

SEPTEMBER 11 – NOVEMBER 8, 2015 | STACKNER CABARET

World Premiere Event

Back Home Again: ON THE ROAD WITH *John Denver*

By **Randal Myler and Dan Wheetman**
Directed by **Randal Myler**

Play
Guide



The Rep
MILWAUKEE

Executive Producers:
Wayne and Kristine Lueders

Associate Producer:
Adlon Partnership

www.MilwaukeeRep.com | 414-224-9490

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Milwaukee Repertory Theater Presents the World Premiere of

Back Home Again!

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John Denver

By **Randal Myler & Dan Wheetman**

Directed by **Randal Myler**

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JOHN DENVER: AT A GLANCE

“It has been said that what Elvis was to the 50s and The Beatles were to the 60s, John Denver was to the 70s.”

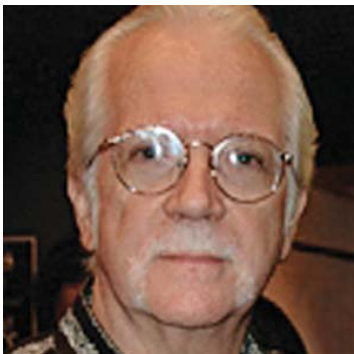
-Dan Wheetman

With a legacy reflective of the true essence of folk music, John Denver proved to be one of the most influential singer/songwriters of the 20th century. Not only did his environmentally and socially- conscious music resonate with audiences of all ages and backgrounds, it helped strengthen his voice as a devoted humanitarian and activist. Denver remains to this day an iconic American figure who managed to bridge the gap between the pop, folk, and country music genres.



Image: ATO Records

CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM



Randal Myler
Author, Director



Dan Wheetman
Author, Music Director



David M. Lutken
Danny



Katie Deal
Singer

ABOUT OUR PRODUCTION

Dan Wheetman on Going Home

On the outside, *Back Home Again: On the Road with John Denver* tells the story of Dan Wheetman's decade touring as a member of John Denver's band. Much like the actor portraying him onstage, Dan Wheetman is a multi-talented artist and musician. He first came to know Denver as a friend, their lives seeming almost parallel at times.

"John and I had very similar lives in some ways. He, of course, was a big star. But we were both musicians, we both came to Aspen around the same time. I ran into him many times before I worked with him. He was my friend. He was very warm and open, and always interested in people. He was a pal, and he treated everyone around him in the same way."

In fact, both Wheetman (Co-Author and Music Director) and his onstage likeness "Danny" (played by the multi-talented David Lutken) acknowledge that the piece will appeal to audience members who are already John Denver fans: "I worked with John Denver and I figure he's the reason you're here tonight, not me." But for Wheetman, his narrative is a framework to tell a more universal story.

"If this piece works on any level, I hope that it works as a story about humans: what they go through, how they deal with each other, how they deal with the things that come up in their lives. And the stuff that comes up in a person's life, both the crazy good and the crazy."

Tonight's Set List



Act I

Starwood In Aspen
Last Thing On My Mind
Jambalaya
Take Me Home, Country Roads
Leaving, On A Jet Plane
Rocky Mountain High
Annie's Song
Aspenglow
Matthew
Grandma's Feather Bed
Honey Be There
Thank God I'm A Country Boy
Saturday Night In Toledo, Ohio
Back Home Again
I Guess He'd Rather Be In Colorado
If You Were A Bluebird
Come And Let Me Look In Your Eyes

PO BOX 1587 ASPEN, COLORADO 81611

Act II

This Old Guitar
Farewell Andromeda
(Welcome To My Morning)
The Music Is You
For Baby
(For Bobbie)
How Can I Leave You Again
Johnny B. Goode
I'm Sorry
Christmas Wish
Like A Sad Song
Perhaps Love
Sunshine On My Shoulders
Poems, Prayers & Promises

John Denver's Letterhead, 1976
Image: RRAuction.com

The Vision and Process

Dan Wheetman credits the seed of *Back Home Again* to Co-Author, Director, and longtime collaborator Randal Myler. Wheetman met Myler when mutual friends recommended him as a fiddle player for a tour of *Quilters* Myler directed. From there, the duo created an impressive repertoire of shared work, including *Low Down Dirty Blues*, seen in The Rep's Stackner Cabaret during the 2014/15 Season.

"[*Back Home Again*] was pretty much Randy's idea. Over the years we had talked about it, and he said, 'You know, we should do something about your life on tour with John Denver.' He pitched the idea to The Rep, and we jumped right in. I pretty much sat down and wrote the story, without any editing. I wrote how it all came to be: how I got into music, how I ended up in John Denver's band, what that was like, and all the things that happened on the road."

