

## PRODUCER



## PETER ASHER

Coaxing the best work from pop's most amazing voices

By Jeff Tamarkin

WHEN HE AND SINGING PARTNER GORDON WALLER BEGAN enjoying hits in the 1960s as Peter and Gordon, London-born Peter Asher made the most of his opportunity. In the recording studio, Asher kept a close eye on the steps that producers Norman Newell and John Burgess took to make now-classics like "A World Without Love" and "Nobody I Know" sound the way they did. "I learned about the technology of production and a lot about the process," recalls the three-time Grammy winner. "At the time it was all half-inch Studer tape recorders and four-tracks. I learned what limiters and compressors and microphones did. Watching Norman and John, I also learned different ways to relate to artists and musicians."

When the duo's string of hits at last dried up, Asher knew precisely where he wanted to land: behind the board. He was in perhaps the best position in the world to do just that, given his close connections to the Beatles—John Lennon and Paul McCartney, overflowing with so many great songs they were offering leftovers up for other acts to record, were the authors of several of Peter and

Gordon's biggest hits. Drafted by McCartney to head up the A&R department of the Beatles' new Apple label, Asher promptly signed a promising young American singer and songwriter named James Taylor.

Asher produced Taylor's self-titled Apple debut, then came to the U.S. to manage and produce the singer full time—including Taylor's breakthrough album, 1970's *Sweet Baby James*. Asher spent most of the 1970s producing hit albums for Taylor and Linda Ronstadt, and went on to work with Bonnie Raitt, Cher, Ringo Starr, Neil Diamond, Diana Ross, Randy Newman, Morrissey and 10,000 Maniacs, among many others. He and Waller joined forces once again in the mid-2000s for several onstage appearances as Peter and Gordon, a heartwarming reunion cut tragically short by Waller's death in 2009. Asher, who is now at work on a Buddy Holly tribute album scheduled to feature Stevie Nicks, Jackson Browne, Cobra Starship, the Fray and others, sat down with us at his Manhattan apartment to discuss his impressive and still-growing résumé.

**'I love all the new technology. We can do things now that we could only dream of back then.'**

**How did you start producing?**

The first record I ever produced was Paul Jones from Manfred Mann—a song called "And the Sun Will Shine" [1968]. He was a brilliant singer and one of the best harmonica players in the history of the world. I wanted to get a really good rhythm section, so I used Nicky Hopkins on piano, Paul Samwell-Smith from the Yardbirds on bass, Jeff Beck on guitar and Paul McCartney on drums. That's how Paul came to ask me to produce at Apple, before he asked me to head A&R there. And what could be cooler than working for a great new record label and the Beatles?

**How did you meet James Taylor?**

The connection was [guitarist and producer] Danny Kortchmar. He'd backed Peter and Gordon, and was in a band called the Flying



With Paul McCartney

Machine with his old friend James Taylor. After we stopped touring and I was with Apple, James came over and played his tape. I was super impressed and I said, "It so happens I'm now running this new label. Do you want a record deal?" He said, "Yes, please." He was identified as a white folk singer, but he was trying to sing like Sam Cooke and Ray Charles. He didn't succeed at that, but integrating some of the soulful stuff that he was devoted to made him different from everybody else.

**How was it recording his debut?**

We took an ad in the *Melody Maker* to hire musicians, rehearsed and then went into the studio. It was eight-track at Trident Studios in Soho [in London's West End]. Everything had been four-track before that. The co-owner of the studio, Barry Sheffield, was the engineer. When Paul [McCartney] came in to play bass on "Carolina in My Mind," that was his first-ever experience with eight-track. He subsequently brought the Beatles over and they did "Hey Jude" at



Peter and Gordon

Trident—that was their first eight-track recording. I had elaborate production ideas for James' record, based upon my determination that people take him seriously and take the songs as being different. I was very concerned that people would say he was just another folk singer. The term "singer-songwriter" had yet to be invented—if you played acoustic guitar and had long hair you were a folk singer.

**Did you use all eight tracks for James?**

We put a lot of strings and horns and percussion on it, so we used the tracks. A big plus was that we didn't have to do the bounce-down. You'd go to four and bounce down to one, and then bounce down to one again, which is why the stereo mixes end up being so bizarre. The mono mixes of all those early records are the only ones to listen to. We never took the stereo mixes seriously, because they sounded weird. We hated it! It was silly. Eight-track enabled us to make a real stereo mix.

