

Knoxville, TN. Hotels. St. James

July 24-31, 1997

The St. James Sessions

by Jack Neely

It arrived on Wall Avenue sometime before World War I. In days when sudden hotel fires burned so hot and killed so many that investigators often gave up on



SECRET HISTORY

total body counts, the St. James was fortified with massive amounts of concrete and steel, enough to dare fate by calling fire impossible. For years, the St. James advertised itself on a sign out front as "FIRE-PROOF." For all we know, it was.

The St. James was one of those places where you might stay for a night (a buck-and-a-half, in the '30s), but then again, you might stay for 20 years. Some did. At its height, the St. James had 150 rooms, each with a bath. But it wasn't an especially fancy place favored by visiting statesmen. When they tore it down, old-timers trying to remember who'd stayed there mainly thought of jazz musicians and baseball players. They say Tommy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo, and even Satchel Paige once signed the register at the St. James. But the St. James is known outside of Knoxville today thanks to some guests who stayed just for an afternoon or so. For a rare several months in 1929 and 1930, the mezzanine of the St. James was a recording studio.

I'd heard about the St. James recordings for years. Some of those old country

and blues 78s appear in catalogues priced in the hundreds of dollars. Once in a blue moon, you hear one of them broadcast on old-time country shows on public radio.

But I'd never heard any of them on CD until this summer, and might not have heard them at all if a reader hadn't recommended this new CD, a package produced in Virginia by County Records, titled *Rural String Bands of Tennessee*. Some who know more than I do think this may be the first time any of the St. James sessions have arrived on CD.

Don't be put off by the academic title—or the unacademic cover image, which looks something like a junior high art class assignment. This record is a fascinating collection of recordings made from 1925 to 1930. Most are by performers who played in Knoxville occasionally. And two of the songs on this CD were actually recorded at the St. James Hotel in downtown Knoxville. Ranking country-music historian Charles Wolfe tells part of the story in his thorough liner notes.

Knoxville never had a huge recording industry, of course—though as far back as 1924, the Vocalian record company had a representative in Knoxville who occasionally sent local musicians like Charlie Oaks, George Reneau, Mac & Bob, and Uncle Am Stuart north to make some of the very first country recordings.

By 1927, record companies, weary of the expense of train fare to record country musicians in their New York studios, were opening small studios in Bristol and Johnson City. Brunswick-Balke-Collender, a com-

pany whose 78s rotated on thousands of Victrolas around the country, picked Knoxville, and the St. James Hotel.

Now, to keep this in perspective, remember this was years before Lowell Blanchard moved to town and fired up the Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round. Roy Acuff hadn't even learned how to play.

Still, this already seemed an auspicious spot, shouting distance from Market Square, which had already been hosting fiddling conventions for half a century. Recently, the *New York Times* had written up Market Square for its lively street music.

And here they found no lack of talent. String bands came in from all over the region to try out. (Some even came from Middle Tennessee to record in Knoxville—a brief reversal in the flow of the Trans-Cumberland talent drain.) There was the coal-mining Raney family from Coal Creek, who called themselves the Southern Moonlight Serenaders. There was the Tennessee Ramblers, already well-known on Market Square, starring Willie Sievers, among the first female guitarists to record anywhere.

And there was Ridgel's Fountain Citians, actually made up of newcomers to Fountain City from up north, but believed to be the first band to record with a 12-string guitar. The Fountain Citians were known for their talent and for their humor; their musical plea, "Baby, Call Your Dog Off (Please)," is on this record. So is the odd brother-sister duo of Nonnie and Bulow Smith who, with shy harmonica player Henry "Red" Bone, called themselves the Perry County Music Makers;

they recorded the peppy dirge "I'm (Brokenhearted) Sad and Blue" at the St. James. These children of a German immigrant had a distinctive sound, thanks in large part to Nonnie's zither.

Wolfe, who teaches at MTSU, has claimed that these St. James sessions produced "some of the best music of this early era."

B-B-C even recorded some jazz and blues disks here. Maynard Baird's 10-piece jazz band cut some sides at the St. James in '29, and the black East Knoxville jazz/blues group that decades later would have an international following as Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong, made their first recordings on this mezzanine.

Many of the St. James recordings are believed to be lost forever, but others show up in lively places. "Vine Street Drag," the Martin-Bogan-Armstrong string-jazz instrumental, is prominent on the soundtrack of the PBS documentary "Louie Bluiie." Howard Armstrong later said the record company cleared out, never paid them for the platter. (Armstrong, usually considered a jazz/blues artist, influenced some of the early white country bands, especially the Tennessee Ramblers. The Ramblers' cut on this CD, "Preacher Got Drunk and Laid His Bible Down," was adapted from a Martin-Bogan-Armstrong number popular in Knoxville in the '20s.)

There's no trace of the St. James today; it's been gone for almost 25 years. But for over half a century it was right there on the north side of Wall Avenue, between Gay Street and Market Square, right where the TVA credit union is now. Stop, next time you pass, and listen.

