

# **A R Pioneers: Architects Of American Roots Music On Record (Co Published With The Country Music Foundation Press)**

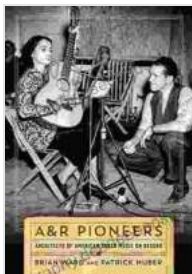
American roots music, a tapestry of musical styles that encompasses folk, blues, bluegrass, and country, has left an indelible mark on the American cultural landscape. This rich and diverse genre emerged from a confluence of influences, including African American spirituals, European folk songs, and Appalachian ballads. The recordings of these songs, initially made on wax cylinders and then on shellac and vinyl records, played a pivotal role in disseminating American roots music to the masses and preserving its legacy for generations to come.

This article explores the history and impact of the record companies that championed American roots music, highlighting their contributions to the genre's evolution, its dissemination, and its enduring popularity. We will traverse the paths of pioneering labels such as Victor Talking Machine Company, Columbia Records, and Okeh Records, examining the pivotal role they played in shaping the sound and trajectory of American roots music.

## **Victor Talking Machine Company: The Birth of Recorded Blues**

In the early 20th century, the Victor Talking Machine Company emerged as a formidable force in the nascent recording industry. Its founder, Eldridge R. Johnson, possessed an astute ear for talent and a keen understanding of the commercial potential of music. In 1903, Victor recorded its first blues song, "My Indiana Home," by Coley Jones, a blues musician from Louisville, Kentucky. This recording marked a groundbreaking moment in

American music history, introducing the heart-wrenching strains of the blues to a wider audience.



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Victor's relentless pursuit of blues talent led to the discovery of some of the genre's most iconic figures. In 1920, the label recorded Mamie Smith, an African American vaudeville performer, singing "Crazy Blues." This popular recording became the first commercially successful blues record sung by a woman and ushered in the era of "classic blues."

### **Columbia Records: Capturing the Essence of Country Music**

As the blues flourished in the South, another musical genre was taking root in the American countryside: country music. Columbia Records emerged as a leading force in capturing the authentic sounds of rural America. In 1924, the label recorded Fiddlin' John Carson, a renowned old-time fiddler from Georgia. Carson's haunting melodies and emotive performances brought country music to a national audience.

Columbia's unwavering support for country music continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The label signed a diverse roster of artists, including the legendary Hank Williams, Bill Monroe, and Carter Family. These recordings showcased the breadth and depth of country music, from its raw and intimate ballads to its foot-stomping dance tunes.

## **Okeh Records: Preserving America's Musical Heritage**

In the 1920s, Okeh Records emerged as a significant player in the field of American roots music. The label's founder, Fred Gaisberg, was an avid music enthusiast who traveled extensively to document the traditional music of different cultures. In 1923, Gaisberg embarked on a journey to the American South, where he recorded a series of groundbreaking field recordings.

These recordings captured the raw and authentic sounds of blues, folk, and gospel music. Okeh's extensive catalog included performances by Muddy Waters, Lead Belly, and the Reverend Gary Davis. The label's commitment to preserving America's musical heritage played a crucial role in safeguarding these invaluable recordings for future generations.

## **Impact on American Roots Music**

The contributions of these record companies to American roots music cannot be overstated. They were not merely passive observers; they were active participants in shaping the genre's development, disseminating its music, and preserving its legacy.

**1. Documenting Musical Traditions:** These record companies sent their engineers to remote corners of the country, capturing the essence of

traditional musical practices. Their recordings became invaluable archives, preserving the sounds and styles of generations past.

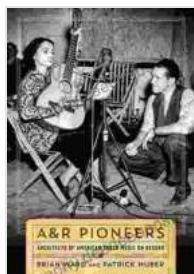
**2. Building Artist Careers:** Record companies provided a platform for talented musicians to reach a wider audience. They played a crucial role in launching the careers of countless artists, including blues legends such as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, country icons such as Hank Williams and Johnny Cash, and folk troubadours such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

**3. Shaping Music Industry:** The rise of record companies transformed the music industry. Their commercial success created a demand for recorded music, which in turn led to the development of new technologies and distribution channels. This dynamic environment fostered innovation and encouraged experimentation, contributing to the evolution of American roots music.

**4. Disseminating Music to the Masses:** Radio broadcasting and the mass production of records made American roots music accessible to a vast audience. Record companies played a vital role in getting these recordings into the hands of listeners, breaking down geographical barriers and promoting cultural exchange.

The record companies discussed in this article were more than just businesses; they were cultural gatekeepers, tastemakers, and guardians of American musical heritage. Their vision, dedication, and passion fueled the growth and dissemination of American roots music, shaping its sound, its legacy, and its enduring popularity. Through their recordings, these companies left an indelible mark on the American cultural landscape,

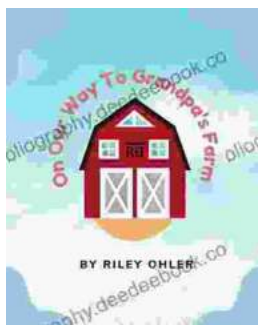
preserving the rich tapestry of musical traditions that continue to inspire and captivate us to this day.



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