

How about that Ralph Sylvester Peer? *Who*, you say? Yes, that's Ralph Peer, spelled P-E-E-R. Oh, so you haven't heard of Ralph Peer? Well, that's no surprise, in fact, it's right in line with Ralph Peer's thinking himself! You see, Ralph Peer "doubted anybody would have any interest in a music publisher, unless it was the angle of the beginning of a new era in popular music...but even then, nobody gives a darn!" Well, Ralph Peer didn't actually say "darn" in that interview...

Good thing that Barry Mazor, a highly-respected music and business journalist didn't take that sentiment of Ralph's seriously, because he wrote a book titled "Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music." What a great book—but that book's title doesn't really do justice to the book's full scope and narrative.

Let's start with a short glimpse of Ralph Peer's life story. This very book quotes an obituary for Ralph Peer published in 1960 in the famous weekly entertainment publication, *Variety* magazine: "Ralph Peer, music publisher and onetime recording exec...was a pioneer in several areas of the music biz. On the artistic front, he was among the first to see the potential in hillbilly, rhythm & blues, and Latin American music; on the business end, he took the lead in thinking of the music biz in worldwide terms...A shrewd businessman, Peer was highly regarded by songwriters for his scrupulous honesty."

Pretty cool, kinda glitzy, huh? But the deeper reality is, there is likely no one more responsible than Ralph Peer in dramatically pioneering and growing worldwide popular music in multiple genres, fruitfully impacting the lives of its songwriters and performers, and, yeah, enhancing the lives of its music listeners!

The substantive start of the story is in the 1920s, when the 36-year-old Peer traveled to the hinterlands and backwoods of rural America to find what he called "local music." And boy, did he have an ear and an instinct for the types of music that would become enjoyed by many millions in the decades following. Music scholars tell us that, cutting a swath from New York City south to key cities in the U.S., Peer made historic "recordings of blues, ragtime, gospel, ballads, topical songs, and string bands." Yes, Peer was clearly recording multiple genres in his search for "local music" that might appeal to a much wider audience. And to Peer, "local music" meant something very original to each musician.

Well, one of those city stops by Peer was in Bristol, Tennessee, where his specific recording sessions would come to be called the "Big Bang of Country Music," you know, to represent Peer's doings as the beginning of it all. So, just who did Peer specifically record? Well, that would include two legends in country music: Jimmie Rodgers as well as the Carter family, who themselves had traveled all day just to cover the 30 or so miles from their home remote in the hills...yeah, to be a vital part of these so-called "Bristol Sessions."

Perhaps you've heard of that Carter family—there was Sara and husband A.P. and sister-in-law Maybelle. Peer immediately fell in love with Sara's voice—a real winner! Now A.P. had a slight but distinctive tremor in his voice due a medical condition...and, amazingly, some modern country-musicologists attribute that as part of "authentic" country music roots, you know, like Kenny Rogers' styling in his song "The Gambler" or Christian gospel artists Bart Millard in the song "Word of God Speak" and David Crowder singing "How He Loves." All that started with "hillbilly music" that came a-rollin' down the hills of dirt-poor Appalachia—where both the worship of God and family pastimes were much focused on distinctive homespun singing!

Of course, *that* was the "original" Carter family. Thereafter, Maybelle forged another music group with her three daughters...and were they ever so popular, vaulting to the big stage and audience attention at the Grand Ole Opry. 'Course, one of those daughters was June Carter, who later married Johnny Cash. Hey, remember that gravelly tremor in Johnny Cash's own personal singing style? Well, after a lifetime in country music entertainment, June Carter Cash passed away in 2003, Johnny also a few months later—so the Carter first-family, two-generation legacy in country music lasted in-person for over seven decades!

But here are the radical breakaways, the paths that Ralph took business-wise right there in the Bristol "roots" era. Peer went to his employer, the Victor Talking Machine Company, and asked for just a \$1 *per year* contract—but also with Peer carving out royalties from the recordings, then splitting those royalties

with the artists. Wow, that was previously unheard of! And, as they say, the rest is history! Only this time the history is really true! Yes, Peer is a modern pioneer of creating royalty income for music artists. His employer was stunned that he was taking such a path. But, as Peer said later—clearly more than a bit tongue-in-cheek—he was a businessman and a gambler. Yeah, like Bill Gates was a gambler. And like Jeff Bezos was a gambler. You see, there's a big difference between loose gambling against the house in Vegas versus taking an astute, well-considered risk in business innovation and persevering entrepreneurship.

