

# SAM BUSH

RADIO JOHN:  
SONGS OF  
JOHN  
HARTFORD



SFW 40254

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS



**1. California Earthquake** (3:24)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Melody, BMI)

**2. Down** (3:29)

(John Hartford/John Hartford Enterprises, BMI-Walnut Creek Publishing, Inc., BMI)

**3. In Tall Buildings** (3:29)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Melody, BMI)

**4. A Simple Thing as Love** (3:19)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Harmony, BMI)

**5. John McLaughlin** (1:50)

(John Hartford/John Hartford Enterprises, BMI-Walnut Creek Publishing, Inc., BMI)

**6. Morning Bugle** (2:50)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Harmony, BMI)

**7. No End of Love** (3:25)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Harmony, BMI)

**8. Granny Wontcha Smoke Some Marijuana** (2:58)

(John Hartford/John Hartford Enterprises, BMI-Walnut Creek Publishing, Inc., BMI)

**9. I'm Still Here** (3:19)

(John Hartford/Sony/ATV Melody, BMI)

**10. Radio John** (5:02)

(Sam Bush-John Harold Pennell/Samanda Lynn Music, BMI-Solargrass Music, BMI)

***Dedicated to Lynn—No End of Love***

New Grass Revival and John Hartford in Johnson City, Tennessee, spring 1981. Photo by Howard Agriesti.









## INTRODUCTION

### JON WEISBERGER

JOHN HARTFORD'S career runs like a multicolored thread through the fabric of the last 60-plus years of American string band music. Sometimes, a particularly vivid bit stands out boldly from its surroundings, but usually it's a more subdued shade that takes a bit of effort to notice. Once you do, though, you begin to see it in a dizzying variety of settings, each a different yet related patch of a musical garment that might be likened to, well, a coat of many colors—not so much the Biblical one as that of Dolly Parton, on whose television show John once appeared.

Two of the most eye-catching bits serve as convenient bookends to that career. Though he'd spent more than a decade as a working musician in the under-appreciated, under-recorded backwaters of the Mississippi River

John Hartford at his home on the Cumberland River in Nashville, April 1983. This documents John performing as inspired by Uncle Dave Macon, wearing a fedora and occasionally twirling the banjo. Photo by Carl Fleischhauer.

bluegrass scene, that initial marker is, of course, “Gentle on My Mind.” “[H]e said, ‘I wanted to drink Julie Christie’s bathwater,’” recalled mandolinist Ronnie McCoury to Andrew Dansby, who wrote Hartford’s obituary for *Rolling Stone* in 2001. “He sat down at a picnic table and wrote the song in 20 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.” Released in 1967, it was quickly covered by Glen Campbell, and between the two versions, it picked up four GRAMMY awards, and became one of the most popular songs of the century—and beyond, as new generations of singers continue to be drawn to its forgiving melody, poetically long lines, irresistible descending bass line, and glowing vision of the rambling life.

The second bit, at the other end of Hartford’s career—and, sadly, his life—is the early 21st-century eruption of roots music into the mass consciousness, exemplified by *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Although John performed only two numbers for the soundtrack album, he presided over the Ryman Auditorium concert (captured in the documentary concert film, *Down From The Mountain*) that featured its performers singing and fiddling “The Big Rock Candy Mountain.” Whether he was on or off stage, the entire show seemed infused with his spirit, as indeed did the loose-limbed breadth of the original soundtrack itself.



In between those two bits, John undertook an astonishing series of interests and activities, bound together by the force of a musical personality that was decidedly distinctive and yet fit comfortably into a long line of American artistic characters. Freed by the success of “Gentle On My Mind” from a need to concern himself with the quotidian preoccupations of a performer—or a songwriter—just trying to keep a roof over his head and a biscuit on the table, he meandered through the 1970s and ’80s, scattering musical and non-musical nuggets everywhere he went.

