

Behind the Image: Jim McGuire's Hall of Fame Photo

By [Phil Newman](#)

One night in 1972, long after the Aereo-Plain band's show in Greenwich Village had ended, in the wee hours approaching 2 a.m., John Hartford slipped on to a stool in front of a canvas backdrop in a Manhattan studio. His host, budding photographer [Jim McGuire](#), made a simple request: *Just play a little something on your banjo. Whatever you like. Don't mind me.*

And so John played, and McGuire quietly shot photos—about two rolls of 35mm film—and one of those frames became an image that would capture not only the essence of a musician but also of a genre, and an era, in American music.

Some 42 years later, McGuire's photo remains emblematic; it was chosen for display upon John's induction into the [International Bluegrass Hall of Fame](#) in 2010.

As for the photographer, he went on to shoot iconic images of [numerous musical luminaries](#)—from Bill Monroe and Dolly Parton to an aging Johnny Cash (with Billy Graham) and a fresh-faced Vince Gill—that became the Nashville Portrait series in 2007; it's available [online](#) and in a [beautiful book](#).



A Favor and A Fan

McGuire still fondly remembers that special session with John and his band.

"It was right before I moved from New York to Nashville, and I was just kind of a kid starting out," McGuire says. "The Aereo-Plain band—John, Tut Taylor, Vassar Clements and Norman Blake—had a show in the Village that night. I knew the record producer, David Bromberg, pretty well and talked him into bringing the guys by my studio after their gig."

In the 1 a.m. range, the band sauntered into McGuire's loft on 3rd Avenue between 22nd and 23rd streets in Manhattan's Gramercy Park neighborhood.

As a devoted bluegrass fan, McGuire was unabashedly star-struck at the sight. "They were all heroes of mine," he says. "I used to go to the bluegrass festivals in the D.C. area."

(continued)

John and his cohorts were exhausted but graciously agreed to McGuire's requests to capture them on film. "Everybody was really tired and just doing this as a favor to Bromberg. They didn't know me at all."

As the shoot unfolded, John got his second wind. "John was the liveliest of the bunch," McGuire recalls. "I've got pictures of Tut sleeping in a chair. He fell asleep when I was shooting Vassar and John."

Natural Magic

McGuire approached the session as he did every shoot: with a commitment to help his subjects relax so the lens could freeze them at their most natural.

"I didn't really give them much direction," McGuire recalls. "All I wanted them to do was to sit there and play. I like for people to feel comfortable enough to be themselves. Once you put an instrument in a musician's hands, they're in their element. That's where the magic sort of happens. I don't like to tell people much about how to look or what to wear or how to stand."

"That's all John was doing," McGuire adds. "That whole body language and sitting and holding the banjo, that was just his natural position for playing."

McGuire knew almost immediately that he had snapped an enduring image. Watching it come to life in the darkroom later confirmed as much.

"That one that was the major photograph from the night, just because of the composition of it. John fell into that body position, the banjo, the way he was looking. He's within himself. That one really popped out."

The photo became widely seen and lauded over the years—and it was the first of what would become the Nashville Portrait series for McGuire. "That old canvas behind him, I still have it, still use it. That photo was the first one I looked at and realized this might be worth doing, shooting musicians on this piece on canvas."

Later, John remembered the photo session and expressed his appreciation for the photographer's artistry. "The first [exhibit] show that I had was in 1982 at Cheekwood in Nashville, and that picture was part of it," McGuire says. "John came to that show with his banjo. He really loved that picture. He told me many times."

McGuire has remained a fan, too. "I still have all of my John Hartford music, most of it on LPs. He's still one of my favorites."

(continued)

Mr. Monroe and the Mandolin

Of the many other stunning portraits McGuire has taken of music legends, an image of Bill Monroe in 1989—tenderly holding his mandolin to his chest—carries deep meaning for the man behind the camera.

“There are so many favorites, but I was a bluegrass fan from day one, and Bill



Monroe was another one of my heroes. His publicist brought him by. When it was over, he asked me, ‘Will you take one more, just for me?’ That was an idea he had, cradling the mandolin after the photo session, like he’s holding a child. And that ended up being the best picture from the day.”

Later, McGuire learned that Monroe had just received the mandolin back from Gibson after it had been smashed in an accident and then painstakingly repaired. “He loved it and was so glad to have it back,” McGuire reflects.

Today, that cherished mandolin is on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in downtown Nashville.

To order the specially licensed Hall of Fame T-shirt bearing Jim McGuire’s portrait of John, visit the [Music & Gear Store](#).