

# We Interview Peter Bartók

Interviewer Stamler notes that “pioneering recording engineer Peter Bartók was one of the best of the early LP-era engineers, and was involved in some remarkable recordings.”

By Paul J. Stamler

**B**orn into a musical family in Hungary (his father was the renowned composer Béla Bartók, his mother the famed pianist Ditta Pásztory Bartók), Peter Bartók traveled across Europe during World War II to join his parents in America—as it turned out, only a few years before his father’s fatal illness. (The story of his journey, and Peter Bartók’s reminiscences of his father and family, can be found in his book, *My Father*, which I read and found delightful<sup>1</sup>.)

Peter Bartók cut records and made tape recordings; much of his work was done using equipment he designed himself, being dissatisfied with commercial-quality gear. In that respect, he qualifies as one of the pioneering audio engineers of the LP era, and I’d venture to say his best work stands up to many of the audiophile recordings released since.

He founded Bartók Records in 1949, which produced critically-acclaimed recordings of his father’s works and other contemporary classical music. But Peter Bartók’s greatest public impact probably came from his behind-the-

scenes involvement with Moses Asch’s Folkways Records; an entire generation grew up learning about American and world traditions from those thick records with blue labels and heavy, double-pocketed jackets containing extensively-notated booklets. Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, the New Lost City Ramblers, ethnographic tapes from every corner of the earth—even the first recordings of avant-garde composer John Cage—passed through the crowded office of Moses Asch, and the cutting amplifiers of Peter Bartók. After Mike Seeger (a founder of the Ramblers) was kind enough to put me in touch with him, it seemed logical to start there.

## THE EARLY YEARS AND MOSES ASCH

*Can I begin by asking about Folkways?*

**PB:** I used to do a freelance recording service. I had a little recording studio that I made out of my father’s apartment in New York initially, and then I moved into something more appropriate. My business is registered as having started in

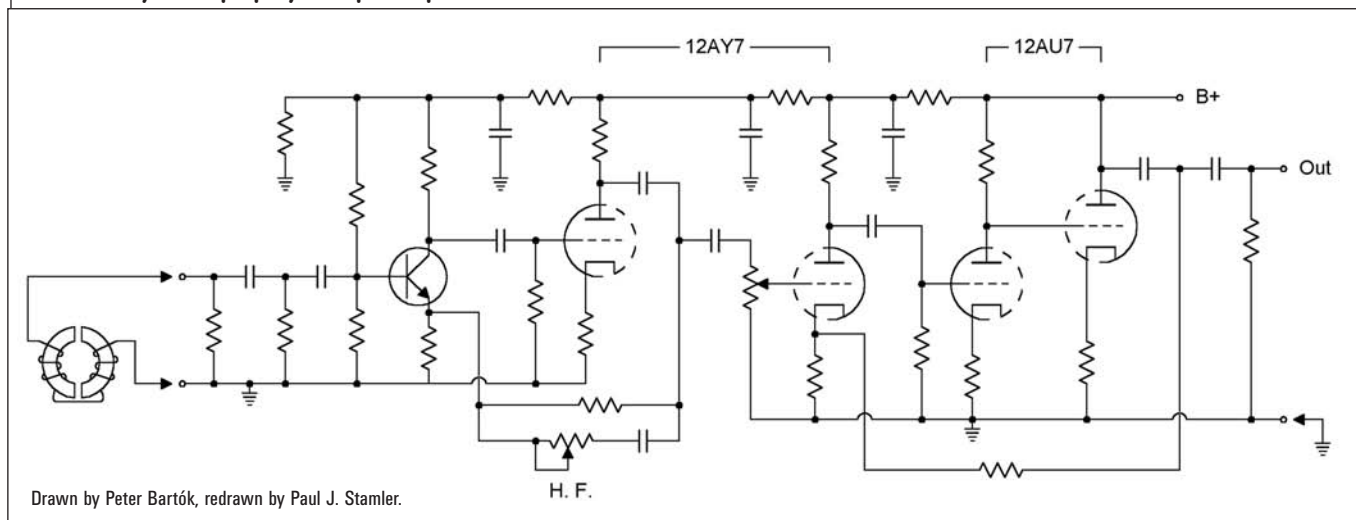
’49, and Folkways was one of my earliest customers for cutting long-playing masters. They brought the tapes, and we transferred them on long-playing lacquer discs, which then went to the factory and were plated.

In my initial work, people came to the studio, played the piano, and recorded. They walked home with a disc. But Folkways brought more interesting folk music records done in the field, which had to be edited sometimes, and then made into long-playing masters. The first record, I think, was a 78 that I made for [Asch].

