

Marty Stuart — Singer, Songwriter... Lifetime Photographer

American Ballads — The Photographs of Marty Stuart

By Bill Hobbs

By the time he was 14, Marty Stuart had a guitar, a mandolin, a spot in Lester Flatt's bluegrass band and a Kodak Instamatic — the latter because of his mom and a jazz musician.

While touring with Flatt in New York City, Stuart came across a book of photographs taken by jazz bassist Milt Hinton while in the studio, on the road, on his tour bus and off it. "He played music, and he told the story of his life and his peers with his camera, and it dawned on me, 'Well, I have the same access to country music now,' so I got a camera, and I proceeded to terrorize everyone that would stand still," Stuart said.

"I walked outside of that bookstore in Greenwich Village and called my mom down in Mississippi and asked her if she'd send me a camera, so she sent me one of those little Kodak Instamatic cameras. You just put it in your pocket and go on."

Four decades later, Stuart's photography will be exhibited at Nashville's Frist Center for the Visual Arts. *American Ballads: The Photographs of Marty Stuart*, May 9 through Nov. 2, features Stuart's black-and-white photographs of iconic legends of country and bluegrass, in addition to ordinary people he's met along the way.

The songwriter, platinum recording artist, five-time Grammy winner and Grand Ole Opry member honed his photography skills through decades of documenting the people and places surrounding him since he first went on tour with Flatt. Frist Center Curator Katie Delmez says *American Ballads* shows Stuart is a master storyteller not only through his songs but also through his revealing photographs.

Stuart's images range from intimate and often candid behind-the-scenes depictions of legendary musicians, to photographs that capture the eccentricities of characters from the back roads of America, to dignified portraits of members of the impoverished Lakota tribe in South Dakota. Among them will be the amazing last photograph taken of Johnny Cash four days before his passing, a photograph of bluegrass legend Bill Monroe playing "Chicken Reel" surrounded by chickens, a backstage snapshot of George Jones, and photographs of a slew of music legends like Porter Wagoner, Loretta Lynn and Merle Haggard — and lesser-known personalities like Unknown Hinson ("The Country Music Dracula").

"I often found myself in the company of Bill Monroe, Roy Acuff, Porter Wagoner, Merle Travis, Grandpa Jones, Ernest Tubb and Stringbean," Stuart says. "They always welcomed me, treated me like family, and gave me reasons to believe I was a part of the tribe. Whether at a concert, the Opry, a recording studio, a truck stop or poker game - any time any one of these people were present, I viewed it as history in motion. However, other than the fans, I seldom saw anyone present with a camera to capture the proceedings."



American Ballads is composed of more than 60 photographs from three bodies of work: "The Masters" of country music; the "Blue Line Hotshots" Stuart met on his travels on America's back roads; and the Lakota people of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and others in South Dakota in the section "Badlands."

The latter came about through a relationship Stuart began with the Lakota in the early 1980s through his former father-in-law Johnny Cash, and the images are rooted in mutual respect and admiration. "The fierce spirit of individualism is the common bond that unites the masters of country music, the characters from the blue line roads of America, and the Native Americans who live in the shadow of the Badlands," says Stuart.

Stuart's images are a love song to an art and a culture he loves. His approach to photography is to photograph what moves him, he says. He's part photojournalist, part fan with a camera, part artist making art.

"All of the above," he says. "Mainly, I think, if I had to pick one of those, I'd probably consider myself a documentarian because I look around this town at people like Jack Spencer, my goodness, what a master — he's just an *artist* with his camera. I see so many people that are true artists, that manipulate images and know how to manipulate light. I just basically hope for the best light possible and hope everything is in focus when I can," he says, a little laugh in his voice.

"I'm not a great technician. No way," he says. "But I shoot from the heart. That works for me because, you know, country music is the same way. I'm really not a formal musician, but it just comes from the heart, and that seems to work out okay."

Stuart sees "no difference" between songwriting and photography. "Every time I shoot a good picture I probably play a better guitar solo the next time. Every time I write a good song it makes me look for deeper things in the next photograph I'm trying to take. It's all under the same umbrella — it's God's creativity, and it's a great gift to us."

