

# John Denver

Mother Nature's Son

John Collis



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## Introduction

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In 1994 John Denver, with the help of a friendly 'ghost' in the form of writer Arthur Tobier, published his autobiography *Take Me Home*. Although it is not a comprehensive nor even a chronological account of his life - Denver lived in the future, and was clearly not a solemn diarist - it is more revealing, candid and self-critical than his image might lead one to expect. When I was invited to write this book, therefore, it was immediately apparent to me that there was no point in simply embarking on an objective, third-person, updated variation on Denver's own theme. At the same time, what he and Tobier had recorded was obviously an invaluable 'research tool' for which I am hugely grateful.

My own feelings about John Denver and his music suggested a solution - another, more fruitful path for me to follow. I have always harboured some reservations about his catalogue of music taken as a whole, while at the same time being intrigued by it. However, if I felt strongly unsympathetic towards it - and as an unreconstructed rock 'n' roller perhaps I should - I would, of course, have been unable to contemplate spending a year writing about it. I have always been keenly aware that the only market for a book about John Denver is likely to be among his admirers.

My reaction was a little more complex than total acceptance or rejection (I should perhaps state at this point that all indulgence in the first person singular will cease after this brief introduction). I pay tribute to his considerable strengths in the following pages, and assert an admiration for many of his songs - indeed, I have grown to respect his work as a whole while working on this book, and to enjoy vastly more of it than I expected. But I still feel that as a craftsman he had blind spots and weaknesses, and I feel uncomfortable with the relentless optimism of certain songs,

while acknowledging that it may well be precisely what others seek. I suspect, furthermore, that Denver attracted a minority of fundamentalist fans who will hear nothing but praise for their hero, who feel unalloyed worship, and I regret that I cannot in all honesty cater for them.

My interest in Denver, therefore, is directed more to other areas of his life and work. He was an industry phenomenon, the most successful American solo artist of the 1970s. This is not only striking in itself, but it implies that he could forge an unprecedentedly strong bridge between himself, his work and the unknown listener. Even beyond those fundamentalists he inspired a legion of fervent Denverites – this is intriguing, and demands respect.

He was an ecological activist and, I suspect, a pantheist – two attributes that further engage one’s sympathy. And he was a complex character who wrote uncomplicated songs – he was clearly often at odds with the sanitised image that the world half-knew, and surely he revelled in this contradiction.

I have therefore taken the opportunity to use the charted facts of Denver’s life simply as the scaffolding of the present book. They are, of course, constantly referred to and returned to, but meanwhile I have searched for the opportunity to scuttle off and explore something that his life brings to the surface, and that in turn brings him to life. What is offered, then, in the hope that my interest can be shared, is a subjective exploration of the factors that John Denver’s life and death bring to mind, given a structure by the objective facts that are available. You, of course, would chart the course of a different exploration, but I argue that it would probably be a parallel one.

# ONE

## 12 October 1997

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As someone who had been twice arrested for drunken driving, John Denver could possibly have been flying illegally when he died. On the first occasion, following his arrest on 21 August 1993, he had plea bargained 'no contest' to a lesser charge. He was given probation, and was ordered to play a benefit concert for an organisation who were trying to combat drink-driving by providing the alternative of a free local taxi service.

A year later he crashed his Porsche into a tree near his home in the mountain resort of Aspen, Colorado. It was the night of the final hearing for his second divorce, from Cassandra. After this second drink-driving episode the jury was split. A date for a new hearing was set, and meantime Denver remained in a legal limbo.

Normally someone in this situation would have had his aviation medical certificate revoked pending the trial, and possession of a valid certificate is necessary for a pilot's licence to remain in force. However, Denver had not voluntarily surrendered the document, and so it could perhaps be assumed that he was flying while pending an appeal, even if one had not been formally lodged. A source at the Federal Aviation Authority explained: 'Short of an emergency revocation, the pilot always has due process to challenge the surrender request and a formal revocation if one comes. In this case, no formal official action followed. He was still legal when he flew and he most likely knew it. So do we.'

