

Take Me Home, Country Roads

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn the story behind the creation of the song.
- Participants will learn about John Denver, who sang the popular version of the song.
- Participants will learn about the song's impact over the past 60 years.

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 lyrics 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 being friends with actor Chris Sarandon, a Beckley native, and from a group of hippies from a West Virginia commune who frequented clubs in which Danoff and Nivert performed. Neither Danoff nor Denver had ever stepped foot in West Virginia prior to the song. Danoff said he loved the words, “Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River,” which brought images of West Virginia to his mind, though many critics of the song believe it actually refers to western Virginia because the mountain range and river only briefly touch West Virginia’s Eastern Panhandle. Danoff, however, said the song was definitely about West Virginia, and he would visit the state on several occasions later in his life, even wading in the Shenandoah River. He would later be named an honorary West Virginian.

The song originally contained a controversial second verse, which was quickly rewritten to allow it to receive commercial airplay.

“In the foothills,
Hidin’ from the clouds,
Pink and purple,
West Virginia farmhouse.
Naked ladies,
Men who look like Christ,
And a dog named Poncho nibbling on rice.
Country Roads ...”

It was changed to a verse which conjures up a more positive image of the state.

“All my memories gather ‘round her
Miner’s lady, stranger to blue water
Dark and dusty, painted on the sky
Misty taste of moonshine, teardrop in my eye
Country Roads . . .”



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. The slow climb up the charts following its release had record label executives wanting to abandon the song, but Denver convinced them otherwise. It later peaked as high as No. 2 on the pop singles chart, and by August, it had sold more than 1 million copies and had become a certified gold record. An Olivia Newton-John version of the song reached No. 3 in Japan and No. 15 in the United Kingdom in 1973.

The song also proved to be popular with soldiers serving overseas at the height of the Vietnam War, as it allowed them to think about returning home to their familiar surroundings, Danoff believed.

“When it came out in ’71, the Vietnam War was really rockin’,” Danoff told CBS News in 2021. “We had hundreds of thousands of troops over there. So, coming home was a big, big deal.”

West Virginia University professor Sarah Morris has studied the impact of the song, saying even though it references West Virginia, the song could be about anywhere.



"We can think about the song as being about any place," she told CBS. "People take the song and re-appropriate it so that it's about the place that's home to them."

It was adopted into the WVU marching band's pre-game performance in 1972 and has been there ever since. Denver and the Danoffs performed the song at the dedication of the new Mountaineer Field in 1980 after being invited to the dedication ceremony by Gov. Jay Rockefeller. Newspaper accounts of the performance indicated that it was difficult to hear Denver because of the sold-out crowd singing along. Brad Paisley performed the song as part of pre-game ceremonies at a 2015 football game.

Danoff and Nivert went on to form the Starland Vocal Band, which had a hit song, "Afternoon Delight" in the mid-1970s. The group won two Grammy Awards in 1977, including best new artist.

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



The "Pride of West Virginia" performing during half-time at a WVU football game. (Photo credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WVU_Band_State.jpg)

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. However, outside issues prevented him from joining the crew on its ill-fated mission, one 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. The effort to make it an official state song initially stalled in the legislature on its first try, but thanks to a push from Princeton radio host Dreama Denver and Sen. Marty Gearheart, the resolution was successful and was signed by Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin. 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 Mountain State Brewing Company, based in Thomas, produces an ale “Almost Heaven,” which pays homage to Denver’s hit record.

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. A reggae version, “West Jamaica,” was inspired by the Denver hit. The song became part of the soundtrack to the online video game

Fallout 76 in 2018. The Library of Congress listed “Take Me Home, Country Roads” on its 2023 National Recording Registry. In being recognized by the Library of Congress, the song “went on to define much of Denver’s career while also becoming a family and sing-along favorite, hitting a common ground simultaneously shared by the genres of country, folk, and pop.”

Resources

“Country Roads led to stadium.” Gerrill Griffith and Norman Julian. *The Dominion Post*. September 7, 1980.

Library of Congress: National Recording Preservation Board, 2023 National Recording Registry.

“Co-Writer of ‘Take Me Home, Country Roads’ Dispels Myths Surrounding Song’s Origins.” Mark Segraves. *NBC Washington*. December 30, 2020.

“Country Roads: How John Denver’s Hit Became the World’s Most Popular Song.” Nick Brumfield. *Expatalachians.com*. March 5, 2019.

“The Global Appeal of ‘Take Me Home, Country Roads’.” *CBS News*. December 26, 2021.

“Biography.” *JohnDenver.com*

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