John Hartford

By Art Menius

"I know why everybody's here; they think I'm going to croak," John Hartford told an audience at Nashville's War Memorial Auditorium in late September 2000, a little more than eight months before his death.[1] The occasion was Hartford's ninth and final appearance on the public radio program "Mountain Stage." Hartford, in good voice and spirits, performed with the John Hartford String Band. Bob Carlin, Chris Sharp, Mike Compton, and Larry Perkins formed last of the several ensembles he fronted in addition to many solo appearances. Audibly moved, John's segment honored his influences Bill Monroe ("In The Heart of the Cross Eyed Child)," Benny Martin ("Me and My Fiddle)," and Earl Scruggs ("The Boys From North Carolina)." In the album's closing track, Hartford offered an ironic and typically irreverent solo rendition of "Give Me The Flowers While I'm Living."[2]

John connected not just words to music, but the old days of Nashville to its present, tradition to innovation, new grass to bluegrass to old-time, television to radio, river to shore, aging musicians to hippies. Goethe may have been the last person to know everything worth knowing, but John Hartford tried. He packed a lot of adventure and exploration into his 63 years. He championed, and wrote part of a book about, Ed Haley, a blind West Virginia fiddler who died in 1951, authored a book (*Steamboat in a Cornfield*) for children, piloted riverboats, wrote songs prolifically, and, although deeply attached to traditional music, profoundly influenced new grass.

To know John Hartford, you needed to see his favorite photograph. It captured a moment with the two of the most significant influences on his life, his fifth grade teacher, Miss Ruth Ferris, and Earl Scruggs.

To know John Hartford, you needed to see his beatific smile and the sparkle in his eye whether entertaining on stage or jamming with friends.

To know John Hartford, you needed to recognize his modesty, especially measured against his fame and accomplishments. Witness what he told me in 1985:

> I do the best I can, and that's how it comes out. I believe that style is created by limitations. My limitations are what define my style. My art is a struggle for me to reproduce the sounds I hear inside my head and communicate them to the listener. Let's just say that I'm always trying to overcome my limitations. And I would say that one of my limitations is to me is not being able to pick any better than I do…. I think my life is working hard at getting better at what I do.[3]

Noted British music school scholar Tony Russell summarized Hartford's music: "Hartford spent most of his life making music with sinew and wit. In the rule-bound worlds of bluegrass and American old-time music, he cut an anarchic figure, yoking the ageless sounds of banjo and fiddle to genial songs about getting high and the decline of that country music institution, the Grand Ole Opry."[4]

I can divide Hartford's career into rough segments. He began as a bluegrass musician and radio DJ. Then he went to Nashville where he was "discovered" as a songwriter and recording artist so promising that Chet Atkins changed his birth name of Harford to a more marketable Hartford. The success of "Gentle on my Mind" and television work took him to Hollywood and a period of out of control living. He returned to Nashville and started over by recording a magnificent trio of albums, *Aereo-Plain*, which inspired if not began new grass music, *Morning Bugle*, and, after a three-year gap, the Grammy-winning *Mark Twang*. A strong case can be made are his best works.[5] On stage during the early 1970s, he seemed to be the counter culture figure from the cover of *Aereo-Plain* performing raunchy pot and sex songs. During his last quarter century, John became respected and respectable. He made himself a modern minstrel man, by turns witty and reverent, a champion of pioneer musicians, a student of fiddle tunes, a writer, and riverboat pilot. Despite the non-Hodgkin's lymphoma discovered in 1980, he continued to record and perform prolifically until he became physically unable some five months before his death.

Although born in New York City in late December 1937, the end of the best birth year for banjo players, John Harford grew up in St. Louis. At an early age he fell in love with two things: music and the Mississippi River. By age 13 he was a fiddler and banjo-player, influenced by the country music on the Grand Ole Opry and his folks' avocation. "My parents used to square dance a lot. Sometimes to live music and sometimes to records," he told me.

> The first band I saw that really turned me around and made me really want to do it was the Foggy Mountain Boys with Earl and Benny Martin and Curley Sechler [in 1953]. As far as actually patterning myself and learning to do what I do now, my inspirations were Earl Scruggs and Benny Martin and other people of that era, Bill Monroe…. That was the sound that really got me going. I would say that what I do now comes as much from that as anything.