However, this begs the question as to why the FAA failed to pursue Denver to surrender his licence. And it is in direct contradiction of a further newspaper report that the FAA had



disqualified Denver from holding a certificate in March 1997, having learned that he had violated a previous instruction to abstain from alcohol as a condition of flying.

His legal right to be in the air was also challenged by a spokesman for the National Transportation Safety Board, charged with investigating the fatal accident. This source claimed that he had been deprived of the authority to fly in June 1996, when the required medical certificate was withheld on account of the first drink-driving incident.

This is clearly a murky area but also a very important one, given its bearing on such matters as insurance. And also, of course, on the reputation of the squeaky-clean singer: it may well have been a wife-beating drunk who fell into the ocean, a man not so spotless after all. This is not to speak ill of the dead - just the opposite, in fact. Denver was clearly a far more complex, and therefore interesting, person than the straightforward surface of his music at first suggests.

The plane was an experimental, fibreglass two-seater, a 'Long EZ' built from a kit, and Denver had just taken delivery of it from another pilot. He took off from Monterey Airport at five o'clock in the afternoon, local time, and headed out towards the ocean to practise take-off and landing procedures. He made three attempts to relay his position to the control tower, and his last words were: 'Do you have it now?' At 500 feet, just a hundred yards from the shore, the plane made a popping sound, rose slightly and then fell like a stone. It had been in the air for 27 minutes and, according to one eye witness, 'it just sort of dropped unexpectedly into the ocean'.

This was the second time that Denver had crashed a plane - in April 1989 he had crash-landed in a 1931 biplane at an airport in northern Arizona, and climbed out unhurt. In 1995 he was sued by a flying instructor after allegedly taxiing his plane erratically on the runway of a Wyoming airfield. He was, however, a seasoned flyer - a qualified pilot for more than 20 years at the time of his death, and one

who had been entrusted with the controls of F-15 fighters. And among his billionaire toys was a Lear jet.

A week after the fatal accident, investigators reported that Denver had simply run out of fuel. Seemingly, he had forgotten to check the tanks before take-off, tried to switch to the emergency tank when he realised that the main one was empty, and then perhaps discovered that there was no reserve supply just before his death. It is a matter for conjecture as to how an experienced pilot, as Denver undoubtedly was, could make such an elementary error, surely an impossible mistake if the basic preflight routine of safety checks had been followed.

Indeed, subsequent reports suggested that, although there were indications that the plane had taken off while low on fuel, this had not caused the crash - the more straightforward explanation that Denver had simply lost control of an unfamiliar aircraft was deemed more likely. San Francisco television station KRON-TV admitted that its story of Denver running out of fuel could have been an oversimplification of a local newspaper report.

However, when the National Transportation Safety Board had completed its investigation into the tragedy, as reported in the *Aspen Times* of 23 June 1998, a design modification was revealed. Blueprints for the plane placed the fuel selector handle, which enables the pilot to switch from one tank to the other, within easy reach between his legs. But the builder of this particular model, Adrian Davis Jr, placed the handle behind the pilot's left shoulder so that the fuel lines did not have to enter the cockpit. Ironically a well-intentioned safety measure had simply created another potential danger.

Denver was aware of it, too. On the day of his death he and an airfield technician had tried to lengthen the handle by clamping a pair of pincers to it, to bring it within reach. But this *ad hoc* measure did not solve the problem, and so it was abandoned. Rather than a handle which was close and

easy to use, therefore, Denver would have needed to take his hands off the controls, remove his harness and twist around in his seat to switch from an almost empty tank to a full one. We will never know how he could have toyed with this problem just before he died without thinking to check the fuel situation. Because it does seem that there was no full tank of fuel, either the main supply or on standby. The investigation showed that, with 15 gallons in its tank, the plane under Denver's two-week ownership had made a test flight, travelled down to the Monterey airfield and then taken off on its final brief journey. This would probably have used a little more than 15 gallons, and there was no record of recent refuelling.

A further revelation was that the plane had a 150 horsepower engine, though the design specified 110 to 115 horsepower. Although there is no suggestion that the more powerful engine was unsafe - the designer said that some modified models went as high as 200 horsepower - it would inevitably have used more fuel than the standard design. Add to this a fuel gauge sited outside the natural field of view, and the cause of the tragedy seems clear.