Just after I started working in this field, my own first record—that I published on my own label—was a 78. I resisted the change [to LP], because,



FIGURE 1: Hybrid tape playback preamp.



as a principle, it was a little bit of a downgrading of quality, because of the slower linear velocity of the groove. And then I did like good-quality 78 records; they were capable of wonderful reproduction, once you got rid of the shellac as the pressing material. When the vinyl was introduced, then they were superb.

*How late did you continue cutting 78s?*

**PB:** As soon as the LP came out, I stopped; there was no reason to continue making 78s once the LP was introduced. It was possible to get the same good quality, as long as you didn't try to jam too much music on one side. The longer an LP is, the less good the quality.

## ON TAPE

*How did you first meet Moses Asch?*

**PB:** Well, just exactly who introduced me to him, or who recommended my services to him, I do not know. He brought discs to be copied, and then he brought tapes to be made into masters. I was on 57th St., and he was on 47th St., so it was not difficult for him to get to me.

He was a wonderful man; he was so imaginative and so full of ideas, and he worked day and night. Which to me was not unfamiliar, because my father was that kind of a person also. It was wonderful to work for him; he was such a colorful personality, and it was nice to interrupt the work and go out to lunch, and then come back and resume—in those days I could do that.

And then I got tape equipment; initially I had only disc, because the only kind of tape recording that I knew was not of very good quality. There was a machine called [Brush] Sound Mirror which people had in their homes, but I thought, "Oh, that's not capable of really good reproduction." Finally, a salesman from Ampex demonstrated the Ampex quality, and it made everything very easy. Let us say there was a set of 78 records that we had to copy on an LP; it was easier to put it first on tape than to keep changing the original source.

My first LP record was still done on discs, and during the cutting of the LP master I had to switch the source from one turntable to another, because it was a 15-minute piece which the musicians

could never get right from beginning to end. There were two records, one was good until the middle, and the other was good after the middle, and so the two had to be combined—without using tape. After that I got the tape.

*So that was your first machine. Was that the Ampex 300?*

**PB:** That was a 300; I accepted at that time Ampex's claim that 15 [ips] is a good speed for making records. The Sound Mirror, which I didn't like, was going at 7½, and of course the higher the speed, up to a point, the better the quality. And at 15, as I found out later, the quality is really not as good as at 30. Before that time, Ampex marketed a machine which ran at 30. The reduction to 15 [ips] was claimed to be an improvement, but actually it sacrificed some of the quality. So I went back later to 30 [ips] once I realized that 15 was a compromise.

*Compromising the sound quality for playing time.*

**PB:** Well, yes, to use less tape material, but a lot of sound was lost, and it had to be equalized excessively to get the same—to get all the frequencies there. Then I received many tapes from Europe that were still 30", and I realized that 30" is the quality that I need.

## ROLLING HIS OWN

So we converted the machines by putting a sleeve on the capstan. The Barpex, I used to call it, combined the two names. Ampex didn't like that kind of thing at all; I bought spare parts, replacements, for Ampexes, and instead I put them together into a machine. But the parts could be had, so . . .

The idea was that, when you edit tapes, it's awkward to bend over a factory-made machine. I wanted the machine to be a desk, where I can spend the whole day and work comfortably, where I can put my knees under the desktop, and not get tired. So we decided to build a machine into a desk.

I'm not the only one who did this; people told me that they encountered a similar machine at RCA studios, for editing, [which] went even one step further. They put [in] four turntables for reels, so that they could switch from one reel to the other at any time without having to

remove reels from the turntable. It made editing more easy; we had to keep on taking the reel off and putting the next reel on. RCA could do it by taking the tape from the other reel. [Pause] Editing tapes was a lot of fun. **ax**

## REFERENCES

1. Peter Bartók, *My Father* (2002). Available from Bartók Records, PO Box 399, Homosassa, FL 34487. ([www.bartokrecords.com/home.htm](http://www.bartokrecords.com/home.htm)).

## DESIGN NOTES BY PETER BARTÓK

The tape playing amplifier (Fig. 1) is about 30 years old; it was the first time I included a transistor in something I built, but I still felt more comfortable with tubes. What dictated the transistor input stage was the enormous gain required (at low frequencies) and the trouble with microphonics if tubes were used at such a low level.

Followed by only a grounding resistor and an open grid, the transistor with a high resistance load can produce a large gain with very few components. The grid-to-plate capacitance of the following tube is of no consequence, as the gain at high frequencies already is low anyway. I may have included a capacitance-resistor combination in parallel with the transistor's load, so feedback would not be the only factor relied on in obtaining the 6dB/octave drop with frequency rise, but the main equalization determines the frequency response. The variable resistor high frequency levels off the response at a desired point and is, in effect, a variable high-frequency boost that is optional for every tape played. That, and the potentiometer for volume, are the only two controls.

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