Hartford wrote that by the time he was fourteen or fifteen he and a friend would make the seven-hour bus ride to Nashville. They made it worthwhile starting by attending the Friday Night Frolic at WSM. Saturday involved hanging out at the original Ernest Tubb Record Store on Broadway followed by the triple header of pre-Opry show at WSM at 6 PM, the Grand Ole Opry from 7:30

until midnight, then the Midnight Jamboree back at the Tubb Record Store[6]. For teenaged boys of limited means, it was quite fortunate that all this happened within three blocks of downtown Nashville. Small wonder then that Hartford would write and record "Tear Town the Grand Ole Opry," which may well have saved the Ryman, and "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore." On one of these junkets, young John used his position with the Earl Scruggs Fan Club to arrange a visit with his hero. The biggest thrill was Earl giving them a ride back to the Ryman.[7] Years later he would more than return the favor. Spying workmen throwing video tapes into a Nashville dumpster, he inquired what they were. Informed that they were "just old tapes of Flatt & Scruggs TV shows," Hartford rescued priceless documentation of the most popular first generation bluegrass band.[8]

By the time he was eighteen, he was picking with his cousin Stoner Haven (real name) as the Missouri Ridge Runners. By 1958, John fiddled with Joe Noel and the Dixie Ramblers. It included Doug Dillard, also born in 1937, on banjo and Doug's younger brother, Rodney on guitar The son of the band's bass player Buddy Van, has placed on YouTube five songs recorded for Marlo Records, which released "Banjo in the Holler/You're on my Mind" on 45. K-Arc Records rereleased it in January 1961.[9].Hartford recalled those times:

> I think I was a senior in high school or my first year in college when I met Douglas, Marvin Hawthorn and Clifford and Gene Goforth. I and Don Brown went to see a Lee Mace show with the Ozark Opry in St. Clair, Missouri, and Douglas was up there. We started hanging around together a lot around St. Louis. Rodney was going to high school in Salem, and he used to come up and sit in with us."[10]

When the Ozark Mountain Trio formed 1958, John became the banjo player. That group that was still around in 1985 as Don Brown and the Ozark Mountain Trio. They had a local television show and also recorded a single for Marlo in 1961 and second single as well as a four-song EP called "Backwoods Gospel Songs" on Shannon in 1962. The sleeve of that recording appears to be the first time John's name, at that time Harford, appeared on a record cover. Hartford stayed with them until around 1962. He earned a BFA at Washington University in St. Louis in 1960 and worked for a while as a commercial artist and sign painter. The pull of music proved too strong. He became a part-time DJ and part-time record plugger. The latter took John through a lot of towns, where he sat in with as many bluegrass bands as he could. He frequently appeared on fiddle with the highly regarded Red Cravens and the Bray Brothers, although their album for Liberty called them the Bluegrass Gentlemen. A decade later Hartford wrote the liner notes for

their Rounder album, *419 West Main*, assembled from tapes of their radio shows, including five tracks with his fiddling.

By 1965, John had made his way down to Nashville as a DJ on WSIX. There the Glaser Brothers signed him to a songwriting contract with their publishing company. When Chet Atkins heard "Eve of My Multiplication," he signed Hartford to a 1966 recording contract with RCA. Between 1966 and 1970 RCA would release first seven including one a compilation of previously released material to take advantage of "Gentle on my Mind." Thinking that the singer-songwriter would be "their Bob Dylan," the label saw so much promise in him that Johnny Cash wrote the effusive liner notes for his debut, *John Hartford Looks at Life*.[11]

Suddenly shifting from playing in bluegrass bands to performing as a solo singer-songwriter required quite an adjustment. In his new role, Hartford said, "I played a little bit on the fiddle and a little bit on the guitar and the banjo, but I mostly just sat there and sang my weird songs. I was really in to being a singer-songwriter in those days, so I mostly sang these long introspective songs I wrote."[12]

At times he just wasn't ready for the spotlight. "I remember playing a show somewhere with some other people. I got up and did something with the banjo. Everybody cheered and stomped and carried on. Then I got real embarrassed and hid behind the piano. It was like I had pushed something too far."[13]

Hartford would grow into a consummate entertainer whether solo or with a band, charming his way along the edges of mainstream popularity. By the 1980s he settled comfortably into a basic, yet flexible, format for his shows whether solo or with a full band. John created an individual entertainment out of various pieces of American folk and popular culture bridging the 1860s to the 1960s, Uncle Dave Macon to Bob Dylan. His stage attire with his vest and bowler hat melded imagery from railroad conductors, steam boat pilots, and patent medicine men. His on stage mannerisms, facial expressions, and body language complemented these atavistic images while engaging audiences with their familiarity.

Hartford mastered the fine art of fashioning a sense of intimacy each individual in the audience. He evolved from the long haired, stoner wild man on the cover *Aereo-Plain*, to an entertainer comfortable with middle age, projecting both authority and approachability mix with playfulness. Remarkably, Hartford could achieve this from a large, elevated stage to an audience

of thousands. He felt a sincere affection and appreciation for the people who bought tickets for his performances. Signing autographs and interacting with fans proved the last part of Hartford's development as an entertainer. He told me that:

> I sat down after the show and just started signing autographs and meeting people… kind of like what I heard Ernest Tubb used to do and I really admired…. I just stayed there and signed and talked and signed and talked until finally there was only one person left. I signed and talked, and then pretty soon he drifted away. I looked around me, and there was just a great big empty room. I thought, "far out. Everybody got what they wanted, and they left."[14]

Once at MerleFest a fan handed me a copy of 1968's *The Love Album* over the restraining fence, requesting that I obtain an autograph for him. He would surely had been overjoyed had I merely returned it inscribed with Hartford's calligraphy. Instead, John excused himself from an all-star picking session in Doc Watson's dressing room and followed me back to the fellow, with whom he visited for almost ten minutes.