Comparing photography to performing, Stuart sees even more connections. "If I was on the other side of the footlights, I know what I'd be looking for in a performer. You look for honest moments and authenticity from the stage — at the end of the night, it's the honest moments and the authenticity that matter when the lights go down."

Stuart still shoots with film, not digital. His current camera is a Nikon F5, the fifth in Nikon's venerable line of 35mm cameras single-lens reflex cameras that began in 1959 with the Nikon F, which was widely used by professional photographers in the 1960s. The Nikon F5, sold from 1996 through 2004, is a technological leap forward from the Instamatic Stuart started with, yet it is far behind today's digital photography technology.

That's okay with Stuart, who prefers film to digital, just as he likes to use older analog equipment in the recording studio.

John R. Cash, Last Portrait,
September 8, 2003.
Archival pigment print.
© Marty Stuart



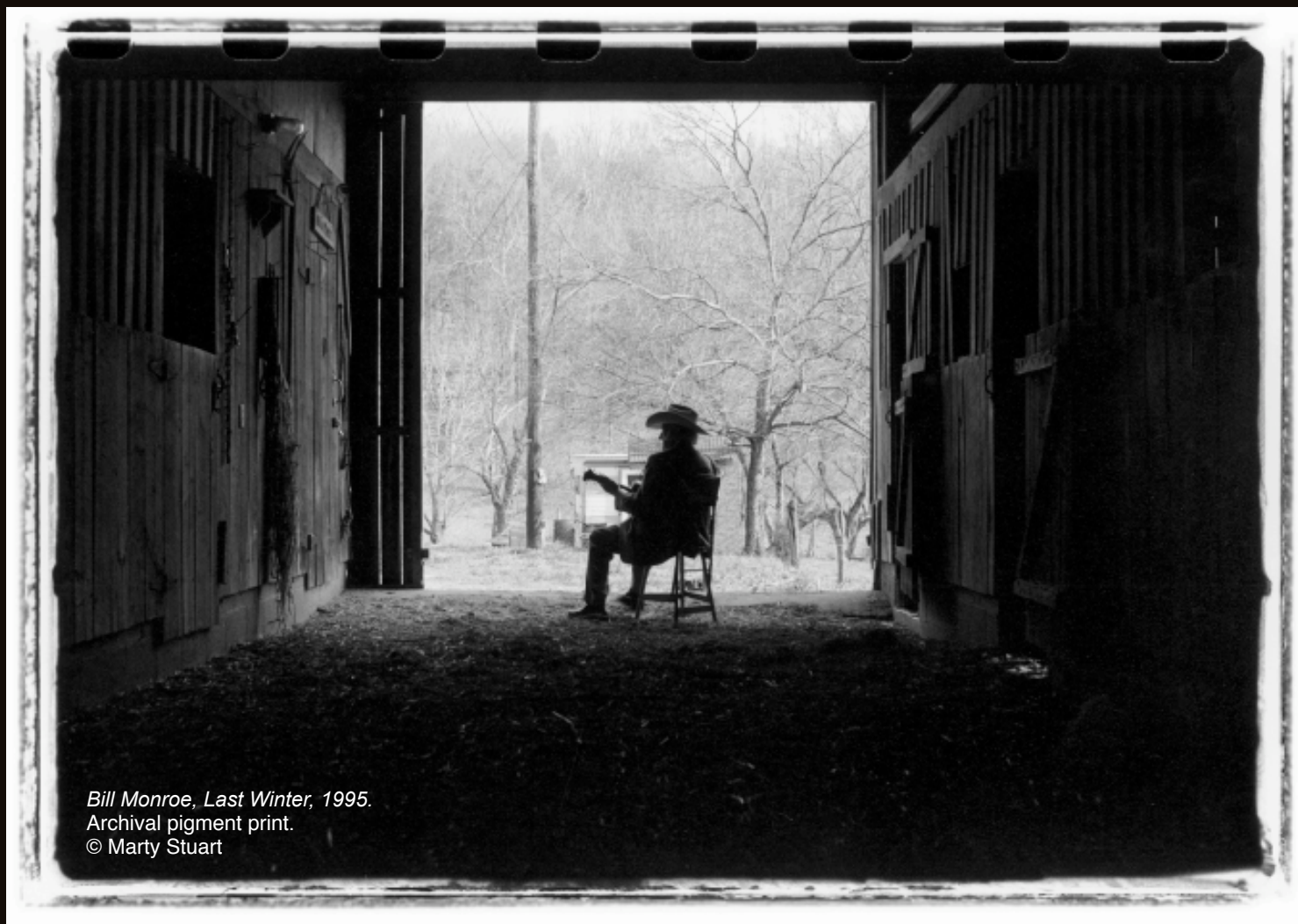
"It's the same thing with recording — there's a depth and a warmth. Digital images are perfect. Maybe that's what bothers me about it. There's a depth and a warmth about analog recording sometimes. I still love true black-and-white prints that look like I could stick my arm down in them and reach as far as I can reach — it's that depth that I love."

