



MARK PEARSON  
MUSIC

## The Night John Denver Opened for The Brothers Four

I

*I hear songs on the radio music to my ears  
'Country Road' 'Rocky Mountain High' memories hang on every word  
While it seems strange to hear them play as I start to wonder why  
The music stops and a voice comes on and says "John Denver's died"*

*He died flying with sea birds off the coast of Monterey  
Soaring toward the sun like Icarus he went tumbling toward the bay  
Something in me must believe he gladly went that way  
But I face the music with a sadder, older heart today*

*Chorus*

*As it gets closer and closer to home  
The further and the further we go  
We try to stay forever young then suddenly grow old  
Getting closer, closer to home*

That's called "Closer and Closer to Home," a song I wrote after hearing the news that John Denver had died. Besides being a big fan of his, he and I are connected in a fun and a kind of funny way.

One of John Denver's early professional breaks came in the mid-sixties when Mike Kirkland of The Brothers Four recommended him to Milt Okun as someone to replace Chad Mitchell in The Chad Mitchell Trio. My professional break came at the end of 1968 when after the Chad Mitchell Trio disbanded The Brothers Four asked John if he wanted to replace Mike Kirkland when Mike was leaving The Brothers Four. When John waited too long to call and accept the job I ended up with the job instead. Because of that you might say John Denver and I are forever linked in some karmic way. Or maybe you wouldn't say that but I might, and I still enjoy telling the story of how I "beat out" John Denver for a spot in The Brothers Four.

II

*It gets closer and closer to home  
The further and the further we go  
We try to stay forever young then suddenly grow old  
Getting closer and closer to home*

The Brothers Four did a show with John Denver in 1970. It was in a field house at a small college in the Midwest for a show that a fellow named Harry Beecham promoted. John got out of his Porsche that afternoon wearing a stylish leather jacket, his million-dollar smile, and a gold chain around his neck with a pendant and the words that said "War is not healthy for children and other living things." While he had not had a hit record yet he was recognized as the writer of "Leavin' on a Jet Plane" and was promoting his 2nd album for RCA, "Take Me To Tomorrow." He talked about the challenges of trying to get radio stations to play the song "Follow Me" off that album. He was also hopeful the title song of his next album, Tom Paxton's "Whose Garden Was This," might just be "the one" that established him.

*Let love go forward from this time and place...*

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### III

*Whose garden was this?  
It must have been lovely  
Did it have flowers  
I've seen pictures of flowers  
And I'd loved to have smelled one*

*Whose river was this  
You say it ran freely  
Blue was its color  
I've blue in some pictures  
And I'd loved to have been there*

*Bridge  
Tell me again I need to know  
The forest had trees the meadows were green  
The oceans were blue and birds really flew  
Can you swear that was true*

While it was impossible to foresee the heights he would reach it was not hard to see that he was going somewhere. He talked about how he and his wife, Annie, were getting ready to move to Colorado after living for over a year with her parents in Minnesota. Actually I'd met her a year or so earlier at a Brothers Four concert when she'd come back stage to say hello, and I had become instantly smitten by this beautiful young woman in purple tinted granny glasses. At that time The Brothers Four still stayed two to a room when we were on the road. Rotating roommates in the course of a tour. One time in Boston I was sharing a room with John Paine. The next morning he said I'd been talking in my sleep calling out Annie Denver's name. She had definitely made an impression on me.

Getting ready for that 1970 concert John Denver was friendly, personable, a consummate pro. I was flabbergasted when he said he had written over a hundred songs the previous year. He happily shared a couple of the ones that he thought were best.



*Let love go forward from this time and place...*



#### IV

*Lady, are you crying do the tears belong to me  
Did you think our time together was all gone...?*

*Sunshine on my shoulder makes me happy  
Sunshine in my eyes can make me cry  
Sunshine on the water looks so lovely  
Sunshine almost always makes me high*

John Denver was deferential to my singing partners and he said he'd be glad to be the opening act for The Brothers Four. As the closing act we did the first sound check. I remember the Shure Vocal Master sound system that was new on the market at the time with its matching column speakers and how John told the sound guy he wanted exactly the same settings as The Brothers Four. Dick Kniss was playing bass for him and Mike Taylor was on guitar. As the world would soon discover John was a splendid guitar player and was playing 6 and 12 string Guild guitars at the time. I remember standing spellbound in the back of the field house listening to him sing...

#### V

*The night they drove old Dixie down and all the bells were ringin'  
The night they drove old Dixie and all the people were singin'  
They went na na na na na na na na na na na na*

*I became an instant fan and to this day regret not taking him up on his offer to visit he and Annie in Aspen. It was an offer he made to lots of people before he had to change his phone number and build a gate to keep unwanted guests from trying to wander down those Country Roads.*

*Now I'd love to tell you how well the show went that night except most of the audience had come to see John and not The Brothers Four. Their restlessness during our set became a sort of mild disgust when we did our version of "Leavin' on a Jet Plane," meant as a tribute to John. I can't remember if anyone walked out but I do remember after the show there were a lot of pretty women standing around and none of them interested in talking to me. I also remember that when we did a show a few days later with Kenny Rogers and the First Edition that Kenny in the middle of telling old Christie Minstrel stories asked us if The Brothers Four wanted to close the show that night. We told him,*

*"Nah, that's okay, we'll be glad to open. You be the headliner tonight."*



*Let love go forward from this time and place...*