This hardly was an uncommon occasion, as Bud Bennett recalled:

> Another time that I saw John play live that was memorable for me was in 1992. He was playing at a small club near my house and when I went to see the show I brought along a poster that I wanted him to sign. At his set break, he was sitting outside at a table and was surrounded by people all laughing and talking. I made my way up to him and showed him my poster and asked if he would sign it. He looked right at me and smiled that crinkly-eyed smile and took the poster and laid it out on the table in front of him. He took out his pen and slowly and carefully wrote in the most beautiful script I can remember ever seeing. He took his time, ignored everything around him and it was as if signing that poster was the most important thing in the world at that moment. I remember noticing that the people gathered around the table were all watching him too. When he finished he put his pen away and looked at the poster a second or two, picked it up and handed it to me and smiled again. He was a special guy for sure.[15]

Adopting new technology such as his miked dance floor and the wireless pick-ups that permitted him to fiddle through the audience, Hartford aimed to make each performance different:

> I don't ever try to do anything like I did on the record…. It all evolves. So when you hear me do a song live, you're not getting a repetition of something you already have on record; you're getting the next step. I think records really are photographs of the artist and the song at that point in their development.
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> The songs I do on my program divide up into three categories. There's the songs I like best, the songs they [the audience] like the best, and the songs we share. Hopefully, there's enough songs we share to make it all worthwhile. There's a happy medium, a pacing, to it all.[16]

During the late 1970s, John discovered that he could fiddle while running in place. After a year of practicing and developing this skill, it became a signature aspect of his shows. It also gave Hartford a profile larger than just a solo performer:

> When I'm working by myself, I still work as a band. I'm not a one-man act; I'm a one-man band, because I tune to standard and ply in a strict meter. So actually I'm a dance band even though I am by myself on stage. Basically I'm a band musician more than a solo musician. When I get on stage with a band, I tend to put myself into a band role. I don't perform and do the things I do when I am by myself.[17]

While John told me performing alone was cheaper than paying a band, the relative simplicity of traveling as a solo act made a difference. Hitting the road with his second spouse and merchandise manager Marie and one or two bus drivers. John aimed for balance between touring and being home. "We don't go out and stay out… We're out three or four days, and then we're in two days, and then we're out two days and in three or four days."[18]

Nonetheless, during his later years, Hartford toured with the John Hartford String Band, his first established group in more than twenty years. Carlin relished the freedom he gave the ensemble. According to Bob, "He would say, well boys, get up there. I'm just going to do my solo set and I want you to fall in behind me. Figure out something to do. And all he would do is turn around and say 'key of D.''[19]

River songs frequently provided high points of his performances: "Watching the River Go By," "Old Time River Man," off of *Down On The River*, "Natchez Whistle" from *Headin' Down Into The Mystery Below* (1978), and "Skippin' in the Mississippi Dew" and "The Julia Belle Swain," from *Mark Twang* (1976). The river acted as both an inspiration and a point of reference for Hartford:

> I've tried to collect songs that I think are river songs for one reason or another. There's a certain element of music which seems to typical of the river area…. Old-time music and the fiddle and the banjo is very much river music going all the way back to the flatboat days. The old flatboats and keel boats and raft boats that floated the river carried a fiddler as part of the crew for morale and to ease the workload. A fiddle tune and a little bit of whiskey could keep a man on the pole for a long time.[20]

Rivers and riverboats rarely strayed too far from Hartford's mind. As a kid he dreamed of piloting steamboats. At fifteen, he lied about his age to get hired as a night watchman on the Delta Queen. That gig carried the additional benefit of time to practice playing his five-string.[21]

While away from the studio and performing sporadically between 1972 and 1975, Hartford reconnected with boats and the river. “I was away from the river for a while, but I realized that I had to have some river in my life just to keep my head straight,” he explained. he earned his 100 gross ton passenger boat license for inland waters. In 1973 he began a tradition of spending about ten days each month of the summer working on the *Julia Belle Swain* out of Peoria, Illinois.

