The Life of Blind Alfred Reed

BY TED OLSON

Alfred Lee Reed was born blind in Floyd County, Virginia; his birth date was long believed to have occurred in 1880 (on June 15 or June 25 of that year), though researcher Warren Moorman recently unearthed a document (the original Floyd County birth record) document that the actual date was January 20, 1879. The 1870 Census states that Alfred's farmer parents Riley Reed (who had served as a soldier in the Confederate Army) and Charlotte Akers Reed lived among other Reed relatives in Floyd County's Alum Ridge area while working as a laborer on a tenant farm, The 1900 Census lists the Reed family as living in the town of Floyd Courthouse (present-day Floyd), with Riley and Charlotte having had six children. Two of those children were blind, Alfred and his older sister Rosetta (nicknamed Rose)—and both lived long and full lives. In the words of Alfred's grandson Denny Reed, who grew up very close (both literally and figuratively) to both Alfred and Rose, "Blind people have more senses than people with eyesight."

Learning to read by utilizing the New York Point System, Alfred found pleasure in music-making. Drawn to the fiddle, he quite possibly studied with an older fiddler from Floyd County, **Fountaine Kingrea** (born 1857). According to music historian Kinney Rorrer,

*"Kingrea influenced **Sam McNeil**, who recorded with the **Floyd County Ramblers** in 1930. Kingrea may also have influenced Alfred Reed, who had acquired a fiddle while still a boy in the late 1800s. Since many fiddlers earned extra money playing for dances in the area, it would be feasible that Reed heard local dance tunes such as **"Granny Will Your Dog Bite,"** a tune that was played by a Southern fiddler to lead troops into battle in 1862 at Sharpsburg, Maryland. The Floyd County Ramblers, led by Sam McNeil, recorded this dance tune in 1930, and it is very possible that McNeil learned the tune from Kingrea. Since it is known that Reed himself played for dances in West Virginia, he most likely played dance tunes he had first heard in Floyd County as a youngster.*

While his parents were not musically inclined, Alfred displayed a prodigious gift for music when quite young, mastering the fiddle, yet also playing the banjo, the guitar, the mandolin, and the organ. He also loved to sing a wide range of songs —

religious and secular, traditional and popular. Alfred developed a singular vocal approach marked by precision of enunciation and tonal clarity; his singing, unlike in the vocal styles of many Appalachian singers of his generation, exhibited little overt nasality.

RELOCATION TO WEST VIRGINIA

Still living with his parents in Floyd County at the turn of the century, Alfred on July 25, 1903, married Nettie Sheard (1882-1948) in Giles County, Virginia, and the couple moved to Nettie's home county of Mercer County, West Virginia. The next year brought the birth of their daughter Savannah, and the couple would have several other children, including their first son, Arville (born November 10, 1905—died December 15, 1994), who would play an important role in Alfred's music career. Other Reed children included three more sons—Tessie, Basil, and Collins—and a daughter Violet.

Living on a succession of small farms in southern West Virginia, the Reed family was mostly self-sufficient, growing much of their food. The 1910 Census has the Reeds living in the Mercer County community of Spanishburg, while the 1920 Census places their residence in the nearby community of Rock. Shortly thereafter, the family relocated to a small farm in Kegley, near Princeton, West Virginia. With a strong work ethic (the 1910 Census asserted that the number of weeks he had been unemployed in the previous year as zero), Alfred supported his family through the difficult years of the Great Depression, giving music lessons, performing at dances and various social and church gatherings, selling printed copies of his own lyrics, and, in 1927 and 1929, making commercial recordings.

In the 1920s, when radio first became available in his area (WHAJ in Bluefield, beginning in 1922), and with the release of the earliest commercial recordings within the emergent "Hillbilly music" genre, Alfred listened to and enjoyed performances by such popular singers as Vernon Dalhart and Carson Robison. Alfred purchased printed songbooks and hymnbooks, and Nettie read the lyrics to him. Because the songs he learned from others did not fully express what he was thinking, feeling, and experiencing, Alfred began to compose his own songs, and he proved exceptionally talented in this endeavor—a craftsman with many things to say.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A SONGWRITER

Alfred was a locally esteemed musician long before his first recordings. By 1927 he and his family had moved to Bluefield (that city's directory for that year placed the family's home on Lilly Road). During this period the Reed house often hosted music-making gatherings involving Alfred and several of his and Nettie's children (specifically, Arville, Collins, Savannah, and Violet) and sometimes including such West Virginia musicians as fiddler Fred Pendleton and singer/guitarist Richard Harold.

