

# John Denver

**Singer, Composer, Musician... Father, Son, Brother, Friend**

**December 31, 1943 – October 12, 1997**

*“ I Am A Song  
I Live to Be Sung  
I Sing With All My Heart”*

Little did the man, known as the “American Troubadour,” realize when he packed up his guitar and left Texas Tech University midway through his junior year that he would spend the next thirty years in such an itinerant lifestyle. Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr., the elder son of an Air Force pilot and his Oklahoma sweetheart, came to be heard and loved by America when he entered the folk club scene of Los Angeles early in 1964. After his grandmother had given him her old Gibson guitar as a twelve year old to overcome his shyness, John worked diligently on his music; thus, it was not surprising that he decided to leave behind his study of architecture to take his chance on becoming a professional singer. Taking the name of **John Denver** so his name would fit onto a record label, the nearly perfect-pitch tenor grew and developed as a singer and songwriter, mesmerizing his audiences with the beauty of his voice and the connection of his words. Denver’s next step along his thirty-three year highway of success led him to filling the spot as the lead singer in the Chad Mitchell Trio, a popular folk group known for its satiric yet poignant style that meshed with the college audiences of the turbulent 1960’s. After being selected from over 250 singers who auditioned, John developed a stage presence that made him ever determined to become a “star.” His tenure with the new “Mitchell Trio,” lasting for two years, led to additional songwriting and a growth of confidence for John Denver.

As the folk group music trends waned, Denver developed his own personal identity as a solo singer and songwriter. Having written the song “Leaving on a Jet Plane” that rose to number one on the music charts for popular folk singers Peter, Paul, and Mary, Denver continued to travel the country, developing his own music style. Through his personal connection with the audience and his role as a true “communicator” with a genuine message to be told, John Denver molded his unique talents, allowing him to express his feelings and observations of all humans everywhere. As John often commented to his audiences, “My music and my work stem from the conviction that people everywhere are intrinsically the same.”

## EARLY CAREER and STARDOM

Married by then to Annie Martell of Minnesota, whom he met while traveling with the Mitchell Trio, the young couple would become the parents of two adopted, multi-cultural children whom John would say were “meant to be” theirs. Having initially developed his concerns for humanity and the environment as a young child, whose own family had to acclimate to new homes around the globe with his father in the Air Force, John had learned how to express those early concerns in music while maturing with the Mitchell Trio. His commitment to those causes evolved with more intensity as his popularity grew as a musician. John Denver was determined to do more than just entertain; he wanted “to make a difference in the world.”

Million sellers became the norm for John Denver as the hit songs exploded from him during the decade of the 1970’s, when he was at one time the top recording artist in the world. Hits such as “**Take Me Home, Country Roads,**” “**Sunshine on My Shoulders,**” “**Rocky Mountain High,**” “**Thank God, I’m a Country Boy,**” and “**Back Home Again**” are recognized now the world over, as well as the songs of dedication for the special people in his life. “**Annie’s Song,**” written in ten minutes on a ski lift in Aspen, is still said to be the most popular wedding song worldwide. People everywhere learned of the committed research for the oceans of the world by Jacques Cousteau through John’s song “**Calypso.**” Written to honor Cousteau and his work, a whole new vision evolved for the people of the 70’s to become stewards of the Earth, dedicated to its environment. All of John’s music has always been filled with metaphors from nature, thereby demonstrating his own love for the out-of- doors while encouraging that same kind love and respect from others.

Throughout the decade of the 1970’s, John was recognized in various ways for his musical talents with many awards. In 1971, he received the Country Music Awards Song of the Year for “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” Then, in 1974 he was honored with the *Cashbox* magazine’s Number One Artist and Number One Album for *John Denver’s Greatest Hits*; the ASCAP Top Album of the Year for *John Denver’s Greatest Hits*; and for *Record World’s* Top Male Recording Artist. In 1975, John received the *Peoples’ Choice Award* for Favorite Musical Performer as well as the American Guild of Vocal Artists award for Singing Star of the Year. In 1977, John Denver was honored by the governor of Colorado with the “**Poet Laureate of Colorado**” recognition; in 1979, the U.S. Jaycees named John Denver as one of the Ten Outstanding Men of America. Throughout the decade he amassed a total of fourteen gold albums and eight platinum albums in the U.S. alone. In an update in June 2001, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced that RCA had audited and updated the John Denver music catalogue. His record sales totals from RCA have reached an all-time total of 32.5 million albums. This does not include overseas sales nor his work with his own record label, Windstar Records.

## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

John's professional growth also showed great advancement during this time period. After several guest appearances on some hit television series at that time, such as "Owen Marshall: Attorney at Law," and the "Dennis Weaver Show," John was offered the opportunity to star in a feature film. His first attempt at acting in a Hollywood film occurred in 1977 when he co-starred with George Burns in a family-oriented movie titled *Oh, God!* What appealed to John was the message from this film: We are all in this together, and it's up to us to take care of each other. This huge hit assured John's place as a true entertainer, with multiple talents just waiting to be developed. He told television Host Phil Donahue at that time that he "refused to 'not' take advantage of every opportunity" made available for him to grow as an artist and a more complete entertainer. John was a willing and "quick-study" artist, craving to grow and expand in a wide diversity of performance areas. The offers and the respect from the world's entertainment industry during those times were immeasurable.

John Denver performed along with Frank Sinatra in 1978 to sell-out shows at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe, California, and he developed a yearly musical-variety special for ABC television over a ten year span. His guests included the most popular entertainers at that time, including Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Tony Bennett, Dick Van Dyke, George Goebel, Danny Kaye, Beverly Sills, Erma Bombeck, Olivia Newton-John, Valerie Harper, and many others. John Denver appeared frequently on popular 'talk shows' with Mike Douglas and Merv Griffin, who once said that "America fell in love with the talents of this young man the first time he appeared." Denver was a frequent guest from 1972 through the early 1990's on the very popular *TONIGHT Show with Johnny Carson* and later with Jay Leno. Bob Hope also recognized the talents of Denver, including him in several of Hope's specials for television. (Merv Griffin. *The Merv Griffin Show*. 1986.)

