



JOHN HARTFORD

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Aereo-Plain Talk

A Conversation with Producer David Bromberg

*By Phil Newman
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Note: The John Hartford Office recently spoke with David Bromberg via phone from his violin shop in Wilmington, Delaware.

David, how did you get connected with John and come to produce *Aereo-Plain*?

John asked me to produce it. We had met at a folk festival, and we spent the whole festival just playing together. People said that if they wanted to find one of us, they would look for either of us and find both of us.

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.

About halfway through, John and I had an argument. We'd finished the sessions that I had booked. He called and said, 'I can't wait to hear it.' I said, 'We're about halfway done.' He said, 'We've got enough tunes.' I said, 'Some of these sound like filler, and some are great. We want all of them to be great.' He hung up furious. He called back a half-hour later and apologized. He said, 'I asked you to produce it.' And we did.

The outtakes that came out some years back are nice, but I don't know what you would want to put on the album and what you would take off. I already knew what I wanted to use, and what I didn't want to use. We went back in and recorded a bunch more, and out of that we had enough to make *Aereo-Plain*.

Do you recall any stories surrounding the songs selected for the album?

I remember that John and I had a disagreement. He didn't want (Hey Baby Want To) 'Boogie' on there, and I put it on. It ended up being the most played tune. It's kind of silly—just John a cappella. And it's the thing radio played most. At one point John told me he thought it was his best album, and he certainly considered it his best, along with *Morning Bugle*.

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As the producer, what unique attributes did you bring to the record that helped to make it what it became?

Someone once told me that John had told them he asked me to produce it because he wanted a New York City viewpoint. I think that is correct. In New York, we'd sit around and smoke pot and play 'Sally Goodin' for an hour and a half. That approach kind of became, after a while, newgrass. John wanted some of the wild playing that we did in New York. After about 30 choruses of 'Sally Goodin', it begins to get strange. And that's what he liked. I think if he had gotten a Nashville producer, he

wouldn't have gotten that. I think I was chosen because I understood that direction.



Looking back over four decades, how would you assess the influence of the album on bluegrass, newgrass and other forms of music?

I'm not the guy to talk to about the influence of *Aereo-Plain*. I feel a little uncomfortable claiming great things for my own work. The person who knows about that is Sam Bush, because I think Sam feels [*Aereo-Plain*] was the genesis of the idea of newgrass. But I don't want to put words in his mouth.

In addition to 'Boogie', were there any other songs that you felt strongly should be on *Aereo-Plain*?

I told John I thought he should do a fiddle-and-banjo version of 'Leather Britches.' That was my idea. 'Turn Your Radio On' was also my idea, and I really love the way they did that. The other songs were John's ideas, just what he wanted to do.

Would you consider the album timeless in its appeal?

Do I think it's timeless? I never realized the effect it had until a couple years ago, mostly from talking to people like Sam and others, who said they enjoyed the album without, in some cases, knowing I produced it.

Why do you think it has had such a far-reaching impact?

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 straight 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. Around that time there were the hard-core devotees in the South and in the North, but that's all the music went to it. It wasn't played on the radio, it wasn't a mass movement.

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Today, of course, bluegrass is more mainstream thanks to the efforts of artists such as Alison Krauss.

Yes, Alison Krauss did something different altogether: She brought back bluegrass. She gets credit for making it a commercial entity once again, and I don't mean that in any way as a slam. What Alison does is not newgrass, to me, it's bluegrass. But I don't know if there would have been Alison Krauss without John Hartford. I'm certain there is a line there, but I'm not sure it's that direct. I think that John might've been responsible for bringing some of the people with Alison and perhaps herself to a better appreciation of bluegrass. But the newgrass movement...I guess is still going on, but is not in the mainstream.

You've had quite a journey over the past 40 years since *Aereo-Plain*, haven't you? What are some of the markers along the way?

I've been a producer and a musician. I've worked on somewhere in the neighborhood of 150 LPs. I was a touring musician until about 1980, when I became burned out. I was on the road for two years without being home for as much as two weeks at a time. I wasn't practicing, wasn't writing, wasn't jamming. I felt like I was no longer a musician. I didn't want to be one of these guys who would drag his ass on stage and play with it bitterly.

I've studied violin for 22 years. I moved here to Wilmington, Delaware, and started some jam sessions. Some great musicians started showing up. I'm performing now, on the circuit, on my own. I'm still a guitar player, mostly.

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David Bromberg's most recent album, Use Me (Appleseed, 2011) is available at:
http://www.amazon.com/Use-Me/dp/B0058XAGF8/ref=sr_shvl_album_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323750443&sr=301-1.

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