All the while, Alfred wrote songs, and his songcraft eventually garnered attention outside his home community. Local officials commissioned him to create songs for political purposes, such as the time Alfred was asked to compose a protest song against a proposal to relocate the Mercer County courthouse from Princeton to Bluefield. He became quite skilled as a writer of topical songs based on events he heard about while listening to the radio or from newspaper articles read to him by his wife. "The Wreck Of The Virginian," Alfred's best-known topical song, chronicled the May 24, 1927, Ingleside railroad disaster, when a freight train and a passenger train collided not far from his house. His compelling retelling of the Virginian No. 3's crash focused on the tragic deaths of the freight train's engineer and fireman.

RECORDING AT BRISTOL

This song, metaphorically speaking, transported Alfred to Bristol. Allegedly, **Ernest Stoneman** had heard Reed sing "The Wreck Of The Virginian" somewhere—perhaps in Bluefield—and had recommended the blind musician to Ralph Peer a few weeks before the start of Peer's location recording sessions in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia, held in late July-early August 1927. Recently hired as an A & R (Artists and Repertoire) producer by the Victor Talking Machine Company (after being affiliated with the OKeh label), Peer was seeking to identify talented musicians who were rooted in a traditional sound and sensibility yet who could record for the Victor label self-composed, copyrightable songs. Alfred, who offered that rare combination of skills, was invited to make some recordings in Bristol—and no doubt he, like the other musicians who recorded there that summer, hoped that some of the resulting recordings would end up on commercially released records.

To accept Peer's invitation, Alfred needed to travel to Bristol. The logical person to take him there from West Virginia was Arville, but the latter was unavailable the last week of July 1927 (the time of Peer's planned session for Alfred). The task fell to Alfred's friend and neighbor Arthur Wyrick (born November 4, 1895—died January 1, 1964), a musician who would play solid rhythm guitar on three of Alfred's recordings in Bristol. On July 28, Alfred entered Peer's makeshift studio, located in the Taylor-Christian Hat Factory on Bristol's State Street (on the Tennessee side of the street; Virginia was across the street), and sang "The Wreck Of The Virginian"; Alfred provided his own accompaniment, his spare yet haunting fiddling complementing but not overpowering his open-throated, warm baritone voice. Peer, evidently moved by what he heard but seeking perfection, requested a second take of "**The Wreck Of The Virginian**" (this was ultimately the performance released as a record); then Peer asked Alfred to perform other songs. Alfred, a lay Methodist preacher with a fundamentalist yet idiosyncratic moral compass, sang three sacred songs he had composed—all accompanied by his fiddle and by Wyrick's rhythm guitar. These three songs, "I Mean To Live For Jesus," "You Must Unload," and "Walking In The Way With Jesus," were different in terms of tone and tempo, but they were all pleas to fellow Christians to remain faithful to old-fashioned, time-proven Christian values and to avoid the pitfalls and vanities of modern life. Despite some admonishments against sin, the three songs were tender, even compassionate. Alfred may have been preaching, yet he wasn't screeching—he stressed redemption. While his message was empathetic and his emotional delivery intense, his lyrics were understated, witty, and brimming with metaphor. Unfortunately, yet understandably, Alfred's sacred songs never became staples in the gospel repertoire. Certainly, it would be difficult to sing these songs with the authority Alfred brings to them.

RECORDING AFTER BRISTOL

While Alfred's Bristol records were impressive, they did not sell well. As Rorrer observes, Victor Records apparently tried to suppress Reed's first release: "It is regrettable that Victor withdrew 'The Wreck Of The Virginian" so soon after its release. It may be that the Virginian Railway asked that the record be taken off the market. No railroad company wanted a song about a train wreck caused by overlooked orders to be memorialized on a phonograph record."