Being on the road as a traveling musician at 13, with his family still back home in Mississippi, photographs became a way "to capture life around me so I could share it with my people back home," he says. "The camera is the only instrument I have

ever found where you can absolutely make time stand still and capture something that's for the ages.

"The thing I did notice about photography is I've never lost interest in it. Sometimes I go for six months and don't shoot a picture because I don't see something that moves me, but I never lost interest in it. But to be shown at the Frist? Absolutely not — never thought it would happen, never *dreamed* it would happen," he says.

Stuart owns what is considered the largest private collection of country music memorabilia outside



Bill Monroe, Last Winter, 1995.
Archival pigment print.
© Marty Stuart

of the Country Music Hall of Fame – things like stage costumes, musical instruments with historic value, and song manuscripts — and photographs.

"I collect other photographers — Les Leverett, the dean of country music photographers. I love collecting Les' works," says Stuart, referring to the Grand Ole Opry's official photographer for 32 years. "Edward S. Curtis, the Native American photographer. Anthony Scarlati, Bill Thorup. Jim Marshall, Annie Leibovitz ... They're as much a part of the archives as anything else."

We asked Marty to name three of his most favorite photographs, and he quickly rattles them off - not by name but by telling stories, because songwriters tell stories.

"Well, I think the last day that I spent with Bill Monroe out on his farm, photographing him. It was a treasured day, because I really loved that old fella. The first time I saw him I was probably 12 years old, and he gave me his mandolin pick that night. I took it to school like I had kryptonite in my pocket.

"He was always a treasured friend. I know he didn't feel like it, but he granted me an afternoon just hanging out with him around his home and on his farm."

That shoot yielded *Chicken Reel, the Father of Bluegrass, Bill Monroe*, an amazing image of the legendary Monroe playing "Chicken Reel" for a flock of actual chickens.

Perhaps his most famous photo is *John R. Cash, Last Portrait, September 8, 2003*, a three-quarters profile of Johnny Cash, late in life with wispy white hair. The last portrait ever taken of Johnny Cash, there's a Mount Rushmore quality to the image. "I walked next door — he was my next-door neighbor — and took that, and four days later he was gone," Stuart says.

But his favorite is the very first photograph he remembers ever taking, at age 12, of country singer Connie Smith.

"My favorite shot is probably a shot that I borrowed my momma's camera and took of my wife Connie Smith when she came to play at the Choctaw Fair when I was 12 years old, and that's the first time I ever saw her," Stuart recalls. "I thought she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, so I borrowed the camera — that's the first photograph I ever remember taking, so that one means a lot to me."

American Ballads: The Photographs of Marty Stuart
May 9 - November 2, 2014, Conte Community Arts Gallery IMAGE
CREDITS. Any image released is available for editorial purposes related directly to the exhibition at the Frist Center for Visual Arts.

The King of Broken Hearts,
George Jones, 1997.
Archival pigment print.
© Marty Stuart

