Each year in Nashville, locally-based musicians gather to perform a benefit concert for the Second Harvest Food Bank of Nashville. Music legend Emmylou Harris has been participating in the event for more than a decade. Last year, she was joined by John Kay, founder and frontman for the band Steppenwolf; Brad Paisley, whose 1999 debut album *Who Needs Pictures* earned him a Grammy nomination; Phil Vassar, a *Billboard* songwriter of the year winner whose debut single *Carlene* topped the charts; and two-time Grammy winner Kathy Mattea. Here they explain why they are involved in the fight to end hunger.

Emmylou Harris

You've been doing this event for the food bank for 12 consecutive years. Can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved?

David Conrad, who's an old friend I knew even before I moved to Nashville, was involved and asked me if I would do it, and it just became something that I did every year. I tended to be in town and then I sort of made sure I was in town. They would tell me when the date was and I would put it on the calendar and it just became something I did every year. Like you celebrate your birthday. I don't like to celebrate my birthday, but I celebrate the Second Harvest concert. It's just a way of trying to give something back to the community. I like it because even though it's a national organization, it's based locally. The people that are in charge in each community know how to use the money, and it's just a way of being a good neighbor even if you haven't specifically met the neighbors. The people at Second Harvest do all the work, and the artists get to show up and kind of get all the attention. I really appreciate how hard everyone works to put this thing together.



Is there a reason that hunger is an important issue to you?

Well I think it's a basic. We'll never be free of problems in this life, but the one thing that we should be free of in the world, and certainly in this country, is hunger. We are living in the land of plenty and that includes basic rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – but it should also include freedom from hunger.

Has hunger ever affected you personally or anyone you know?

Never, never. I have always had food to eat. I've never experienced hunger. No one close to me has ever experienced hunger, so I'm very lucky and if I can do anything to keep someone else from experiencing hunger then I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to do that.

How would you tell your fans that they can get involved?

There's a Second Harvest in just about every city, I believe, and I think they should find out. I think the main thing is to understand that hunger doesn't just happen at Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter. That it's every single day, and Second Harvest deals with it on an everyday level, so donate food, see what you can do to become involved. It's a simple thing to do, but I think it's so important to understand that there are people in every community who don't have enough to eat, and there's an organization like Second Harvest that is doing all this front work. All they need from you is either goods, or money, or maybe a little bit of your time, and it's a good way to be a part of the community and try to help everyone in the community.

We've also found that celebrities are able to help so much. For instance, we have some donors that make contributions in honor of celebrities on their birthdays.

That's a good idea. As I said, I don't normally make a big deal about my birthday, but if I thought that fans of mine were donating money or food to Second Harvest on my birthday, that would really, really make me happy.

John Kay

How did you get involved with the food bank?
Well, really I became more and more aware of them because of my last ten years living in this community. There were benefits in and around town in different venues by various entertainers. Second Harvest was one of the organizations that my wife and I started to contribute some funds to in more recent years – particularly around Christmas time, and I've become more and more drawn to the organization because of the community. A couple of times there was a shortage at the food bank and a call to action by the local papers to the community, and apparently the population came through in both instances. So I was more informed about what was going on and more interested in being connected as a result. And you know, in the end, these are the people who day in and day out quietly do what all of us should be doing really.

Have you ever experienced hunger first hand?
I was born and raised in Europe after World War II and grew up behind the iron curtain for the first five years of my life, and we were on food rations, so you ate whatever they had. So while we weren't really hungry in the sense of being on the starvation level, we didn't have food that was really a pleasure to eat. We just had enough to merely sustain us week after week. That was something that stayed with me for years, so I feel that America's Second Harvest addresses one of the more obvious basic human needs. In our country of plenty, I feel somewhat ashamed as a citizen to know how much hunger there is and how little of it seems to wind up on the mass media radar screen because it's old hat. Unless people are dying by the bushel the camera doesn't seem to turn their way. That may sound a little bit cynical, but I just don't think that this country, particularly going through this unusually rich time of economic growth, should turn away from the less fortunate that live right under our noses.

It really isn't an issue that the media covers unless we can give it a different hook.
Right. Sell me on this. Human suffering just doesn't cut it. You know I would love it if one of the more upscale cruise lines would get a lecturer that has a captive audience aboard and tell them, "While you're enjoying that cordon bleu six course meal, I want to ask you to come to a thing tomorrow. I'll show you a few slides of what exists across the railroad tracks in the town you live in in America." There are a lot of people, I think, who are so isolated, so insulated because of their privileged existence, they don't have a clue, and they don't even have the opportunity to respond because, again, the mass media's not covering it.



Which is why it's great that people like you get involved because that's definitely a headline.
I remember a quote, I don't remember the exact words, but it was during one of John Kennedy's speeches. I think it was some sort of acknowledgement of Robert Frost, and he said something along the lines that what artists do almost by definition is to point to certain things that are not what they ought to be in society. I think it's only natural for the artistic community or entertainment people to participate.

Do you find that you're able to influence other celebrities to get involved?
You know I am a bit of a loner by nature. I've been at this for over 30 years, and when I come off the road I tend to hole up in the hills. Oddly enough, I just finished a solo album called *Heritics and Privateers,* which is a very personal point of view album, and as a result I did not want to saddle the band with it. It's really more about various things that are on my mind in respect to the society we live in, and certainly one of the conclusions that I reach is that I haven't been doing my share as a human being. So whether or not I'll be able to influence others is a great big question mark, but certainly I intend to be more active.



