In 1927, 30-year-old Jimmie Rodgers — a railroad brakeman from Meridian, Miss. — persuaded Ralph Peer, an executive of Victor Records, to give him a shot. On the last day of November, in a studio in Camden, N.J., Rodgers recorded "T for Texas" — a 12-bar blues song with propulsive guitar runs and line-ending "oh-de-lays." Retitled "Blue Yodel," the song was a smash hit, and a star was born. Less than six years later, the singer of "T.B. Blues" lost his fight with the disease.

Eighty years after his death, his music and his legend live on, freelance journalist Barry Mazor reminds us, in "Meeting Jimmie Rodgers," a valentine to his subject. A "Rorschach inkblot ripe for interpretation," the Rodgers of memory, Mazor maintains, works "both sides of the marketplace": he is a Huck Finn outsider and anti-hero, and an ambitious Tom Sawyer conformist. Generations of musicians, including Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Hank Williams and Bob Dylan, absorbed aspects of his public persona, his sounds and his subjects.

Rodgers songs, Mazor demonstrates, served as a medium of exchange between country music and '50s and '60s rockabilly. Edgy in its time, the sexual boasting, hints of violence and a "keep you on the rough side" centrifugal force appealed to a cross-over sensibility. So did his cocky side, his lyrics and the "twist" he gave them.

Although he acknowledges that the lines between pop music genres "were often deliberately blurred," Mazor does not make sufficiently clear that country and rock 'n' roll are best understood as social constructions and not musical conceptions. They were, by and large, what DJs, record producers and performers said they were. That's why Jimmie Rodgers — and so many other singer-songwriters — could be called "the father" of country and rock 'n' roll.

As he celebrates Rodgers' impact and influence, Mazor struggles to assess his debt to African-American artists. He does not doubt that Rodgers knew about Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Clara Smith, the "empresses" of 1920s blues. Nonetheless, he claims, persuasively, that Rodgers' adaptations should not be "reduced to the cliché of simple white-from-black appropriation."

His lyric, "When a women gets the blues, she hangs her head and cries; when a man gets blue, he grabs a train and rides," for example, introduced distinctive emotional and narrative implications. Blues songs, then, were the product of overlapping sensibilities, related repertoires, and constant conversation within an extended family.

For 14 years in the '30s and '40s, with the exception of "The Soldier's Sweetheart/The Sailor's Plea," none of Rodgers' records was released. Despite support from Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow and other country heavyweights, sales of his re-issues were slow until the mid-1950s.

Mazor attributes the revival to "rising affection for the safely past" Roaring Twenties — and an end to segregation that prepared the way for the flowering of country music and the ascendency of rock 'n' roll.

Even after you meet — and listen to — Bruce Mazor's Jimmie Rodgers, he remains something of an enigma, a "Singing Brakeman" on a mystery train, more wanted dead than alive.

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Associate Images:
1920s singing star Jimmie Rodgers (left) with Will Rogers. Courtesy Will Rogers Memorial