At the time Denver had been staying in his summer home nearby, out on the Monterey Peninsula. His second wife, Cassandra Delaney, lived close by, and so Denver could visit their daughter Jesse Belle, perhaps even hope of reconciliation. On his last night he ate dinner at a regular haunt, Clint Eastwood's Mission Ranch in Carmel. On the following morning, according to the local *Star* newspaper, he played in a five-ball game of golf at the Spyglass Hill Golf Club, overlooking the bay. But as soon as the game was over he headed for the airport, keen to try out his new plane.

In view of the possible conflict between his drinking and his decision to fly that day, it was stressed after the tragedy that no trace of alcohol or any other prohibited drug had been detected in his body. Norman Hicks, the Monterey

county sheriff, commented in *Rolling Stone*: 'No one indicated that he had been drinking anything at all. In fact, the people he was playing golf with say that he had declined drinking a beer that day because he didn't want to impair his flying abilities.' So he had taken his responsibility on board to that extent, but it still seems to be a matter of interpretation, not hard fact, as to whether he should have been in the air in the first place.

The *Star* also revealed some details of Denver's last interview with the paper, describing it as 'eerie'. Talking three days before his death, Denver said: 'When my day comes, I want to be lucky and die doing what I love most - flying. What a glorious way to pass on.' On the following day he had a medical check-up, and was pronounced in excellent health.

The paper also quoted from another prophetic interview. 'I've always been concerned that I'm going to run out of life before all my dreams come even close to being fulfilled,' he said. 'I think that to die before your time, and to me dying before you've really lived, is so tragic. I try to live every day as though it's my last. I hope that when I come face to face with death that I'm ready. I want no regrets.' This is indeed eerie, a strange preoccupation for a fit, very wealthy and supremely successful man seemingly cruising contentedly through middle age. Alas, the journey was not proving that contented, and the drinking was an obvious demonstration of underlying depression at the twofold collapse of his family life. The landlord of a historic pub in the West End of London reports that, on his last visit to the UK, he would come in on his own, sit quietly and morosely, and drink steadily. He was not looking for company, and did not want to be recognised. He had sorrows, and he was drowning them.

When Denver's death was reported, President Clinton spoke in tribute of his 'soaring music [that] evoked the grandeur of our landscape and the simple warmth of human

love. He was a dedicated champion of the environment, spending many hours on the vital work of protecting natural heritage. And he opened many doors to understanding among nations, through his tours of the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam.' Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary said that 'if he had sung the telephone book you would have felt a sense of joy with it, because he would have sung it joyfully'.

Another intriguing tribute, published in *Billboard* on 25 October in a Chet Flippo piece headed, 'ARTIST, ACTIVIST DENVER LOST TO CRASH', came from Michael Greene, the president of the National Academy of Recorded Arts and Sciences. Greene made an extraordinarily high claim for Denver in catalysing a shift in social attitudes among a whole generation of 'aware' Americans. He said that Denver's 'voice and music helped an entire generation make the transition from the rebellion of the '60s and the '70s to the positive, proactive naturalism of the late '70s and early '80s'.

This is a somewhat conservative view in that it dismissed the conscience-awakening of the 1960s with the negative, dead-end word 'rebellion' - it was, after all, a rebellion that broke down racial barriers in America and helped to make the Vietnam War untenable, to take just two positive examples - but it is a weighty tribute nonetheless.

Newspaper headlines reporting the news of Denver's death called him the 'Cosmic Cowboy', 'The Space Cowboy', or more simply the 'Country Boy'. To *Rolling Stone* he was a 'country-pop star'. He would have revelled in the attempts to pin down his style. In the UK, the *Daily Mail* piece was headed 'A SINGER WHO REACHED FOR THE STARS BUT ALWAYS FELL TO EARTH', summing up not just the manner of his tragic death but the dichotomy between image and reality - a flawed Mr Clean. And the *Guardian* headline pinpointed another of the contrasts apparent in his life and career: 'LOVED BY FANS, LOATHED BY CRITICS'.