Fred Pendleton and Alfred Reed, 1927. Courtesy of Goldenseal Magazine

Nevertheless, Peer kept Alfred under contract. That December (1927), Alfred and Arville traveled by train to Camden, New Jersey—Victor paid travel and lodging expenses—to make recordings in the Victor studio there (in the converted Trinity Baptist Church at 114 North 5th Street). The four songs that Alfred had recorded in Bristol were powerful yet were limited thematically. These new recordings, made on December 19, were more diverse, revealing the range of his songwriting interests. "Explosion In The Fairmont Mines," based on the earlier coal mining song "The Dream Of The Miner's Child," commemorated the December 1907 mining disaster at Monongah, near Fairmont, West Virginia. In Alfred's song, a young girl, by telling her father of her portentous dream of a mining disaster and thus detaining him at home, saves him from certain death when an actual accident happens at his mine. Alfred then recorded his poignant song "The Fate Of Chris Lively And Wife," which depicted a married couple naively traveling in a horse-drawn wagon across some railroad tracks, unaware of the fast-moving train that will imminently kill them (this song was based on a true incident, as husband-and-wife Christopher Columbus Lively and Mary Lively were struck by a train on September 2, 1927, in Fayette County, West Virginia). Next, Alfred made what one commentator called an "anti-flapper" record, "Why Do You Bob Your Hair, Girls." Arguing against women exercising their right to wear their hair as they pleased, the song expressed sincere (if, from a 21st Century perspective, paternalistic) concern for women's moral integrity. Alfred's sympathies also extended, predictably, to men, and a subsequent recording, "Always Lift Him Up And Never Knock Him Down" acknowledged male struggles in coping with the difficulties of modern life. The sixth and final recording by Alfred from that Camden session was "The Prayer Of The Drunkard's Little Girl," in which a child yearns for her father to overcome alcoholism and return to the family that loves him.

That same day in Camden, Arville, who played rhythm guitar on all his father's recordings after the 1927 Bristol sessions, was invited by Peer to make a solo recording; this was "The Telephone Girl," a charming time-piece (probably adapted by Alfred from an 1880s poem by George Devyr) that showcased Arville's considerable if under-documented music talents—his melodious, vibrato-rich tenor voice and his intricate guitar picking. Victor would release the performance and

the record label would misspell Arville's first name as Orville. The younger Reed recorded four additional numbers that same day with fiddler Fred Pendleton (February 24, 1904—December 29, 1972), who had traveled with the Reeds to New Jersey; the duo featuring Arville Reed and Pendleton was credited as The West Virginia Night Owls (the musicians had often performed together back home—sometimes with Alfred). Of the four recordings made by The West Virginia Night Owls in Camden, two—the traditional numbers "Sweet Bird" and "I'm Goin' To Walk On The Streets Of Glory"—were released by Victor; the other two, "Fate Of Rose Sarlo" and the intriguingly titled "Give The Flapper A Chew" (both allegedly Alfred Reed compositions), went unissued and are now lost.

Alfred Reed was paid $50 for each song he recorded in Camden. Beyond that, his Victor releases from both of his 1927 recording sessions (Bristol and Camden) collectively generated some royalties. Throughout 1928 and for much of 1929 Alfred remained in West Virginia writing songs and performing locally; he made money playing music on the streets (by 1930 he and his family were registered by census workers as living in Summers County, West Virginia), and Alfred also sold (for 10 cents each) printed sheets ("broadsides") bearing the lyrics to some of his songs. It was certainly a source of pride to Alfred that through his music-making he could generate an income with which to support his family.

THEMES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The collapse of the U.S. stock market in late October 1929 soon led to a decline in the recording industry. But the latter situation took a few months to fully manifest itself, and in December 1929 Alfred and Arville were summoned by Peer back to the studio for another recording session—this time in one of Victor's New York City studios. Again, Victor paid the train fare and lodging, and the Reeds were booked into the Knickerbocker Hotel. During a two-day session that began on December 3, Alfred made 10 recordings that were eventually released (accompanied by Arville on guitar, with Arville sometimes adding harmony vocals); all of those recordings interpreted memorable Alfred Reed compositions, and one— "**How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live**"—was destined to become a classic of the American song repertoire. Two additional songs recorded by the Reeds during this particular session—"The Railroader," composed by Alfred, and "Bonnie Little Girl," apparently written by Arville—went

unreleased; that recording of "Bonnie Little Girl" no longer exists, while the recording of "The Railroader" probably survives today in some form on metal parts stored in the Sony Music vault.