Brad Paisley

Is this one of the first things that you've done with the food bank?
Yeah it really is, as far as events go. I've always been a fan of what they do and I think that having a good friend like Mike Dungan, who is my label president, on the board of the food bank helps out because I know exactly what this place is about and what they stand for and where the money goes and how they work. And it's great. It is such a great organization. I'm totally honored actually to get a chance to be here and be able to support it in my own way.

A lot of people don't realize that hunger exists in America. Was there a time when you realized that it does?
Yeah, I see people who are hungry at my shows sometimes. If you play a fair, you'll see people and you'll be able to say, now that is somebody who doesn't get enough to eat. You can just tell. It's not so much even that they're thin or anything. You can just tell that they're not getting what they need out of life in that sense.

In America there really isn't a problem with starvation. There's a problem with hunger which then leads to not being able to learn in school and other problems, so it's not the same thing that you would see in third world countries.
No it's not. But it's very bad. It's almost worse, because we're such a rich nation. Anything I can do to help I owe at least that.

Do you feel that as a musician and a person who has a celebrity status it's important for you to be involved in social issues like hunger?
Always. I mean, I think it's your job. You want to be an artist and a celebrity? Fine. Deal with this stuff too. Don't just take the money and run. It is really a privilege to get to do this for a living. There's a lot of better singers and players in this town than me, and they're not getting to do this for some reason. I don't know why the cards didn't fall in their favor, but I get to do this for a living. I'm making enough money to live on it, and I'm very blessed. I don't know how an artist can go do shows on the road and not walk away totally humbled by what they see. Every night I meet kids who are sick and people who don't have what they need in life – worse problems then I could ever dream of – so this career has been a wake-up call for me in that sense.

How would you hope to inspire the people that listen to your music?
I would love to inspire people to, in any way, recognize that it's easy to get in your own little house and close the door and pretend that there's nobody who needs you, but we're all obligated to our fellow human beings here. Our obligation doesn't end at home or with family or just friends. Why else are we here? I mean, we have to be here to help each other out. I would love to be able to pass along a little of that kind of outlook to fans because I think it's really easy for people to get really comfortable and not think too much about hunger. They might think it's up to celebrities to do something. And, yeah, it is, but one celebrity can't make the same dent a million people can. Celebrities can call the attention to it, but then the mass population has to get involved too.

Phil Vassar

How did you first get involved with the food bank?
Well, ever since I've been with Arista, it's always been one of our big charities. We have a lot of fun. We get to go and have food drives and stuff like that. This is my third or fourth year that I've been involved with the food bank.

Why is hunger an important issue to you?
It's hard to believe in a country as rich as the United States that there are still people who don't have food. And people can really make a difference. Especially on local levels, if everybody just did this, if everybody would just get involved and support this charity, we could help a lot of people, you know? We could get to a lot of people.

In America we could actually end hunger, if we just use our resources differently.
I think we really could, and if we don't, then there's something wrong with us. I really, really believe that.



Have you or anyone you've known been affected personally by hunger?
I've been totally blessed my whole life. We've always had food. I don't think we had a lot of money growing up, but we always had food somehow or another, but you'd go to school and you'd see kids that were malnourished – it's just so sad. I can't even think about kids not having food. I have a two year-old daughter and I can't even think about it.

One in five children in America is at risk of being hungry.
Unreal. So it's a real honor to be able to lend whatever I have talent-wise to this effort.

What would want to tell your fans about getting involved?
You know, it's amazing how inexpensive it is to so some good. A lot of us have bad habits. I've tried to kick some, like tobacco, and I just think as much money as you spend on things like a pack of cigarettes – you're talking about three or four dollars a day. That's a lot of food. By the end of the month you've got a pretty big amount. For me, personally, that's one of my little goals – to cut out things like that and do more for other people.

Kathy Mattea

You do so much charity work. How do you choose which charities you want to work with?
Well I tried to do things that touch my life. The Second Harvest people I got involved with many years ago when I used to do the Marlboro tours in the late 80's. They did a piggyback thing with Second Harvest, and as part of that I went through the food bank in Atlanta and was just blown away by what they did. So if something comes up that's a Second Harvest thing I always try to do it because I just think the work they do is really important and they're really well organized. And it's just a cool place! I've also done a lot of work for AIDS charities, and I've lost a lot of friends to AIDS, so that was a no-brainer, and I've been doing some stuff for a cancer lab. I've been helping to host a ski tournament to raise money for that. My father's just fought his fourth battle with cancer, and was terminal this time last year and is now in complete remission. So really you just try to speak to the things that touch your life.

Has hunger ever touched your life personally?
My parents were both depression kids and both my grandfathers were coal miners. There were six kids in both of my parents' families, and we've spent many hours talking about what life was like back then. My mom's told me stories about people begging at the back door and times when they didn't know if they were going to lose their house, and they managed to keep food on the table, but it took a lot of tap dancing. I think growing up with all of those stories kind of gives you a perspective. I've been fortunate. I was always provided for, and since I struck out on my own I've been able to provide for myself, but the idea that hunger exists in our country today is just ludicrous. It's just ridiculous. The fact that there are people going hungry and people without health care in our country. I mean, if I just sit and think about it for five minutes I get so mad I want to throw something.



Is there anything you would want to tell your fans about how to get involved?
Making donations is one of the things that I would tell people to do. Another thing is people can organize food drives at their schools or churches at different times of the year. You can also go down and schlep boxes, you know. Volunteer to go pick stuff up. Call the Second Harvest in your town and ask them what they need, because they can always use volunteers. And it's an interesting thing to me. I've been thinking about this a lot lately – how many people spend so much of their time being lonely and sort of feeling disconnected from the people around them. Volunteering is such a good way to turn the cycle the other way. By giving you also receive. You meet another community of people, and you feel needed, and I think that that's something that's really kind of missing for a lot of people these days.