In 1976 John Denver was tapped to host the Emmy Awards, and he hosted the Grammy Awards four times from 1978-1984 for Producer Pierre Cossette. John Denver was also a frequent and favorite Guest Host for Johnny Carson's *TONIGHT Show*. In 1981 John received a special "Premier Artist Award" from RCA, his record producer then, after garnering record worldwide sales of over ten million albums for *John Denver's Greatest Hits*. Also in '81, Denver hosted his own unique *Music and the Mountains* special for television, accompanied by the Aspen Music Camp and the Aspen, Colorado, Symphony Orchestra from on top of the nearby Rocky Mountains. In this production, John joined concert violinist Itzhak Perlman for a duo, playing both a guitar and also his own mandolin. He later recorded his enormously popular song "Perhaps Love" with the opera star Placido Domingo; several years later, John co-starred with Domingo for a special Christmas production for television in 1987 from Austria, along with star Julie Andrews. The two men, musical giants in their own genre, also reunited to perform at the special Carnegie Hall Anniversary celebration in New York. Both held enormous respect for the other's talents and friendship.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

As John's concerts around the United States were always sellouts, so did his immense popularity increase around the world as well. Often, his concerts were taped for television specials in the various countries including Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand, Ireland, and eventually into Japan, Russia, China, and the Far East. John's interest in using the friendly medium of television served for more than just his own personal singing, however. John was a friend and cohort of the late Jim Henson, the creator of the famous "Muppets" that were adored by children and adults alike. The two united on several occasions to produce some of the most memorable programs for children on both public and commercial television, shown all around the world over many years. John Denver appeared proudly on these specials with the lovable, furry creatures, the most famous being his 1981 *John Denver and the Muppets: A Christmas Together*. John also aired another Muppet special titled *Rocky Mountain Holiday* in 1984, where he took the Muppets into the beautiful Maroon Bells Park of the Rocky Mountains, in Colorado, for a camping trip. No one knew whether the Muppets or John Denver had the most fun on that trip! He took such joy in living life to the fullest, and he taught others how to do so as well.

Additional television specials by Denver also included several other types of educational and documentary events, some of which garnered awards for him. In 1971, John was asked to create the theme song for a documentary titled *The Eagle and the Hawk*, which introduced Morley Nelson, noted ornithologist, to John Denver. Nelson, along with Nell Newman, daughter of Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, was working to restore to health a Red-tailed Hawk and a Bald Eagle. This show encouraged John's interest in birds of prey as he joined the filming crew in Idaho to record his song "The Eagle and the Hawk," which also greatly showcased John's vast singing range. Then in 1972, John met with Tommy Tompkins, noted outdoorsman and former Canadian Mountie, to go into British Columbia, Canada, to film their journey in search of lost herds of bighorn sheep in the Canadian Rockies. This documentary was titled *Day of the Bighorn*, and again, another song resulted titled "Rocky Mountain Suite." In 1978 John traveled by horseback, airplane, and glider through the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and areas of Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons in Wyoming to film the award-winning special *Rocky Mountain Reunion*. John, along with several members of the Colorado Division of Wildlife, a Falcon researcher, and a government trapper traveled on various journeys through parts of these states for the purpose of reuniting some very rare, endangered native animals into their natural habitat. Animals such as wolverines, Trumpeter Swans, pelicans, otters, Greenback Trout, Perigrine Falcons, and Golden Eagles were carefully carried by John and the others to re-establish their habitats in their native land. Again as before, John sang the song that resulted, "I'm Flying Again," as he flew his glider along side a glorious Golden Eagle. John flourished, not just as an entertainer, but as an avid environmentalist and humanitarian.

## DOCUMENTARIES AND PASSIONS

For another educational and award-winning documentary, John Denver and ABC television joined together in 1978 for a wonderful film titled *Alaska: American Child*. John met and traveled with several bush pilots who had moved from the lower 48 states to be challenged by the “wildness and natural beauty” of Alaska. This was John’s way of helping to educate the people of America with “our national treasure,” the state of Alaska, its beauty and its culture. This film was used to help convince the U. S. Congress to adopt the **Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act** (1980) which created the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that preserves that very most northern part of Alaska for its natural habitat.

Along with John’s father, Lt. Col. “Dutch” Deutchendorf, John also hosted an award winning television special in 1980 titled *The Higher We Fly: the History of Flight*. This production was honored by the Houston Film Festival and won the coveted Osborn Award from the Aviation/Space Writers’ Association. John had earned his own pilot’s license in the mid-70’s, with the help of his Air Force father’s training, and he flew everything from his own Lear Jet to his beloved aerobatic airplanes and gliders. In this special John himself piloted everything from a homemade replica of the original Wright brothers’ first airplane to an Air Force F-15 fighter aircraft. He also took us along as he personally demonstrated a ride in NASA’s Space Shuttle Simulator. John took us into the realm of outer space as he visited a planetarium in New Mexico, learning about the latest findings of our universe. John’s natural love of flying additionally led to his dedication to NASA and America’s work with outer space, and he worked diligently to help create the “Citizens in Space” program. In 1985 John received the **NASA “Public Service Medal”** for “helping to increase awareness of space exploration by the peoples of the world,” normally reserved for spaceflight engineers and designers. Also in 1985, John Denver passed NASA’s physical exam and was a finalist for space flight, scheduled to possibly make the first citizen’s trip on the Space Shuttle in 1986. After that fateful explosion of the flight with teacher Christa McAuliffe aboard, John dedicated his song “Flying for Me” to all of the astronauts, as he continued his support for NASA. [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov)

Another way that John Denver connected with people, especially with thousands of would-be sports enthusiasts, was to educate us about the art of skiing with *The John Denver Celebrity Pro-Am Ski Tournaments*. This was a yearly television special, produced from 1975 through 1984 on NBC Sports Television and held at Heavenly Valley near Lake Tahoe, California. John, along with family, celebrity, and sports friends, competed to raise funds for various charity events. John offered free entertainment to participants in order to raise money for many worthy causes, including his beloved Windstar-- the environmental educational research organization that evolved from John’s childhood dream. This tournament led to John’s work as a performer and **Commentator** for the **1984 Sarejevo Winter Olympics**, where John was asked by Roone Arlidge, president of ABC Sports, to compose and sing its theme song, "**The Gold and Beyond.**" John also interviewed many locals and sang at schools, plus for the athletes of the Olympic Games.