In 1971, for instance, came the startlingly creative fusion of *Aereo-Plain*, a Warner Bros. release recorded at what would soon become known as Hillbilly Central, a legendary Nashville recording studio that was ground zero for the outlaw movement in country music. Made with a cast drawn from a wide swath of bluegrass turf—fiddler Vassar Clements, guitarist Norman Blake, resonator guitarist Tut Taylor, and guitarist-turned-electric-bassist Randy Scruggs—the album included another signature song, “Steam Powered Aereo Plane,” and zigzagged its way through a sequence of songs that ran from the lurching rant of “Boogie” to almost-straightforward renditions of country gospel classic, “Turn Your Radio On” and fiddle-and-banjo favorite, “Leather Britches,” the flamboyant “With a Vamp in the Middle,” and more. The album, Sam Bush would remark later, was a foundational influence in the development of newgrass.



A few years later, John took up with brilliant but troubled early bluegrass fiddler Benny Martin, teaming with producer Michael Melford to record several albums with him, including *Tennessee Jubilee*, which featured Martin's one-time boss Lester Flatt, pedal steel guitar legend Buddy Emmons, one-time Elvis drummer D. J. Fontana, iconic country pianist Hargus "Pig" Robbins and more, and *Slumberin' On The Cumberland*, with Emmons, Robbins, guitarist Pat Burton, and Sam Bush.

In the meantime, John also turned up as the author of oblique, yet somehow pointed liner notes to one of bluegrass's most powerful and influential albums, J. D. Crowe and the New South's self-titled 1975 release, known by its catalog number as Rounder 0044.

In 1976, he recorded *Mark Twang*, the first in what would become an irregular but persistent set of records that reflected the solo performances that would be seen at bluegrass festivals and concert venues over the years, featuring banjo, fiddle, and rhythms pounded out by his feet. The album won a GRAMMY award for Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording, though it could be seen as traditional only through an act of imagination.

At nearly the same time, John joined Doug and Rodney Dillard, whom he had known since his days in the Missouri bluegrass scene of the 1950s, and another heterogenous crew to make *Glitter Grass from the Nashwood Hollyville*

*Strings*, an amped-up collection that included “Two Hits and the Joint Turned Brown.” A reunion with the two a few years later produced, among other things, a cover of Stevie Wonder’s “Boogie On Reggae Woman.”

That’s not even half of what he did in the 1970s, and though he was first diagnosed with cancer in 1980, the avalanche of activity continued—and, if anything, crossed even more boundaries. By 1990, for instance, his precisely modulated drawl had become such a rich expressive vehicle that documentary filmmaker Ken Burns drew on it for narration in his *Civil War* series. He wrote a children’s book based on a true incident, *Steamboat in a Cornfield* (1986); recorded again with Clements, this time with noted jazz bassist Dave Holland; appeared on albums by Bill Monroe, Béla Fleck, and many more in between; made a whimsical collection called *Retrograss* (1999) with inventive mandolinist David Grisman and bluegrass/folk/old-time elder Mike Seeger that transformed bluegrass, folk, rock, and pop numbers into a correspondingly broad range of old-time music styles; assembled a string band that included Ronnie McCoury and his uncle Jerry, mandolinist Mike Compton, and others, recording and popularizing numbers such as “Squirrel Hunters”; and engaged in a years-long study of the work of Kentucky-West Virginia fiddler Ed Haley that included curating compilations of Haley’s recordings and a book that was unfinished when he died. And all along, his love for steamboats and steamboating, which led him to



obtain a riverboat captain's license and to pilot the *Julia Belle Swain* whenever inclined, kept him intimately connected to the rhythms of river life, stretching back to before he was born and forward into the present.

"He has always insisted on being himself, which has meant being many things," the writer Tom Piazza said in his liner notes to one of Hartford's last recordings, *Good Old Boys* (1999), and even the truncated version of his story in the preceding few paragraphs is enough to underline the point. It is also true that all those many things were, in one way and to one degree or another, essentially American. In his individuality, in his amalgamations and juxtapositions of a multitude of vernacular musical strands, in his invocation of legions of predecessors known and unknown, Hartford bid, consciously or not, to take his place in a pantheon of American cultural figures that ranges from Walt Whitman and Mark Twain to Charles Ives to legions of so-called American Primitives. And this perhaps explains why he was and continues to be beloved by such a wide range of Americans: in his stubborn blend of simplicity and complexity, in his embrace of everyone from the backwoods fiddler to the urban hippie, he exemplified and expressed qualities that connect us to the best of our past, our present—and, one hopes, our future.



