The story is told of two very cold nights in February 1995 in New York City. People from around the world and the United States gathered in the driving rain outside the Sony Music studios where John Denver was about to make music history. Over the next two nights, the Wildlife Concert was about to become a two-hour television special, a double live CD, and a home video; a combination not attempted before. The people stood in the bitter weather, and started to sing to keep warm. The song they happened to share, as John Denver arrived, was the well-known favorite, “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” It was unforgettable, especially for him. The booklet that would eventually accompany the disks shared his memories of that night.

“When I arrived for sound check, I was amazed. So many friends and fans patiently standing in line...their faces nearly frozen, singing a song I wrote with Bill Danoff around 25 years ago. I don’t know all of the ways that song must have touched people, but I’m grateful that I have somehow been able to say something that has meaning for others. I can’t tell you how thankful I am, and how thrilled I still get, to know people all over the world are familiar with my songs.”

THE SONG
“Take Me Home, Country Roads” was John Denver’s first big hit. When it was released in 1971 it became perpetually popular, both in the United States and around the world. It became an official song of West Virginia in 2014.

The lyrics were first created by his friends and fellow musicians Bill Danoff and Taffy Nivert, who originally hoped to sell the song to Johnny Cash, but John Denver convinced them
“Take Me Home, Country Roads” was first recorded by John Denver in New York City in January 1971 on the RCA label. It was released on the B-side of Denver’s second album, “Poems, Prayers and Promises.” It was also released as a single on April 12, 1971, peaking at number two on Billboard’s US Hot 100 singles for the week ending August 28, 1971. The song was a success on its initial release and was certified Gold by the RIAA on August 18, 1971, and Platinum on April 10, 2017.

“Country Roads” became one of John Denver’s most popular songs. It has continued to sell, with over 1.6 million digital copies sold in the United States.

The song is considered a tribute to West Virginia. In March 2014, it became one of the four official state anthems of that state. In 2023, the song was selected by the Library of Congress for inclusion in the National Recording Registry.

None of the song’s three songwriters had spent much time in West Virginia. The inspiration to sing about this state came from a set of beautiful postcards a friend had sent to Bill Danoff. The lyrics remain popular and are a meaningful tribute to the state of West Virginia, including the song’s first words “Almost heaven” followed by:

West Virginia
Blue ridge mountains, Shenandoah river
Life is old there, older than the trees
Younger than the mountains, blowing like a breeze
Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong
Mountain mamma, take me home
Country roads

The first performance of the song (December 30, 1970) was to a sold-out crowd at the Washington, DC, night club, The Cellar Door. This was John Denver’s fifth night of a week-long performance there. The opening act was the band Fat City featuring Bill Danoff and his then wife Taffy Nivert, the co-creators with John of “Take Me Home, Country Roads.”

Bill Danoff credited the song’s great reception with “John’s incredible energy. He was a ball of fire.” But others credited the crowd’s response to all three of these performers. By the end of that magical night, the three of them agreed they had created a real hit. In Danoff’s eyes it “felt good to sing this song they had created together.”

Since its debut, this song has been covered by more than 150 other artists ranging from Olivia Newton-John to Loretta Lynn, The Osborne Bros., Ray Charles, The Carter Family, The Miller Brothers, 101 Strings, Pete Huttlinger & Chris Nole, Jim Horn, Eddy Arnold, and Tennessee Ernie Ford, just to name a few. Bill Danoff considers Ray Charles’ cover his
favorite. This song has also been recorded in 19 languages. “Take Me Home, Country Roads” continues to be popular globally. Denver told of being greeted by children singing the song in such places as China, Africa, the Soviet Union and other countries during his many travels.

A year after the song’s release, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” became Morgantown, West Virginia University’s football and basketball game anthem.

The song was played at the funeral for West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd at the state capitol in Charleston, West Virginia, on July 2, 2010. Many others have also chosen it to be the last goodbye, as loved ones have gone home to a place where they belonged.

The Mountain State Brewing Company produces “Almost Heaven,” an amber ale named after this ode to West Virginia.

**THE ARTIST**

John Denver was really Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr. and was born on December 31, 1943 in Roswell, New Mexico. His father was Captain Henry John “Dutch” Deutschendorf Sr. (1920–1982), a United States Army Air Forces pilot stationed at Roswell Army Air Field. His mother was Erma Louise (1922–2010).

A father who was a pilot in the military meant there was a good deal of travel that made John’s childhood sometimes difficult. John’s interest in music began when his grandmother gave him her guitar when he was 11 years old.