> I’m a regular working pilot. What we do is the first day I stay in the pilot house all day, because these are two day trips. That night we stay at the Starved Rock State Park lodge. We usually have a jam session at the lodge, and I play that night. The next day on the way back I… sit in with the house band and do a couple of numbers.[22]

Whether on the river or touring and recording new albums, a single song that had transformed Hartford’s life in many ways and television appearances that resulted from it remained his identity for mainstream audiences. “Gentle on My Mind,” a hit twice for Glen Campbell, became one most-recorded songs in the history of popular music. Before that, John’s own single of “Gentle on My Mind” first released on 1967’s *Earthwords & Music* for RCA reached number 60 in the charts, high enough for Campbell to hear it on the radio and want to record it. The song also changed everything for Campbell, at the time best known as a great session guitarist and a part-time member of the Beach Boys. “Gentle on my Mind” kick started his fabulously successful career as a recording artist.[23]

Ronnie McCoury of the Del McCoury Band and the Traveling McCourys recounted for *Rolling Stone* what Hartford told him about writing “Gentle on my Mind:”

> He could really paint a picture with words. He told me he wrote 'Gentle on My Mind' after he had watched *Dr. Zhivago*. And he said, “I wanted to drink Julie Christie's bathwater.” He sat down at a picnic table and wrote the song in twenty minutes. He said it went against every rule that could be a rule in music. It didn't have a chorus, it had a banjo on it, and it was four minutes long.[24]

The awards, opportunities, and money came quickly, perhaps too quickly for Hartford’s own good. He received the Grammy for Best Folk Performance, while Campbell got the one for Best Country & Western Solo Performance. “Gentle on my Mind” earned four BMI awards spread over 1968, 1969, and 1970, twice each for Pop Song of the Year and Country Song of the Year.[25] The song’s royalties, which exceeded $100,000 per year well into the 1980s, gave him financial freedom to explore his diverse interests.[26]

Three decades later BMI rated "Gentle on my Mind" the number 16 song of 20th Century in any genre.[27] The song earned its third Grammy by the Band Perry for Best Country Duo/Group Performance in 2015.[28] A*merican Songwriter* listed it as the number seven Country song of all time. *The Tennessean*'s Peter Cooper wrote the citation for that:

> Campbell's version of Hartford's Grammy-winning song has aired more than 5 million times on television and radio. Lyrically, it's among the densest songs in popular music. Words upon words spill out, yet a lovely melody is unhampered by the chatter, and the lyrics were a beacon for new-era songwriters like Kristofferson and Tom T. Hall. "Through cupped hands, 'round a tin can/I pretend to hold you to my breast and find/That you're waiting from the back roads by the rivers of my memories/Ever smiling, ever gentle on my mind."[29]

For John and his family, the impacts extended far beyond the song and its awards. Jan Howard of the Grand Ole Opry introduced Hartford to Bill Thompson, then program director for a Los Angeles country music radio station. "He took some of my albums and gave them to Tommy Smothers. Mason Williams [of the instrumental hit "Classical Gas."] listened to them and liked them and told Tommy he should check into me." Soon Hartford had an airplane ticket to Los Angeles to meet Smothers.[30]

Without any experience, Hartford found himself a television comedy writer along with Williams and fellow banjo player Steve Martin for CBS's *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. John moved his family to Los Angeles in 1968. He began appearing regularly on camera for both that program and *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*. "We ended up taping at the same time, and I'd be running across the hall between the two shows. Pretty heady stuff."[31]

Heady enough to derail some of Hartford's creative drive, which had been more than prodigious. Between December 1966 and November 1967 he had released three RCA albums of original songs:

> It didn't appear to be disruptive because it was a real ego trip. I would say it was quite disruptive. Especially "Gentle on My Mind. I've still never figured out why me creative output went way down after that song won all those awards. It was very strong before that song did what it did…. In fact, I hadn't really begun to get that creative output back until I started to work with Jack Clement [in the early 1980s]. Then it really went into overdrive.[32]

Comedy writing didn't quite pan out. Since Williams had worked out so well in that role, Tommy Smothers assumed John, also being a musician he dug, also could. Williams remembered Hartford contributing ideas, he could not recall seeing a single script written by

him. Nor did John have fond memories either, saying that writing amounted to a group of comedians sitting around a table, smoking and drinking, trying out jokes on each other.[33] Hartford's role soon morphed into artist relations for the guests of the shows and an on camera performer.[34]Other than for the Smothers Brothers, his twenty-three writer credits in TV and film mostly come from the use of "Gentle on my Mind" in programs ranging from the *Benny Hill Show* to *The Wire*, *O Brother Where Art Thou* to *Kojak.*

After making his debut network television appearance at the 1967 Grammys, Hartford appeared on thirteen episodes of various incarnations of *The Smothers Brothers Show* between 1968 and 1975 and twenty-one times on the *Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*. His other television and movie credits included ten episodes of *Hee-Haw*, a half dozen each for the *David Frost* show and the *Joey Bishop Show*, a couple of *Playboy After Dark* outings, and hosting an episode of *Hollywood Palace.* John served as host an ephemeral 1970 variety program called *Something Else,* sponsored by the American Dairy Association[35]. As their spokesman, John did TV spots promoting milk.[36] Guest performers on the show included Iron Butterfly, Richie Havens, and the Guess Who. Intended for a youth audience, YouTube clips of Hartford show him rambling around Los Angeles in a convertible liberally using lingo such as "far out" and "groovy."[37]

