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# Radio's up next for Hartford after video

By Jon Bream  
Staff Writer

It's not clear if it's an honor or ignominy. But John Hartford may be the first performer to appear on "A Prairie Home Companion" after starring in a music video.

Music video in Lake Wobegon?

Raise the question with the banjoist-fiddler extraordinaire and he gives you a flinty stare. "Well, it's a radio show," he said grumpily and then paused. "Maybe they'll let me show it on the radio."

He chuckled.

Indeed, "A Prairie Home Companion" is a radio show that Hartford's quite fond of. All of Garrison Keillor's homespun tales, plenty of acoustic music of all kinds, live coast-to-coast audience. During Hartford's travels that include as many as 200 concerts annually, he invariably finds time to join Keillor on the show, as he will do again Saturday.

But back to the video. Not too many fiddler-banjoists — or any pickers associated with country music, for that matter — make music videos. "I've always kind of done my own thing," Hartford said while in town recently for a Guthrie concert.

Not only did Hartford star in the video but he directed it. "I did a lot of shots where I could see the monitor out of the corner of my eye. We shot and reshot and reshot and reshot and edited and edited. After we got in the swing of it, I very quickly was able to divorce myself from the fact that it was me on the camera. I just worked with lights and the darks and the compositional aspects."

Actually, Hartford, 46, was trained as a visual artist. He studied painting, drawing and sculpture at Washington University in St. Louis, but music, which he had been playing since age 9, was pulling him in a different direction. He was a country radio disc jockey ("I played too many banjo and fiddle records") and later as a session musician in Nashville.

There he attracted the attention of the Smothers Brothers, who flew him to Los Angeles to appear on their TV show. Through that program he met Glen Campbell and became the songwriter-in-residence for "The Glen Campbell Good-Time Hour." That, of course, became a springboard for Hartford's career.

Two years earlier he had written a song called "Gentle on My Mind." "I



Staff Photo by Bruce Bisping

John Hartford likes "A Prairie Home Companion" and will appear on the show Saturday.

went to a movie, 'Dr. Zhivago,' and I came home and wrote a song," he recalled. "It was just a feeling I got. I didn't even know I had a song."

Hartford has told the story hundreds of times and recounts it with the enthusiasm of the Happy Hooker detailing last week's tricks. However, he can't complain too much because "Gentle on My Mind" has been his paycheck. Not only did Campbell record it, but so did dozens of other artists. And it reportedly yields Hartford a healthy annual income, though he declines to discuss such matters.

In July, he was honored with a Million-Aires Award by Broadcast Music, Inc., commemorating 4 million plays of "Gentle on My Mind." That would translate into playing the record nonstop for 22 years.

That song and Hartford's virtuoso-musicianship coupled with an offbeat wit have opened many a door for him. He has been in demand as a studio musician and concert performer and he has recorded 17 albums of his own, including the Grammy-winning "Mark Twang" in 1976.

His latest effort, "Gum Tree Canoe," has won auspicious reviews. It's an odd, but likable, mixture featuring a tune by the Rolling Stones, a 19th-century folk song and, of course, songs about rivers (rivers are to Hartford songs what streets are to Bruce Springsteen tunes).

"I think it's the best thing I've ever done," said Hartford with his drawl that sounds like an amalgam of various Southern accents. "Jack Clement was the first producer I ever had who let me go back and work on something till it was right. Most other producers were afraid they didn't have the money. So this really has the kind of polish I've always wanted."

It was Clement (who has worked with everyone from Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis to Charley Pride and Don Williams) who suggested that Hartford cover the Stones' "No Expectations." But it was the singer who picked the old Janis Joplin favorite, "Piece of My Heart." "It was a song I heard Bonnie Bramlett do," he said, "and I always liked it."

It was the song made into the afore-

mentioned video, the first video, in fact, by an artist affiliated with Flying Fish Records, a haven for folkies, bluegrass players and other traditionalists who don't necessarily make commercial records.

Imagine a rock-blues classic interpreted by a banjoist-fiddler with a twangy baritone voice. The idea was so off-the-wall that radio stations wouldn't play it even though the video was being broadcast right alongside clips by the Jacksons, Prince and Huey Lewis and the News.

"We actually hired some professional promotion people to promote the record and they got it on a lot of stations," Hartford said.

"Then in order for it to go up the next amount in Billboard (chart), they had to get a certain number of what they call 'add' stations. These people wouldn't add it (to their playlists) 'cause it had fiddle and banjo on it. They said it didn't fit into their country format."

But it will fit on "A Prairie Home Companion" — video or no video.