John also later hosted the Greater Phoenix Pro-Am Golf Tournament for several years, as his love and talent for the game of golf grew as well. He was for many years a popular celebrity participant in the annual Bob Hope Celebrity Pro-Am Golf Tournament that later became the Pebble Beach Celebrity Pro-Am Golf Tournament in Monterey, California. John Denver was also an avid fisherman, appearing as a guest celebrity, along with his son Zachary, on the *Outdoor's Fly Fishing the World* Show where he caught the largest brown trout ever by a guest. John Denver never did anything halfway!

Another passion of John Denver's was art, and his specialty was in the realm of photography. He was a talented painter, but with his traveling schedule, he decided to make use of the unique environments in which he found himself. John once stated that "photography is a way to communicate a feeling," and he held his premier showing in 1980 at the **Hammer Gallery in New York City**. In this show, John displayed his photographs that featured everything from "Country Roads" from Europe to the U. S. as well as macro close-ups of flowers and caterpillars. This show was a benefit fundraiser for the Windstar Foundation, his "non-profit environmental education organization, organized to promote a holistic approach to addressing environmental concerns." John's photography was still another unique expression of his wonderful artistic talent. (<http://wstar.org>)

## **NEWER RECORDINGS AND WORKS**

During the period of the mid to late 1980's, John Denver spent an enormous amount of his time dedicated to the worthy causes to which he had committed himself over the years, including the environment, world hunger, outer space, as well as peace in the world. As a result, his recordings had become almost secondary to what he then wanted to do with his life, using his celebrity status to help solve those problems in the world. Yet John Denver created some of the most beautiful songs that he'd ever written during the late 80's and early 90's. Several of John's albums during that time period were recorded on his own label, Windstar Records, and are not counted in the total of sales through RCA.

Some of his work also took on a new image, as in *Dreamland Express* in 1985; John made one of his first music videos to "Don't Close Your Eyes Tonight." This video allowed him to show a more mature side that he had not demonstrated in his work before. Although John Denver had incorporated the use of videos to enhance the background of his songs in all of his concerts since the early 70's, the new trend in music was to embellish the singer's recordings with videos for television music programs. Another powerful album from that time period was *One World* in 1986, with John's song of dedication to the lost Space Shuttle and the astronauts of NASA. This album also contained the legendary "Let Us Begin: What Are We Making Weapons For?" Powerful videos that included actual footage of historic events enhanced both songs. "Let Us Begin..." was also recorded for a single, joining John Denver with Alexander Gradsky, the most popular recording artist in the

Soviet Union. This was the first time ever that a Soviet citizen was allowed to record with a Western artist, and this single was recorded in Moscow (Denver 198).

The two later performed this song together on stages concurrently from both Russia and America, and later in Japan where John was hosting an Earth Day 1990 program, as well as in various venues around the world. Gradsky was also a guest singer at Windstar for the summer "Choices For the Future" Symposium.

Another album with newer John Denver songs from that time period also includes *Higher Ground*, from 1989 with "Sing Australia," John's dedication written to honor the Australian Bicentennial when he was invited to host that celebration. His beautiful love song titled "For You" was included on this album, plus another video resulted for the song "Country Girl in Paris." Two more songs, "All This Joy" and "Falling Leaves (The Refugees)" dealt with the same themes of resolving hunger and peace in the world. The song "Higher Ground" became the theme of a series of lectures that John presented around the country and world during 1989-1990, representing the work of Windstar.

John also added video footage to the song "Raven's Child," written after the oil disaster at Prince William Sound in Alaska and recorded on *Earth Songs* in 1990, as well as on *The Flower that Shattered the Stone* album. John was shown in the video visiting the disaster area one year after the event in 1990 with Jay Hair, then president of the National Wildlife Federation. *Earth Songs* was produced and sold through the National Wildlife Federation, and they also joined in partnership with Windstar at that time. The National Wildlife Federation also honored John Denver in 1990 with its **Conservation Achievement Award**.

Another beautiful album from 1990 was titled *The Flower that Shattered the Stone* after the title song, which was written by John's good friend and Colorado poet Joe Henry. The title song was also recorded with Japanese artist Kosetsu Minami, at one time known as the "Japanese John Denver." He, too, was a strong environmentalist, working to preserve Lake Biwa, a large freshwater lake in Japan. He and John held a joint concert in conjunction with a conference on the pollution of bodies of freshwater in the world. One of John Denver's most beautiful songs titled "The Gift You Are" is also from this album, written at the birth of daughter Jesse Belle but dedicated to all the people of the world. John stressed that all people everywhere are a "gift" of love to each other. John also wrote and recorded in 1990 the title song for the album *Christmas Like a Lullaby*, along with his personal arrangements of other traditional Christmas songs. This followed the birth of Jesse Belle, the daughter he shared with his second wife, Australian Cassandra Delaney. And if John's music was a reflection of his life, then his title song for the 1991 album *Different Directions* was the story of his second marriage, falling apart after only three years. The song "Amazon: Let This Be A Voice," celebrating his dedication to working for the betterment of the world, was also on this album, and "Let This Be A Voice" became the title of John's final television documentary.

