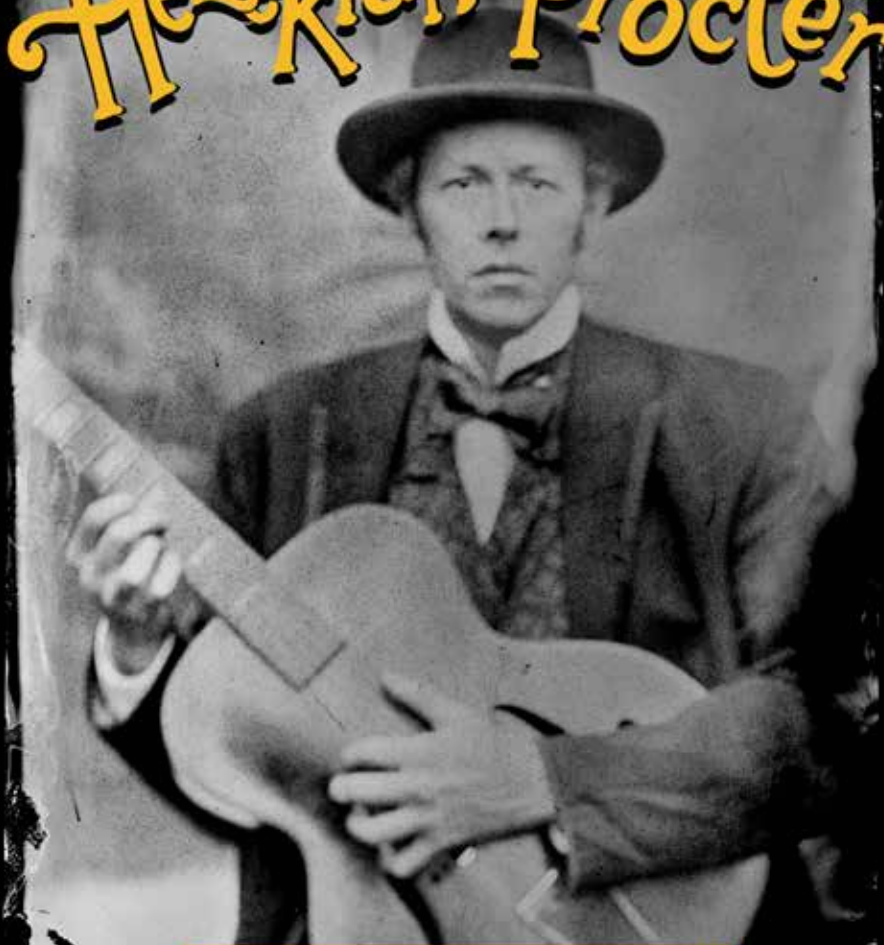


The Complete Recordings of

Hezekiah Procter



A novel in liner note form by
LI'L ANDY

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BLUE LEAF PRESS

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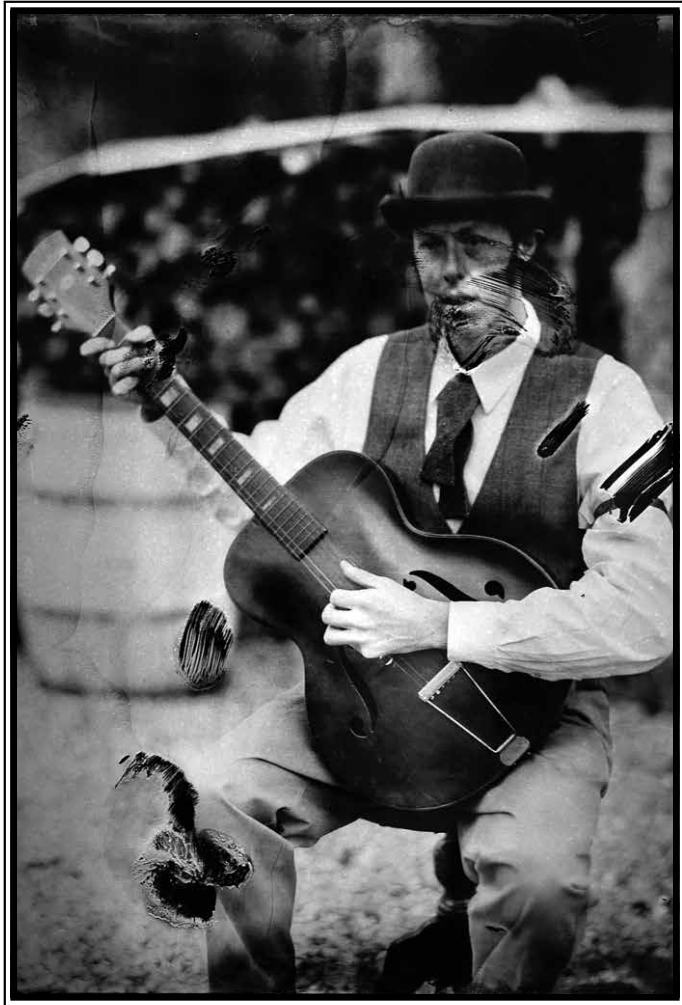
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DEDICATION

To all the forgotten musicians, past and future

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One of the four known photographs of Procter, taken for the Okeh Recording Co. (circa 1926)

INTRODUCTION



WHEN THE RECORDING ARTIST who most frequently called himself “Hezekiah Fortescue Procter” first came to the attention of the audiences who flocked to the medicine shows that travelled the rural Southeast in the years before the Great Depression, he was renowned as a singer of evangelical songs and pop-jazz novelty numbers, one of the most promising voices in the new genre of commercial stringband music. By the time of his disappearance in 1929, he was hunted by North Carolina police, a labor leader whose musical career had fallen into almost total obscurity, a man with few friends who had seemingly burned every bridge with his long line of collaborators.

How Procter fell from grace so quickly is the story this compilation aims to tell.

This collection gathers for the first time all extant sides that Procter recorded with the **HASH HOUSE SERENADERS** and **THE PROCTER FAMILY**—his short-lived collaboration with his brother Jeremiah Isosceles Procter and sister-in-law Euphemia Middle—along with two undated, unreleased sides for Gennett Records whose authorship is in dispute, but which archivists believe may be Procter himself.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND FORMATIVE YEARS (1903-1915)



