



## Aiding the American Farmer

**Farm Aid, the annual concert founded and organized by the recording industry's top names, helps America's struggling farm families stay on the land.**

A native son of the Midwest, John Mellencamp was a young man in his early 30s in the summer of 1985, and his album, *Scarecrow*, was burning up the charts. Its title song, "Rain on the Scarecrow," was a searing commentary on what he saw happening to farms around his home in Bloomington, Indiana.

This land fed a nation, this land made me proud  
And son I'm just sorry, there's no legacy for you now  
Rain on the scarecrow, blood on the plow  
Rain on the scarecrow, blood on the plow

As John says, "It isn't like you had to go looking for a cow, or looking for a cornstalk, they were everywhere. They were right outside the door." Growing up and as a young man, he knew the people who owned those cows and those cornstalks. They were small, family farmers—people who had grown up on the land, and loved it.

Scarecrow on a wooden cross, blackbird in the barn  
Four hundred empty acres, that used to be my farm  
I grew up like my daddy did, my grandpa cleared this land  
When I was five I walked the fence, while Grandpa held my hand

Farmers prospered in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a federal farm policy that bolstered foreign exports of agricultural goods, and tax laws that encouraged outside investment in American agriculture. Because markets and income were so good, farmers were encouraged to borrow more and more money. They took on heavy debts, buying additional farmland, even though the land prices were seriously inflated.

Farmers owed nearly \$50 billion to banks in 1970, but by 1985 their debt had exploded to \$215 billion, with an overwhelming \$20 billion a year in interest, yet the value of land and other farm assets declined nearly 50 percent from their peak in the late '70s. Farmers couldn't pay back the loans, and a tsunami of farm foreclosures swept the country.

The crops we grew last summer, weren't enough to pay the loan  
Couldn't buy the seed to plant this spring, the Farmers Bank foreclosed  
Called my old friend Schepman, to auction off the land  
He said John it's just my job, and I hope you understand

But there were some people who wouldn't accept the changes that were ravaging rural America. They would intercede on behalf of the farmers.

### MUSIC FOR CHANGE

On July 13, 1985, rock musicians and bands, from both sides of the Atlantic, got together for the Live Aid charity concert, to raise money for African famine relief. During the show, Bob Dylan said something about it being too bad that some of the money being raised couldn't be used to support American farmers.

Willie Nelson heard Dylan's comment, and was spurred to action. "He was going to try to put this concert together; I think I was like the first guy he called," John Mellencamp says.

Just six weeks later, on September 22, 1985, before a crowd of over 80,000 people in Champaign, Ill., the first Farm Aid concert happened. Willie, John, and their friend, Neil Young, had recruited a veritable who's who of musicians. Over 60 acts performed, raising over \$7 million for America's family farmers. As John explains, "Every rock band, and every country band, and every folk band in America was there. The first guy on the act was Jon Bon Jovi; he started the show and it just went on and on and on from there."

The who's who element has continued. In 16 concerts, Willie, John and Neil have drawn 329 artists into the fold. From Alabama and the Allman Brothers Band to Joe Walsh and Dwight Yoakam, some of music's biggest names have come to perform, and have donated not only their time, but also all their expenses associated with playing at Farm Aid, making the concert a true benefit. Some artists have played Farm Aid only once or twice; others, like Dave Matthews, or Hootie and



the Blowfish, play whenever their schedules allow.

Jim “Soni” Sonefeld, drummer for Hootie and the Blowfish, remembers well the band’s first performance at Farm Aid 1995. “I can guarantee you we were very nervous getting up in front of all those people at the first Farm Aid concert we did, and realizing that Willie Nelson invited us to do this gig with him. We were still very impressionable and we wanted the chance to be on with our idols. I think we got the call to do Farm Aid, and realized ‘wow,’ John Mellencamp’s gonna be there, Neil Young’s gonna be there, Willie’s gonna be there.”

But the chance to be on with these idols isn’t what’s kept Hootie coming back time and again. Soni grew up much like John Mellencamp did, in a small Midwestern town where corn and cows predominated, but he saw farm friends from school leave as the family farms were sold for subdivisions, and he saw independent businesses give way to big box stores. “I have always believed in, and tried to actively support, the small guy and the local guy in any business, from farming to a lot of different businesses. Why have the mom-and-pop record stores and the mom-and-pop convenience stores gone out of business? Why have family farmers gone out of business? ...”

#### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Farm Aid is about the music to most concertgoers, but to the artists themselves, it is very much about the cause. At its genesis, the cause was the depression—both economical and spiritual—that was troubling rural America; today it is still about family farmers, but it is also about providing the American people with a safe, fresh and locally grown food supply from family farmers, who are often good stewards of the land—for air and water quality, and for wildlife.

The result of these artists’ generosity has been that, since its inception, Farm Aid has granted over \$17 million to more than 100 farm organizations, churches and service agencies in 44 states. Many Farm Aid grants are used for direct services, like food and emergency aid, legal assistance and hotlines—services that have helped thousands of struggling farm families across the country stay on the land. Farm Aid also grants funds to nonprofit organizations around the country that promote outreach, education and the development of long-term solutions for the problems facing rural America. In recent years, some of this support has gone to local efforts that confront the threat of increasing corporate control of agriculture.

When Farm Aid started, the farm crisis was “on the front page of the paper almost daily. There were foreclosures, and farmers going to help each other at penny auctions [farmers support each other by bidding very low to force the auctions’ cancellation]. People were very conscious about it,” says Carolyn Mugar, Farm Aid’s executive director.

Carolyn was recruited by Willie Nelson to help, about 10 days before the first concert. She says that although the farm crisis is not on the front pages of the paper anymore, there is still a real need. The farm crisis has become a chronic problem, but Carolyn sees something to be hopeful about. “People are becoming more conscious about where their food comes from and they are concerned about whether they are going to have access to fresh, locally grown, family farm raised food as opposed to food from factories, or food from other countries. We know that people are more and more interested in making a commitment to connect with family farms.”

#### LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

I ask John if, in the summer of ‘85, he thought he was going to be part of something that would go on for years and be such an influence on the dialog about rural America and our food system, or did he think they would do one concert, raise some money to give away, and that would be that? “Oh, definitely, I think the latter of the two was about all the vision I had. I can’t speak for Willie or Neil, but that’s about all the discussion we had at first. You have to imagine, at that time it was really quite an undertaking, just doing that first concert.”

But as everyone associated with Farm Aid points out, the problems have not gone away so neither has Farm Aid. It continues to grow and change, responding to changing, but continuing needs. Carolyn points to an example: “When we started, we knew that industrial agriculture was on the horizon, but it really started coming into people’s consciousness much clearer as factory farms arose in rural communities, ruining air quality, polluting rivers and driving family farmers out of business. People are realizing what this horror is, and they are more willing to start taking note of the difference between industrial food and family farm raised food.”

John follows up on the point. “When we started out we took a lot of paths and avenues that we hoped would help family farmers. But we realized as we were traveling them that they didn’t seem to be going particularly the way that we’d hoped. We could see that just being there for the farmer wasn’t going to work; we decided to take a more educational position and tried to be more proactive with the general public.”

What John sees as important in terms of the organization’s ability to ensure ongoing support of the cause is the backing of



younger musicians. "I'll tell you, I am always surprised about the people who want to play at Farm Aid. I had three young acts wanting to participate last year, and these people were 22 years old—they had grown up watching it, and they were just so eager to play Farm Aid," he says.

Thanks to his commitment to Farm Aid, Willie, John and Neil extended an invitation to Dave Matthews (who owns a farm of his own in Virginia) to join the board of directors of Farm Aid in 2001. John says, "Dave's enthusiasm and commitment to Farm Aid have been just incredible. I think it must have been 1995, in Louisville, Ky., that he first played with us—that was before he was so well known, he was just starting out, but his commitment to Farm Aid was very big. He was so excited to be a part of everything and worked so hard.

"Dave is not one of those guys that 'half-asses' anything," he adds with a laugh.

One thing is for sure, with new artists coming on board, and the commitment of John, Willie, Neil and Dave, Farm Aid will continue to provide great music for an important cause, and it will continue to advocate a food system that keeps the family farmer as the caretaker of the land.

About the Author: Carol Ekarius is a contributing editor to HF and author of several books on small farming, including her latest, *How to Build Animal Housing* (Storey Publishing, Spring 2004).

HFLyrics to "Rain on the Scarecrow" used with permission of John Mellencamp.

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