(opposite) L-R: Sam Bush,  
Tom Britt, John Hartford  
backstage at Telluride, ca. 1980.  
Photo by Lynn Bush.





IF JOHN HARTFORD IS NO LONGER with us, Sam Bush is very much a man of the moment—still on the road, still in the studio, still creating. Like Hartford, he connects past, present, and future in ways that illuminate them all, creating a musical environment with so much breadth that it might even exceed, but certainly matches, Hartford's oeuvre. Like Hartford, he's liable to turn up almost anywhere—in Bill Monroe mandolinist's chair for recordings by two of Monroe's best-loved fiddlers; or playing and singing with Emmylou Harris, as he did in her Nash Ramblers in the early 1990s; or playing mandolin on Alison Krauss's first record and fiddle on iconic Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver's third; or hosting the International Bluegrass Music Association's glittering annual awards show; or writing and recording with legendary singer/songwriter Guy Clark; or earning the title "King of Telluride" for the persistence and diversity of his appearances at Colorado's marquee (and dizzyingly diverse) Telluride Bluegrass Festival every year for decades; or recording in the '90s with country superstars Garth Brooks and Shania Twain; or picking up a Lifetime Achievement for Instrumentalist award from the Americana Music Association in 2009—or, circling back to Hartford, recording with him on several albums, mostly during the back part of the 1970s.

Unlike Hartford, though, Bush has spent big chunks of his career as a band member or band leader, and usually performing or recording with others, as

distinct from the solo work that played such a prominent role in Hartford's. Members of some generations know Bush from his role as the through-line, beginning-to-end member of the trailblazing New Grass Revival; for others, his role in epochal, cutting-edge recordings by NGR bandmate Béla Fleck, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas and Strength in Numbers; for still others, especially in this century, his leadership of the Sam Bush Band, who appear on this project's title track. No matter how his wide-ranging audience has discovered his music, elevating him—improbably, almost impossibly, it seems—from long-haired bluegrass rebel to long-haired bluegrass elder along the way, his visible joy in making music with colleagues has been central to his appeal.

So the first of several surprises about this project is that it is, literally, almost all Sam. Outside of the title track, he plays all the instruments—a serendipitous product of the process he describes in his notes, but one that turns out to be just right, blending as it does Bush's band orientation with the self-reliance that underpinned so much of Hartford's work. And there's a surprise within a surprise, too, for the fact of Sam's casually demonstrated proficiency on the five-string banjo will surely be news to almost every listener.

Less obvious, but at least as important, is Bush's preference, not for the old-time string band music of Hartford's later years, nor even for what he has called a harbinger of and influence on "newgrass"—i.e., *Aereo-Plain*—but



instead for material from the years before and after that, from Hartford's early RCA albums, and again from the projects on which he appeared, notably *Nobody Knows What You Do* (1975). So Bush's focus is not on Hartford the curator and impresario of Ozarks or Kentucky fiddle tunes, but rather on Hartford the singer-songwriter, who came to Nashville as a colleague of writers like Kris Kristoffersen and Tom T. Hall, who shook up Music Row with distinctive songs that channeled—sometimes overtly, sometimes less so—the growing tides of the counterculture into its publishing houses and studios.

“Gentle on My Mind” was, of course, the most visible of Hartford's efforts in those years, but Bush has revived some less familiar ones. Examples include the wistful anthem, “In Tall Buildings”; the dry, witty twist on the blues, “I’m Still Here,” which Bush reframes as a guitar-mandolin “brother duet” with a single voice; and the earnestly folky yet irresistible “A Simple Thing as Love,” similarly transformed, this time into laid-back ‘grass, complete with a new signature lick. The same goes with the two instrumentals, both drawn from *Nobody*—which, given Bush's appearance on the originals, invite comparison between then and now in ways that enrich our understanding, not only in the hospitality to new arrangements of the tunes themselves, but also in the ways in which Sam's playing has both changed and remained the same.



