

# Take Me Home, Country Roads

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It's a song about going back to that familiar place, about traveling to somewhere the listener feels a sense of belonging. It's a song that has achieved almost hymnlike

status among West Virginians because of the pride it instills when those opening words of "Almost Heaven, West Virginia," pour forth from the speakers.

"Take Me Home, Country Roads" has been a part of West Virginia's cultural landscape for more than half a century, but the song nearly left out any mention of the Mountain State, as it was actually inspired by a drive through Maryland on the writer's way to a family reunion. A struggling songwriter and performer, Bill Danoff composed the tune thinking it would be a perfect song for Johnny Cash. He had even considered inserting Massachusetts in place of West Virginia but ultimately opted against it. He had never even set foot in the state prior to writing the song, which also was never intended for John Denver.

But fate intervened one December night in 1970. Denver was in the Washington, D.C. area performing at the Cellar Door. Following the concert, Danoff and Nivert played the song for Denver at the couple's Maryland apartment. Denver fell in love with the music, and the three of them worked through the night to finish the song. "Country Roads" was performed in public for the first time on Dec. 30, 1970, as part of an encore at one of Denver's shows. The couple joined Denver on stage,



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and Nivert had to hold the lyric sheet during the performance. The song received a five-minute standing ovation.

The line, “the radio reminds me of my home far away,” is a reference to Danoff’s growing up in Massachusetts and listening to WWVA Saturday Night Jamboree broadcasts. He also drew images for the song from friends and from a group of hippies who frequented clubs where Danoff and Nivert performed.

The song was released on Denver’s album “Poems, Prayers & Promises” in the spring of 1971, and it debuted as a single in April of that year. It wasn’t immediately a success, but it later peaked as high as No. 2 on the pop singles chart. It was certified as a gold record by August.

It was adopted into the West Virginia University marching band’s pre-game performance in 1972. Denver and the Danoffs performed the song as the dedication of the new Mountaineer Field in 1980. Brad Paisley performed the song as part of pre-game ceremonies in a 2015 football game.

## John Denver

The son of an Air Force pilot, Denver was born Henry John Deutschendorf Jr. on Dec. 31, 1943, in New Mexico. His grandmother gave him his first guitar at the age of 11. He left home at 20 to pursue his musical dreams, changing his name to John Denver in honor of the capital of his favorite state.

His first big break came when he was picked to be the lead singer for the Mitchell Trio. He penned the hit song, “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” which was recorded by Peter, Paul & Mary. After striking a solo career, Denver stayed on the pop charts with such songs as “Rocky Mountain High,” “Annie’s Song,” “Sunshine on My Shoulders” and “Thank God I’m a Country Boy.”

Denver became involved in several charitable and environmental causes. An avid pilot, Denver passed NASA’s fitness tests and was a leading candidate to be the first civilian in

outer space on the space shuttle Challenger. But outside issues prevented him from joining the crew on its ill-fated mission, which ended in an explosion shortly after takeoff in 1986. Denver passed away in October 1997 from injuries suffered in a crash of his plane near Monterey Bay, California.



## The Reach of Country Roads

“Country Roads” is played and sung after every WVU athletic victory, and it has become a staple as an exit song at weddings. A state legislature resolution in 2014 named “Take Me Home, Country Roads” as an official state song. West Virginia tourism officials obtained the usage rights to the song, and the opening line, Almost Heaven, West Virginia, has become a popular theme used to attract tourists to visit destinations within the state’s borders.

The song has been recorded by such artists as Ray Charles and Olivia Newton-John and has been translated into several different languages ranging from French and Italian to Greek and Hindi.

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