



# John Bell

## Travelin' Light

Writer: Amy Flurry

Features, Issue 33, Published online on 21 Jun 2007

Click [here](#) to return to the issue 33 cover story home page.

**For 22 years, singer/guitarist John Bell has anchored Southern-fried Athens, Ga., jamband Widespread Panic, and—despite his group’s stadium-filling popularity—he’s always eschewed the spotlight.** This deference to the whole, parsed through the obscure morsels and spare storytelling he doles out from the stage, has bolstered his enigmatic persona. But when you sit down with Bell for a conversation, the mystique slowly melts away; what’s left is a kindhearted, thoughtful and generous man.

I first meet this reluctant rock star at a restaurant in Atlanta; he needs a little needling to get him talking but, when he does, he gestures with hands, like he’s coaxing words out of the air, rarely resisting an analogy to lasso his disparate thoughts. After our meal, he hands me a manila envelope stuffed with information on Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), the debilitating genetic disease that his goddaughter and niece, Hannah Elliott, 11, has lived with since being diagnosed at 13 months.

When we pick up again, a month later in Athens, Bell and his wife, Laura, are in the process of converting an aging house in the town's historic corridor into a wellness center. The original idea was to find a place where Laura could base her counseling practice but, now, says Bell, "we've [also] included a space for yoga and meditation groups and other workshops and we've discussed having guest speakers from time to time."

### **Panic for the People**

After staying together through two decades of heavy touring—not to mention the loss of close friend/founding member Michael Houser to cancer—Widespread Panic has sold more than three-million albums with minimal radio play. This summer they will co-headline the Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival with The Police.

Bell and his bandmates are well aware of the breadth and vigor of their audience, an active and enterprising fanbase that accounts for record-breaking attendance numbers and over 100 sold-out dates per year. With this kind of support, the members of Widespread Panic have long leveraged their success to help those in need: They've played charity concerts for Tunes for Tots, a nonprofit that purchases musical equipment for underserved public schools; and Panic Fans for Food, a fundraiser conceived and run by their fans, helps feed the hungry through donations collected at the band's concerts. But, these days, Bell seems more compelled than ever to give back.

"I feel there's so much more I would like to be doing," he says. "I want to do more now because I can envision doing more. I'm grateful to personalities like Oprah and Bono and those in my personal life that have inspired me to find creative ways to build on that."

### **A Helping Hand for Hannah and her Buddies**

If Bell plans to step it up even more, that's good news for people on the receiving end of his philanthropic efforts. Already—privately, and with little fanfare—Bell has helped raise over \$2 million for Spinal Muscular Atrophy research. "He and Laura were with us at Hannah's first birthday party when we noticed she didn't have the skills the others had," says Hannah's father, Duncan Elliott. "And they were there when she was diagnosed."

Like any concerned relative, Bell was moved to do what he could to ameliorate his niece's difficult situation. "I had this idea of a silent auction, music and golf all balled into one," says sports enthusiast Bell. "All I had to do was put it into action and, at the very least, I knew I was going to be there, if that's all there was to it."

Bell wanted the event to be one where those with the disease and those who wanted to support the cause could come together and have fun. "I've seen charity events turn into an obligation, and though people are happy to write a check, they're ready to go home," he says. "[But] this is a giving thing in both directions."

The singular effort turned into a full-fledged annual golf tournament named Hannah's Buddies Charity Classic, followed later in the evening by the John Bell and Friends Benefit Bash, which includes dinner, a silent auction and, of course, plenty of live music from Bell and his cohorts. Now in its eighth year, the show has attracted musical guests including Col. Bruce Hampton, Kevn Kinney, Galactic and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

"Well over half of the kids with this disease don't make it past their second birthday, so they're never really acknowledged as part of their community," says Elliott. "When John came forward to help, it was the loudest voice this cause had ever had. It penetrated the fanbase pretty deeply, making it a 365-day-a-year cause for a lot of them."

Perhaps here is where the nebulous relationship between Bell's private and public lives hinge together, working in tandem toward a greater good. "[Where SMA is concerned]," he says, "a cure is the obvious goal, but part of our ongoing mission has been inclusion and quality of life at the moment, getting the most out of the journey [these kids] are on now."

*For more informaion, visit [FightSMA.org](http://FightSMA.org).*

---

Save & Share