His complete actor credits include distinctive voice overs representing various people in nine episodes of Ken Burns' iconic *The Civil War* (1990). Besides his on-screen turn in *O Brother Where Art Thou,* he appeared as "The Fiddle Player" in 1981's made for TV film *The Return of the Beverly Hillbillies* in which Earl Scruggs appeared as himself and Rodney Dillard was "The Guitar Player." For public television Hartford appeared in Great Plains National Instructional Television Library's 20-minute *Music of America* film along with Duke Ellington, John Jacobs Niles, and his friend Williams. He performed on an episode, that also featured Doc and Merle Watson, of PBS' *Live From Wolf Trap* during the 1977-1978 season.[38] John also appears, as one would expect, on Mississippi segment of the Smithsonian-produced *River of Song*, filmed in 1997 for PBS. YouTube also features of Hartford on at the helm of the riverboat Twilight talking about his love for rivers and music from an early 1980s Ohio Public Broadcasting' show called *Ramblin'.*[39]

As a television performer, hit songwriter, and major label recording artist John adopted the questionable habits of a swinging late 1960s celebrity. The combination of philandering and

cannabis smoking would cost him his first marriage. The latter seemed to be the ultimate deal breaker for his first wife Betty, left at home with two children while John partied. “I couldn’t have that in my life, so we separated on January 1, 1970,” she told Andrew Vaughn. “I stayed in L.A. about six months, and he visited the kids about two times. That’s when I realized I could not put our lives on hold any longer, and I moved back to Nashville.”[40]

Despite the estrangement, Hartford was preparing for changes that would also take him back to Nashville. While still living on the West Coast, John recorded the August 23, 1969 episode of The Johnny Cash show. They played a bluegrass set in tribute to Bill Monroe accompanied by his future collaborators Norman Blake and Vassar Clements. Thus started the path back to folk, bluegrass, and old-time music.[41] A performance at the 1970 Big Sur Folk Festival reinforced his desire to return to his roots in Nashville.[42] When CBS offered him a serious acting job as the star of detective drama, Hartford decided to return to Nashville instead.[43]

In musical and geographical transition, John performed on July 4, 1970 at the Festival of American Folklife, produced by the Smithsonian’s Ralph Rinzler on the Mall in Washington, DC. There he was accompanied by Blake and Tut Taylor, who would become the fourth member of the Aereo-Plain ensemble, sometimes called the Dobrolic Plectral Society, a reference to Taylor’s unique way of playing the Dobro with a flat pick.[44].

At 1970 Philadelphia Folk Festival (August 28-29), however, Hartford showed up with none of his future collaborators. His backing ensemble played 12-string guitar, drums, and bass. The recorded performances capture his music midway the old sound and his developing progressive bluegrass approach. He opened the afternoon set with “Natural to be Gone,” from his final RCA and then current release *Iron Mountain Depot*. From there The Philadelphia material is mixed. Hartford introduced “Skippin’ in the Mississippi Dew” as a new song that he hasn’t recorded and not sure what he’ll do with it. It would not appear until six years later on *Mark Twang*. Some RCA songs such as “Like Unto A Mocking Bird” get a progressive bluegrass treatment. Interestingly the arrangements are different from one set to the next, much closer to bluegrass in the afternoon, then to folk rock the next evening. A number of songs appear in both sets, suggesting he either had not spent much time developing material his band knew or that he was simply experimenting. He demonstrates some flashy bluegrass fiddling on “Orange Blossom Special,” yet he also dips into his 1970s stoner and lover meme.

Leaving RCA for Warner Brothers, he chose to perform the music he loved and gave Blake, Clements, and Taylor the freedom to do the same at Glasser Brothers Studio in early 1971. *Aereo Plain* brought together traditional bluegrass, progressive influences, old songs, and his admittedly weird songs. It helping spawn the new-grass movement by demonstrating how music could be innovative while still sounding like bluegrass. From New Grass Revival to the Punch Brothers, *Aereo-Plain*, has influenced the bands who wanted to push bluegrass to its edges.

Philadelphia may have been the festival where he met David Bromberg and a friendship quickly formed through almost non-stop playing music together. John soon asked Bromberg to produce his next album.