In New York City, Alfred sang songs exploring gender roles from several perspectives. "We've Got To Have Them, That's All" was engagingly matter-of-fact in asserting the inevitability, despite differences and misunderstandings, of relationships between males and females. "Beware" expressed empathy for women by acknowledging their vulnerability in relationships with duplicitous men. "Woman's Been After Man Ever Since," on the other hand, communicated a counterview on male-female interpersonal relationships through a combination of irony and clever wordplay. Alfred also recorded "Why Do You Bob Your Hair, Girls—No. 2," a humorous reprise of the similarly titled song he had recorded in 1927 at Camden (Victor mistitled the new song on the record label as "Why Don't You Bob Your Hair, Girls—No. 2"). Another recording from December 3, of Reed's song "There'll Be No Distinction There," offered utopian hope for an integrated, religiously unified, sinless society. Reed's lyrics and performance on this recording attained considerable moral gravity, memorably speaking to the spiritual and ethical hypocrisies and aspirations of his era. An alternate recorded take of this song allegedly exists in the vault—one of only three alternate takes by Blind Alfred Reed still in existence (the other two extant Reed alternate takes, of "The Wreck Of The Virginian" and "Walking In The Way With Jesus," were from the 1927 Bristol sessions and were included in 2011 on Bear Family Records' complete Bristol sessions boxed set).

The next day—December 4, 1929—Alfred recorded two self-composed songs that had grown, like "There'll Be No Distinction There," from his complex social vision. These songs, "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" and "Money Cravin' Folks," were critical of capitalism, castigating American society for its tolerance of injustice. It is perhaps not coincidental that Alfred recorded these two songs in New York City, the belly of the economic beast; he was possibly intentionally making a statement about the world around him (and Victor, no doubt unintentionally, underscored that statement by releasing these two hard-hitting songs on the same 78 RPM release). "Money Cravin' Folks" pulled no punches in blaming the international financial system for the economic woes that he and his contemporaries were experiencing.

But the song that delved deepest to expose the roots of that era's problems was "**How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live**." Like many of his fellow West Virginians (frankly, like many of his fellow Americans), Alfred had known hard times before the Wall Street crash, and "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" should not be interpreted strictly as a Depression Era song; indeed, the song's continued popularity into the 21st Century is a testament to its universality. "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" was among the more socially conscious records released during the Great Depression. That the song was not immediately embraced as an anthem during that era says less about the record's merits and more about the distractions and desperations that people were confronting at the time of its release. The song's exposé of social inequality reinforced by a rigged economic system was likely simply too true for many people to hear and bear.

The other recordings that Alfred made on December 4 were "Black And Blue Blues," a gritty song about a relationship gone wrong; "The Old Fashioned Cottage," a sentimental rural idyll (Arville's nimble guitar work and graceful harmony singing are perhaps most movingly captured here); and "You'll Miss Me" (not to be confused—as some commentators have done—with the Carter Family's "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?"). Given its position as the penultimate recording of Alfred's career in music (his swan song was the finger-pointing "Money Cravin' Folks"), "You'll Miss Me" seems prophetic today, as Alfred was effectively silenced by the Depression; upon their release the records featuring his New York City recordings from December 1929 did not sell well (by 1930 the entire music industry was feeling the sting of the economic collapse), and Alfred's Victor contract was not renewed.