John would eventually star in several made-for television movies, including the 1986 Disney Productions of *The Leftovers* and *The Christmas Gift*, delightful, family-oriented films. In 1987 John was recruited for the critically acclaimed *Hallmark Hall of Fame* production of *Foxfire*, written by and co-starring Hume Cronin and his wife Jessica Tandy. Set in the Great Smoky Mountains, John found a kindred spirit and great training through the unique companionship of Cronin and Tandy. In 1988 John Denver sacrificed the opportunity to star as the lead on Broadway in the Pierre Cossette production of *The Will Rogers Follies*, for which he had planned to write the songs and help score the musical. As fate would have it, CBS television offered him a pilot for a weekly series titled *Higher Ground*, where he would use his talents as a pilot with it set in Alaska. Unfortunately for John, this series did not move beyond the pilot stage, and John was left behind with the Broadway production as well. *Christmas In Aspen* in 1988 brought back many memories of John's first Christmas special, *Rocky Mountain Christmas* from his "hometown" in 1976. Once again around a roaring fire with family and friends, John reminded us of the meaning of the season. In 1991, *Montana Christmas Skies* brought together John's older children, Zachary and Anna Kate, with John, his band, and several country singing stars as they joined with the Assiniboine and Gros-Ventre Indian Tribes of north central Montana. The television special was filmed on location at the Ft. Belknap Reservation for a glorious holiday celebration. John Denver's last performance as an actor was in the made-for-video production of *Walking Thunder*, filmed in 1993 and telling the story of a family's journey into the wild and unknown lands as settlers of the American West. This was released in Europe originally and in the U.S. in 1998, after John's loss.

Also, during the 80's and into the 90's John Denver was a perennial favorite performer with the Boston Pops Orchestra, as well as other orchestras around the world. John Williams especially, as Conductor of the Boston Pops, maintained a high regard for John and labeled him the "true Renaissance Man." Williams would often tap John Denver to perform for various events celebrating America, often for the July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations in both New York City and Washington, D.C. John Williams wrote the song "America, the Dream Goes On" for John Denver to sing, as the headline singer, for the "Lady Liberty" celebration when the Statue of Liberty was rededicated after a period of reconstruction. In 1989 John Denver was one of the entertainers requested to participate in a wonderful musical event at the White House called "An Evening At The White House." In 1990 he hosted "Christmas In Washington" for the president, his cabinet and staff, plus their families. His final Christmas concert was in 1996 with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. This was recorded and released for the public as a CD in 2001.

## FINAL PRODUCTIONS

The final major musical production for television by John Denver came in early 1995 in New York City. *The Wildlife Concert* was a live musical concert production by Sony/ Legacy Records for the benefit of the Wildlife Conservation Society, the oldest environmental organization in the United States, based at the Bronx Zoo. This live concert, taped for producing a CD as well as a video to benefit the Wildlife Conservation Society, attracted thousands of John's fans for the taping from around the world over two, cold and snowy nights in Manhattan. The program was shown on Father's Day on the "Arts and Entertainment" channel on cable television where "A & E" garnered its highest ratings ever. The sales of both the video and CD created a whole new audience for Denver, and he later received in 1997 another gold record for this recording. This program has also been used by local PBS affiliates during its fund-raising campaigns, due to its great popularity.

*All Aboard* was the final album that John recorded, filled with songs about trains, as they impacted the development of this country. None of the songs recorded were John's original works, but this album did generate a Grammy Award for the Best Children's Album, posthumously given in 1998; John's children accepted this.

One final television program that John Denver was just completing prior to his loss was in conjunction with the *Nature* program on the Public Broadcasting System.

*Let This Be A Voice* was a joint documentary effort, with Sandy Ostertag as partner and producer, where John was returning to several favorite places in the wilderness to show how man can truly make a difference. First, however, John traveled for five days through the Grand Canyon on a guided raft, down the Colorado River, with his son Zachary and his younger daughter, Jesse Belle. In all of his years of environmental work, John had never rafted through the Grand Canyon, and while on this journey he was working on a new song. He wanted to express his joy of "coming home" for the wolves that had been allowed to inhabit Yellowstone National Park once again. His song was titled "Yellowstone, Coming Home," and he would sing portions of it periodically as he worked through the journey; a personal recording was used for the finale of the show since he was never able to record it professionally before his untimely death. John was also shown teaching his daughter about fossils and swimming through a waterfall, along with filming the journey as they traveled. In addition to the Grand Canyon trip, John later reunited with Morley Nelson in Idaho once again, rappelling down a cliff with the 86 year old ornithologist to investigate a Bald Eagle's nest. John was thrilled to learn that the majestic bird was no longer facing the danger of extinction, as a result of the dedication of men like Nelson. John also took us again to Alaska to visit with his good friend and fishing companion, Stu Ramstadt.

We journeyed along with John on Stu's airplane to an area where the caribou were migrating; this was perhaps the largest herd ever filmed in one place. John and Stu "rested" in the middle of the herd as thousands wandered all around them. This production was perhaps the finest tribute that John Denver could have left for his fellow humans to experience, and it was surely a true picture of just what John Denver, the man, was all about.

## COMMITMENT AS A WORLD CITIZEN

During those mid years of meteoric fame of the 1970's, John Denver also began his long and true commitment to the peoples of the world. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter named John Denver as a member of the President's Commission on World and Domestic Hunger, from which he personally co-founded **The Hunger Project**. John served on this commission with President Carter for two years, and he remained dedicated to helping to resolve the problems of hunger and starvation in the world. The Hunger Project has grown and developed into a worldwide service/educational organization, currently operating in over twenty countries and 2000 communities around the globe; John Denver remained committed to The Hunger Project throughout his lifetime. In conjunction with The Hunger Project and the United Nations UNICEF organization, John was tapped to be a member of the fact-finding delegation sent to Africa in the early 1980's to learn as well as to offer ideas to the villagers. Devastated by years of drought and starvation in these countries, including Zimbabwe, Somalia, Burkina Faso, and Mozambique, where no one spoke English, John Denver communicated with his music. The children gathered all around him, and the love he shared was what they returned to him. He also visited the slums of India to raise the awareness to the travesty of hunger for all the governments from around the globe. John went before Congress to testify in support of funding for these world causes. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan conferred on John Denver the Presidential **World Without Hunger Award** for his "vision, initiative, and leadership in the effort to achieve a world without hunger" and for his years of dedication and commitment to this worldwide cause.

