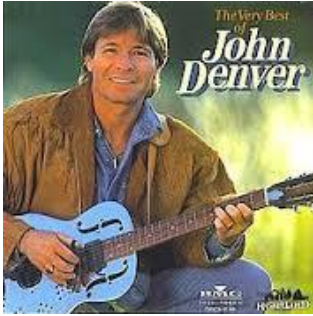


BIOGRAPHY

John Denver at Glance



Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr. (December 31, 1943 – October 12, 1997), known professionally as John Denver, was an American singer, songwriter, activist, and humanitarian. After traveling and living in numerous locations while growing up in his military family, Denver began his music career in folk music groups in the late 1960s. His greatest commercial success was as a solo singer, starting in the 1970s. Throughout his life, Denver recorded and released approximately 300 songs, about 200 of which he composed. He performed primarily with an acoustic guitar and sang about his joy in nature, his enthusiasm for music, and his relationship trials. Denver's music appeared on a variety of charts, including country and western, the *Billboard* Hot 100, and adult contemporary, in all earning him twelve gold and four platinum albums with his signature songs “Take Me Home, Country Roads”, “Annie’s Song”, “Rocky Mountain High”, and “Sunshine on My Shoulders”.

Denver further starred in films and several notable television specials in the 1970s and 1980s. In the following decades, he continued to record, but also focused on calling attention to environmental issues, lent his vocal support to space exploration, and testified in front of Congress to protest against censorship in music. He was known for his love of the state of Colorado, which he sang about numerous times. He lived in Aspen, Colorado, for much of his life, and influenced the governor to name him Poet Laureate of the state in 1974. The Colorado state legislature also adopted “Rocky Mountain High” as one of its state songs in 2007. Denver was an avid pilot, and died while flying his personal aircraft at the age of 53. Denver was one of the most popular acoustic artists of the 1970s.

Early Years

Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr., was born in Roswell, New Mexico, to Erma Louise Swope and Lt. Col. Henry John Deutschendorf, Sr., an Air Force officer (who set three speed records in the B-58 Hustler bomber and earned a place in the Air Force Hall of Fame). Henry Sr. was of German ancestry, and met and married his “Oklahoma Sweetheart”. Denver's Irish Catholic and German maternal grandmother was the one who imbued Denver with his love of music. In his autobiography, *Take Me Home*, Denver described his life as the eldest son of a family shaped by a stern father who could not show his love for his children.

Because Denver's father was in the military, the family moved often, making it difficult for Denver to make friends and fit in with people of his own age. Constantly being the new kid was agony for the introverted child, and he grew up always feeling as if he should be somewhere else, but never knowing where that "right" place was. While living in Tucson, Arizona, Denver was a member of the Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus for two years. Denver was happy living in Tucson, but his father was transferred to Montgomery, Alabama, then in the midst of the Montgomery boycotts. The family later moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where Denver graduated from Arlington Heights High School. Attending high school in Fort Worth was a distressing experience for the disenfranchised Denver. In his third year of high school, he borrowed his father's car and ran away to California to visit family friends and begin his music career. His father flew to California to bring him back, and Denver unhappily returned to finish high school.

In 1969, John Denver abandoned the band life to pursue a solo career and released his first album for RCA Records: *Rhymes & Reasons*. Two years prior, Denver had made a self-produced demo recording of some of the songs he played at his concerts. He included in the demo a song called "Babe I Hate to Go", later renamed "Leaving on A Jet Plane". Denver made several copies and gave them out as presents for Christmas. Producer Milt Okun, who produced records for the Mitchell Trio and the high-profile 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 version of the song hit number one on the Billboard Hot 100.

John Denver's Career

His next album, *Poems, Prayers, and Promises* (released in 1971), was a breakthrough for him in the U.S., thanks in part to the single "Take Me Home, Country Roads", which went to number 2 on the *Billboard* charts despite the first pressings of the track being distorted. Its success was due in part to the efforts of his new manager, future Hollywood producer Jerry Weintraub, who signed Denver in 1970. Weintraub insisted on a re-issue of the track and began a radio-airplay campaign that started in Denver, Colorado. Denver's career flourished from then on, and he had a series of hits over the next four years. In 1972, Denver scored his first Top Ten album with *Rocky Mountain High*, with its title track reaching the Top Ten in 1973. Between 1974 and 1975, Denver experienced an impressive chart dominance, with a string of four No.1 songs ("Sunshine on My Shoulders", "Annie's Song", "Thank God I'm a Country Boy", and "I'm Sorry") and three No.1 albums (*John Denver's Greatest Hits*, *Back Home Again*, and *Windsong*).