Although *Melody Maker*, which in its heyday provided the broadest coverage of pop music among the UK magazines, seemed to think itself too hip to pay tribute to Denver, the somewhat racier *New Musical Express* did publish an obituary two weeks after the crash. It could not remain entirely respectful, of course – it referred to his ‘saccharine pop ballads’ and captioned the accompanying picture ‘Denver: Fondly Remembered Muppet Guest’. However, it also paid tribute to his visits to the USSR and Vietnam, to his Chernobyl benefit, to the founding of his ecology organisation, Windstar, and to the fact that in 1993 he had been awarded the Albert Schweitzer Music Prize, which is ‘given to outstanding humanitarians’.

Colin Escott, who along with Martin Hawkins is the world’s acknowledged expert on the legendary Memphis record label Sun, has written at length about Denver and once referred to the disparity encapsulated in the *Guardian* headline. ‘When you dominate popular music the way John Denver did,’ he said, ‘no one can call you “lucky” any more. When you’re in the charts for a decade and then some, when you sell out concert after concert, when you set a house record at venues like the Universal Amphitheatre . . . then it means you’re speaking for – and to – a generation.’

Escott points out that it is inevitable that when this happens ‘the self-appointed pundits, critics and taste gurus will hate you’, but that this is irrelevant in the face of the artist’s ability to touch so many people’s lives.

Denver himself expressed the opinion that ‘most of the critics who write negatively about me are people working in big cities, on big newspapers or magazines. I come in singing about the mountains, the wilderness, about love and family.’ Escott tellingly describes Denver’s vision as that of ‘America before the fall’. The fall of Adam and Eve, presumably – fig leaves may be involved, but not the leaves on every autumnal tree.

Denver was a political activist who grew up surrounded by the right-wing military establishment. He was a clean-cut guy who could get nasty. And he was certainly not without a sense of humour. Years after his remarkable dominance of the American charts had ended almost as suddenly as it began, he could make the tongue-in-cheek boast: 'I've got five or six songs in every karaoke bar in the world!' Earlier, on the successful TV specials made during his years of fame, his co-stars were invited to insult his trademark appearance with gusto. When he appeared as Pinocchio, with a daft grin slashed across his goofy face, it elicited the comment, 'That's a face only a woodpecker could love.' On another show, his boyhood dreams of being a star were cruelly put down. 'You got good hair, but it just looks stupid.' He was proud of his success, but not precious about it. And no doubt his vast wealth, in itself a direct barometer of his popularity, allowed him to shrug off the snide remarks about his music and appearance, and even to join in with them.

The music business gets a little uncomfortable when it cannot squeeze an artist into a familiar pigeonhole. As the hints to record-shop assistants used to say on the outer sleeve of vinyl albums, 'File under Rock' or 'File under Jazz' - put a label on it, otherwise we can't sell it. And yet John Denver thrived while always resisting categorisation. Certainly his background was in the folk music of West Coast coffee houses and clubs, but his mature work does not identify him as a folk singer. For a start almost all of his material was contemporary, newly minted, usually by himself. And his producer Milt Okun's liking for 'sweetening' the sound with string sections and woodwind took it a long way from traditional roots.

Some of Denver's songs draw on country-and-western sounds, either in the exhilarating singalong freedom of 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' or in the corny hokum of 'Thank God I'm a Country Boy'. But Denver would never own up to being a country singer - indeed, towards the end of his life

he confessed that he felt out of touch and out of sympathy with contemporary trends in country music. By the mid-'80s his relationship with his record company, RCA, had deteriorated because he hated their last-ditch attempt to turn him into a country singer – even though he adopted the pose so superbly. He often sang about the countryside, of course, and about natural phenomena, but that is not the same thing.

And he was certainly not a rock singer. He seems to lack any intuitive feel for the rhythmic pulse of rock 'n' roll, although this may have been simply because he was not interested in exploring it. Similarly with the country-rock hybrid, which usually displays an empathy for the blues that is missing in Denver's work. He does not bend a note, nor employ the bluesman's technique in slurring the third or seventh note in the scale to support the feeling of the lyric. He just hits the notes, pure and simple. As for the sometimes-used term 'countryopolitan', it simply seems too ungainly and cumbersome to try and work out whether it fits.