From his personal dedication as a "global citizen," John Denver also fought for world peace, linking the two as precipitous causes for the other. Denver wrote several songs for both causes, including "I Want to Live," which, along with an accompanying film, he dedicated as the anthem for the Hunger Project; "It's About Time"; and the rousing "Let Us Begin: What Are We Making Weapons For?" In 1986 John Denver was appointed as a **United Nations Goodwill Ambassador** by U. N. High Commissioner Jean-Pierre Hocke at *Refugee Gala*, a fund-raising telethon for refugees. John was dedicated to the work of the United Nations as well, and he served on several commissions with **UNICEF**, (United Nations International Children's Education Fund) as well as with **UNESCO** (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). He later worked directly, just prior to his death, with the **U. N. Pathways to Peace Mission**, seeking ways to encourage a peaceful coexistence in the world for all.

## FIRST AMERICAN ARTIST BEHIND IRON CURTAIN

Another way that John Denver communicated with the people of the world occurred when he was the very first American artist allowed to perform in the former Soviet Union since the suspension of cultural ties between the two countries in 1980. In 1984 John had been invited by the Soviet Union of Composers to perform in their country; the successful results of that led to a concert tour by John Denver in 1985. He later returned to the Soviet Union in 1987 as the first artist to perform a benefit concert for the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. He even considered an offer that was made by the Soviet Space Agency for him to fly into space aboard the Russian spaceship Mir. Because it would mean spending a year away from his family, he opted not to do that; he wanted to be home for the birth of Jesse Belle.

In October of 1992 John was also the first Western artist to perform a multi-city tour of mainland China. John had performed at the White House several years earlier for the visiting Chinese officials, and he had made a point to learn some of his songs in Chinese for the premier. When he visited China, he was surprised and delighted to realize that the Chinese people actually knew his songs, in English. From there, John was also allowed into North Vietnam, again as the first Western artist to perform there. The audiences have always been large in Europe, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Now he had an entirely new following in the Asian world who also loved his voice and message. Also in 1992, John Denver founded **Plant-It 2000**, “a non-profit tree planting foundation, dedicated to properly planting, maintaining and protecting as many indigenous trees as possible worldwide.” <http://plantit2000.com> John’s dedication to the environment was as never-ending as his dreams for a “peaceful and environmentally sustainable future.” <http://wstar.org>

## LASTING RECOGNITIONS

Two of the most prestigious awards that John Denver received before his untimely death included the **Albert Schweitzer Music Award** and John’s induction into the **Songwriters’ Hall of Fame**. Albert Schweitzer is probably best remembered as a missionary, physician, humanitarian, philosopher, and Nobel Prize winner, yet he also was a concert organist and musicologist. In his memory, the Albert Schweitzer Institute for the Humanities has presented this renowned **Albert Schweitzer Music Award** to the musician who best exemplifies what Schweitzer represented in the world. For the first time ever, in 1993 this award was presented to a non-classical musician when daughter Rhena Schweitzer Miller presented John Denver with this esteemed honor. She stated as she presented this that it was *"For a life's work dedicated to music and devoted to humanity."*

Then, in 1996 John Denver again was thrilled upon being inducted into the **Songwriters’ Hall of Fame**, a lasting recognition for a lifetime devoted to the universality of music. As John frequently spoke, “Music does bring people together. It allows us to experience the same emotions. People everywhere are the same in heart and spirit.... Music proves: We are the same.” (*John Denver: A Legacy of Song*, 4.)

## WINDSTAR FOUNDATION/ WINDSTAR LAND CONSERVANCY

My music and my work stem from the conviction that people everywhere are intrinsically the same,' John Denver often spoke. 'When I write a song, I want to take the personal experience or observation that inspired it and express it in as universal a way as possible. I'm a global citizen. I think we all are--at least we've all got to start thinking that way. I want to work in whatever I do with my music, my writing, my performing, my commitments, my home and personal life--in a way that is directed toward a world in balance, a world that creates a better quality of life for all people.' This conviction, among others, led John in 1976 to co-found Windstar Foundation, a non-profit environmental, education and research center whose aim is to promote a sustainable future for the world. *(John Denver: A Legacy of Song, 3-4.)*

Probably the one accomplishment with John Denver's work of which he was the most proud and dedicated, along with his music, was the Windstar Foundation. Windstar began as a childhood dream where John wanted to have a place, high in the mountains, where he could join with people from around the world to work cooperatively for the good of the world. This concept grew for John when he and Thomas Crum first became associated with each other. Tom was a mathematician, then teacher, and marital arts expert in Aspen, specializing in Aikido. When John's road manager, Kris O'Connor, brought the two together for Tom to become John's own personal trainer and security expert, the two men developed a bond as kindred spirits. John and Tom grew "in sync philosophically" as well as idealistically; they collaborated in what would become called the Windstar Foundation, "an institution that was school, meeting place, and model environment combined" (Denver 134).

As John Denver wrote in his autobiography in 1994:

Windstar, in its original conception, was in part going to be...  
a demonstration of what we know scientifically and technologically that is in harmony with nature. We were looking at the use of energy in the world. ...In developing Windstar, Tom Crum and I focused on renewable forms of energy: the wind and the sun. ...Even before I thought of the sun as energy, I connected to it pragmatically: the sun as the source of life on this planet....  
(Denver 164).

Thus, the Windstar Foundation had its beginning in 1976 when John Denver and Tom Crum developed their plan for its future. In 1978, "John Denver purchase[d] 985 acres of ranch/farm/wilderness land in Old Snowmass, Colorado, and then donate[d] that land to the Windstar Foundation." (<http://wstar.org>)

In the beginning, John Denver, Tom Crum, and Hal Thau (business manager) were the first board of directors, with Tom operating the daily workings of Windstar (until the mid 80's) and John Denver serving as its President for as long as he lived. As they created their organization, Windstar became essentially a school where people from around the world would attend workshops and take back into the world what they would learn about the environment, built around "the connections between mind, body, and spirit" (Denver 165).