As with many of his neighbors, Alfred struggled economically during the Depression; the 1930 Census listed him as living in the community of Greenbrier in Summers County and was unemployed, though of course he probably farmed and taught music when he could. Thereafter, Alfred's music could only be heard on hard-to-find 78 RPM records—or, for those fortunate few who happened upon him during the Depression's early and middle years, performing live in public spaces. Alfred frequently performed on the streets of nearby towns, particularly in

Hinton. In 1971 his son Collins recalled that Alfred would often walk the three miles to Hinton to perform music in a park or on street corners. "Many times he would walk all the way back home without having earned a nickel," Collins remembered; "on more successful occasions he would pick up some groceries on the way back. Six or seven cents was enough to buy a pound of bacon." In 1976 Arville recalled Alfred's forays to play music in town: "He got around pretty good in familiar places, but you had to lead him whenever he went someplace new. He would play his fiddle in Hinton with a cup alongside. We never knew how much money he would bring home." In 1937, his live appearances were curtailed when a local ordinance banned "street performances" by blind musicians.

FINAL DAYS AND POSTMORTEM RELEASES

The 1940 Census placed Alfred and his family living in a farmhouse in the community of Pipestem (also in Summers Country), where he had resided since the mid-1930s. According to that census, Alfred was unemployed, with Nettie operating the family's small farm. After Nettie's death in 1948, Alfred moved to the community of Cool Ridge in Raleigh County, West Virginia, where he died on January 17, 1956, at the age of 75. He was buried beside Nettie at Elgood in Mercer County.

During the late-1950s and early-1960s urban folk music revival, a rumor circulated among some younger musicians that suggested that Alfred had died from privation and hunger, a literal starving artist. The Reed family, however, has long insisted that in his last years Alfred was comfortable and contented, a revered patriarch taken care of by a close-knit family. Alfred's grandson Denny Reed acknowledged that "my grandfather, given his situation, was always a happy person." Clearly the death certificate for Alfred Reed confirms that he died of natural causes. Family members, such as Denny Reed and Alfred's great-granddaughter Debi Hunter Fraley, have related with pride that Alfred—relying upon his music talent, his unwavering faith, and his willingness to work hard—was able to help his family through some exceptionally difficult times. "My grandfather had a brain," said Denny, "and he used it to take care of his family."

In 1971, the founders of Rounder Records (Ken Irwin, Marian Leighton Levy, and Bill Nowlin) interviewed Arville Reed—they were gathering information for the notes to be included in *How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?: The*

Songs of Blind Alfred Reed, the 1972 LP compiling 14 long-unavailable 78 RPM records by Alfred. Arville at this time asserted that, shortly after Alfred's death, Ralph Peer's publishing company (Peer International Corporation) sought to renegotiate the rights to Alfred's songs; the Reed family obliged, said Arville, but Peer International never paid the family the dollar promised in the new contract as renegotiation payment (Denny presently has a copy of this 1958 document). Clearly Arville was reflecting his family's lingering sense of frustration at a publishing company and a recording industry that had given up on Alfred and Arville after 1929 and that had not kept Alfred's songs or his recordings in circulation after that time.

THE LEGACY OF BLIND ALFRED REED

While Blind Alfred Reed was a powerful, inimitable performer, his signature contribution to American music was his songwriting, as his songs are the primary reason he is remembered today. Arville Reed recalled the process by which his blind father wrote songs: "He would hear about events over the radio and compose the songs [in braille] in the house in front of his family. We would stay down there [in Camden, New Jersey, or in New York City] one day and record all the songs my father had." Arville underrepresented his father's output, as Alfred composed but never recorded other songs, and one of those unrecorded compositions— "The Blind Man's Song"—survives in the form of lyrics printed on a broadside. Preserved on a manuscript are the lyrics, typed in 1920, for another song, "The Lightning Express" (probably adapted by Reed from a song by J. Fred. Helf and E. P. Moran entitled "Please, Mr. Conductor, Don't Put Me Off The Train," originally recorded in 1899 by Byron G. Harlan).

Many of the songs that Alfred recorded continue to be sung today. Diverse musicians over the years—rock legends like Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen, and David Lindley, respected popular music acts like Murray Head, The Del-Lords, and UB40, and roots music icons like The New Lost City Ramblers, The Red Clay Ramblers, and Old Crow Medicine Show—have re-interpreted Alfred's songs for new generations. And in 2008 a host of musicians with West Virginia connections—from Little Jimmie Dickens and Connie Smith to Tim O'Brien and Kathy Mattea—teamed up to honor Alfred's songcraft for the album *Always Lift*

Him Up, issued by the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame and released to coincide with the induction of Blind Alfred Reed into that Hall of Fame.

