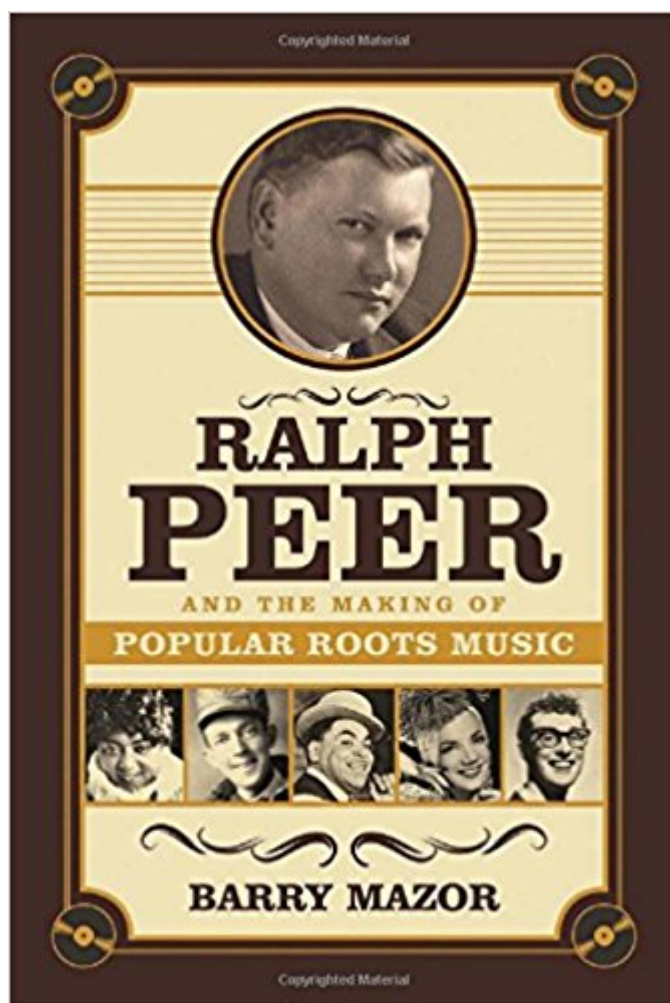


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# Ralph Peer And The Making Of Popular Roots Music



## Synopsis

This is the first biography of Ralph Peer, the adventurous and even revolutionary A&R man and music publisher who saw the universal power locked in regional roots music and tapped it, changing the breadth and flavor of popular music around the world. It is the story of the life and fifty-year career, from the age of cylinder recordings to the stereo era, of the man who pioneered the recording, marketing, and publishing of blues, jazz, country, gospel, and Latin music. The book tracks Peer's role in such breakthrough events as the recording of Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (the record that sparked the blues craze), the first country recording sessions with Fiddlin' John Carson, his discovery of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family at the famed Bristol sessions, the popularizing of Latin American music during World War II, and the postwar transformation of music on the airwaves that set the stage for the dominance of R&B, country, and rock and roll. But this is also the story of a man from humble midwestern beginnings who went on to build the world's largest independent music publishing firm, fostering the global reach of music that had previously been specialized, localized, and marginalized. Ralph Peer redefined the ways promising songs and performers were identified, encouraged, and promoted, rethought how far regional music might travel, and changed our very notions of what pop music can be.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Mr. Mazor discusses the evolution of American music and intricacies of music publishing

with equal authority. He likewise brings impressive clarity and cohesion to considering the big-picture nexus of culture, commerce and evolving technology in which Peer's saga unfolds. He tells this complex, intertwined story with ample substance for serious scholars while also making his book welcoming and accessible for neophytes.

• The Wall Street Journal  
"A complex, fascinating story told by Mazor, a seasoned music-business commentator, with skill, clarity and zest."

• MOJO Magazine  
"Mazor's extensive research, including access to hours of archival interview tapes of Peer, sheds new light on this important yet little known person who affected so much of the music we all listen to today."

• Country Standard Time  
"This is an overwhelming book about an overwhelming character in the music field, a true visionary, who realized the potential power of common music long before anyone else - and who transformed the lives of many of those artists whom he recorded. We owe Barry Mazor a debt of gratitude for telling Peer's incredible life story, his monumental accomplishments, putting them all in one place, and bringing them to the light."

• Bob Dylan  
"Musicians know who Ralph Peer was, and now his life and contributions to our nation's music are made available to all of us in Barry Mazor's wonderful and absorbing biography. Mazor [...] has given us a beautifully written portrait of an utterly fascinating man. One is continually astonished at how a shipping clerk from Independence, Mo., at various junctions in his life, made decisions that transformed American music by bringing new artists and forms of music - from country, blues and bluegrass to early rock and roll - to millions of citizens who had not yet encountered them."

• New York Times  
"Ralph Peer's true importance in American music is rarely understood outside of the music business, but Barry Mazor's book draws a compelling portrait of Peer as business innovator, music scout, and publishing executive, detailing his visionary pursuit of musical riches in previously unexplored rural America and Latin America - yielding a body of recorded blues, country, and pop that are the foundations of American musical culture."

• Laura Cantrell  
"Ralph Peer was there first to discover and record roots music before anyone else. This remarkable man brought that legacy to the world, nurturing the early country, blues, jazz, and Latin artists. It's all in this book. Dive in and be awed."

• Donovan  
"Peer finally receives his due in this excellent biography."