> He asked me to produce the record in a way I've never heard of any other record being produced. He didn't want anyone to hear a single playback, note one, until the record was mixed and sequenced. I basically produced it in a vacuum. I had nobody to consult with. Then again, with musicians like those on it, I can't claim any huge credit, because those guys were just incredible players.[45]

Bromberg, who believes Hartford wanted a producer who would bring the experimental looseness of the New York bluegrass and old-time scene with its long jams on a single song rather than Nashville professionalism. In 2011 he was very certain why *Aereo-Plain* proved so influential:

> What was going on was, we were discarding some of the rules. But the musicians who were discarding the rules knew those rules cold, and could play in a strait jacket so beautifully you'd never notice the strait jacket, but we got rid of the straight jacket. It was kind of a liberation of bluegrass string---band music, allowing it to do something else. Truthfully, it needed something. Bluegrass was as dead as a mackerel.[46]

John's son Jamie Hartford reinforced Bromberg's thinking in a 2014 interview:

> My dad was always into improvisation. He felt like the subconscious mind knows the right thing to do in the right situation. And if you can tap into it, you get better performances. And Vassar Clements was, like, the guru of that. He played totally off his subconscious.[47]

At the time of John's death, Vassar told writer David Potorti that Hartford was "my closest friend." He then talked about *Aereo-Plain*:

> Back when he got out of the Glen Campbell thing in California, and he came down here and put this band together, me and Tut (Taylor) and Norman (Blake), and Randy Scruggs played bass on [the album]. And then I think we'd go out, me and him and Tut and Norman, and if there was a bass player somewhere around, he

> played, and if there wasn't, we just played ourselves. But that was so different that records companies didn't know which way to take it…. It was so different that it still stands. People listen to it and play the music. They say it's one of the best things they ever heard, the most different.[48]

Song and prose writer Ken Spooner offered a rich description of the Aereo-Plain band:

> The first time I saw him in person was at the Cafe Au Go Go in Greenwich Village, New York City.... It was in the very early seventies and he was touring to support his soon to be released *Aereo-Plain* album. John's physical appearance had altered radically from what we knew from TV. With a mattress factory explosion hair style, he looked like the hippies he would be singing about on "Up On The Hill".... He did a couple of solo numbers and then brought out Norman Blake, another strange looking character, who proceeded to quietly dazzle us with his guitar that weaved all around what John was doing on the banjo. The tour was advertised in the NY area as John Hartford and some of the best studio musicians from Nashville.... As John continued on, he brought out his "straight men" Vassar Clements and Tut Taylor one by one, layering in the textures we would all soon be listening to again and again when *Aereo-Plain* hit the streets.[49]

Warner Brothers, however, wanted hit songs rather than an enduring cult classic that barely cracked the Top 200 of the *Billboard* charts. Sadly, John realized that he could not afford to keep his remarkable band on salary.[50] In 1972 Hartford and Norman Blake toured as a duo and, with bassist Dave Holland, recorded the follow up to *Aereo-Plain*, *Morning Bugle*. Veteran producer Jim Rooney called it a "brilliant album."[51] Although it contained songs that have met the test of time such as "Nobody Eats at Linebaugh's Anymore," and an original named "Old Joe Clark," *Morning Bugle* failed to meet Warner Brothers' sales expectations. It was quickly on the way to being his rarest record other than the early 45s with bluegrass bands. "In two weeks it didn't meet some kind of sales quota," John recalled. "They stopped mailing them out and promoting them, and nobody could get them. I went to Joe Smith and asked for my release, and he gave it to me. So I spent three years where I didn't record for anybody."[52]

Ultimately, the river inspired Hartford to return to the studio to record *Mark Twang*, produced by Michael Melford. Soon thereafter Melford entered law school, eventually becoming the real-life Harvard Square attorney that the hosts of "Car Talk" on National Public Radio called Dewey, Cheatham and Howe. With a distaste for major labels, Hartford began a long association with Chicago independent Flying Fish Records with *Mark Twang*. "I got to know [Flying Fish founder] Bruce Kaplan, and I liked his operation…. So I went with him. They keep my albums in print. I've always had pretty much artistic control."[53]

After *Mark Twang*, John recorded prolifically, primarily for Flying Fish. He made a brief return to major label for 1987's *Annual Waltz* on MCA/Dot, followed by a couple more on Flying Fish. After Kaplan's untimely death, John and his second wife and concession manager Marie Hartford started their own label, Small Dog A-Barkin'. They released a half dozen CDs. The Hartfords had once attempted to acquire *Areo-Plain* and *Morning Bugle* from Warner Brothers. The label insisted they would not license less than three albums.[54] Thus John and Marie "bootlegged" his own releases on cassette for sale at the merchandise table. After five years of Small Dog A-Barkin' releases, Hartford moved to the Rounder Records, which had acquired Flying Fish, for number of recordings that included delightful and fascinating explorations of old-time music.