While he was studying architecture at Texas Tech in Lubbock, John was part of the musical group The Alpine Trio. In 1963, he dropped out of college and moved to California. It was suggested then that “Henry John Deutschendorf Jr.” was too long of a moniker and a shorter, more memorable name would serve him better. So “John Denver” became his stage name. In 1965, he took Chad Mitchell’s place in the Chad Mitchell Trio.

In 1967, Denver had made a self-produced demo recording of some of the songs he played at his concerts, including “Babe, I Hate to Go,” a song he later renamed “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” Denver made several copies and gave them out as presents for Christmas. Milt Okun, who produced records for The Chad Mitchell Trio and folk group Peter, Paul and Mary, had become Denver’s producer as well. Okun brought the unreleased “Jet Plane” song to Peter, Paul and Mary. Their recording of this John Denver creation became a number one hit on the Billboard Hot 100, and went to number two in the UK in February 1970.

In 1969, John Denver pursued a solo career and released his first album for RCA Victor. It was titled “Records, Rhymes & Reasons.”

**JOHN DENVER’S ACTIVISM**

Denver’s often difficult youth opened the way for his impressive musical career as a singer-songwriter, guitarist and actor. But there was another side to John Denver. He was a serious humanitarian, actively addressing global hunger with President Jimmy Carter, environmental
issues ranging from endangered wildlife and pollution to climate change and world peace. He founded Windstar and Plant-It 2000 and worked with some of the most prominent scientists and activists of the era. Much of these efforts beyond his music led to some significant songs.

He worked with Buckminster Fuller and dedicated the song “What One Man Can Do” to him.

His efforts for peace led to the song “What Are We Making Weapons For?” and this was the song he sang together with Alexander Gradsky, the leading singer-songwriter in Russia. The following year, at the Melodiya Studios in Moscow, they together recorded this anti-war number, from both US and Soviet perspectives.

John Denver wrote “Calypso” in 1975 as a tribute to Jacques-Yves Cousteau, his research ship, and crew of the Calypso. Profits from the song were donated to fund the operating of the ship for years.

“John really was an environmentalist before there was a word for that,” said Ron Deutschendorf, Denver’s brother.

Denver was also deeply interested in NASA and space travel. He had passed the training for a ride on what became the disastrous flight of Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986, but instead Christa McAullife, a teacher from New Hampshire, became the first civilian to fly in space. John Denver dedicated his song “Flying for Me” to all astronauts.

John Denver recorded and released approximately 300 songs, about 200 of which he composed. He had 33 albums and singles certified Gold and Platinum in the US by the RIAA, with estimated sales of more than 33 million units. He recorded and performed primarily with an acoustic guitar and sang about his joy in nature, disdain for city life, and enthusiasm for music. Denver's folk music style appeared on a variety of charts, including country music, the Billboard Hot 100, and the adult contemporary. He earned 14 gold and eight platinum albums in the United States alone. His signature songs are “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” “Annie's Song,” “Rocky Mountain High,” “Calypso,” “Thank God I'm a Country Boy” and “Sunshine on My Shoulders.”

MOVIES & TV SPECIALS
John Denver appeared in several films and numerous television specials during the 1970s and 1980s. His most memorable movie is the 1977 hit “Oh, God!” In this delightful motion picture, he starred alongside George Burns, who played the role of God.

“The Leftovers” is one of those wonderful Disney Sunday Movie Classics. It originally aired on November 16, 1986. This delightful story brought Denver back to acting which he had stepped away from for a short time after the “Oh God!” films. The story of “The Leftovers” is about a small group of close-knit orphans and their father figure, Max, played by Denver. They band together to try to keep their orphanage/home from being shut down.
“The Christmas Gift” is a 1986 American made-for-television drama film. It was Denver's first acting role after “Oh, God!” He said he took the role “because it was the perfect opportunity to ease back into acting; it is a light, warm tale of human relationships. I waited for something that I felt really good about and turned down a lot of scripts over the years. I've been very picky about acting projects.” This film has become a classic, broadcast annually during the holiday season. The plot involves “a widowed New York City architect and his young daughter who take a Christmas vacation and end up in a small mystical town in Colorado where everyone believes in Santa Claus.”

“Foxfire” is a television film that premiered on CBS on December 13, 1987, as part of the Hallmark Hall of Fame anthology series. It stared Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn and John Denver. The story focuses on Annie Nations, an aging widow who lives alone on her farm. Unable to let go of the past—she sometimes visits with the ghost of her husband—she gets pulled into a very current battle with a real-estate developer looking to buy her land. She also needs to help her son, Dillard, a country singer played by Denver, struggling to raise his son and daughter all on his own. As Annie deals with these pressures, she begins to reflect on her long life on the farm. This winner of two prime time Emmys was also a Golden Globe nominee.