HENRY FORTESCUE PROCTER WAS BORN in or around Burningtown, NC, sometime shortly after the turn of the century. His family moved to Hayesville Point, a small town along the Hiwassee River, during that town's gem-mining boom of 1903. His father, a sometimes-successful businessman and prospector, invested most of the family's meager earnings in a bronze mine — a venture quickly discovered to be a swindle (bronze is an alloy compound created from smelting copper and aluminum and therefore cannot, by its very nature, be mined).

Following the loss of the family's entire savings, Procter's father was forced to seek work in the Hayesville mines — an ignominious arrangement that saw the elder Procter performing shift work and taking orders from men who were formerly his peers and business partners. The sharp drop in status would deeply affect young Henry's social outlook and already belligerent character.

It was from his mother that Procter would inherit a love of music. Ruby Burt was the organist at the local Pentecostal Nazarene Church, and Henry often accompanied her to all-day singing conventions and “camp meetings,” an influence that can be heard throughout his music, most notably in Procter's composition “**O JOY OF JOYS**,” and in his habit of “adapting” melodies and verses found in shape-note hymnals (and often claiming they were his own), such as “**POLAND**” (retitled by Procter as “God of My Life”) or “**AFRICA**” (or “Now Shall My Inward Joys Arise.”)

When she and her family still enjoyed a middle-class income, Ruby ensured that her youngest child was taught the rudiments of music theory — registering young Henry in the North Carolina Academy of Music and Speech in 1912. A fervently religious woman, it was Ruby who schooled Procter in the Holy Scriptures, in hopes that he would one day enter the ministry.