One of the musicians on *Always Lift Him Up* was John Lilly, who in recent years has been one of leading preservers and promoters of Alfred Reed's legacy. Beyond performing songs from Alfred's repertoire, Lilly has befriended the musician's descendants and has written movingly about the lasting impact of Alfred's music for *Goldenseal*, a magazine Lilly formerly edited for the West Virginia Division of Culture and History.

Lilly said that Alfred was both a man of his time and a man ahead of his time:

Reed was a man apart. He lived a rewarding and successful life on his own terms with the hand he had been dealt with. Reed's performance style includes elements of the late 19th-century parlor tradition alongside the emerging country or hillbilly musical stylings of the day. His plaintive, melodic violin playing reflects his highly religious, church-based background, in which the songs are intended to deliver a higher message and not performed for show. His vocal delivery, however, is at times reminiscent of Jimmie Rodgers, Frank Hutchinson, Ernest Stoneman, or other topical singers from that period, who projected an emotional if restrained narrative delivery in their songs. We understand from family members that Alfred possessed a broad repertoire of traditional and popular music. His recorded output, however, paints a picture like that of the performing songwriters of a more modern age. His stance in favor of the common man and his protests of greed and corruption align him with such popular and populist figures as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, among others. His sense of humor, particularly about the "battle of the sexes," reflects an openness about domestic life and personal relationships rare in his day.

Lilly also observed that Alfred's songs have outlasted the times in which they were created:

Reed's original songs ring with the excitement and tension of the late 1920s, and his recordings reflect the turbulent times during which he lived. In many respects he stands at the crossroads of old and new, tradition and innovation, rural and urban. We will never know what went through his mind as he wrote songs, made recordings, and sold his music on the streets of southern West Virginia, but it is

doubtful that he could have envisioned the impact his songs and recordings would have. We are fortunate to have his recordings and to be able to see the world through his surprisingly keen eyes.

Reed's influence on traditional musicians such as The New Lost City Ramblers and The Red Clay Ramblers is obvious as they recorded and performed his songs in a traditional style. Reed's influence on rock artists such as Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen and others might be less direct but perhaps more profound. By addressing social issues in a simple country-music style, Reed set the wheels in motion for a later generation of banjo players, harmonica blowers and guitar strummers who helped to change the world with their songs.

Kinney Rorrer sums up Alfred's legacy this way:

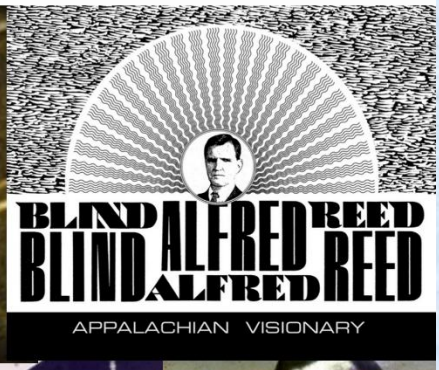
Reed ranks high among fiddler/singers in recorded old-time music. His clear, resonant baritone voice, along with his haunting fiddle sounds, make him stand out among the best of the old-time recording artists. Even more important were his compositions of social commentary on the cultural trends of his time along with local "event ballads." Reed's comments on economic and social conditions in such recordings as "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times And Live" and "Money Cravin' Folks" are timeless pieces that still ring true. His ballads of tragedy, such as "The Fate Of Chris Lively And Wife" as well as "The Wreck Of The Virginian," tell us a story of a particular time and place — an approach that has been a part of the folk tradition since the ballad singers of the Middle Ages. Also, since Reed was a lay Methodist minister, it is no surprise that he recorded so many fine religious songs, such as "There'll Be No Distinction There" and "Walking In The Way With Jesus."

Alfred's songs should live on in the repertoires of musicians who value songs with a conscience—songs that seek to venture beyond the shadowy world of injustices, hypocrisies, and lies to identify and characterize timeless and empowering truths, however hard those truths may be to see.

Blind Alfred Reed

We Salute You!

The Reed family: (Left to right) Arville, Alfred, Savannah, (rear) Tessie, Nettie holding Violet, circa 1913. Courtesy of Golde Magazine



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