In the 1970s, Denver's onstage appearance included long blond hair, embroidered shirts emblazoned with images commonly associated with the American West (created by designer & appliqué artist Anna Zapp), and "granny" glasses. His manager, Jerry Weintraub, insisted on a significant number of television appearances, including a series of half-hour shows in England, despite Denver's protests at the

time, “I’ve had no success in Britain... I mean *none*.” Weintraub explained to Maureen Orth of *Newsweek* in December 1976, “I knew the critics would never go for John. I had to get him to the people.”

Denver was also a guest star on *The Muppet Show*, the beginning of the lifelong friendship between Denver and Jim Henson that spawned two television specials with The Muppets. He also tried his hand at acting, appearing in the *The Colorado Cattle Caper* episode of the *McCloud* television movie on February 24, 1974, and starring in the 1977 film *Oh, God!* opposite George Burns. Denver hosted the Grammy Awards five times in the 1970s and 1980s and guest-hosted *The Tonight Show* on multiple occasions. In 1975, Denver was awarded the Country Music Association’s Entertainer of the Year award. At the ceremony, the outgoing Entertainer of the Year Charlie Rich presented the award to his successor, but in protest of what he considered the inappropriateness of Denver’s selection, Rich set fire to the envelope containing the official notification of the award. However, Denver’s music was defended by country singer Kathy Mattea, who told Alanna Nash of *Entertainment Weekly*, “A lot of people write him off as lightweight, but he articulated a kind of optimism, and he brought acoustic music to the forefront, bridging folk, pop, and country in a fresh way... People forget how huge he was worldwide.”

In 1977, Denver cofounded The Hunger Project with Werner Erhard and Robert W. Fuller. He served for many years and supported the organization until his death. Denver was also appointed by President Jimmy Carter to serve on the President’s Commission on World Hunger, writing the song “I Want to Live” as its theme song. In 1979, Denver performed “Rhymes & Reasons” at the Music for UNICEF Concert. Royalties from the concert performances were donated to UNICEF. His father taught him to fly in the mid-1970s, which led to reconciliation between father and son. In 1980, Denver and his father, Lt. Col. “Dutch” Deutschendorf, co-hosted an award winning television special, “The Higher We Fly: the History of Flight”. It won the Osborn Award from the Aviation/Space Writers’ Association, and was honored by the Houston Film Festival.

Personal Life

Denver’s first marriage was to Annie Martell of St. Peter, Minnesota. Their wedding was held at the Christ Chapel at Gustavus Adolphus College. Annie was the subject of his hit *Annie’s Song*, which he composed in only ten minutes while on a ski lift in 1974. The couple lived in Edina, Minnesota, from 1968 to 1971. Following the success of “Rocky Mountain High”, Denver purchased a residence in Colorado and owned one home in Colorado continuously until his death. He and Annie adopted a son, Zachary, and daughter, Anna Kate, who John would say were “meant to be” theirs. John once said, “I’ll tell you the best thing about me. I’m some guy’s dad; I’m some little gal’s dad. When I die, Zachary John and Anna Kate’s father, boy that’s enough for me to be remembered by. That’s more than enough. Zachary was the

subject of “A Baby Just Like You”, a song that included the line “Merry Christmas, little Zachary” and which he wrote for Frank Sinatra. Denver and Annie Martell divorced in 1982 and the ensuing property settlement caused Denver to become so enraged he nearly choked his ex-wife, and then used a chainsaw to cut the marital bed in half. Martell continues to live in Aspen, Colorado.

John Denver married Australian actress Cassandra Delaney in 1988, after a two-year courtship. Settling in Aspen, the couple had a daughter, Jesse Belle. Denver and Delaney separated in 1991 and divorced in 1993. Of his second marriage, Denver would later recall that “before our short-lived marriage ended in divorce, she managed to make a fool of me from one end of the valley to the other”. In 1993, Denver pleaded guilty to a drunken driving charge, and was placed on probation. In August 1994, while still on probation, he was again charged with misdemeanor driving under the influence after crashing his Porsche into a tree in Aspen, Colorado. Though a jury trial in July 1997 resulted in a hung jury on the second DUI charge, prosecutors later decided to reopen the case, which was closed only after Denver’s accidental death in October 1997. In 1996, the FAA decided that Denver could no longer fly a plane due to medical disqualification for failure to abstain from alcohol, a condition that the FAA had imposed in October 1995 after his prior drunk-driving conviction.