However, those hopes were dashed when tragedy struck the family again. In 1915, the Procters' humble two-room home was burned to the ground in a fire of unknown origin. Sometime shortly thereafter, it seems, Henry Procter left Hayesville with “**KERR'S INDIAN REMEDY COMPANY**,” an itinerant medicine show based out of Spartanburg, SC. With the exception of his brother, Jeremiah, he would never see his family again.



Kerr's Indian Remedy Company troupe circa 1915, the year Procter joined. Kerr is fourth from the left; Buschenberg is pictured at center with walking stick.

TO THE MEDICINE SHOWS (1915-1920)

THE SO-CALLED “INDIAN REMEDY COMPANY” was then becoming known around the watermelon, tobacco and lumbering regions of the South. Its owner and impresario, **WILLIAM R. KERR**, made the dubious claim that he had received the recipe for his **VIM-TONE** brand of tonics from the Kickapoo native tribes of Oklahoma. Kerr travelled with a small troupe, and each member was expected to fill the multiple roles of comedian, musician and patent medicine salesman.

One of these was **ADOLF (LATER, “ADOLPHUS” OR “AL”) BUSCHENBERG**, a multi-instrumentalist and comedian who spoke in a pronounced German accent when not in character. It is from him that we gain much of the information about Procter's involvement with Kerr and his subsequent apprenticeship as an entertainer.



Adolf Buschenberg, multi-instrumentalist for the Hash House Serenaders and the source for much information on Procter's early years.

“First time I saw Hezzy, we were sitting in the back of the show wagon when we were packing from some small town. He was holding a Bible that was the size of a pack of playing cards. Always we had roughnecks trying to stow away with us. After a while, they would learn that medicine show life was not fun at all and we would have to take them to the police or drop them off at a church. If they stayed, they would have to be fed, and many times those kids would wind up

as delicate-boys for Brother Lance, our buck-and-wing dancer.

“So I go to Hezzy and I say: ‘Get home to your mother, little boy. This is not a place for God-fearing Christians.’ He looked up from his Bible and said: ‘I am not come to preach to the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance.’ I just laughed and laughed. I had given him warning enough.”¹

The teenaged Procter seems to have started work for Kerr as a roustabout and “snake-geek” before finding his niche in the company as a fire-of-God preacher.

Profitable as the act was, it proved a short-lived feature of Kerr's revue; news of a near-child “geek” in the show soon caught the attention of church groups and reformers — a

¹ From an interview with Mike Seeger included on *Al Buschenberg: The Library of Congress Recordings*. Folkways SFLP0381.

powerful contingent in the rural South that Kerr knew was best kept at arm's-length from his style of entertainment. Kerr hoped to assuage the concerns of local citizens by having Procter geek in blackface, but the ruse fooled no one.

After a run-in with Mrs. Richard Irvine Manning, president of the South Carolina Temperance League and wife to the governor, Kerr cooked up another scheme to deflect local reformers. When authorities came to scrutinize Procter's act, the young geek took to the stage with a 5-foot-long "fixed" snake, as usual. This time, however, the boy was struck with a sudden revulsion and paralysis when setting his teeth to the serpent and began speaking in tongues.



Man chewing piece of snake which he has just bitten off. State fair sideshow in Donaldson, Louisiana. November 1938.

A NOTE ON "GEEKING"

"Geeking" was a common practice from the heyday of America's carnival shows, in which a troupe member would bite the head off a live animal, typically a chicken or snake.

Working as a "geek" was an unglamorous "entry-level" position in the dime museums and medicine shows of the late 19th and early 20th century and was almost exclusively the domain of alcoholics or drug addicts hired as "wild men" and frequently paid with liquor or narcotics—especially during the Prohibition era.