This historic, extraordinary step in the betterment of lives of artists is what has helped dramatically foster the proliferation of music worldwide the last hundred years. Yes, if you have only a few fans, like many artists do, you won't make millions writing songs and performing. But in the digital era of companies with worldwide reach like Spotify, an elite artist can make many millions each year on royalties. Hey, that's one of Ralph Peer's key contributions—that *everybody* in the supply chain of great music can get rewarded!

Still, a key part of Peer's genius and drive was also to discover—or perhaps a better word is “uncover”—what's nowadays called “roots” music. That's Peer's “local music” idea that can work to appeal to a much wider audience. And indeed, Peer was very much at the root of uncovering “roots” music artists...from Rhythm & Blues...to the early gospel-infused hillbilly-turned-country music...to Cuban and Latin American music. Yeah, Peer went “international” in focus—including Europe—when virtually nobody else was, growing his company's presence to 21 countries by the 1950s. And these types of “roots” bore fruit all the way to modern popular and rock music. Yeah, Elvis Presley's very first record had Peer-initiated copyrights.

But like for all companies, it was not all a bed of roses. In 1950, the company didn't even pay employees their “expected” Christmas bonuses. But the company “came back” soon, continuously innovating with artists like Buddy Holly even while Peer helped steer a revival of broadcasting country music, which had fallen to just a few radio stations in the U.S. dedicated to that genre. Along the way, Peer responded with key, balanced industry leadership regarding thorny worldwide issues around international copyrights. And just who better qualified for that than the groundbreaking Ralph Peer? But then...Peer died in 1960.

However, his legacy was carried on—indeed, his company didn't miss a beat (!)—with his widow Monique running the company and then ultimately his son...also named Ralph Peer...taking over. And currently granddaughter Mary Megan Peer is the CEO. And so it all continued from the founder's death in 1960 to this very day, with the company that's now called [peermusic](#) associated in one specific way or another for decades with hits by a treasure trove of successful talent like The Rolling Stones. Chicago. The Allman Brothers. KISS. David Foster. Whitney Houston. Garth Brooks. Christina Aguilera. Rascal Flatts. Josh Groban. Bob Seger. Katy Perry. Beyoncé. Nick Jonas. Drake. Jason Aldean.

And, yeah, remember those shared copyright fees? After criticism about its lack of transparency, Spotify released information about how much it paid artists in royalties just in 2021 for its streaming—\$7 billion! And that's just one company. That's a long way from the Carter family driving down to Bristol, where Ralph Peer was in the process of creating what we can call his own “roots” for shared royalties for the betterment of artists worldwide to this very day. Here's how biographer Mazor captures Peer's influence.

“[Ralph Peer] envisioned markets and genres that hadn't been there at all, tested them and experimented with them. He matched music and artists that worked together in the areas he identified, and he kept finding fresh ways to repeat the outcome, expanding the musical possibilities for them all. He made many people a decent livelihood in the process, and he changed what we can hear. These were not small things. For many, they were everything.”

Here's what Peer himself said, “Somebody had to discover it. And I did...and I figured out these things in my own mind. But if I didn't, somebody else would have.” Hey, wait a minute, Ralph, not so fast! True risk-taking and innovation that perseveres for decades and ultimately better the lives of hundreds of millions of people—well, that doesn't “*just happen*.” The reality is, Ralph Peer crafted innovative paths for both royalties and roots music that underly pop music today. Yes, *Peer is without peer in the history of music!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. From his efforts at the Bristol Sessions through many years following, Ralph Peer found ways to carve out opportunities for music artists, both in “uncovering” their “local music” talents and also rewarding them financially. Do you know Christians (e.g., bosses, teachers, parents) who likewise seem to “find ways” to specifically lift people up at particularly opportune times? Do you personally do that? So, is this focus a special gift or can any mere Christian effectively manifest this kind of impact? Discuss.

2. Ralph Peer indicated that “somebody else would have” done what he did. But what about you? Specifically, do you believe you are uniquely appointed by God to lift up, witness to, or lovingly steward others that cross your paths in life—a very real set of divine appointments for you to act upon? Discuss.

3. It’s highly likely you had never heard of Ralph Peer before this podcast episode. What about all those others who died decades or even centuries ago? Is it important that people are famous? From a Christian perspective, is it important what our demonstrable obedience to God be recorded for others to read or hear about? Or is our meeting with Jesus for divine “rewards or burning” for our deeds at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9-16) simply enough? Discuss.