

in concert



"Liberty," a bluegrass group from Aspen.

John Denver, a bluegrass group called Liberty, and 'Eugene, Ore-gone'

Critics of John Denver always point to the simplicity of his songs, the recurring themes. The guy can only sing about trees and mountains, right?

But there must be something else to his music, something that stirs a response in his listeners. Because Saturday night in McArthur Court, John Denver worked his magic on an audience of 6000 that devoured every word he said or sang and still wanted more. A rare atmosphere was created in the old basketball gym, a kind of bond between performer and audience.

Denver's appearance, sponsored by the ASUO Cultural Forum, EJD Enterprises and Concerts West, was preceded by 45 minutes of hand-clapping, foot-stamping bluegrass music by a group called Liberty from Aspen, Colorado. Describing their style as "hick music, mostly," John Sommers, Vic and Jan Garrett and Larry Gottlieb started their set with a bluegrass tune called "My Walkin' Shoes Don't Fit Me Any More."

Peering up to the crowded third balcony of Mac Court, Vic Garrett observed, "There's a bunch of folks out there." He went on to explain, "We're used to playing for 50 or 60 people a night at a little place called the Blue Moose."

McArthur Court probably isn't the best place to start playing to large audiences, but Liberty overcame the obstacle, helped by an audience that clapped, sang, stamped and generally enjoyed the music. Their first song was followed by Kristofferson's "Help Me Make It Through the Night," and then Jan Garrett vamped her way through "Hey, Good Lookin'" and left the crowd yelling for more.

Vic Garrett announced, "We're going to dip into our bag of 1950's trash now," and the group performed a beautifully schmaltzy version of "I Remember You." This was followed by Jan Garrett singing Loretta Lynn's "Fist City," which she described as "a song about two chicks punching each other in a bar."

Some more bluegrass music, and then John Sommers got out his fiddle and the group shook the dust off the rafters with a fantastic version of "The Orange Blossom Special."

The audience was still buzzing enthusiastically about Liberty when John Denver bounded on stage. Flashing a smile that seemed almost too wide for his face, he exclaimed, "We're sure happy to be here in beautiful McArthur Court in Eugene, 'Ore-gone' — Actually, we're pretty happy to be anywhere . . ." He invited the audience to "sing along, but limit yourself to the choruses. Let me sing the verses (pause, grin), it's my show."

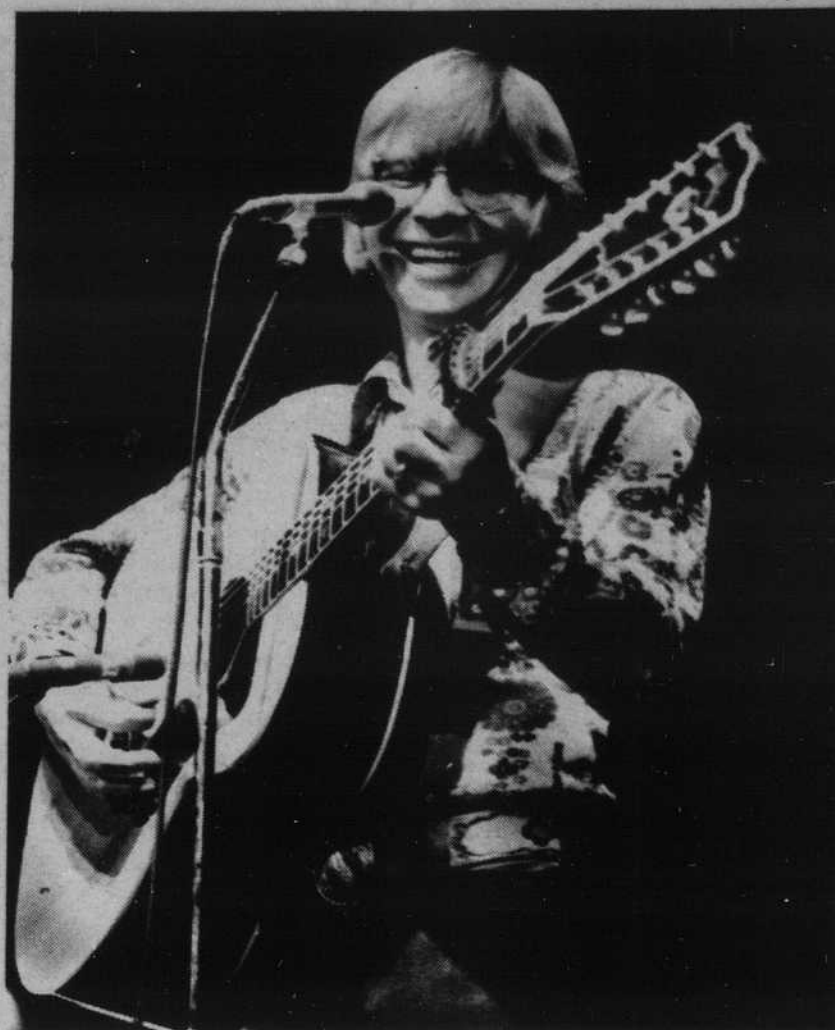
Denver's show was simple, keeping with his down-home image. The back-up group was only Steve Weisberg on acoustic and steel guitar, and Dick Kniss on bass fiddle, with Denver switching from 6-string to 12-string guitar. On some songs, color slides and films of Denver, his family and friends, and the mountains around Aspen were shown on three screens on the stage behind him.