Procter learned the technique from an unknown Black troupe member of Kerr's company and quickly gained notoriety as "the Boy Geek Wonder".

As Kerr and other carnival performers rushed to his side, ostensibly to aid the stricken youth, Procter launched into a sermon that, by all accounts, whipped the rubes into a state of religious fervor with its shocking erudition and eloquence. On the spot, "The Boy Geek Wonder" was reborn "**The Boy Fire Preacher.**"

"William Kerr's Indian Remedy Co. show has been drawing sizeable receipts in the Southeast with a new act — Hezz Procter, the Boy Fire Preacher," wrote *The Billboard* magazine in "Pipes for Pitchmen", its column devoted to medicine shows. *"As night descends upon the whistle-stop towns, Kerr's torch-lit stage features the ephebic preacher, who rails against the evils of drink and promiscuity so often the scourge of rural audiences of the region. Kerr's tonic is a well-known 'liquid fire' devised to rid the body of the impulses that feed such vices, and the venerable Doctor is reporting a handsome increase in sales thanks to the young sin-killer, who, at only 17 years of age, has become a star and novel attraction for the company."*²

As the above *Billboard* clipping from 1917 makes clear, it was around this time that the young Henry Procter decided to assume the forename of "Hezekiah", likely selecting it from the Second Book of Kings as a moniker more befitting a religious act in a medicine show.

² Although no definitive date of birth can be determined, Procter — or Kerr — was likely lying about his age at this point and was quite probably only 15 or 16 years of age at the time of assuming his "Boy Fire Preacher" persona.



The Hash House Serenaders circa 1927, after their split with Procter.

BANDLEADER: MEETING THE HASH HOUSE SERENADERS

THE INDIAN REMEDY COMPANY SERVED as a training ground for many vaudeville entertainers, at one time including legendary blues singer **Pink Anderson** and one-man-band **Daddy Stovepipe**, often cited as the earliest-born blues musician to ever record. It was during Procter's own apprenticeship with Kerr that he met the musicians who came to record under the name of **The Hash House Serenaders** — the group with which he would record both his most jazz-influenced compositions and what many early stringband enthusiasts consider his best recordings.



Clayton "Papa" Hunsucker, the Serenaders' sousaphonist reputed to be the illegitimate son of medicine show impresario William R. Kerr

The Serenaders were comprised of the aforementioned **Adolf Buschenberg**, who sang, whistled, played violin, harmonica, autoharp and alto saxophone; **Derwood "Sonny" Wilson**, a South Carolina itinerant laborer who worked in the watermelon and tobacco fields when he wasn't Kerr's resident banjo plucker; and **Clayton "Papa" Hunsucker**, a sousaphonist widely believed to be Kerr's illegitimate son begotten

with Gertrude, the company strongwoman.

Procter appears to have stayed with Kerr's company as long as five years, a period which allowed him to hone his dramatic skills as a showman and build his repertoire of songs. The Boy Preacher's "service" would typically end with Procter leading the audience in hymns taken from the **Sacred Harp** or **The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion** songbooks. As audiences grew tired of hearing the same songs played at the three shows a night Kerr's troupe was expected to perform, Procter was forced to write new ones to keep his "Boy Preacher" routine fresh. According to Buschenberg, it was around this time — 1919 or 1920 — that he recalls "**The Least of These, My Brothers**" and "**I See Jesus Coming Down the Road**" becoming a part of Procter's stage act.

Members of the company spotted Procter's seemingly innate talent for composing songs and quickly turned to the young evangelist for fresh material. The fledgling songwriter's output was dictated by the needs of Kerr's troupe: evangelical songs of moral instruction for his own stage act, and pop-jazz novelty numbers and parlor songs for his peers. **"On a Summer Night Like This"** was composed for **Emmett Miller**, who would later come to fame for recording the original version of "Lovesick Blues", the song that catapulted **Hank Williams** to stardom; **"I'm Gonna Find a New Sweetheart"** for Kerr's minstrel songster **Ferman Tapp**. Procter began charging as much as three dollars for his labors and built himself a profitable sideline to the salary paid by Kerr.

