



**CENTER FOR POPULAR MUSIC  
MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY, MURFREESBORO, TN**

**JOHN HARTFORD AUDIO COLLECTION**

**16-011**

**Creator:**

Hartford, John C. (1937–2001)

**Type of Material:**

Manuscript Sound Recordings

**Physical Description:**

5,494 manuscript audio tapes, including cassette tapes and DAT tapes

**Dates:**

circa 1952-2001, bulk 1970-1995

**Abstract (Descriptive Summary):**

The John Hartford Audio collection is comprised of over 5,000 audio cassette tapes created and collected by the musician over the course of his long and prolific career. Hartford regularly documented all aspects of his musical interests and professional career. These tapes include Hartford's personal collection of performances, jam sessions, interviews, recording sessions, songwriting efforts, and personal practice sessions that were created and kept for his own preservation, critique, and review. The collection also includes recordings of steamboat whistles, dubs of commercially available records, as well as copies of historic recordings of early bluegrass jams and radio performances given to Hartford by other musicians.

Noteworthy musicians and events that appear in the collection include rehearsal sessions for the Aereo-Plain album (Vassar Clements, Tut Taylor, Norman Blake), bluegrass pioneers such as Benny Martin, Earl Scruggs, and Bill Monroe, and many important old time and contest fiddlers including Gene Goforth, Texas Shorty, Benny Sims, Jim Wood, Mark O'Connor, Frazier Moss, Buddy Spicher, and Ramona Jones. The collection also has examples of Hartford's work with pop, country, and rock musicians, such as Delaney & Bonnie, Hoyt Axton, and Shel Silverstein.

A subset of this collection – consisting of 952 digitized audio files - has been processed and described with funding from a Grammy Museum grant, while the remainder awaits

review.

**RESTRICTIONS:**

A portion of this collection is open for research access; only the processed and digitized tapes are open for research access (those that were done as part of the Grammy Museum Grant Program). Some files in the collection may require additional permissions for access.

The Center for Popular Music and Middle Tennessee State University do not claim to hold any rights to the intellectual content of the materials in this collection. All collection materials are subject to standard national and international copyright laws. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this collection that may go beyond "fair use" of such copyrighted material as provided in Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. Center staff are able to assist with copyright questions for this material.

**Provenance and Acquisition Information:**

This collection was donated to the Center by the John Hartford Office (Katie (Hartford) Hogue and Eric Hogue) on August 22, 2016.

**Subject/Index Terms:**

Axton, Hoyt  
Berline, Byron  
Blake, Nancy  
Blake, Norman  
Bluegrass festivals  
Bluegrass music  
Bluegrass musicians  
Bramlett, Bonnie  
Bramlett, Delaney  
Bush, Sam  
Carlin, Bob  
Chancellor, Jim "Texas Shorty"  
Clement, Jack  
Clements, Vassar  
Compton, Mike  
Contest fiddling  
Dillard, Doug  
Flatt, Lester  
Forrester, Howdy  
Goforth, Gene  
Grand Ole Opry  
Grier, David

Hartford, Jamie  
Hartford, John  
Howard, Mark  
Huskey, Roy Jr. 1956-1997  
Jones, Ramona  
Keith, Bill  
Martin, Benny  
McCoury, Del  
McCoury, Ronnie  
Molsky, Bruce  
Monroe, Bill, 1911-1996  
Moss, Frazier  
O'Connor, Mark  
Old time fiddling  
Old Time Music  
Perkins, Larry  
Rice, Tony  
Scruggs, Earl  
Sharp, Chris  
Silverstein, Shel  
Songwriters  
Spicher, Buddy  
Steamboats  
Taylor, "Tut"  
Thomasson, Benny  
Thompson, Bobby  
Travis, Merle  
Wood, Jim

**Agency History/Biographical Sketch:**

John Cowan Hartford (1937-2001) was a highly influential singer, songwriter, instrumentalist, TV star, performing musician, and "amateur librarian" who was well known for his recordings and performances that freely mixed both traditional and progressive elements. He was born in New York City, but grew up in St. Louis. During his youth, he became deeply interested in the Mississippi River and its rich maritime history and culture of steamboats. He also discovered bluegrass and old time fiddle music in his area. As an avid radio fan, he often tuned in to the Grand Ole Opry to hear his favorite group, Flatt and Scruggs, which regularly featured their innovative fiddler, Benny Martin. Hartford heard Flatt and Scruggs (with Martin) at a local venue and that life altering event got him started on his path towards playing music. Also during this time he was introduced to the rich old time fiddling tradition in his region through well-known local fiddlers such as Gene Goforth and Roy Wooliver.

As a young man, Hartford studied art at Washington University in St. Louis and played banjo and fiddle with regional bluegrass groups such as the Ozark Mountain Trio and the Bray Brothers. He also worked as a successful radio disc jockey throughout the region that was in demand due to his ability to adjust his radio persona to fit any format. In 1966, Hartford signed a record deal with RCA and released two LPs the following year. One of those recordings, *Earthwords and Music*, included the song, "Gentle On My Mind." Glenn Campbell's chart-topping cover of that song brought Hartford fame and provided the financial security for him to spend the rest of his life focused on the creative efforts that were most important to him.