“Walking Thunder” is a 1994 film starring James Read, John Denver, David Tom and Bart the Bear. It tells the story of a young boy who travels with his family on a wagon on their way to California and become stranded in the Rockies. There they learn to survive, adapt to their surroundings and make the most of what they have with the help of a mountain man, an elderly Sioux medicine man and a legendary bear known by the Native Americans as Walking Thunder. The film won a Silver Award at the Worldfest Film Festival. It was released in 1995, but was not widely distributed until 1997.

THE MUSIC GOES ON
Over the years, John Denver hosted his own variety and music specials, including several concerts from Red Rocks Amphitheatre, where now a statue of him resides, as well as a display of artifacts paying tribute to him in the Colorado Music Hall of Fame.

His seasonal special, “Rocky Mountain Christmas,” was watched by more than 60 million people and was the highest-rated show for the ABC network at that time.


Denver continued to record into the 1990s, also focusing on environmental issues as well as lending vocal support to space exploration and testifying in front of Congress to protest censorship in music. He lived in Aspen for much of his life, and he was known for his love of Colorado. In 1974, Denver was named poet laureate of the state. The Colorado state legislature also adopted “Rocky Mountain High” as one of its two state songs in 2007, and West Virginia did the same for “Take Me Home, Country Roads” in 2014.
John Denver was a popular guest star on “The Muppet Show,” and it was the beginning of the lifelong friendship between Denver and Jim Henson that spawned two television specials with the “Muppets,” including “A Christmas Together” and the Emmy-nominated “Rocky Mountain Holiday.”

Denver hosted the Grammy Awards five times in the 1970s and 1980s, and frequently guest-hosted “The Tonight Show.” He was posthumously presented a Grammy for his 1997 children’s album “All Aboard!” And, in 1998, he was named to the Grammy Hall of Fame for “Take Me Home, Country Roads.”

In 1975, he was awarded the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year award. This resulted in some objections from the country establishment who felt Denver’s music was “folk” and not “country.” In 1998, Denver posthumously received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the World Folk Music Association, which also established a new award in his honor.

AN UNTIMELY DEATH
John Denver was a skilled pilot. He owned and flew his own private jet, along with assorted other aircraft. Unfortunately, on October 12, 1997, while he was flying a light plane he had recently purchased, a Rutan Long-EZ, he was killed in a single-fatality crash. Flying solo over Monterey Bay near Pacific Grove, California, it is believed difficulty in switching fuel tanks resulted in his death. He was only 53 years old.

In his memory, “The John Denver Sanctuary” was created. The Sanctuary is an open space and park free to the public from dawn to dusk. There is no fencing around the area and no tickets are required for entry to the Sanctuary and its surrounding trails.

The John Denver Sanctuary is nestled in the heart of Aspen, next to the Rio Grande Park, adjacent to Theatre Aspen's summer performances. Its location, near the Roaring Fork River, makes this an ideal spot for quiet meditation or a family gathering.

The Sanctuary’s “Song Garden” features many of the iconic singer's lyrics etched into native river boulders placed in a perfect circle to represent the circle of life as a score of music. At the circle's center, a single Colorado Blue Spruce was planted which symbolizes the spirit of John. It is an idyllic location and visitors will not wonder for long where “Rocky Mountain High” originated.

Additionally, the man-made wetlands and winding streams work as an innovative stormwater filter system, cleaning water before it drains into the Roaring Fork River. Within the Sanctuary, you will find one of the largest perennial flower gardens open to the public, which adds to the friendly atmosphere for its visitors from around the globe.

The Sanctuary has since been expanded and continues to be a quiet place to pause and reflect. John Denver’s remains are not located there, however, as the cremains were
distributed by an airplane high above the Rocky Mountains during his memorial service, October 1997.

“Take Me Home” is also the title John Denver used for his autobiography. It was written with the assistance of Arthur Tobier and published in 1994.

Among the very many awards Denver received, in 1993, he became the first non-classical music artist to receive the prestigious Albert Schweitzer Award “for a life dedicated to music and humanity.”

“Take Me Home, Country Roads” epitomizes the way John Denver reached out to unite the hearts and minds of all people who long to be in the place where they belong, caring for the planet and each other. His last film, which was not shown until after his passing, is a 1998 video called “Let This Be A Voice” which is “a legacy to his conviction that each of us can be a voice for wildlife and wilderness, which are an inspiration to us all.”

*Tomi Jill Folk and Hank Bruce wrote “Peace Beyond Fear,” an award-winning collection of short stories inspired by the songs of John Denver.*

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*