Denver’s talent is extended beyond music. He was a painter as well, but because of his limiting schedule, he pursued photography. He once said that “photography is a way to communicate a feeling”. Denver was an avid skier and golfer. His love of flying was secondary only to his love for music. He collected vintage biplanes, and in 1974, he bought a Learjet, which he used to fly himself to concerts. He also bought a Christen Eagle aerobatic plane, two Cessna 210 and in 1997, an experimental, amateur-built Rutan Long-EZ

Political Activism

Denver became outspoken in politics in the mid-1970s. He expressed his ecologic interests in the epic 1975 song Calypso, which is an ode to the exploration ship and team of environmental activist Jacques Cousteau. In 1976, he campaigned for Jimmy Carter, who became a close friend and ally. Denver was a supporter of the Democratic Party and of a number of charitable causes for the environmental movement, the homeless, the poor, the hungry, and the African AIDS crisis. He founded the charitable Windstar Foundation in 1976, to promote sustainable living. His dismay at the Chernobyl disaster led to precedent-setting concerts in parts of communist Asia and Europe.

During the 1980s, Denver was critical of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Administration, but he remained active in his campaign against hunger, for which Reagan awarded Denver the Presidential World without Hunger Award in 1985.

Denver's criticism of the conservative politics of the 1980s was expressed in his autobiographical folk-rock ballad "Let Us Begin (What Are We Making Weapons For)". Denver was also critical of the Republican-dominated Congress and American Conservatism of the 1990s. He denounced the National Rifle Association (NRA) as a corrupt political machine that could buy off politicians, and in an open letter to the media, he wrote that he opposed oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Denver had battled to expand the refuge in the 1980s, and he praised President Bill Clinton for his opposition to the proposed drilling. The letter, which he wrote in the midst of the 1996 presidential election, was one of the last he ever wrote. Denver was also on the Board of Governors of the National Space Society for many years.

Awards and Recognition

A. Academy of Country Music

- 1974 Album of the Year for "Back Home Again"

B. American Music Awards

- 1975 Favorite Pop/Rock Male Artist
- 1976 Favorite Country Album for *Back Home Again*
- 1976 Favorite Country Male Artist

C. Country Music Association

- 1975 Entertainer of the Year
- 1975 Song of the Year for "Back Home Again"

D. Emmy Awards

- 1975 Emmy for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Special for "An Evening With John Denver"

E. Grammy Awards

- 1997 Best Musical Album for Children for *All Aboard!*
- 1998 Grammy Hall of Fame Award for "Take Me Home, Country Roads"

F. Songwriters Hall of Fame

- Inducted in 1996

G. Other Recognition

- Poet Laureate of Colorado, 1977

- People Choice Awards, 1977
- Ten Outstanding Young Men of America, 1979
- Carl Sandburg's People's Poet Award, 1982
- NASA Public Service Medal, 1985
- Albert Schweitzer Music Award, 1993

Death

On October 12, 1997, Denver was killed at the age of 53, when his experimental Rutan Long-EZ plane, aircraft registration number N555JD, crashed into the Pacific Ocean near Pacific Grove, California, while making a series of touch-and-go landings at the nearby Monterey Peninsula Airport. The National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) accident ID is LAX98FA008. Denver was the only occupant of the aircraft. As the crash badly disfigured Denver's head and body, making identification by dental records impossible, records of his fingerprints taken from his arrests for intoxicated driving were used to confirm that the fallen pilot was indeed the singer.

In 1996, nearly a year before the accident, the Federal Aviation Administration had learned of Denver's failure to abstain entirely from alcohol after his drunk driving arrests, and had previously revoked his medical certification. Since Denver was required by the FAA to have at least a third-class medical certification in order to exercise the privileges of his pilot certificate, he was not legally permitted to fly at the time of the accident. However, there was no trace of alcohol or drugs in Denver's body at autopsy.

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