Although the high-tech buildings were never expanded on the Windstar land, the famous “geodesic dome” structures were developed as a result of John and Tom’s association with Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller. “Bucky” was a renowned architect, designer, author, environmentalist, philosopher, futurist, and true “Renaissance Man ” who joined with John and Tom in 1980 in the expansion of the Windstar dream. His first geodesic dome was built on the Windstar land, in 1984, for the purpose of teaching and demonstrating how to maintain a garden year-round in the Colorado Rockies; this would feed an average-sized family even during the harsh winters. Fish hatcheries and nurseries were established there, as well, and they not only worked, they flourished. John incorporated his desire to help with the struggles for resolving world hunger into his work with Windstar, and he felt that he was “doing something that was going to have a real, profound impact on the world” (Denver 166).

The year **1980** was the kickoff for a wide range of developments with Windstar. After the U.S. Department of Energy granted \$25,000 to “retrofit [the] existing ranch house as a solar energy demonstration center and conference facility,” the Board of Advisors was created (<http://wstar.org>). John performed and dedicated his song “What One Man Can Do” for “Bucky” Fuller’s 85th birthday at Windstar, and the garden education program was begun. Windstar became a viable force in the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, as John spent countless hours and numerous trips lobbying Congress for this, along with Alaskan environmentalist “Mardy” Murie. **The Hammer Gallery in New York City** held an exhibition of photographs by John Denver along with the paintings by David Armstrong that celebrated the formation of Windstar and benefited the foundation. During that same year, Windstar joined with the University of Colorado in its “**School/ Building Program.**” Later, college credit could be obtained through the U of C for working with Windstar and its lands. (<http://wstar.org>)

By **1981**, **Windstar’s Lecture Series** took off, and they received the New Land Foundation grant to produce a research booklet about Oil Shale. John also took the cause of Windstar to the **National Press Club** in Washington, D.C. when he was invited to be a guest speaker. As the coldframe gardening project began, Windstar’s first **Volunteer Week** was held. When **1982** came around, the Lecture Series was expanded, and the “**Earthkeepers**” was developed as a “global/ environmental children’s education program” (<http://wstar.org>). The **Windstar Biodome Project** was officially initiated as a “passive solar greenhouse with an integrated growing system” (<http://wstar.org>). Windstar also co-sponsored “**An Evening of Peace**” at the Colorado State Capitol, with 30,000 people in attendance. The Cousteau Society presented Windstar with a Certificate of Appreciation for its dedication. (<http://wstar.org>)

During **1983**, as the **Lecture Series** continued to grow, a \$25,000 Harris Foundation grant to construct a **Biodome** was awarded to Windstar. An award-winning **“Peace Creations”** project for children developed with the union of the American Friends Service and The Windstar Foundation. Additional opportunities for children came when Windstar sponsored the **Roaring Fork Summer Music Camp in Aspen**. The year **1984** brought into being their audio taped versions of the well attended Lecture Series. Windstar also hosted the **“Volunteers for Peace”** program which was an international youth exchange. And finally, the **Windstar “Biodome Gardening Project”** began its work. (<http://wstar.org>)

Windstar came into the national limelight in **1985** when the television shows *PM Magazine* and *Entertainment Tonight*, as well as the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper all featured the **“Biodome Gardening Project”** and the work of Windstar. The Lecture Series continued to attract nationally recognized experts, and a \$50,000 private donation was received by Windstar to support the additional development of the Biodome Gardening Project. (<http://wstar.org>)

Windstar conducted three days of **“Global Game Workshops”** for students in junior high, senior high, and college. Also, Tom Crum presented an Aiki series titled **“Beyond the Gold”** throughout that summer season, using the idea of the theme and John’s theme song that were used for the 1984 Winter Olympics (<http://wstar.org>).

By **1986** a pivotal year was achieved: the first **“Choices for the Future”** symposium was held in Aspen at the Music Tent, and it attracted over 1000 people from around the world with extensive press coverage. Speakers included such renowned experts as Astronaut Rusty Schweigert, Jean-Michel Cousteau- son of researcher Jacques-Yves Cousteau, developer and entrepreneur Ted Turner, Colorado Governor Richard Lamm, Peter Bourne, William Farley, Tom Crum, and John Denver. Windstar also presented Jacques-Yves Cousteau with its first **Windstar Award**. Over \$20,000 was collected for the “Choices” video documentary series to be produced, and the **Windstar Journal** was launched as a quarterly publication, filled with environmental information and tips by experts. In North Carolina the first fifty-foot diameter **Biodome pilot project** went into operation, while the IRS approved Windstar’s status as a public, not-for-profit educational organization. The Educational Foundation of America granted Windstar \$29,000 to support its **Land Education Program**. The **“State of Our Planet”** presentations were made at the University of Washington, Southern Oregon College, and Ashland, Oregon, High School. (<http://wstar.org>)

As John’s dedication and funding to Windstar increased, so did his commitment to its programs. In **1987** the **“Choices for the Future”** symposium was broadcast via live remote to thirty-six states, and David Brower, first Executive Director of the Sierra Club and later founder of Earth Island Institute, received the **Windstar Award**. (<http://wstar.org>)

Speakers again were the famous and the expert, including Dick Gregory, Peter Grace, Jean Holmes of *The Hunger Project*, plus John and Tom. The **first fifty-foot diameter Biodome went into operation at Windstar** while a second one was built in North Carolina. **The Land Education Program** included four interns and eighteen apprentices from thirteen states. National press coverage included the *CBS Morning Show* and *National Public Radio* features. (<http://wstar.org>)