Instead, Denver drew on existing styles, notably country and folk, but guided them towards the pop mainstream. His songs have the structural simplicity of folk music, and often betray a country twang. But their outstanding quality is found in the purity and range of Denver's voice, and it is this that makes him so distinctive.

Objective listeners undoubtedly find some of his songs overly sentimental, even cloying, without the stiffening sense of irony that can usefully counteract sweetness, and they may feel that as a songsmith, a craftsman, he sometimes seemed too easily satisfied with the technical or rhythmic structure of a piece. Reviewing a 1982 concert for the *St Paul Dispatch*, critic Laura Fissinger expressed these reservations tellingly. 'Apparently, his fans don't notice the lack of artistic and emotional counterpoint, but casual listeners find it a nearly insurmountable obstacle . . .



Denver's fans get angry when others call him treacly and sentimental, and it's understandable. The world desperately needs to act on the things he sings about. But Denver's writing is so unrelentingly chipper and clichéd that he too frequently becomes a parody of himself, taking all those worthwhile messages into cartoon land with him.'

But what no one can deny is that his voice was a quite remarkable instrument, and what this criticism ignores is the numerous songs that chart the turbulence of his private life. They may not have the depth of observation and the constantly surprising imagery that one associates with, say, a Bob Dylan, but unrelentingly chipper they are not.

Denver's longtime collaborator, his producer Milt Okun, illustrated one technical aspect of his music - both a limitation and, in its way, a positive virtue - in a reminiscence published after Denver's death. 'Some years ago I was in Salzburg, where John did a Christmas special, *The Sound of Christmas*, with Julie Andrews. A young American woman who managed the King Sisters, who were also on the show, said she loved John's music. She wondered why he never did a song in a minor key. I told her that among 150 songs or so, surely some were written in a minor key. I told John about it, and he thought that was strange. Back in LA, I pored through his catalogue, and I couldn't find a bloody song in a minor key. He lived his whole life in a major key.'

When his vocal virtuosity combines at the highest level with a lyric that effectively expresses his passion for the natural world, we can hear what made John Denver unique. This surely reached a peak in 'The Eagle and the Hawk', and extraordinary marriage of vocal pyrotechnics and pantheistic feeling for nature, a synthesis that belongs to him alone.

This 1971 song made its first appearance on Denver's fifth album *Aerie*. It is little more than a fragment, suggesting a spontaneous burst of inspiration that could not be laboured

over for fear of losing the moment, just as Coleridge could work no more on 'Kubla Khan' once his head cleared. It is a moment that Denver describes in *Take Me Home*. After the huge success of 'Take Me Home, Country Roads' he was approached by the producer of an ABC documentary about birds of prey, Robert Rieger, to contribute a song to the soundtrack. Not only was he keen to comply, having been interested in the fact that the eagle has had a symbolic importance to various cultures throughout history, but it also gave him a good excuse to join the crew out in Idaho, where he made himself useful by helping to shift the filming gear around.

Denver encountered the eagle and the hawk on that trip (two birds, though following the *Oxford* definition of a hawk as a 'diurnal bird of prey', to distinguish it from the owls, an eagle *is* a hawk). The golden eagle was one rescued by the ornithologist working on the film, Morley Nelson, and the hawk was a red-tailed juvenile being treated for a broken wing.

When the young hawk was fit enough to be released back into the wild, Denver was given the eagle to hold. He describes how at one moment the eagle's nictitating membrane lifted from its eye, and the bird gazed at him for 20 seconds. He was struck by the power of the bird's gaze, and humbled by the fact that it was only interested in him for such a short time. 'The eagle sparked my idealism,' he says. 'This is the way I'd stay grounded, by being in nature and teaching about it.' Sadly, of course, Denver was never actually able to stay grounded for long, and his attempts to get closer to the sensation of the eagle's flight eventually killed him.

The song starts with an increasingly urgent, restless acoustic-guitar riff over which Denver's voice soars in, as if approaching from some aural horizon. His voice, impossibly high and powerful, is of course the eagle. As he describes his flight he suddenly hits a thermal and rises even higher.