*RADIO JOHN* IS, then, both a powerful, sophisticated tribute to a giant of American roots music and culture, and an intimate salute to a lifelong colleague and friend—a true labor of love, made by another artist who has grown to iconic stature through a quiet but unyielding insistence on being himself, and on embracing more than one way of doing it. The world could use a fresh reminder of how much it needs John Hartford and his music, and of how much it needs Sam Bush and his music, too. Here it is.

*J.W. Brevard, N.C., June 2022*

Sam Bush and John Hartford jamming during Charlie Bush's 80th birthday celebration at the American Legion in Bowling Green, Kentucky, 1999. Photo by Lynn Bush.







## SONGS OF HARTFORD

### BY SAM BUSH

GROWING UP ON A FARM outside Bowling Green, Kentucky, we received Nashville television reception—some days better than others. I first saw John Hartford on *The Wilburn Brothers Show* on a Saturday afternoon in 1967. Really unique that he could play the three-finger Scruggs style banjo while singing. Not long after, on a trip to Nashville 55 miles away, I found the Hartford album *Earthwords & Music* (1967) at the Ernest Tubb Record Shop. I was hooked upon listening to that record so I bought more of his early RCA LPs. In 1969, there he is on CBS with *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*. John was also a touring musician now and I got to see him perform at the basketball arena at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. I was in the high school marching band my senior year. We did our rainy football halftime performance and I hightailed it to E.A. Diddle Arena in my muddy band uniform in time for his show.

A new style of John Hartford came with the LP *Aereo-Plain* release in 1971—his distinctive songs and picking with his talented band—Norman Blake, Vassar Clements, and Tut Taylor. I first met John at Bill Monroe's Bean Blossom

Festival in 1971. The Aereo-Plain band LOVED to jam offstage and I was fortunate to participate in many a jam with all the band members countless times. When Tut left Aereo-Plain in 1972 and became John's manager for a short time, John asked me to replace Tut in the band. I loved their music but New Grass Revival was just beginning and that's where I wanted to be. John and I became fast friends and New Grass Revival played numerous shows touring with and opening for John Hartford solo, jamming together at the end of his set, and sometimes just playing the entire show with him.

The poem about New Grass Revival on the back cover of our first album was written by our friend Radio John (Hartford) of KSTL Radio in St. Louis. (Radio John was his DJ handle in the 1960s.)

### **The Arrival of the New Grass Revival**

Curtis Courtney, Ebo and Sam  
The New Grass Revival Bluegrass Band  
They've already gotten nationwide approval  
Which is pretty dam good when you live in Louval  
Tho' other more traditional folks have ask for removal  
Of excess locks of hair

But the New Grass Revival they don't care, cause their heads and  
hands are not there  
They are off picklin' fast  
And you bet your ass  
They play that grass  
And do a lot of things to it also not recommended by the Chief  
But then  
This ain't the first Bluegrass Band  
That's been on relief  
You could help relieve this problem  
Und buy dis oblem

—Radio John, Topanga Canyon, October 1972

John and I had a long and close friendship through the years and continued to hang out and jam. I was included on a few of John's Flying Fish albums in the 1970s and I've had the pleasure of standing next to John Hartford piloting the *Julia Belle Swain* steamboat on the Illinois River.

My love for John and his music led to recording these songs. Lynn and I love to go to the panhandle of Florida when we have time. I take a variety of



instruments and recording devices to work on ideas. A few years ago, I was thinking of my favorite Hartford songs and began making demos, playing all the instruments, with the intention of sharing them with my band to record them someday. In true Sam style, lack of engineering skills and patience, I was having a rough time overdubbing by myself.

One night after jamming along County Highway 30A with my local musician friend Donnie Sundal, I mentioned my lack of “home recording skills.” Donnie, who co-owns Neptune Recording Studio in Destin, Florida, offered to help. Donnie showed up at our beach carriage house the next day with complete Pro Tools, digital recording equipment, mics, preamps, large speakers, and the works! In no time, we were laying down tracks (and he engineered). Only then did I realize this could be a true solo endeavor of my love affair with John Hartford’s music.