• Booklist  
"The world has been waiting for this! Ralph Peer is surely the most fascinating character in American vernacular music business history, and I personally thank him, since I otherwise would have been sacking groceries in El Segundo, or parking cars in Pacoima all these years. Mazor does a spectacular job weaving together the threads

of Peer's discoveries in blues, jazz, country, and Latin. You will be amazed! I can't recommend this book strongly enough. Ry Cooder "Mazor's book rolls along at a swift and radio-friendly tempo, supplying invaluable detail on Peer's achievements and the vision that drove them." Paste Magazine "A thrill to read and wonderfully told." The Commercial Appeal "Barry Mazor tells Ralph Peer's story engagingly and accurately, and his documentation is impressive." 78 Records

Barry Mazor is a longtime music, media, and business journalist. He is a regular contributor to the Wall Street Journal and to the online music magazine *Â* medium/cuepoint, and is the author of *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers and Connie Smith: Just for What I Am*. He is the former senior editor and columnist for *No Depression* magazine and his work has appeared in numerous publications, including *American Songwriter*, the *Nashville Scene*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Washington Post*. He was awarded the Charlie Lamb Award for Excellence in Country Music Journalism in 2008.

Fabulous. I knew of Peer as the discoverer of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter family, but did not realize that he was present at Mamie Smith's first big-selling recording, nor that he was involved in the early careers of Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong. He nearly single-handedly introduced Latin-American music to (North) America, and he survived long enough to play a part in Buddy Holly's career. His key insight was that the music of ignored, often impoverished, subcultures (Black communities in the Delta, hillbilly settlements in the mountains) not only presented a market that could be exploited through recordings made for local consumption, but also provided artists who could bring their music into the mainstream, often in somewhat transformed ways. He was far from a folklorist who wanted to document and preserve the traditional forms in a pristine state. Rather, he liked what happened when these musics melded into the mainstream, and he liked the artists who could meld them. You could argue that Peer, more than any other one person, was responsible for what eventually happened to American popular music in the post-WW2 era; specifically, the advent of that strange amalgam of hillbilly and blues we call rock 'n' roll.

Barry Mazor's fascinating, beautifully written book about Ralph Peer's life and work brings into sharp focus Peer's hitherto unexplored role as the architect not only of individual careers at the dawn of recorded country music, but of roots music itself as a force in the marketplace and the culture at large. It was Peer,

Mazor argues, who recognized the potential for music on the regional and racial margins to flourish as a lucrative commodity, nurturing new artists, audiences and business models. It was Peer who insisted on the preeminent value of musicians who write as well as perform their own work. And it was Peer who cultivated, tested and perfected these concepts at home before exporting them worldwide, developing international networks and copyright strategies that evolved into a virtual roots music empire. As his story unfolds, Peer comes into focus as a creative genius in his own right, an American original whose vision and talent equals those of the artists whose careers he shaped, and a sometimes inscrutable mixture of incongruous traits and inclinations. Outwardly and socially conventional, Peer also relished long shots and high stakes, gambling and winning on artistic ventures and career schemes that only he would recognize as worth the risk. With an unerring ear for winners in a broad range of musical genres—blues, jazz, country, and a wide spectrum of Latin strains—and sustaining close relationships with some of his artists, Peer never necessarily appears as an outright fan of the recordings he oversaw. Did he play those records at home? It's hard to say. What's certain is that Peer heard something in the music that rang true enough to drive his dream of a richer, more diverse world of musical choices than anyone had previously imagined. Mazor's thesis about Peer's role in shaping the course of music in America and beyond seems bold at the outset, but irrefutable by book's closing chapters. Like Mazor's previous book, *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers*, this one draws not just on painstaking research of its subject, but on the author's decades of immersion in, and distillation of, the history of performing arts in 20th century America. The two books read like interwoven strands of an ambitious larger tapestry in the making, richly allusive to people, events and movements that Mazor brings to bear with authority, insight and great writing. In fact, the author's voice is as singular and compelling as that of anyone writing music history and criticism today, his prose a pure pleasure coming off the page.

I've known for a long time who Ralph Peer was, mainly through his role in the Bristol sessions. However, thanks to this book my eyes were opened wide regarding Peer's foresight, business practices, deep reach into several different genres, and the ultimate impact he had on popular music. There were so many different points and achievements in his life where he could have quit music and his legacy would still be known, but he kept seeing opportunities and changing the status quo. One account I especially enjoyed was how

he began signing BMI writers as a result of radio's threat to not play ASCAP affiliated songs. When push came to shove and ASCAP tried to throw their weight around with radio, Peer had all the publishing for great BMI affiliated songs and expedited the change of the music landscape. The book has many other accounts of Peer's achievements (he's one of the reasons that song writers get paid a royalty), as well as story after story of the many seminal artists and performers he worked with. Several of the other reviews can provide more details. The subject matter (music publishing) might not be a subject of interest for the casual reader, but for those into music you're going to enjoy this book! Highly recommend! (I also recommend reading John Hammond's biography. Without Hammond and Peer we might still be singing along with Mitch Miller!)

While I've collected and studied music for 50 years, this book covers the history, travels and insights into this pioneer producer that answer many music historians questions. This fantastic true story takes you behind the scenes of historical recordings from Mamie Smith, through McDonald, Hayes, Whistler and Cannon jug bands, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter family to Buddy Holly and others! Many unique and rare photos supplement this Peer biography.

I knew about The Bristol Sessions but not all he did for overall music. Barry has covered dealings with most every label and publisher from the 19 teens through the 1950's.

I have a doctorate in American Studies and worked with a great musicologist, so I have read many, many books over the past 35 years on American popular music. I have to proclaim that this is a seminal work. It is researched, written, and argued expertly. And the bonus is that Barry Mazor is a great writer.

Rating w/o review

This is an amazing story of a man's life and the history of music and American music. It will change your perception of the music you know. I am both an American history buff and an American blues and pre-blues buff. This fit both of these past times.

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