After a couple songs off his "Rocky Mountain High" album — "Mother Nature's Son" and "Spring" — Denver launched into "Leaving on a Jet Plane," with the audience joining in on the final chorus. No matter how many times you've heard the song, no matter how tired you've gotten of the Peter, Paul and Mary version, it somehow sounds fresh and new when Denver sings it. The feeling was apparently mutual — Denver beamed and praised the audience. "You folks sing real good . . . hmmm . . . Eugene, 'Ore-gone'." A quick break, while Denver offered his views on the political leadership of the state on environmental issues: "You have a very progressive state here — you're setting a good example for the rest of us."

Perhaps the tone of the concert was getting too serious; anyway, the next number was "Saturday Night in Toledo, Ohio," a song describing the night life, or lack thereof, in Toledo. Denver explained that the song was "thrown in to lower the quality of the show — it usually works."

After leaving Toledo, Hohio, permanently behind, Denver said he learned the next song from Arlo Guthrie. "It was written by a friend of ours, Steve Goodman . . . About a month after I recorded it, Arlo recorded it and had a big hit record — really ticked me off." A grin to show he really isn't mad at Arlo, and then a rousing version of "The City of New Orleans."

He went on to talk about the "Bighorn" television special, which was filmed over a nine-month period in the mountains near Jasper,



John Denver

Photos by Clay Eals

Alberta. Denver gets excited talking about the mountains and the bighorn sheep and all the things he learned. He's also excited about the music he wrote for the special, the "Rocky Mountain Suite." "It says exactly what I want it to say."

Leaving the mountains, he went on to "I'd Rather Be a Cowboy" and "a song I wrote for my lady," "Goodbye Again."

One of Denver's passions is eagles, "the most majestic, awesome, awe-inspiring birds I've ever seen." He described the way eagles' eyelids work: "His eyelids go 'bloop' and he blinks once and knows all there is to know about you — and then he goes to to something important." He sang the song he wrote for a television special about eagles filmed in Idaho, "The Eagle and the Hawk." Finishing it exuberantly, he exclaimed, "I like to sing that song, man, I get all wound up and I feel like I'm going to bust a gut and it's all right!"

In September, Denver was a guest host on the "Tonight" show. That gave him the chance to sing "for the first and probably the last time on national television," the "Forest Lawn Song," a great tongue-in-cheek putdown of the funeral and cemetery business, talking about the options available, such as plastic grass and piped-in Billy Graham tapes.

Denver then sang a new song, "Matthew," written about his uncle. Before the audience finished clapping, he started to play "Rocky Mountain High," and the audience went wild with applause. Everyone sang along, and someone shouted, "That's what we came to hear!"

"Rocky Mountain High" was followed by Denver's personal favorite — "Poems, Prayers and Promises." Then Liberty came back on stage and joined him for four songs, winding up with everyone in Mac Court singing and clapping to "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

Denver left the stage, but returned alone to stand in the spotlight and sing a song of loneliness, "I Guess He'd Rather Be in Colorado."

And that was the end of the concert. But when Denver left Mac Court, he left behind him a warm friendly feeling that maybe there was hope left for a troubled world.

Relaxing after the show, Denver remarked, "I really liked this concert, it's fun to do a show like this . . . I'd like to come back to Oregon sometime." And later, "All I'm singing about is my life. I wouldn't be up there singing if there wasn't anyone out there listening."

Maybe John Denver's music and lyrics are simple. Maybe he's naively optimistic about making the world a better place.

Maybe he's just what we need.

Cynthia Spinelli

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