As Procter saw the inner workings of Kerr's show, tensions rose among the troupe. As was common to medicine shows, musicians, jugglers and comedians were expected to walk through the crowd selling the patent medicine of choice while the doctor made his pitch from the bally. At \$2 a bottle, it didn't take long for Procter to calculate just how much money the yokels in every jerkwater town were putting in Kerr's pockets.

Quietly, behind the scenes, Procter sowed dissent among the ranks. In a profession whose very *raison d'être* was to take the "marks" for as much money as possible, the other members of the Indian Remedy Company didn't take lightly to the suggestion that they might be being fleeced themselves.



Billboard Magazine's "Pipes for Pitchmen" column from Sept. 4, 1920: "W.R. Kerr's show suffered damage to the amount of about \$350 on August 16 when the stock tent was burned about 11:30p.m."

"Hezzy would say 'There are rubes who break their backs liftin' watermelons and then there are rubes who lift VimTone for Dr. Kerr,'" recalls Buschenberg. "He that hath given forth upon usury, he shall surely die, his blood shall be upon him.' He used to quote that kind of guff all the time."

The rivalry between Kerr and Procter reached its peak when disaster struck the company on August 16, 1920. The Indian Remedy Company had been playing in Greenville, SC for three weeks when the stock tent burned, costing Kerr \$350 in damages during what had been a very lucrative run. The Good Doctor had to close the show temporarily and was incensed.

"Someone did this on purpose, that's for certain," he was quoted as saying in The Billboard. "I've chucked cigar-ends on that tent for years and the canvas never so much as sparked."

ATLANTA AND BEYOND: THE MISSING YEARS (1921-1925)

SUDDENLY OUT OF A JOB, Procter and the Hash House Serenaders wandered south to Atlanta, GA, playing street corners, box socials, and dances along the way. Little is known about the years of 1921 to 1925, but the musicians likely continued performing with one another in a dime museum, nightclub or other hole-in-corner locale that would have been considered beneath the purview of the local newspapers of the day.

A reference to a “Hezz Fortescue” appears in the *Atlanta Chronicle* of 1924:

“Polk Brockman Furniture, known in these environs as purveyors of furnishings of quality, will be unveiling the latest models of Victor ‘Talking Machines’ and other phonographic equipment Saturday next. Hezz Fortescue and his Band, who performed here at last Spring’s Rotarian dance to great applause, will be on site to perform the latest popular tunes published on sheet music for those assembled.”

Polk Brockman’s furniture store in Atlanta was indeed a well-known gathering place for local musicians in the 1920s and 30s. As retailers of gramophones and phonograph players, Brockman’s carried a large stock of the latest 78s. Local musicians were known to stop in to listen and learn the latest Tin Pan Alley compositions that might earn them tips or drinks when performed at dances or rent parties.

Brockman allowed this occasional disruption on his showroom floor because it consolidated his position as the



Advertisement for James K. Polk Furniture, where Procter and other Atlanta musicians would meet in the mid-1920s. Brockman himself is pictured in the inset at the top.

eyes and ears of northern record companies in the Deep South. Long before the term “talent scout” became commonplace in the recording industry, Brockman was a known recruiter to the artist rosters of record manufacturers — perhaps the reason Procter would later pay tribute to the entrepreneur and his store by including a mention of having “a cakewalk down at Brockman’s store” in his song “**In a Gingham Dress**”.

