3 July 2024 / Why “Country Roads” feels like home

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): *Today, Explained.* Sean Rameswaram.   
  
I went to see some live music in Edinburgh, Scotland late last year. And when I entered the venue, I was somehow surprised to see a seven-piece band of dudes in kilts. Very literally Scottish, you guys.

But then I was even more surprised by what they were playing.

<CLIP> SCOTTISH BAND COVERS “TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROADS” with BAGPIPES

SEAN: Everyone knows this super regionally specific slice of Americana John Denver dropped in 1971? Then I was talking to my cousin in Sri Lanka and he said:

PEEPERS: Yeah man, everybody knows ‘Country Roads.’

SEAN: And I was like, do they??!!

But then the more I looked into it, the more I realized Cousin was right.

Ze Germans know these roads:

TAPE

SEAN: The Japanese:

TAPE

SEAN: By the time I heard the French-Canadian “Country Roads” …

TAPE

SEAN: I had to know how this happened.

So – just in time for Independence Day – we’re gonna find out on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. When you wanna learn more about “Take Me Home, Country Roads” it helps to speak to Professor Sarah Morris.

SARAH MORRIS (West Virginia University English professor): I’m an assistant professor of English and I’m the coordinator of undergraduate writing at West Virginia University.

SEAN: Sarah’s so West Virginia she’s writing a whole book about this song.

SARAH: When RCA realized how popular the song was going to be, and it was actually shared outside of the United States first, they really started sharing it with different artists, and that caused its global popularity to move pretty quickly. So in the in the first year or two of, of the original release, Loretta Lynn covered it:

<<Take Me Home, Country Roads recorded by Loretta Lynn>>

*Dark and dusty painted on the sky…*

SARAH: Lynn Anderson covered it, Tennessee Ernie Ford covered it. The Statler Brothers recorded it.

*<<Take Me Home, Country Roads recorded by The Statler Brothers>>*

*Misty taste of moonshine, teardrops in my eye*

SARAH: It was distributed to all these different artists. But one of the things that I think is interesting is that there were three versions that stand out. So there's the original:

*<<Take Me Home, Country Roads recorded by John Denver>>*

*Country Roads, take me home to the place I belong*

SARAH: There's Olivia Newton-John's country-pop version, which was distributed throughout Europe:

*<<Take Me Home, Country Roads recorded by Olivia Newton John>>*

*West Virginia, mountain mama…*

SARAH: And then Ray Charles's R&B cover that went to African-American markets:

*<<Take Me Home, Country Roads recorded by Ray Charles>>*

*Take me home, Country Roads… Now put your hands together!*

SARAH: And from those versions you can trace different variations.

SEAN: Sarah says John Denver’s label, RCA, basically started a game of telephone back in 1971. And we’re still playing that game, because this song still slaps. But don’t take my word for it, take Charlie Harding’s:

CHARLIE HARDING (CO-HOST, SWITCHED ON POP): Co-host of Switched on Pop and professor of music at NYU.

SEAN: Charlie gave us a host of reasons why ‘Country Roads’ is such a ubiquitous banger.

CHARLIE: First… it follows the essential songwriting rules established by Irving Berlin, the great 20th century songwriter wrote 1500 songs in his life, including songs like puttin’ on the Ritz, God Bless America, White Christmas, he had Nine rules. We're not going to go through all of them, but it hits on some of the most important ones. For example the song has to have an average range that anybody can sing. Anybody can sing country roads. Okay. The high note. Sometimes not. Second, the title has to be planted in the song, so you can't forget it. Berlin says that songs should have heart longing, and this song is fundamentally about heart longing. And finally, it just has to be a simple song. And Country Roads couldn't be more simple. Which leads me to the second point, which is that Country Roads contains the most fundamental, most memorable melody. <<guitar note>> Mi, Re, Do. That is the whole structure of the chorus melody. Mi, Re, Do, 3 Blind Mice, Mi, Re, Do. It is ingrained in our memory. In fact, the music theorist Heinrich Schenker called this the Ursatz melody, the fundamental melody which is underlying all Western music. And so when we sing Country Roads – Mi – take me home –Re– to the place –Do– Road, home, place… Mi Re Do. Each of those words falling right on a downbeat on the most fundamental melody. It follows the simplest, easiest to sing melody that anybody can follow along with. It has this one high note who all the celebratory singers can go together. “I belong.” You don't even have to hit the high note. And when you sing ‘I belong,’ You are claiming your space in this song. This song is meant to be sung together in community all around the world.

SEAN: And it is! People are singing this song in Scotland, in Nashville, and all over … Asia?

JASON: I think it's fair to say on any given Friday or Saturday or Sunday night, whether you're in Seoul, Manila, Tokyo or Hanoi, there will be a drunk man or woman belting out “Mountain mama” at any given moment. If you travel across Asia, this song is pretty much ubiquitous and you'll find it wherever you go.  
  
SEAN: Jason Jeong is a writer based in Brooklyn. A few years ago, he wrote about the song for *The Atlantic* on the occasion of its 50th birthday. Specifically, how the song got so big in Asia.

JASON: In 2009, there were two sociologists named Grant Blank and Heidi Ruppke, who published a paper on the musical preferences of Chinese college students. So they went to various classrooms throughout western China. And this would have been the early 21st century. So if you think about American songs that were popular at the time, you're probably thinking, I don't know, Kelly Clarkson had just won American Idol. Maybe you bought her debut album. Or if you're hip, maybe you like The Strokes or Britney Spears. But after asking these Chinese students what their favorite American song was, the answer was overwhelmingly ‘Country Roads’ by John Denver. And what they found was that a lot of students had learned the song while they were learning English in high school or in middle school, and Grant Blank and Heidi Ruppke concluded that this song was also a powerful cultural symbol, for these students, and were associated with their ideation of America.

SEAN: But how did it get to be so popular in China? Seems like it was good ol’ détente.

JASON: So for historical context, U.S. China relations under Mao Zedong during the 50s through the 70s were essentially unilaterally hostile.

SCORING IN, COLD WAR, APM

JASON: The U.S. was fighting the Cold War against the evil commies

*<CLIP> BARRY GOLDWATER: I’ll say it so the All American people can hear that the only enemy of peace in the world is communism.*

JASON: And much of Mao's domestic policy was predicated on the idea that the US was this bad imperialist enemy. So it wasn't until after Mao's death in 1976, when his successor, Deng Xiaoping, ushered in a new era of political detente, and this shift culminated in 1979, when he became the first Chinese head of state to visit the US under President Jimmy Carter.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER: This house belongs to all Americans. People who are firmly dedicated to a world of friendship and peace. And Vice Premier Deng, on behalf of all Americans, I welcome you here to our house <<applause>>*

JASON: If you look at the reception of Deng's trip to Washington, there were protesters from the right who were upset that Jimmy Carter was holding hands with with the communist from the East.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS ARCHIVES:*

*Frank Reynolds. About 400 noisy demonstrators were on hand at Deng’s hotel. <<yelling>>*

JASON: And there were also accounts of protesters from the left who thought Deng’s now a capitalist pod and were betraying Mao's socialist vision. But it was within this context that Deng Xiaoping came to America to visit Jimmy Carter. And as is customary when a head of state comes to visit the entire spread, the full spread was laid out for Deng and the Chinese delegation. This included a night of festivities, at the Kennedy Center, where Shirley MacLaine performed, the Joffrey Ballet were there, as were the Harlem Globetrotters, *obviously.* And John Denver.

*<CLIP> JOHN DENVER: Mr. Vice Premier, it is with great joy that we welcome you to our country and it is with true love that we extend our very best wishes to you and your people on your new, long march toward modernization in this century.*

SCORING FADES

JASON: If there's anything in the world that transcends politics or borders, it's probably trick shots and and folksy singer songwriters. So this trip left an impression on Deng, because a few years later, he invited John Denver to be one of the first touring artists from America to visit China.

SEAN: But it wasn’t *just* detente boosting ‘Country Roads’’ in Asia. It was also the U.S. military.

JASON: If you think about Asia’s relationship with America throughout the 20th century, probably the most visible legacy of American influence were Army bases. And wherever there were Army bases, there was radio.

*<CLIP> Vietnam Military Radio Newscast, Sept. 28, 1970: It’s 2200 hours, exchange of gunfire in Korea! AFVN News, compiled from commercial and military news agencies. Good evening, I’m Marine Sgt. Troy Pittington.*

JASON: So for millions of listeners in Japan, Korea, or the Philippines or Vietnam, countries where American military presence were very much real, their first introduction to American pop culture would have been through Armed Forces Radio.

*<CLIP> ARMED FORCES RADIO: This is the American Forces Vietnam Network where the hits just keep on comin!*

JASON: If you think about the type of music that was popular during the 70s and 80s, you're probably thinking the sensuality of Marvin Gaye …

*Marvin Gate, Let’s Get it On*

JASON: … or the vibrant costumes of Elton John …

*Elton John, Bennie and the Jets*

JASON: … or the anti-war politics, of CCR …

*CCR, Fortunate Son*

JASON: But obviously the suits at Armed Forces radio weren't going to allow obscenity or vulgarity of any form to broadcast across the airwaves. So if you've ever watched the movie …   
  
 *<CLIP> GOOD MORNING VIETNAM:  
 ROBIN WILLIAMS: Goooooooooood morning, Vietnam!*

JASON: It's, it's like how Robin Williams’ character was constantly getting in trouble for, for getting funky with it.

*<CLIP> GOOD MORNING VIETNAM: Good morning, Vietnam? What the heck is that supposed to mean? And who gave anyone permission to program modern music?*

JASON: So the music that did ultimately clear the airwaves were, were easy listening soft rock or Dolly Parton or John Denver.

SEAN: “Country Roads” was innocuous, but it was also a crowd pleaser, no matter the crowd.

JASON: 100%. I mean, I don't know anyone in my age cohort who, who loves John Denver. I think it's hard to evaluate, like really omnipresent fixtures in pop culture objectively, if that's even possible. But the song is really beautiful.

SCORING – INSTRUMENTAL “Take Me Home, Country Roads”

JASON: Having listened to it for the first time in a while, like, this song is about one to go back home, which is something that I think anyone can relate to. And it's about, it's about mountains and trees and pretty streams.

SEAN: You're reminding me of <chuckles> a Reddit thread I stumbled upon doing research for this episode. In R/AskanAmerican, someone says, “Do you find it odd that Country Roads is enjoyed around the world? Got me nostalgic for a place I've never been to.”

JASON: Yeah!

SEAN: And then legacy underscore user 1010 says in response, “No, every country has roads. Most people use them to go home.”

JASON: <chortles> They’re not wrong…  
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
JASON: That's the crazy thing about this song. I think, I think that's a perfect description. It's, it makes me nostalgic for a place I've never been. I've never been in West Virginia. I, I don't, I don't plan on visiting West Virginia anytime soon, but for some reason, I can see it.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: We’re gonna visit West Virginia when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> LOGAN LUCKY: LOGAN’s DAUGHTER: West Virginia, mountain momma, take me home, country roads*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with some fun facts. “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” was made famous by a guy named John Denver, who was born and raised as Henry John Deutschendorf Jr. in Roswell, New Mexico. The song was originally intended for Johnny Cash Denver’s co-writers Bill Danoff and Taffy Nivert also wrote “Afternoon Delight”.

*<CLIP> “Afternoon Delight” Starland Vocal Band: “Afternoon Delight”*

*Anchorman, Ron Burgundy: Now if you don’t think this is the greatest song ever I will fight you.*

SEAN: And, guess what? Bill and Taffy weren’t from West Virginia either! Taffy was from D.C., where she and Bill lived and wrote the song. Bill was from Massachusetts and apparently considered making the lyrics something like:

*NOAM HASSENFELD (Unexplainable host): <sings> … a place I belong*

*Massachusetts, Boston Celtics …*

SEAN: Okay, the Celtics thing is a joke. But he was serious about Massachusetts.   
  
I asked West Virginia University English Professor Sarah Morris if it bothers West Virginians that their calling card anthem was written by three outsiders. She said they weren’t totally outsiders.

SARAH: So it's true that Bill Danoff had never been to West Virginia. But the eastern Panhandle of West Virginia is only about 60 miles from D.C., so it's not a world away. And West Virginia was so prominent in the cultural and political landscape of the 60s. So Kennedy campaigned really heavily in the state. The Appalachian Regional Commission was established in the 60s. All these road building and charity efforts put West Virginia in the spotlight. If you were living in DC, there's no way you wouldn't have known about the state. But John Denver, he was in a band called the Mitchell Trio. From 1965 until about 1968, and they toured college campuses all over the eastern seaboard, including West Virginia.

*<CLIP> WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY: John Denver, the Mountain State’s adopted favorite son, played a special visit to the campus as part of the gala opening ceremonies for the new Mountaineer field on September 6th.*

SARAH: So he performed out at West Virginia Wesleyan College. He performed at Marshall University, in 1970. In the fall, he performed solo at Concord College's homecoming celebration.And then Taffy Nivert, her voice is really interesting to me because in some ways we don't hear from her very much, but she has probably the deepest connection with the state. She went to college across the river from West Virginia in the northern Panhandle. So she spent time in Wheeling while she was in college across the river. She told me that when she was in college, she'd look across the Ohio River and think of West Virginia as the motherland. So she had kind of a deep emotional connection, if not a lifelong connection, if not the connection of a West Virginia native.

SEAN: All that being said, there are West Virginians who take issue with some of the references in the lyrics – namely these two:

*<CLIP> JOHN DENVER: Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River*

SARAH: Yes. I mean, geographically speaking, the Shenandoah only crosses a tiny bit of the state, right? And the Blue Ridge Mountains, they're just a tiny part of the state, right? So, like geographically, they're talking about a very small piece. So I think lots of West Virginians say, yeah, but it's not really about us, except we live in this cultural landscape where West Virginians are either derided or are completely invisible. We're always making this ongoing accounting of of existing. And that's that's an extreme sentiment, but it happens to all of us. Or, a celebrity says something really terrible or makes a hillbilly joke and we can say, ‘Well, we've got ‘Country Roads.’’ Like, here's evidence that we were recognized and, and that we were loved. So West Virginians use it in all these really utilitarian ways. People singing at funerals, people singing at weddings, at graduations, at family reunions.

*<CLIP> West Virginia University: Join us as the class of 2016 sings Country Roads! <<West Virginia… Blue RIdge Mountains… Shenandoah River…”*

SARAH: I can't believe how many people have told me stories about family vacations where when they cross the state line, mom and dad wake everybody up and you sing ‘Country Roads.’ Right?  
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
SARAH: It's a thing. I thought it was just my family. It's not. It's a thing. They sing it at protests in governmental offices.  
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
SARAH: It's everywhere in the state. People decorate their houses with it. I probably have five different country roads themed t shirts. People tattoo it on their bodies, right? That it's this, it's used rhetorically in lots of different ways. But I think something really important to understand is that Country Roads speaks to West Virginians, because leaving is infused into our cultural consciousness.

SCORING IN – TEx24 Somber 01 - Canopy Dusk SOFT CLACKY-01.A1

SARAH: From 1950 to about the year 2000, West Virginia lost nearly 800,000 people – people migrating out because there aren't jobs. The industry is, by and large, owned from the outside, right? Businesses close. We've, we export a lot of our resources. And we continue to use, to lose population and numbers larger than any other state. We just, we just lost another congressional seat because of population loss. So we're taught that we have to lead to succeed. There's no home for us here. And that if we want to stay, maybe we can't. And so ‘Country Roads’ really calls to that.

SCORING STARTS TO FADE

SEAN: I asked Sarah to tell us more about how “Country Roads” has been used in protests, because …this is not exactly, you know, Rage Against the Machine. She said she herself witnessed students belting the song on West Virginia University’s campus in Morgantown.

SCORING FULLY OUT

SARAH: So, this was a speaker, as I recall, that had a religious message.

SEAN: Hm.

SARAH: And, and he was holding a sign. And sometimes, you know, college campuses, we get, folks who come through as, like, itinerant preachers. And I, I think that's the kind of situation. But I think he was saying something pretty divisive. I don't know, I couldn't hear it. All I could hear was ‘Country Roads.’ <chortles>  
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
SARAH: But I think I've seen this pattern of West Virginians using it in congressional offices. Like, I was able to find recordings of folks using it to protest, Rockwool, which is an industrial plant that was being put in in the eastern part of the state:

*<CLIP>Zachary Salman, Singing in protest of Rockwool Factory:*

*West Virginia, Mountain Mama, take me home, country roads*.

SARAH: There was a tweet that went out some time ago that said that, you know, being arrested while singing Country Roads is peak Appalachian experience …  
  
SEAN: Hm.  
  
SARAH: … for someone who's engaging in civic discourse. So, I do think it's used for all of these different rhetorical purposes.

SEAN: Do you think the song itself is political? This idea of home that clearly strikes a chord with people, no matter where they're from feels more emotional than, than political. But does this song have a politics?

SARAH: Oh, well, all our emotions are tied up in politics.  
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
SARAH: I mean, especially today, right? So much of our political landscape is governed by emotion rather than reason. So when a candidate plays country roads at a rally, oh, we think he's on our side if you're from West Virginia.

SEAN: And do our candidates play this song at rallies?

SARAH: Yes, yeah. There's, there's a really great clip of President Trump using country roads at a speech in Charleston and when the music is shut off before the song is over, the audience keeps singing.

*<CLIP> West Virginia Public Broadcasting:*

*<<John Denver, Country Roads>>*

*<<crowd sings along>>*

*President Donald Trump: Beautiful, West Virginia.*

SARAH: In the days after Trump used the song, John Denver's estate came out and said that they don't endorse any political candidate using the song. But I don't, I don't think, I don't think it's wrong. And I don't think it makes the song divisive. I think it still has those connective qualities, whether we're using it or whether a politician is using it at a campaign stop, or whether it's used in a beer commercial or whether it's used to sell tires or whatever, right? And that's another aspect that I've been thinking about is it's, it's used to create affiliation and a sense of belonging. And political campaigns do that. We, we want to associate our values with a candidate's values. And playing the right song allows for that. Just the same as playing the right song helps us sell a Google Home device or whatever.

*<CLIP> Booking.com: There’s a booking for every resolution, book yours at booking dot com.*

*<CLIP> Corona Commercial*

*<CLIP> Google Home Commercial: Ok google, turn on the hall lights.*

*KID: Daddy!*

SEAN: Do you think this song is, is singing about a state in a country that maybe sometimes just doesn't exist anymore? I mean, I know you're saying this song can, can be used as a political statement because politics are emotional. But it also seems to transcend politics in that there are liberal people who love this song, and they're conservative people who love this song. And there are people who have a strong connection to West Virginia who love this song. And there's people who listen to this song and want to move to West Virginia. It seems to just transcend all of the stereotypes or biases we might have about a certain place. And yet, people – I don't know – people seem to want to wear their biases on their sleeve now. They want to not just vote in election, they want to fly Trump flags and they want to fly ‘Fuck Trump’ flags, which was in the news recently, you know? Is the world of this song a thing of the past?

SARAH: I would, I would venture to say that it's a thing that never existed.

SEAN: Hm!

SARAH: So I think one of the things that ‘Country Roads’ does is create an imaginary landscape that's flexible and can be applied to any home. So one of the concepts that I work with in my book is, is ‘hiraeth’, which is a, it's a Welsh term that means something like homesickness but not quite, it's like, a deep existential longing for a place that you've never been or a place that doesn't really exist in the first place. So I think there's this sense of imaginary landscape that taps into a deep seated, universal feeling of wanting to belong to a place and to each other. And that's what gives the song power, which is why we see it transformed in so many different ways. That it's not it's not really about West Virginia. And yet West Virginians can take it up. But like…

*<CLIP> TOOTS AND THE MAYTALS, COUNTRY ROADS:*

*West Jamaica, my mama, take me home*

SARAH: Toots and the Maytals can make it West Jamaica or, Israel Kamakawiwoʻole can make it West Makaha.

*<CLIP> ISRAEL KAMAKAWIWOʻOLE, COUNTRY ROADS*

*To the place I belong, West Makaha, Mount Kalalea*

SARAH: Or there's, a really great group of, of sisters called the Moipei Quartet, who talk about Kenya.

*<CLIP> MOIPEI QUARTET, COUNTRY ROADS:*

*Almost heaven. That is Kenya.*

SARAH: So it's, it's flexible and taps into something ineffable, right? Something that's this deep human need. And that's what I think the power comes from. But for West Virginians it’s different because it calls us out by name in a way that we're not used to being called out.

SCORING OUT, RAY CHARLES’ ‘TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROADS’

SEAN: Professor Sarah Morris. West Virginia University. She’s writing a book about “Take Me Home, Country Roads” that she hopes it’ll be out later this year. You also heard from Jason Jeong. He’s got a piece in *The Atlantic* from a few years back titled “The Song That Sold America to a Generation of Asian Immigrants.” And also Charlie Harding. He’s got a show called *Switched on Pop*. And they did an episode about ‘Country Roads’ last year.

Our program today was produced by Victoria Chamberlin. We were edited by Matthew Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd. Thanks to West Virginia native and *Death, Sex & Money* host Anna Sale for her counsel on this one. All hail Anna Sale.

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is taking a few days off for Independence Day. We’ll be back in your feeds Monday.   
  
Happy 4th!

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]