The third annual “**Choices for the Future**” symposium was again held in Aspen in **1988** with 1200 people attending. Alexandre Gradsky, Ken Blanchard, Andrew Young, Leo Buscaglia, Dennis Weaver, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Al Huang, Soviet commentator Vladimir Posner, along with John and Tom were speakers. “**State of Our Planet**” presentations were also conducted in Denver as well as Honolulu, Hawaii; Des Moines, Iowa; and Los Angeles, California. A **Youth Exchange Program** between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. was hosted by Windstar, while the **Windstar Award** was presented to Soviet academician and scientist, Yevgeny Velikhov. The **Windstar Connection Program** was launched, extending the concept into various states and countries around the globe. Windstar designers helped to create an international youth exchange camp to be located in the Soviet Republic of Georgia with the theme of “**Problem Solving for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**” (<http://wstar.org>)

As the “**Choices for the Future**” symposium continued in **1989**, the Windstar Award honored Kenya’s Wangari Maathai, the founder of that country’s Greenbelt Movement. A company to design and manufacture Biodomes around the country was “spun-off” from Windstar, and **NASA joined with Windstar** joined to create an “**Institute for Global Change.**” This think-tank of scientists was to be fully administered by Windstar and funded through a grant from NASA. By this time, Windstar’s membership topped 5000 people from all fifty states and twenty-two foreign countries. (<http://wstar.org>) Windstar continued to host ecology students from Moscow University as part of an exchange program between the two countries while the **Windstar Connection** program grew to include thirteen cities in the U.S., as well as Toronto, Tokyo, and Sydney. Windstar also began its *Earth Pulse Handbook* Series, entitled “**Creating a Healthy World- 101 Practical Tips for Home and Office.**” Programs titled “**Higher Ground**” was hosted by John Denver as a multi-media environmental presentation and held in five U.S. cities as well as in Toronto, Sydney, and Tokyo. (<http://wstar.org>) The Discovery Channel presented “**More Than Enough For Everyone: The Windstar Experiment,**” a wonderful documentary showcasing the work of Windstar with John Denver. (<http://wstar.org>)

By **1990**, Windstar held a special program in a new location, “**Windstar in Washington,**” with Jesse Jackson, Mary Berry, Lou Gold, Jay Hair, Thomas Adkins, William Reilly, Jeffrey Hollander, Tom Crum and John Denver. The **Windstar Award** was presented to Akio Matsumura, Director of the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival. (<http://wstar.org>)

Also in **1990**, “The **Windstar Foundation** entered into a partnership with the **National Wildlife Federation** in order to expand opportunities to communicate the Windstar vision to people around the world” (<http://wstar.org>). Windstar participated in the celebration of **Earth Day 1990**, celebrating its twentieth anniversary, through the worldwide **Windstar Connection** programs and the appearances of John Denver. Working as another spin-off from Windstar, the **Aspen Institute on Global Change** held its first formal meeting. (<http://wstar.org>) Windstar also launched its “**Windstar Checks**” program, with proceeds from each book of checks ordered to go to Windstar for support. (<http://wstar.org>)

The sixth annual “**Choices for the Future**” was held in **1991** in Aspen with Whoopi, Goldberg, Anthony Zerbe, Pat Schroeder, Ben Cohen, Betty Sue Flowers, Hal Bidlack, Matthew Fox, along with John Denver and Tom Crum, with the Windstar Award going to Lester Brown, president of WorldWatch Institute. Windstar worked with the National Wildlife Federation to sponsor **Eco Expo-The National Marketplace for the Environment**, held in Denver, CO. The first annual **Windstar Youth Award** was presented to the founder of Children for a Safe Environment, Kortney Johnson. The “**Holiday ReLeaf**” card program began for the purpose of helping with the re-forestation for the Rainforest, with part of the proceeds going to “Rainforest Action Network.” (<http://wstar.org>)

In **1992** the “Choices for the Future” presenters were Ed Begley, Jr., Linda Ellerbee, Al Gore, Chief, Oren Lyons, Dennis Weaver, Barbara Pyle, Rev. Carla Berkedal, Tom Crum and John Denver. Phil Lane, Jr., received the **Windstar Award** as coordinator of the The Four Worlds Development Project. The **Windstar Youth Award** went to Erika Pena, founder of Kids for the Earth recycling organization. The Windstar Foundation also hosted the “**Grass Roots Aspen Experience**” for fifty disadvantaged urban youth, using the ‘outward-bound’ style of activities. **Biodome Workshops** for the preschooler through college level students were held. (<http://wstar.org>) Also in June of 1992, John Denver attended The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which produced the **Rio Declaration** in support of protecting the Earth and its children.

“**Choices for the Future**” continued in **1993** with Noel Brown, Lou Gold, Bill Curtis, Tony Huston, Rosa Perez, David Suzuki, Mo Siegel, Tom Crum, and John Denver. Marian Wright Edelman, President of The Children’s Defense Fund, received the **Windstar Award**, and Cory Dunne won the **Windstar Youth Award** for “his concern, commitment, and consistent efforts of behalf of the environment.” (<http://wstar.org>)

In **1994** the guest speakers for the “**Choices for the Future**” included Joseph Cornell, Laura Huxley, Harold Robles, David Darling, Theo Colborn, Tom Crum. Susana Valadez, co-founder of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and Traditional Arts, won the **Windstar Award**, with Carolina Garcia Travesi, founder of The Ecological Children’s Club, was presented the **Windstar Youth Award**. (<http://wstar.org>)

In **1995** the tenth annual and final “**Choices for the Future**” symposium was held again in Aspen at the Music Tent with presenters David Brower Kenny Loggins, Rolland Smith, Mary Catherine Bateson, John and Ocean Robbins, Aeeshah Ababio, Dennis Weaver, Randy Chavez, Tom Crum and John Denver. **Windstar’s Award** was presented to Hugh and Marty Downey, founders of Lalmba, an all volunteer international relief agency, and also to co-recipient **President Jimmy Carter** for dedicating his life to serving the global community. Melissa Poe, founder of Kids F.A.C.E., Kids For A Clean Environment, won the **Windstar Youth Award**. The Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) entered into a fund-raising campaign in order to purchase the one-half interest in the property owned by the National Wildlife Federation. Both Windstar Foundation and RMI donated their one-half interests in the land to a new not-for-profit organization, *The Windstar Land Conservancy*. (<http://wstar.org>)

