, as early as 1952, several unique African-oriented creations including the rhythmic, upbeat, "Woman From Liberia," as well as the minstrel-like "Liza."

On the airbase at Smyrna, Rodgers had reacquainted with one of these wartime buddies in the base mess hall, both men hugging, laughing, and pounding each other on the back, delighted to again see one another. When a racist Staff Sergeant snarled aloud at seeing this white airman "hugging a Nigger," Rodgers pounced on him, pummeling the larger man into submission until a half dozen soldiers finally pulled him off. Airman 2nd Class Rodgers pulled extra duty for a month. The punishment mattered little.

"I never did learn how to handle prejudice," he admitted later. Skin-based hatred made no sense to him. Such stupidity was anathema and intolerable, even if defending a friend meant month-long military reprisal. Even among the staunchest of Southern racists, Rodgers signaled a message of moral courage and egalitarian defiance: beneath the skin we all bleed red. The kid with guitar had guts.

Such grit and guts, he carried forth into his music, creating his own inimitable tunes, intent on enlivening and integrating musical attitudes even if audiences adhered to entrenched separatist lifestyles in the starkly segregated South – a dichotomy that frankly, mystified him. All he could do was to give himself in song, and hope that the message resonated. Transcending race and region, it did. In his first few evenings, word quickly spread of this new and "different" singer. Seeing how Rodgers packed in patrons, nightclub owner Bobbi Brown kept Rodgers as her "Unique" headliner for two years.

Here, for the first time, the Jimmie Rodgers sound was taking root, although no one knew quite what to make of it. His style and song repertoire wasn't Folk Music per se, or some white boy's revision of so-called "Race music." It wasn't true "Rockabilly," nor rightly akin to that of his namesake, the "Father of Country Music." It was, to varying degrees, all, and yet none, of these. More pointedly, in the rural environs of early Fifties Tennessee, it wasn't even "Southern" music. Unlike the heretofore dirt-poor Tupelo-born Presley whom radio listeners initially mistook for black, Rodgers had not only an unmistakably white, but unsettling "Yankee" voice, albeit, every bit as compelling and entertaining for its purity, resonance, and surprising three-octave range, as that of the slightly younger "Hillbilly Cat" from Memphis.

Yet, for all the initial acclaim, Rodgers instinctively knew that Nashville was not his venue. While audiences found favor with his voice and new folk styling, record executives remained reluctant to sign him. He had a name they knew, but not the “Singing Brakeman’s” down-home style. Rodgers rightly sensed that he would never really fit into the staid traditional Mason-Dixon music world of 1950s Nashville.

Released from service, he returned home and armed only with guitar, amp, and ambition, soon began knocking on nightclub doors in the Northwest, determined to support himself with song. Closer to home, and unsure whether his evolving innovation with electric guitar and original uptempo creations would play here, as it did in Nashville, he initially reverted to the more traditional styles of earlier folksingers whose music he and his Northwest neighbors had grown up listening to.

Going club to club to seek paying gigs, he was hired often enough, but soon discovered that what augured for him was less a promising vocation than permanent vacation unless he elected to permanently alter his repertoire and styling. By the mid-Fifties, the suffocating era of stultifying McCarthyism was closing. Times and tastes were changing. It was now an age of youth and new experimentation in which rock ‘n roll was taking root. In Washington, Oregon, and elsewhere, club owners demanded that he "amp up" his folk music to match the frenetic backbeat rhythms of nascent Rock 'n Roll in order to impel bar patrons to dance. It was either “move their feet or move out the door,” and Rodgers, desperate for each dollar, eagerly acquiesced, giving each song both volt and verve to increasingly meld folk to rock in order to earn what was sometimes a paltry ten dollars per night. Yet in paying his dues, Rodgers discovered, much to his relief, that audiences resonated to his revved up “folk rock” songs as readily as they had in Nashville.

Soon, word spread, and Rodgers’ innovative sound began inviting not only audiences, and adulation, but admiration from fellow entertainers who encouraged him to bring his novel music to the big time: Los Angeles and New York.

What Rodgers had developed in Nashville was now the Northwest’s demand, and soon-to-be, the new national rage. Within months, he would make his mark, recording the nation’s number one hit record, an uptempo electric folksong that he had first transformed three years earlier, “Honeycomb.” Over the next two years, dozens of new hits would chart, as America and the world discovered not only a new singer, but a new musical style. For Jimmie Rodgers had magically melded folk with the uptempo rhythms of rock ‘n roll; his genius fusing genres to form an amped-up evolution in song, the electric roots of Folk Rock music.

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