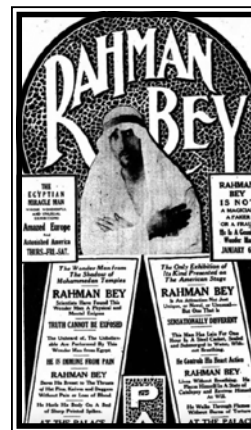
It is likely through their association with Brockman’s that the Serenaders came to record for **Ralph Peer** of the **General Phonograph Company** in the summer of 1925. When the pioneer of field recording made a trip to Asheville, NC in August of that year, he recorded six sides of the group—a generous usage of wax masters on a “hill country” band certainly unknown to anyone from the North. Nonetheless, Peer’s influence would be decisive in the career and legend of Hezekiah Procter, although it would end in the break-up of the Serenaders and in rancor between the two men themselves.



**FIRST RECORDING SESSION:
ASHEVILLE, SEPTEMBER 1925.**

The **George Vanderbilt Hotel** must have seemed like foreign territory to the foursome of unemployed entertainers as they unpacked their instruments in its improvised “control room” on September 2, 1925. The Vanderbilt was the premier society hotel in cosmopolitan Asheville, a town of 38,000 populated with theatres, mansions and a municipal auditorium. Only a year earlier both **Béla Bartók** and **Rahman Bey** “**The Egyptian Mystic**” had stayed as guests in the hotel while performing engagements at the city’s Majestic Theatre.

Facing Procter and his band were three northerners whose interest in the music they immortalized was strictly commercial: G.S. Jeffers, sales rep for the General Phonograph Company; Charles L. Hibbard, recording engineer; and Peer himself, the man whose power — and ear for untrained musical



talent — virtually defined what was “race” and “country” in the early years of folk music’s commercialization.

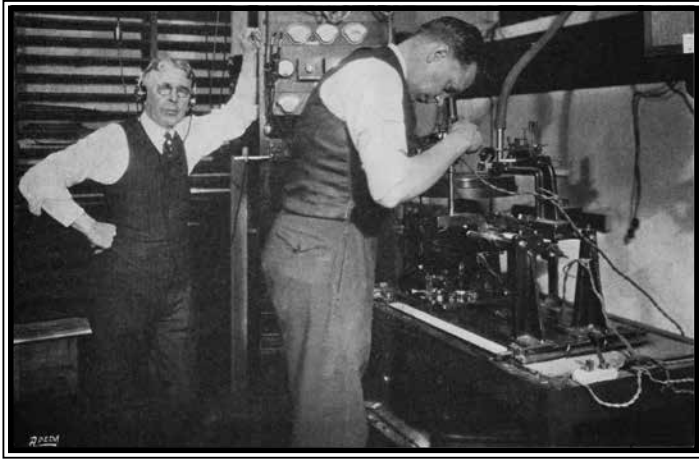
The *Asheville Citizen* described the technological marvels of the recording session in an article published on August 27, 1925:

“In order to get perfect reproduction everything has to be ‘just so.’ At a signal from the producing engineer the disk begins whirling and the players begin playing and everyone begins perspiring.

But the perspiration doesn’t show up in the finished product. The recording device is like an ordinary phonograph mechanism in appearance. A thick wax disk rests on a circular bed that revolves when the motor is turned on. A needle or stylus bears down on the wax disk when the motor is turning. Five minutes and a new record is made.”

Hezekiah Procter and the Hash House Serenaders began their short-lived recording career by committing to posterity a rendition of the theme song for the Kickapoo Remedy Co.: “**Dr Kerr’s Ballyhoo (Get Yourself a Remedy)**”, in which Procter name-checks several of his contemporaries in the show and Buschenberg replicates the energized patter many a medicine show performer would ab-lib to draw a crowd.

Following the song, the ensemble cut two masters that day that reveal the jazz and blues influences on Procter’s songwriting: “I’m Gonna Find a New Sweetheart” and



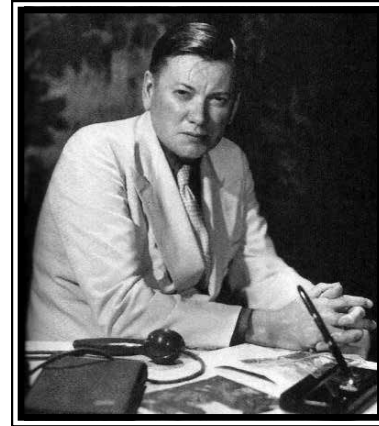
Okeh engineer Charles L. Hibbard (left) — who was present at Procter's first recording session in 1925 — with a Western Electric amplifier and cutting lathe.