Once Wheetman documented his story, the cast and creative team set to work in one of The Rep's rehearsal halls devising the finished piece that audiences will experience. They finalized the set list of John Denver songs, and trimmed away material that did not push the story forward. Wheetman respects the evolutionary and collaborative nature of the creative process, acknowledging the great trust he has for his team. This trust proves essential given the challenges associated with seeing his journey come to life onstage.

"As directors, you have a vision of the whole, but it cannot be so narrow that it does not give the actors a chance to fill in things or breathe life into it. It cannot be so precious that you do not do what it takes to fix it. Yesterday, I had to sit quietly through a bunch of it because I was so emotionally attached. I mean, it is my life up there. [Danny] is telling the story as I would tell the story. I am talking about loss, I am talking about love, I am talking about all the changes in my life that were going on, and I just had to let the other people in the room talk about it and move it along; not hold on so tightly to what was precious to me and just let it be, and let it happen. That is just part of the process of creativity."

Dan Wheetman hopes that *Back Home Again* will stand on its own merit as an experience reflective of the human condition, and, through word of mouth, reach audience members beyond those who consider themselves true blue John Denver fans. "It is all tied together. It is about folks."



The Playbill for Myler and Wheetman's *It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues* at The Ambassador Theatre, New York, New York, 1999.

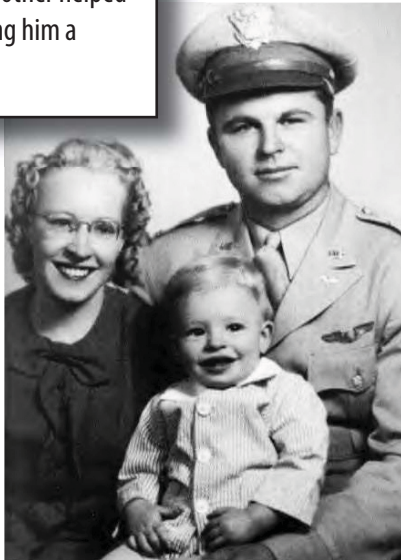


Felicia Fields in *Low Down Dirty Blues* at The Rep, March 20 - May 24, 2015
Photo: Micheal Brosilow

JOHN DENVER: A TIMELINE

December 31, 1943: John Denver was born Henry John Deutschendorf to parents Henry John and Erma in Roswell, New Mexico. As an Air Force family, they moved around the southern and southwestern United States, and even to Japan.

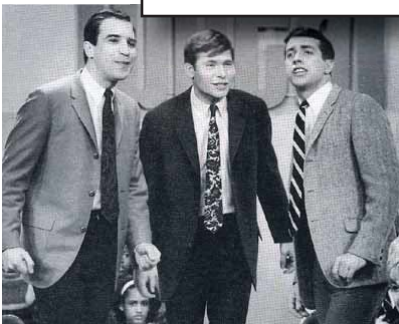
Despite a challenging relationship with his conservative father, Denver found reprieve when spending time on his grandmother's farm in Oklahoma where he reveled in the country music of the era. His other grandmother helped fuel his musical education by gifting him a 1910 Gibson guitar.



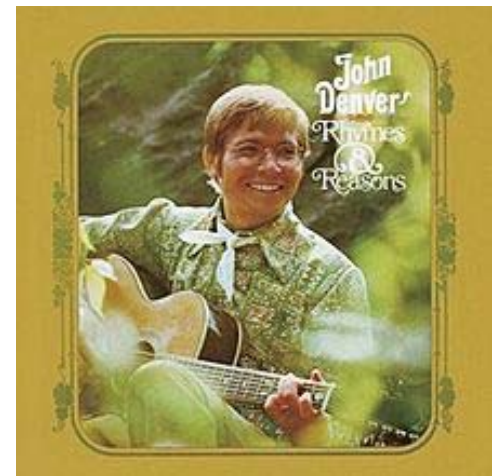
John Denver as a baby
Image: Findagrave.com

1961-1964: With his family settled in Texas, Denver attended Texas Technological College (now Texas Tech University) for architecture studies. There he sang in a folk-music group called the Alpine Trio. He eventually dropped out of school and moved to California to pursue a music career. He assumed the stage name John Denver, a loving tribute to the city and surrounding Rocky Mountains with which he was so enamored.

1965: Denver moved to New York City, where he auditioned for and began performing as vocalist, guitarist, and banjoist of the Chad Mitchell Trio. It was while touring with the trio that Denver met Anne Marie Martell, whom he married the following year. The couple would eventually adopt two children, Zachary and Anna Kate, prior to their divorce in 1983.



John Denver singing
with the Chad Mitchell Trio



The cover for John Denver's first solo album, "Rhymes & Reasons"
Image: Sony Music Entertainment

1969: Denver signed with Mercury RCA records and released his first solo album, "Rhymes and Reasons," which featured the single "Leaving, On A Jet Plane." The song was popularized nation-wide when covered by Peter, Paul, and Mary later that year.