Some of the Flying Fish releases between the excellent albums *Mark Twang* and *Gum Tree Canoe* can fairly be described as uneven. Some reviewers, especially from the academic world, did not know what to make of a musician whose music followed so many directions. Future NEA chair Bill Ivey reviewed *Mark Twang*, a Grammy winner considered one of Hartford's best outing for Western Folklore:

> I am never quite sure where to locate artists like Norman Blake, John Hartford, and Vassar Clements in my thinking. Though they orient their live and recorded performances toward a late folksong-revival audience, they have extensive contact with traditional country music and thus are of greater interest to the folklorist than similar performers in the pop music field.
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> John Hartford is a talented musician, but his solo effort "Mark Twang" (Flying Fish 020) is self-indulgent and sloppy. Hartford remains a stylish songwriter, and his "Skipping in the Mississippi Dew" and "Don't Leave Your Records in the Sun" show flashes of the talent that brought Hartford fame for "Gentle on my Mind" several years ago. Both the technical and musical quality of this album is below John Hartford's capabilities.[55]

W.H. Ward reviewed *Dillard-Hartford-Dillard* in the *Appalachian Journal* even though all three were from Missouri:

> [A]n anthology that gives each of these figures enough room to exercise his estimable talents but not, happily, enough to allow for the kind of self-indulgent excesses to which Hartford is sometimes prone…. "a conspicuous particular and typically Hartfordian exemplar of the first quality being "Two Hits and a Joint Turned Brown"…. They press the rehearsal tape: slips, giggles and all.[56]

Other academics found unexpected uses for Hartford's music. Sociologist Ralph Turner cited his best known song to exemplify the distinction between what he called "institutionals" and

"impulsives." "The institutionals often fall into 'the malaise of retirement.' In contrast, freedom from past commitments is heralded poetically in the popular song, 'Gentle On My Mind," by John Hartford."[57] Another found that another Hartford composition could engage freshman English students:

> As the student enters the lecture hall, he hears the familiar sounds of John Hartford (on tape over the P.A.) singing 'Like unto a Mockingbird,' a song that satirizes the 'follow the crowd" theme. (The presentations serve two purposes – informational and motivational).[58]

Gerald Haslam advocated for the poetry of Hartford and his contemporaries in *The English Journal*:

> The argument that recognized poets project finer images or create more compelling language than does a Dylan or a John Hartford or a Buffy Sainte Marie or a Phil Ochs may indeed be sound, but it is valueless unless we give the work of such young writers the same objective and aesthetically honest appraisal, we would give 'serious' writers. And, of course, Dylan et.al. are profoundly serious writers…. [T]his work is dynamically contemporary; as alive, as changing, as confused and confusing, and occasional as beautiful as the young people who dig it. It stands as a great critical challenge just as it represents a rich pedagogic resource.[59]

John Hartford was the first mainstream celebrity that I got to know well. This happened because I was at the peak of my brief career as a fulltime music writer while also working for the Linear Group. The small Asheville-based company produced the successful *Fire on the Mountain* program hosted by David Holt on The Nashville Network from 1983 to 1987. Hartford accepted a five-minute spot alternating weekly with Gamble Rogers on our radio series, "The Liberty Flyer," which had a six month run on 113 commercial stations.

The Linear Group recorded "The Liberty Flyer" in downtown Asheville, first at Bill Stanley's Barbecue 'n' Bluegrass, then at the new Asheville Junction, an attempted revival of Andy Cohen's locally legendary late 1970s roots music night club. Unfortunately, "The Liberty Flyer," did not attract advertisers. We gave the bartered ad time from the stations to the American Red Cross, which leads to my oddest Hartford story.

At the Asheville Junction, we did a session that included recording PSA's for the Red Cross. One of the spots involved a volunteer checking John's blood pressure. The volunteer was rude to John, so that we had to cut it several times to get an attitude-free version. Typically, Hartford remained patient, and the volunteer left as soon as he was done. The Asheville Junction featured

facing the street. Soon we heard the loud thud of an impact, followed by flashing blue lights filling the room though the large, plate glass windows, and then the sirens' wail. The cranky volunteer, headed the wrong way on a one-way street, had smashed a parking meter. He was suffering from insulin shock, explaining his behavior.

As the spring of 1985 approached, John's agent, Keith Case, and I convinced *Bluegrass Unlimited* to assign me to write a cover story about Hartford. At the same time the Linear Group wanted me to discuss some ideas with him.

So off I took for Nashville on first of many trips there during 1985. In the Nashville suburb of Madison I found my way to the Hartfords' home, with a commanding view of the Cumberland River, mimicked the features of a riverboat. This was a more than appropriate home for both a musician who wanted a big room for jamming and riverboat man and collector of all things connected to the rivers of middle America, writer of songs and prose, collector of fiddle tunes, and philosopher. It contained the archival repository of man who kept everything.