“**The Crib House Drip**” (a song about the rigors of contracting a venereal disease; subject matter more common to blues and certainly a type of risqué material Procter would not again attempt after falling under Peer’s influence.)

However, Buschenberg recalls that Peer stopped the group midway through a fourth jazz-inflected tune and asked if the Serenaders had any material that could be added to Okeh’s “hillbilly” catalogue.

“He said: ‘You’re white boys — so why aren’t you playing white songs?’ So we took a break and decided to work up some of the tunes we’d done at church suppers and in Hezzy’s boy-preaching act with Kerr — not dance numbers to be sure!”

Although the three subsequent songs — “**Jennie Blythe**”, “**When the Fire Comes Down**” and “I See Jesus Coming



Ralph Peer, creator of “Race” and hillbilly genres for Okeh and the mastermind behind *The Bristol Sessions*.

Down the Road” — bear the mark of being his own compositions, Procter informed Peer that they were traditional folk ballads well-known in the Blue Ridge Mountains, believing that’s what Okeh was searching for on its remote recording expedition. He was dead wrong. Peer listed himself as author on the log sheets, adding the publishing rights to the growing catalogue of his own Southern Music Publishing.

Peer selected “Jennie Blythe” and “I See Jesus Coming Down the Road” for the group’s first release on Okeh, listing the record in the company’s Fall 1925 catalogue within its 45,000 series of “Hillbilly” releases (the first instance in which any record company used the new term.) It wasn’t an accident that Peer chose a murder ballad waltz paired with a religious foxtrot for the group’s debut on recordings; both songs fit squarely within the mold of what Okeh felt rural white Southerners would be most likely to buy.

Procter appears to have taken it upon himself to inform Peer about the proper billing of the group; a telegram dated September 10, 1925 to Peer’s New York office from Procter reads: “Mr. Peer. We never discussed the name of our group during our record session here in Asheville. Be advised of

the proper billing for the phonograph label: HEZEKIAH PROCTER with HASH HOUSE SERENADERS which we will use for all future engagements.”

This may have come as a surprise to Buschenberg, Wilson and Hunsucker. Up until the time of their first Okeh release, the musicians — all of whom were older and more experienced in show business than Procter — appear to have performed under the name of **The Dixie Boys**. Whether the group decided on the new name of “The Hash House Serenaders” collectively or if it was a flight of fancy of Procter himself is not known.

Peer and Procter kept up a lively correspondence following the Asheville recording session, particularly after the cunning recording director confirmed his suspicion that most, if not all, of the songs the purported “leader” of the Serenaders had presented to him were, in fact, original compositions and not long-forgotten folk songs as Procter had originally told him. As Peer recounted to researcher Lillian Borgeson in a 1959 interview:

*“It didn’t much concern me whether the artists had written the songs or not... What mattered was had someone else already recorded it. Or it was so well-known that it was in the public domain and uncopyrightable — like an old blackface song like “Little Log Cabin in the Lane” or hillbilly folk music like “Silver Threads Among the Gold”. I wasn’t interested in wasting sides on something another publishing company already had copyright on.”*³

³ In this regard, Peer was not unlike another early figure of country music’s commercial history: A.P. Carter, the leader of The Carter Family, whose travels as a fruit tree salesman allowed him to collect — and subsequently copyright — literally hundreds of Appalachian folk songs.



Almost single-handedly, Peer was drawing the blueprint for the modern country and western music industry by establishing a network of songwriters whose compositions he could assign and collect royalties upon. His business arrangement with Okeh was then unheard of: foregoing any salary, Peer had instead asked his superiors for a one-cent-per-record-side royalty, which he would split with the artist.

