

JIMMIE RODGERS

FIRST COUNTRY SUPERSTAR

Considered the “Father of Country Music,” Jimmie Rodgers paved the way for the entire genre during his brief career. He was country’s first superstar, attracting millions of fans and inspiring countless artists with his mix of jazz, blues, pop, folk, old-time gospel, and hillbilly music.

Born James Charles Rodgers on September 8, 1897, outside Meridian, Mississippi, he was the son of a railroad foreman who repaired and built train tracks. Rodgers’s mother died when he was only five or six, and he often went with his father in his work travels around the South. Rodgers rarely attended school, but he learned about music on the streets, listening to the different sounds coming from theaters, saloons, traveling shows, and his father’s African American work crews. He learned to play the banjo and guitar as a boy and began performing at an early age.

At age fourteen, he began railway work as a brakeman and flagman, moving around the South and Southwest. In his free time, he took every opportunity to perform, hoping to launch a professional music career. In 1924, at age twenty-seven, Rodgers learned he had tuberculosis, or “T.B.,” a lung disease with no cure at the time. He quit the railroads to become a full-time musician, and for the next three years, he struggled to make a living as a touring performer.

Rodgers’s big break came when he was invited to a recording session by Ralph Peer, an employee of the Victor Talking Machine Company whose job was to find and record new talent. On August 4, 1927, Rodgers recorded two songs: a ballad, which is a simple story song, and a lullaby.

SOURCES

Country Music, U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *Mississippi Historical Society*; *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*; *Songwriters Hall of Fame*; *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash



Though neither sold well, Rodgers was invited to return to the Victor studio in Camden, New Jersey, where he recorded what would be his most popular song, “Blue Yodel” (also known as “T for Texas”). Nicknamed the “Singing Brakeman,” Rodgers spent the next five years performing around the country, recording over one hundred songs, and appearing live, on radio, and in film. He wrote and recorded many songs that are now considered classics, including “T.B. Blues,” “Daddy and Home,” and “In the Jailhouse Now.” With his amusing stage personality and bluesy singing style, he was able to update country music’s old-time image and draw in a large and diverse new audience.

In 1933 at thirty-five years old, Rodgers died of tuberculosis while recording in New York. In 1961, he was in the first group of members elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame.