

Lifestyles

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John Denver musical offers glimpse into his life

By Jennifer Saylor
STAFF WRITER

A nationally-touring stage musical featuring the music of '70s folk icon John Denver debuts locally this month before beginning a 13-state tour.

"Almost Heaven: Songs of John Denver," appearing at the Diana Wortham Theatre in downtown Asheville, is loosely based on the singer's 1994 autobiography, "Take Me Home."

"The John Denver music and story seem like such a great fit for our mountain town," said Angie Flynn-Melver, an Asheville producer of "Almost Heaven."

Born Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr., Denver, an avid conservationist, changed his name in tribute to the Rocky Mountain landscape he cherished. His song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" mentions the Blue Ridge Mountains by name.

Other popular Denver singles include "Thank God I'm a Country Boy," "Sunshine on my Shoulders" and "Rocky Mountain High."

The mix of concert and musical biography includes 29 of Denver's songs performed by a five-member cast and live band as images from his politically-turbulent era, the '60s and '70s, project onto a backdrop.

As well as a singer, songwriter and environmentalist, Denver, who died in 1997 at age 53 in a plane crash, was a humanitarian and political activist. He co-founded the Hunger Project and founded the Windstar Foundation, a nonprofit environmental education organization in Snowmass, Colo.

With his trademark blond bangs, wire-rim glasses,

Western shirts and wholesome farm-boy air, the singer's image was famously squeaky clean.

"I think people love John's music because he sings about subjects we all think about and feel, but are sometimes too embarrassed to admit," cast member Ryan Nearhoff said. "He sings about love, the environment and human nature in very simplistic and straightforward ways."

While many of Denver's songs are political and environmental, his best-known works are staples of easy listening and adult contemporary radio and the guilty pleasure of many a closeted fan.

"My own musical tastes range from The Beatles to Stone Temple Pilots to Outkast, yet when a Denver tune comes on satellite radio as I'm driving, I turn it up and start listening. I can't explain it," said Charlie Flynn-Melver, another of the show's local producers.

Nearhoff joined the production unfamiliar with Denver's music, but after two weeks of rehearsal, he said he's become a fan of Denver's songs, which find new meaning today.

"Back in the '60s and '70s he wrote against the war," Nearhoff said. "It is incredible how accurately those lyrics can be applied to the current status of our nation."

The new John Denver fan calls "Almost Heaven" a new twist on familiar tunes that don't butcher the music that made Denver famous. "The show eases you into a glimpse of his life, his music and his spirit without theatrical special effects and huge chorus numbers," he said.



Cast members, left to right, Alex Hanna, Benjamin Zep Miskel, Vernae Taylor and seated, Ryan Nearhoff, at rehearsal for Almost Heaven.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY NC STAGE

"Almost Heaven" premiered with a different cast in New York in 2005. But the New York show never toured, making Asheville's run of "Almost Heaven" the launch of a new

touring production.

After leaving Asheville, the show will tour the East Coast from New England to Florida.

"Almost Heaven: Songs of John Denver" appears at

Diana Wortham Theatre in downtown Asheville Oct. 2 through 7. Tickets are \$20-\$35, and are available by phone at (828) 257-4530 or online at www.dwtheatre.com/.

Joli Rouge

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meet people or check out the library to catch up on some reading. You can get whatever you're in the mood for."

On its Myspace page, the Joli Rouge advertises itself as a geek bar for "geek fun."

"This is a place where, if you don't fit in anywhere else, you do fit in here," Mitchell said. "We get all sorts, and since we get all sorts, we take care of everybody."

Not only does everyone seem to get respect, but Mitchell also attempts to respect patrons' wallets.

"We keep the prices low, we keep the prices fair, and we pour a strong drink," Mitchell said. "We figure that's what you're at the bar to get."

Mitchell takes pride in the drink-making process, and he learned all of his skills while working at Joli Rouge.

"It's been my favorite job I've ever had," Mitchell said. "I make mixers. We're the only bar I know of that hand-makes its own mixers fresh from scratch every day."

Joli Rouge has the best drinks in town because they carefully take limes and combine them with sugar before thinning the substance out with water, Mitchell said.

"We're the only bar I know of that keeps fresh fruit on hand," Mitchell said. "If you order a peach daiquiri, we take peaches and crush them up in the daiquiri with the rum. There are no blenders here."

Employees invest as much effort into their drinks as the events that take place. Every employee books acts to perform at the Joli Rouge that are as eclectic as the bar itself.

"Everybody who works here is kind of a geek," Mitchell said. "We share sci-fi fantasy novels, and when everybody is done reading them, we put them on the shelf, so basically that's why it's a geek bar."

Joli Rouge is located on the corner of Spruce and College Street in downtown Asheville. It is open from 3 p.m. until 3 a.m. every day.

ZERO By Scott Selsor



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