“Of course, I had this all figured out,” Peer revealed over 30 years later. *“Just a year from that time my royalty check was a quarter of a million dollars. And that’s just for three months.”*

It all hinged on finding not-yet-copyrighted folk songs. Or, if they couldn’t be found, on finding talent that could write new songs that sounded like them. Thus, when Peer figured out Procter could write new “old” songs, he suddenly realized that on that day in Asheville he had found much more than just another garden variety hillbilly act. He had found his golden boy: a songwriter so steeped in the traditions of old-time and stringband music that he could be tapped like an oil well to produce new copyrights for the Okeh label.

“By insisting on new material,” Peer said, *“and leaning towards artists who could produce it for us, their own compositions, that created the so-called hillbilly business and most of the _____ blues business too.”*⁴

⁴ Word omitted. For original, see *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America’s Blue Yodeler*. Porterfield, Nolan. University Press of Mississippi (2007), p. 99. For similar views expressed by Peer, see *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*. Mazor, Barry. Chicago Review Press, 2015, p.19.

The Okeh label issued all six sides it had recorded of Procter and the Serenaders. When the platters began showing up in furniture and sheet music stores throughout the South, the names printed on Okeh's distinctive red-and-gold labels surprised the musicians, Procter included. While their first two pairings were attributed to "**Hezekiah Procter and The Hash House Serenaders**" — as Procter had telegraphed — the jazz- and blues-influenced "I'm Gonna Find a New Sweetheart" and "Crib-House Drip" appeared not only under Okeh's "Race" records series but under the name "**Tiny Procter & The North Carolina Sheiks**", most likely in hopes that phonograph buyers would be fooled into assuming the group was an entirely different one, presumably comprised of Black performers.

WRITER-FOR-HIRE: SEARS-ROEBUCK COMES CALLING

THE 1920S WAS A LUCRATIVE TIME to be a songwriter — *if*

a songwriter had the right contacts. For Procter, the right contact came along in the autumn of 1925. Although no correspondence pertaining to the arrangement has been discovered, it was almost certainly through Peer's influence that the **Sears-Roebuck** company commissioned a song from Procter.



Sears-Roebuck, who billed its mail-order catalogue as "The Cheapest Supply House on Earth" and "The Book of Bargains", was looking to capitalize on advertising possibilities on phonograph and the emerging market of radio. Procter wrote the made-to-order "**In the Roebuck Catalogue**" sometime in the winter of 1926, making sure to mention the company's own line of "Supertone" musical instruments and its "Neighbor Order Plan", which offered discounts to families and neighbors who combined their orders into one shipment.



Procter circa 1926, in his only published promotional photo for Okeh Records.

The Complete Recordings of
Hezekiah Procter

UNTIL RECENTLY, LITTLE WAS KNOWN ABOUT THE SINGER WHO MOST OFTEN CALLED HIMSELF “HEZEKIAH FORTESCUE PROCTER” — the man who recorded some of the earliest examples of country, jazz, and old-time music in the years from 1925 until his mysterious disappearance in 1930.

From his apprenticeship in the medicine shows that travelled the South to his involvement with the disastrous Gastonia labor strike of 1929, Procter set the blueprint for the modern country star: cantankerous, talented, self-destructive—and perhaps a murderer.

This groundbreaking work of scholarship tells Procter’s life story and accompanies the compilation “The Complete Recordings of Hezekiah Procter: 1925 to 1930”, a two-disc, 29-song box set available now from Back on Wax Records*.

A novel and new album from the acclaimed Montreal songwriter Li'l Andy, “The Complete Recordings of Hezekiah Procter” is at once music, history, fiction, biography and recorded performance art.

The purchase of this book includes a free download of the album “The Complete Recordings of Hezekiah Procter: 1925 to 1930” in mp3, WAV and FLAC formats.



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