1971: Denver became a household name when he debuted "Take Me Home, Country Roads." From there, Denver experienced commercial success throughout the 70s with pieces such as "Rocky Mountain High," one of many songs that highlighted his reverence for the natural and physical world.



John Denver performs for his 1975 television special *An Evening With John Denver*
Image: Wikipedia.org



A screenshot from NATURE's *John Denver: Let This Be A Voice*, 1997
Image: PBS.org

1976: Denver refocused his energy on his humanitarian and activist efforts, founding the non-profit Windstar Foundation and World Hunger Project. He continued to devote himself to numerous causes over the next thirty years, including environmental preservation, anti-hunger, and children's rights movements. His work earned him several awards and appointment to the Commission on World and Domestic Hunger by President Jimmy Carter.

October 12, 1997: Tragically, Denver lost his life at age 53 when the experimental aircraft he was piloting crashed over Monterey Bay, California. Over one thousand fans attended his funeral. A musical entitled "Almost Heaven" paid tribute to the beloved artist in 2005.

1981: Denver married his second wife, Cassandra Delaney. They had one child, Jesse Bell, before they divorced in 1991.

AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC: FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE

Origins

The term *folk* hails from the German word *volk*, or *people*. Folk music refers to a broad spectrum of musical genres created by and passed down between generations of working class men and women. While the term was not coined until the 19th century, folk music has undoubtedly been in existence since the origins of humanity.

Accessible by nature, folk music invites participation and understanding from people of all backgrounds and perspectives. Because this music was often shared between people who were illiterate, it remained true to the oral storytelling tradition by giving a voice to the experiences of those who would not have had their stories shared through the written word. Themes tend to be both community-specific and universal, including: war, labor and work, economic struggle, civil hardship, love, and spirituality and religion.

American folk music, or *Americana*, refers to variety of musical genres, including bluegrass, country, gospel, Appalachian, blues, and Cajun. Though developed in the United States, these forms trace their origins all over the world, including England, Scotland, Ireland, and Africa. They eventually gained recognition by musicologists as distinct musical genres as folk music evolved.

Evolution

Like the nation from which it draws inspiration, American folk music has evolved drastically over the past century. The most notable change in the genre came with the emergence of the singer/songwriter. Woody Guthrie ("the original folk hero") was one of the first artists who combined traditional melodies with original lyrics to craft new pieces. His music, which empathized with the struggle of the American laborer, helped popularize the genre in the 1930s and 1940s. This was a departure from the work songs, folklore, and cultural traditions that comprised what some musicologists and historians consider "true folk."



Woody Guthrie and his famed guitar, 1943.
Image from Wikipedia.org

Influential Folk Artists

Bill Monroe
Woody Guthrie
Pete Seeger
Doc Watson
Bob Dylan
Joan Baez
Paul Simon
Cat Stevens
Steve Earle
Simon and Garfunkel
James Taylor
The Mamas and Papas

1960s American Folk Revival

Americana fluctuated in popularity through the 1950s with artists like The Weavers and The Kingston Trio seeking to honor the sounds and intentions of “true folk.” However, the 1960s brought a resurgence of the genre, putting it at the center of the counter-culture and Civil Rights movements. Folk music served as a vehicle for social change and was heard from small coffee shops in Brooklyn to political rallies in D.C. Singer/songwriters like Bob Dylan electrified the traditionally acoustic folk sound, and folk rock emerged as a distinct form.

Some critics argued that this new iteration of folk music was actually “anti-folk”; that the use of the genre as a platform for politics minimized critical folk elements, such as ethnic and cultural identity. Others argued that the inclusion of political commentary and scholarly references made it inaccessible to the “common man.” Despite these criticisms, the genre reached new audiences, and inspired younger generations to concern themselves with the pressing issues of the time.



Alan Lomax performs at the Mountain Music Festival in Asheville, North Carolina
Image from Wikipedia.org



Joan Baez and Bob Dylan at the March on Washington, 1963.
Image from Wikipedia.org

Modern American Folk Music

Folk music experienced a decline in mainstream popularity following the 1970s, seeing its next small peak in the 1990s. The Indigo Girls were among artists that continued to cultivate the folk rock and indie folk scene moving into the 21st century. Now, artists like Mumford and Sons, The Lumineers, and Shovels and Rope continue to develop the identity of folk music as it evolves in a fashion true to its nature, but innovative for a new generation.

Extend Your Folk Music Experience!

To learn more, check out the Lomax Family Collection online via the American Folk Life Center. The archive, created under the direction of John A. Lomax, Sr., and Alan Lomax, features an extensive body of field recordings, manuscripts, and images representing almost one thousand cultural groups.

VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's Patty and Jay Baker Theater Complex is located in the Milwaukee Center downtown at the corner of Wells and Water Streets. The building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company.

The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The Stackner Cabaret is located on the second level and can be accessed via the escalator or elevator.



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