**How was *Sweet Baby James* recorded?**

When it came to *Sweet Baby James*, I realized that perhaps I'd overdone it a bit on the debut album. James' voice is at its best when he sounds like he's telling you a story sitting in your living room. I came to L.A. and assembled the band. We brought in Carole King on piano because I loved her piano playing. "Kootch" [Danny Kortchmar] was of course a given on the guitar. I found a drummer, Russ Kunkel, who was not a studio drummer at the time—he'd never done a session. And then we used a few different bass players. We rehearsed every day at my rented house—it was empty, but we had a big sitting room with a piano and a stereo. We'd rehearse two or three songs in the afternoon, then head over to Sunset Sound and record. Bill Lazerus was the engineer. That was also eight-track

and much simpler than the first album. The whole thing was done in two weeks. It cost \$7,600.

**What did you see in Linda?**

My God, what *wasn't* there? Somebody said, "You've got to come see this girl at the Bitter End. She's amazing." There was this incredibly gorgeous girl wearing short-shorts and bare feet—the epitome of California hotness in every respect. Then she turns out to be one of the greatest singers you've ever heard in your life—nailing these incredible songs with emotion, control and a big amazing voice. I was overwhelmed.

**How did you start working together?**

I didn't immediately sign her. I had just started managing Kate Taylor, James' sister, and I wasn't sure whether that would be a potential conflict. Eventually we met again in California. I became both Linda's producer and manager, and finished the record she was in the middle of [1973's *Don't Cry Now*]. Then we did *Heart Like a Wheel* and things started to go crazy.

**Tell us about some of the other artists you've worked with.**

Cher is great—so determined and very hard-working. I like people whose voices are distinctive. One thing that Linda, Cher, Diana Ross and Natalie Merchant [formerly of 10,000 Maniacs] all have in common is that a few syllables in and you know who it is. Ringo Starr was wonderful. I wanted



With James Taylor in 1969

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Neal Preston/Corbis

With Linda Ronstadt and Ron Wood

**'I'm very hands-on, but not to the point of interfering with the creative process!'**

to get him back playing drums, which he did. I love his drumming. Neil Diamond's a great singer. His voice is so huge, so distinctive. And he's an underestimated songwriter—he's written some brilliant songs. Very straightforward guy, and very funny. Bonnie Raitt's so soulful. An underestimated guitar player too. I wanted her to play on everything and she kept going, "I'm not really a guitar player," but she really is. One of the best slide players in the world.

**Is Diana Ross difficult to work with?**

Not at all. I knew her socially, ever since we did [1960s TV show] *Hullabaloo* with the Supremes back in the 18th century. (laughs) And she was great. You really have to kick

yourself when you think, "I'm sitting here listening to bloody Diana Ross!" She still sings great and does every take differently. She likes to try stuff every time.

**What was Gordon Waller like?**

He was big-hearted. He could be grumpy, but he was friendly with everybody. He was also an underrated singer—he had an extraordinary voice. We sounded completely different. He had this big, resonant Elvis-y voice and I've got this choirboy tenor, English, white, un-soulful voice. But they worked together.

**How do you relate to artists?**

I'm very hands-on, but not to the point of interfering with a creative process that is



With Mick Jagger

going well. I'll often have preconceived ideas on how the track should come out, but I try not to let that get in the way and at least listen to what other people come up with. There's no point in hiring great musicians if you're going to make them play only what you had in your head.

**How has your producer role changed?**

Surprisingly little. I love all the new technology. People go, "Don't you really miss tape?" I say, "No, I'm so happy to see the back of it." We can do things now that we could only dream of back then. Like all technology, it can be wildly overused, but the fact that you can do things you'd only dreamed of doing is very exciting.

ESSENTIAL ASHER

Here are some of the best examples of Peter Asher's production work:

- James Taylor, *Sweet Baby James* (1970)
- Linda Ronstadt, *Heart Like a Wheel* (1974)
- Bonnie Raitt, *The Glow* (1979)
- Cher, *Cher* (1987)
- 10,000 Maniacs, *In My Tribe* (1987)
- Ringo Starr, *Time Takes Time* (1992)
- Randy Newman, *Faust* (1995)
- Carole King and James Taylor, *Live at the Troubadour* (2010)



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