

Far out: “Country Roads” turns 50

by Jim Bissett, *The Dominion Post*

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Any ex-pat West Virginian who has ever punched up “Take Me Home, Country Roads” on the jukebox can tell you.

The late John Denver’s far-out ode to moonshine, mountain mamas and winding, Whitman-like lanes can’t help but make a person on the other end of that exchange feel like he should have been home yesterday.

Even if the summoner of the three minutes and eight seconds of sudden, unexpected longing couldn’t get out fast enough after graduation.

Fifty years ago on this day – April 12, 1971 – West Virginia became a destination, on AM radio.

That’s when the aforementioned song was released as a single from Denver’s “Poems, Prayers and Promises” album.

Critics haven’t been entirely unkind to the Me Generation LP, heavy on singer-songwriter sensitivity.

Thank the Mountain State standard most of West Virginia’s born-and-bred now simply refer to as, “Country Roads,” for that.

“I knew I had something,” Bill Danoff told *The Dominion Post* previously.

Wherever home is, take me there

Danoff was a Washington, D.C., folk singer and wannabe rock ‘n’ roller by way of Springfield, Mass.

He came to Georgetown University in the 1960s to study Chinese language and culture while dabbling in the capital city's thriving local music scene.

That's how he and his then-wife, Taffy Nivert, also a songwriter, got to know Denver, who was doing frequent club dates there while trying to forge his name in music.

The couple had some chords and words they'd been fooling with: A little sing-along about place.

Or, rather, that sense of place you get from home.

Especially if you happen to be a few states over when you start maybe to reconsider that place and the roads you could take to get you back there.

Danoff was thinking about his growing-up years in western Massachusetts, and not West Virginia.

And Nivert kept touching on the Terrapin State – as she's a Maryland native.

Casting a singer

Both had Johnny Cash, not John Denver, in mind for the song, even though they considered him a friend.

It's also worth noting that neither at that point had even fully ventured into the state next door with the funky, squiggly borders.

Well, there may have been a whisper of a jaunt across the tip of the Eastern Panhandle, where their song's geographic misnomers – i.e., the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah River references – were likely born.

As the origin story goes, they pitched the song to Denver, who came to their apartment to hear it by way of the emergency room.

He had been involved in a not-quite-minor car crash hours before. He flailed his arm on impact and smacked his hand off the windshield, breaking his thumb.

Ordinarily, Denver would have played guitar with Danoff that evening, which may have led to broader musical explorations and a glossing-over of the tune, but with his hand in a cast, he couldn't do that.

So, he turned his ears full in the direction of that sing-along about the Mountain State and its slightly misplaced geography.

After the first run-through they, as Danoff said, all agreed that, yes ... something ... was there.

Almost heaven, Cincinnati?

Nine years later in Morgantown, all Danoff knew was that the concrete on the floor of the place they were using as a dressing room didn't appear to be entirely dry, as everything was still that new.

This day – Sept. 6, 1980 – was the day they cemented the legend of “Take Me Home, Country Roads” in these climes for good.

Danoff was there with Nivert and Denver to dedicate Mountaineer Field.

They ambled out onto the 50-yard-line.

They ushered in both a new stadium, and a new Don Nehlen era of WVU football.

“Hello, West-by God-Virginia!” a certain shag-haired singer yelled into the microphone.

And then, when Bill bent the string on that opening guitar lick, and when John hit the “Almost heaven, West Virginia” line, and when Taffy began harmonizing, the trio immediately had the sold-out crowd singing backup.

Even the University of Cincinnati fans, whose team would lose in the inaugural game.

By then, the trio was used to the accolades.

A multitude of artists across genres covered the song.

And people just seemed to know the words, as if by sonic osmosis.

Danoff is still amazed “Country Roads” is a favorite in Munich beer halls during Oktoberfest.

It's just that on this particular Saturday, in an autumn now four decades gone, it was West Virginia air and ethos the song was occupying.

“Yeah, it was something,” Danoff would remember with a smile.

“The sound came down in waves.”

Magic, in the grooves

Morgantown-based musician William Matheny is 36, and he’s been thinking about songs and the words that go with them for easily 28 of those years.

His dad, Mark, taught him his first chords on the guitar when he was 6.

Two years later, he was playing the blues, knee-high to a Marshall stack, on a Fender Stratocaster bigger than he was.

Two years after that, he was writing his own songs in a band featuring the elder Matheny on bass.

Now, he’s a highly sought, alt-country performer who has played at Nashville’s storied Ryman Auditorium, while having his music lauded in Rolling Stone and on National Public Radio, besides.

For him, “Country Roads” has the Holy Grail recipe: Pleasant-sounding chord changes, and narrative lyrics that make you automatically think of place – even if the subject is just a state of mind for you.

“The song is its own chemical reaction,” he said.

“I’m thinking we had magical dust in the grooves of that original recording. I mean, it really is a ‘West Virginia’ thing.”

Denver may have presented himself as an affable, “Aw, shucks,” guy on the stage, Danoff said, but he was actually quite savvy and shrewd about the music industry.

Denver’s review of the song . . . the first time the couple played it through that night in the apartment?

There was a (broken) thumb’s up, and what would become a signature phrase, the co-writer remembered.

“He said, ‘Far out.’ But he said that for everything.”



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[This article has been slightly edited for use on this website]