Cut to the pandemic shutdown of 2020 and this touring musician’s livelihood is completely taken away. Now there was time for me to bring these digital solo recordings to life and I turned to Rick Wheeler, my sound engineer, and his home studio, to finish this labor of love.

All that we lacked was a big finish, so I called friend and cowriter John Pennell. After many conversations regarding all of Hartford’s considerable talents, we came up with “Radio John” as the final track. I gathered my touring band to

record this song to honor my friend and complete my love letter to John Hartford's music that I hold so dear. I've enjoyed revisiting these amazing songs and hope you find the joy in them.



(L-R) Butch Robins, John Hartford, Buck White (hidden), Sam Bush, David Grisman, and Peter Rowan during a live performance at the "Peace, Love and Bluegrass Festival" in Warrenton, VA. 1973. Photo by Phil Zimmerman. Courtesy of County Music Hall of Fame and Museum.



## TRACK NOTES

### 1. California Earthquake

Sam Bush, vocal, acoustic guitar, mandolin, electric bass, banjo

An early John song written in the 1960s when he lived in California. Even then, waiting for the big one and “They tell me the fault line runs right thru here.”

### 2. Down

Sam Bush, fiddle, mandolin, acoustic guitar, electric bass, banjo

One of the instrumentals I was fortunate to record with John for the *Nobody Knows What You Do* album.

### 3. In Tall Buildings

Sam Bush, vocal, mandolin, acoustic guitar, electric bass; Donnie Sundal, harmony vocal

One of John’s early songs, later rerecorded, which I got to play on. This song especially speaks to me—as a boy growing up on the farm. Thanks to Donnie Sundal for the beautiful high harmony vocal.



#### **4. A Simple Thing as Love**

Sam Bush, vocal, mandolin, acoustic guitar, banjo, electric bass

A song that to me established John as one of the most important songwriters of the 1960s.

#### **5. John McLaughlin**

Sam Bush, banjo, acoustic guitar, mandolin, electric bass

Another instrumental from *Nobody Knows What You Do*. John and I spent a lot of time in the 1970s listening to the Mahavishnu Orchestra, especially “Birds of Fire.” This tune was inspired by John McLaughlin’s music from that period.

#### **6. Morning Bugle**

Sam Bush, vocal, mandolin, acoustic guitar, electric bass

I started loving this song while listening to it on a Thanksgiving weekend, in a motel in Savannah Beach, lonesome for home and family. The song brought me comfort then, as it does now.

#### **7. No End of Love**

Sam Bush, vocal, acoustic guitar, mandolin, banjo, electric bass

From the 1960s period when John’s love songs were so “to the point” and well said.

## **8. Granny Wontcha Smoke Some Marijuana**

Sam Bush, vocal, acoustic guitar, electric bass, fiddle, banjo, mandolin

Another song I played and sang on in the 1970s with John. A fond memory of the day is some of the “older” musicians on the session kept looking up, as if expecting lightning was about to strike. Who knew some of these lyrics would be predicting the future!

## **9. I’m Still Here**

Sam Bush, vocal, mandolin, acoustic guitar

One of John’s early classics played with just mandolin and guitar. I always loved this song and after the last few years, it takes on a new meaning for all of us.

## **10. Radio John**

Sam Bush, lead and harmony vocals, mandolin, fiddle; Chris Brown, drums; Wes Corbett, banjo; Todd Park, electric bass; Stephen Mougin, guitar, harmony vocal

A true love letter to John’s life and music by John Pennell and me. It was a joy to write and record with the Sam Bush Band, doing what I love the most, jamming with the band. Thanks to Béla Fleck for the loan of John’s D banjo for Wes Corbett to play on his first recording with the band.





## CREDITS

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Executive producer: Lynn Bush

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Nashville, Tennessee; and by Stephen Mouglin at Dark  
Shadow Studio, Goodlettsville, Tennessee

Mixed by Rick Wheeler at the Wheel House, Leipers  
Fork, Tennessee

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Annotated by Sam Bush

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A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a dark vest, steering a large wooden ship's wheel. The scene is set on a ship, with a wooden railing and a view of the sea and distant land visible through the window behind him. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The man is looking out towards the horizon.

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