In **1996**, the **Windstar Restoration Rendezvous** was held as a celebration for Windstar’s twentieth year. This would mark the beginning of the restoration of the Windstar Land, as designed in the newly organized *Windstar Land Conservancy*. Pitkin County Open Spaces signed the land conservation easement officially as the final step in protecting the Windstar Land in perpetuity. The **Windstar Youth Award** was presented, again by John Denver, to Tara Church, founder of Tree Musketeers, in El Segundo, California. Also, the “**TREES from Grass Roots**” program was begun in cooperation with **Plant-It 2000**. **Summer Workshops** were held, including “The Zen of Seeing” by Lee Shapiro, and “Akido and Human Relationships” by Roderick O’Connor. (<http://wstar.org>)

**Workshops** in **1997** included Earth Day Birthday Party, the Volunteer Work Weekend, Camp Windstar for Kids, An Evening with J. Baldwin, editor of the Whole Earth Catalog, and “Holistic Resource Management,” by Rio de la Vista. Also in 1997 the **First Annual Educator’s Week** was held, and the **Windstar Connections Newsletter** was introduced. The **Windstar Foundation’s World Wide Web site** was created in 1997, and the **Environmental Studies Scholarship** program was started. (<http://wstar.org>)

**ON OCTOBER 12, 1997, WINDSTAR MOURNED THE DEATH OF ITS PRESIDENT, CO-FOUNDER, AND FRIEND...JOHN DENVER.**

“Windstar Foundation began a period of rest, reflection, and revisiting of its mission and goals.” (<http://wstar.org>)

In the spring of **1998** the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual **Volunteer Work Weekend** was held as a revival of the Windstar spirit at the Windstar Land Conservancy. The tenth annual **Windstar Connections Leadership Conference** was held, also.

Also in August of 1998, the **JOHN DENVER MEADOWLANDS** on the Windstar Land Conservancy was dedicated, with John's family in attendance. "The John Denver Meadowlands" was created through donations by the National Arbor Day Foundation in memory of John Denver.

In 1999, the **Wetland Restoration Project** began at the Windstar Land Conservancy, and the nineteenth **Annual Volunteer Work Weekend** was also conducted at the Windstar Land Conservancy. The Windstar Foundation received a **Non-Violence Award**, announced by the Los Angeles Times.

For the year 2000, the third **Annual Educators' Week** and the twentieth **Annual Volunteer Work Weekend** were held, as well as a **Kids' Week at Windstar**.

On December 31, 2000, on the anniversary of John Denver's birthday, newly elected Windstar Foundation President Ron Deutschendorf, brother of John Denver, and the Windstar Foundation announced that invitations to join the Windstar Global Family were being extended once again: "And the Vision Goes Forward."

As 2001 opened, the fourth **Annual Educators' Week** as well as the twenty-first **Annual Volunteer Work Weekend** took place on the Windstar Land. Another **KIDSWeek at Windstar** took place, with Native American teepees being rebuilt as they once stood on the property. The Biodome frame was repainted and the Aiki Tent was also reconstructed on its platform.

**Windstar Foundation's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary** was celebrated in October at the **Fall Open House**.

**Three Environmental Studies Scholarship** recipients were announced.

**Windstar Foundation continues in its quest to continue the goals and mission of its Co-Founder, President, and Friend John Denver.**

*For more information, contact the Windstar Foundation, using its web site at <http://www.wstar.org> or send inquiries to:*

*Windstar Foundation  
P.O. Box 656  
Snowmass, CO 81654  
phone: 970-927-5435*

## ***WINDSTAR FOUNDATION***

### ***WINDSTAR: Mission***

To inspire individuals to make responsible choices and take direct actions to achieve a peaceful and environmentally sustainable future.

### ***WINDSTAR: Vision***

Windstar envisions a world where people see themselves as a part of a complex and interdependent web of life. Decisions and actions regarding ecological, cultural, political, economic, and global issues guided by concern for each other and the planet will ensure a society that works for all people – for all time.

### ***WINDSTAR: Goals***

To promote a holistic approach to addressing global issues, preceded by an understanding that respect for others and self-respect have a direct impact on our respect for the world around us.

To inspire individuals to recognize their connectedness to the world around them.

To encourage commitment in helping to create a healthy and sustainable future for all people.

To create opportunities for individuals to gain knowledge, skills, and experiences which enable them to demonstrate commitment through responsible decisions and actions.

### ***WINDSTAR: Philosophy***

- Windstar believes that personal, interpersonal, societal, and ecological environments are all integral components in the creation of a sustainable future for the planet.
- Windstar is the recognition and demonstration that each of us is part of, and responsible for, the quality of life on planet Earth; and that which affects any one of us, affects us all.
- Windstar believes that each individual can play an important role in creating a peaceful, healthy, and promising future on a global scale.
- Windstar recognizes the human species as part of nature, whose existence depends on its ability to draw sustenance from a finite natural world, and whose continuance is contingent upon its ability to keep from destroying the natural system that regenerates this world.
- Windstar is an expression of the power of human creativity, integrity, and responsibility.
- Windstar integrates Earth, mind, and spirit and encourages individuals to operate out of this integrated place.

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Further information regarding The John Denver Memorial Peace Cloth can be found at these sites: <http://www.wstar.org/Windstar/AssociatedPrograms/PeaceCloth/peacecloth.html>

<http://www.johndenverpeacecloth.com/>

*John Denver Biography* and *Windstar Milestones* compilation are to be used in conjunction with the “*John Denver Memorial Peace Cloth*” for educational purposes only. Composition is the compilation of research from sources cited as well as the intellectual property of Linda Wolverton.

Information compiled by Linda Wolverton, Guardian member: Windstar Foundation  
Member: Heart of Ohio Windstar Connection.