After a period of time in the late 1960s in Los Angeles, working in television as an actor and writer for the "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," Hartford returned to Nashville and immersed himself in the bluegrass and old time fiddle music he had loved since his youth. In 1971, Hartford recruited Norman Blake, Vassar Clements, and Tut Taylor to work on a musical project built around Hartford's original songs and tunes. Their efforts resulted in the release of the *Aereo-Plain* LP in September of that year. Initial reception and sales of the record were not particularly impressive, but over time, *Aereo-Plain* has become one of the most influential recordings ever released in the American acoustic music scene.

For years after the release of *Aereo-Plain*, Hartford maintained his robust touring schedule and continued his tireless work writing songs, practicing his banjo and fiddle, learning to read and write standard notation, documenting pioneering bluegrass and old time musicians, and working on steamboats. He also spent a considerable amount of effort studying the life and music of the fiddler, Ed Haley. His Haley-related work resulted in the release of two double CD sets of Haley's home recordings, in addition to Hartford himself recording a CD of Haley's tunes with his string band. Along with his research partner, Brandon Kirk, Hartford wrote a lengthy, unpublished biography of the fiddler.

John Hartford died on June 6, 2001.

**Scope and Content:**

Hartford created this collection to document virtually every aspect of his rich musical life. Hartford, as many musicians noted, "always had his tape recorder running." He recorded rehearsals, informal jam sessions, metronome practice, concert performances, field recordings and oral histories of fiddlers, parties, "Journal Tapes" with song ideas and more. The tapes include examples of old time fiddling, bluegrass, Hartford's original songs, Newgrass creation and exploration, and even recordings of him playing folk and roots rock music with artists such as Delaney and Bonnie and Shel Silverstein.

The processed portion of the collection is comprised of 952 digital audio transfers and

the corresponding photographic scans of the original source tapes, cases, and J-cards. These recordings date mainly from 1971 to 2000 with some examples of radio performances by Flatt and Scruggs and others that date to the early 1950s. The recordings, most of which were made in very comfortable, familiar settings for the musicians, offer unique insights into the personalities and playing of important figures in bluegrass, newgrass, and old time music such as Earl Scruggs, Benny Martin, Bill Monroe, Vassar Clements, Tut Taylor, and Norman Blake. The jam sessions Hartford taped consist of his usual collaborators, as well as unique combinations of master musicians that never recorded or performed together. During these jams, the musicians often discuss their inspirations, playing styles, and past histories in an intimate setting that would usually be very difficult for someone outside their immediate social circle to access. Taken as a whole, this collection illustrates John Hartford's unique role as a visionary, a hit making pop songwriter, hippie iconoclast, hard-core traditionalist, master singer and instrumentalist, and ringmaster of a brilliant and fun music scene based out of his riverside home in Madison, Tennessee.

**Collection Contents:**

Please see attached list for descriptive contents information regarding the 952 digitized audio files from this collection.

**Arrangement:**

At the time of physical transfer of the tapes to the Center, tapes were housed in boxes, given a box number, and briefly inventoried on an Excel spreadsheet. In the absence of a true original order by the creator, a basic arrangement has been imposed on the collection.

Digitized tapes are physically arranged loosely by year. Tapes that have not been digitized are still housed as they came to the Center, in their initial arrangement in provided tape boxes.

**Location:**

Manuscript audio visual materials are located in the archival stacks area, organized by accession number. Digital files are housed on the Center's internal server.

**Materials Cataloged Separately:**

Per Center policy, certain formats are cataloged separately for accessibility. Separated materials collected by John Hartford and related to this collection include commercial sound recordings, commercial sheet music, and commercial video recordings (all unprocessed). Please see Center Archivist for more information on these materials.

**Related Materials:**

The Center has a number of collections and individual items that are related to John Hartford's original music and his wide-ranging interests in traditional music. The Charles

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K. Wolfe Audio Collection (05-023) contains duplicates of Hartford's recordings of musicians such as Benny Sims and Howdy Forrester. The Wolfe collection also contains what are likely to be original recordings made by Hartford of traditional Midwestern/Missouri fiddlers such as Gene Goforth, Cleo Persinger, Marvin Hawthorne, Ed Thorpe, and others.

A draft of Hartford's biography of Ed Haley and a binder of transcriptions of Ed Haley fiddle tunes can be found in the James Edward (Ed) Haley and Family Collection (94-085). Other audio collections such as the Marvin Hedrick Audio Collection (14-060) and recordings of the Bray Brothers will be of interest to Hartford researchers. Sheet music of many of Hartford's early song compositions can be found in the Professional Guide to the Songs of Glaser Publications, Inc. binder's volume (CPM Volume 164). Video recordings of Hartford and other prominent banjo players can be found in the Tennessee Banjo Institute Collection (1988) (88-026).

The Center also houses several other collections created by John Hartford, including the John Hartford Collection (16-009) (includes manuscript music fiddle notebooks and other unprocessed manuscript materials) and the John Hartford Video Collection (unprocessed).

Processed by John Fabke, 2019-2021. Finding aid written by John Fabke, June 2021. Revised by Rachel K. Morris, July 2021.