I enjoyed seeing John's face glow with enthusiasm as he told me about his then current collecting passion:

> About three and one half years ago I learned how to read music. That was able to unlock the doors of the 1000 fiddle tune book [*One Thousand Fiddle Tunes: Authentic Country Fiddle Playing -- The Fiddler's Bible*]. Actually, what I've been doing is trying to collect every kind of fiddle tune that has been written down on a piece of paper. I've got O'Neal's collection and the 1000 fiddle tunes book, and I've gone to the Library of Congress and found some of the old fiddle tune collections there and made Xeroxes of them.[60]

The would be comedy writer by then was contributing fiddle tune transcriptions to the little known specialist publication *The Devil's Box*.[61] He also interviewed Bill Monroe for an instructional video and remained an active songwriter:

> Most of what I have been writing these days [early 1985] has been fiddle tunes, but I've been writing quite a few songs and finishing a few. I'd say maybe one a day. Usually what that means is a title and a melody and a few lyrics. I don't actually finish that many songs. Actually, it is very hard for me to finish.[62]

Hartford pulled some 3x5 index cards out of his iconic vest. He explained that he wrote song ideas on these, whether new or to advance an incomplete composition. Thereby, he always had something on which to write that could be easily filed and organized.[63]

Over those two days in March 1985 we explored a lot of that territory in both conversation and geography. Lunch at the Nashville's Ellicott Place Dairy Bar involved a visit with one the Jordanaires. A call from a formerly obese friend prompted a drive to Murfreesboro to share the news with pre-eminent country music historian Dr. Charles Wolfe. Charles let each of us copy a recording of the Opry in December 1940. Just standing in John's driveway, the legendary Cowboy Jack Clement, best known for his work with Johnny Cash, wandered over to talk to his neighbor.

Clement had just produced, over the course eighteen months, John's well-received *Gum Tree Canoe* album for Flying Fish. "It has been a wonderful creative experience," Hartford announced.

> He taught me as much about recording as I have ever learned from any one man. So many songwriters, players, singers, producers and creative people have come along under his guidance. I find myself extremely lucky just to have gotten to work with him. I certainly think this record I've done with Jack Clement is technically and aesthetically better than anything I've ever done. He shows me how to get what I really want on the record.[64]

In June 1985 I was back in Nashville for the first meeting that fall would result in the formation of IBMA, the International Bluegrass Music Association. Shortly, I became its initial executive director. During the exciting early years of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Owensboro, Kentucky for IBMA's World of Bluegrass, John proved one of the key established figures who validated IBMA even as he questioned the need for a genre based trade association. "What is the most successful music genre?" He once asked me. "Rock. What is the one without a trade association? Rock." Yet back when jam sessions filled hotel rooms late at night rather than private showcases, you could find Hartford picking with old friends like Vassar Clements.

As John's health began declining, he refined his thoughts about trade associations, communities, and music. He delivered his essay as the keynote of IBMA's first Leadership Bluegrass class in the same conference room at the Nashville BMI offices where the organization had been created. His message was a cautionary one about the changes that would come as new people inevitably "moved into our village." They also proved prescient so shortly before the *O Brother, Where Art Thou* boom for bluegrass and old-time music. Hartford participated in that phenomenon with a fiddling appearance in the 2000 movie and its *Down From the Mountain* follow-up, some of his last performances.

During early 2001, John started losing use of his hands. By April he had developed a bad case of pneumonia. When Hartford realized that his long battle was lost, he came home to spend his final days. For around six weeks musicians dropped by daily to play music for John. According to Jim Rooney, each day seemed like John and Marie's Christmas open house with lots of food, music, and no plan. One nice day he wanted to be outside, so he and Pete Wernick carried him on the porch. Tim O'Brien and Maura O'Connell arrived and music making ensued, described by Rooney.

> John was pretty weak and often his head was on his chest, but his hand tapped time and at the end of each tune he lifted his head and gave us one of those beautiful John Hartford smiles! If ever we needed it, this was proof of the wonderful sustaining stream of music…. It is up to us to flow with it as long as we can.65

Several efforts endeavor to keep Hartford's life and music alive, including live albums and reissues such as a 2014 release by Australia's Raven Records of a five-CD set of his RCA recordings, 2011 performances and the *Memories of John* album by the John Hartford String Band, a yet to be released 2012 documentary film, *AereoTwang*, and a namesake festival. The website, Fiddle Hangout, reported in September 2015 that collaborator was nearing completion of Hartford's unfinished book, *West Virginia fiddler, The Search For Ed Haley*, for 2016 publication[66]. His lifetime of collecting and constant writing of song ideas, loose verses, and pretty much anything else produced collections in three archival depositories. The McConnell Library's Appalachian Music Collection at Radford University in Virginia,[67] the University of Missouri – St. Louis' Pott Library,[68] and, most recently in late 2015, his family donated his personal collection of 2500 books to Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music, where IBMA had held its first public event in October 1985.[69]

In part, this chapter draws from my feature about John Hartford that appeared in the June 1985 issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited*, my review of *Live At College Station Pennsylvania* for the *Old Time Herald*, and my reviews of *Memories of John* and *A Tribute to John Hartford: Live From Mountain Stage* both for *Bluegrass Unlimited*.

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