

also stayed sometimes with a friend in Woody Creek, a couple miles out of town (Hunter's hood), and since Aspen is a fish bowl town, local stories swirl around. Hunter and his guns usually pissed people off. One time he shot icicles off of a cabin rented by John with a high-powered rifle. John wasn't in it at the time, but the story got back to him. He was not amused. He and Hunter could agree about trees, but not guns.

The last time I saw John was in Nashville a few months before he died. He'd just finished recording *All Aboard* with Roger, the project that would win them both a Grammy for Best Children's Album of the Year (1998). I was writing for magazines at that time, and especially enjoyed a bi-line in *EQ*, a music publication. I penned a column, *Demo Queen*, and wrote cover features, as well. I liked writing and thought of it as another career, one I could do at home and be with my girls. I asked John to give me an interview (for fun), saying I'd try to get it in the local paper. (A week later, I pitched *Music Row Magazine*, but, shockingly, they weren't interested.) John said, yes, but it would have to be on the way to the airport. By this time (1997), John's music star was not so bright. His venues were getting smaller and he was not getting any airplay. His energy was still upbeat and he mustered on, but part of the problem was his music didn't fit into a specific slot. In the 70s, all genres of music would play on radio stations, but that changed in the 80s—stations became Country or Pop or Alternative or Hard Rock or Hip Hop and so on. John's music did not fit neatly into any musical genre. He was sort of folk, sort of country—sort of pop.

John had mixed feelings about Nashville, but that's where we lived at the time (soon after we moved to Miami) and John wanted Roger to produce this train album for Sony Records, plus, several of the musicians in the band lived in Nashville. John dodged ugly ghosts

in Nashville. There had been that nasty incident at the Grand Old Opry (1975) when a drunk Charlie Rich burned John's *Entertainer of the Year Award* live on camera with John smiling his big smile on a remote monitor, oblivious to the slight. He was on tour in Australia at the time. John was still angry about that and who could blame him?

Khrist O'Connor, John's sometime road manager and sole assistant for this trip, drove us to the airport. The days of big staff were gone. John rode shotgun and I sat in the backseat with my recorder, pad and pen, the tools of my new trade. I asked about his current projects, which I knew about, but it had to be official out of his mouth; he mostly wanted to talk about his new environmental organization Plant-it 2000—he wanted everyone to plant trees. He loved trees. I thought the interview was going well. I'd recently interviewed Tony Brown, President of MCA Records, for an EQ cover feature and felt confident about this new gig of being a journalist. And, given my personal relationship with John, it was an amusing role to be in for the fifteen minutes it took to get to the airport, so different than our usual banter about the kids, his mom, my mom. But the stranger thing was the smallness of it. Just a regular car, no limo, no entourage; John traveling alone on commercial—that was different.

Setting: K.O. pulls up to the curb. John gets out of the shotgun seat, throwing his duffle bags on the curb—no one around to help. He looks a little tired. His hair is ruffled, sticking out in places. Conrad gets out of the back seat and walks to him.

Memory Clouds

John

So...ummm, tell your old man to call me tonight, after he's done with the mixes.

Conrad

Okay. Where you going?

(John scans the perimeter while talking, checking out the people nearby—his typical behavior in a public place.)

John

California, Boston, New Jersey, New York and then what?

K.O.

(From inside the car.) Texas.

John

Texas. Then I'm taking some time off, play some golf, got a new plane I want to break in. And, don't forget to talk about Plant-it 2000 in your article. Hey, congratulations on your new gig. I read your *Demo Queen* column. Like it.

Conrad

My new career path, I guess.

Conrad Reeder

John

Whatever you do, you'll do fine.

Conrad

(smiling)

Thanks. Don't work too hard.

(John looks back at Conrad—gives her a hug and a peck on the cheek. Picks up his bags and flashes a big toothy smile.)

John

Thaaanks darlin'. See ya.

Conrad

See ya.

(John picks up bags and walks away, as Conrad waves and gets back in the shotgun seat.)

End.

John walked up to the check-in counter with his bags. It was bizarre to see him as almost a regular person, not the super star on a

Memory Clouds

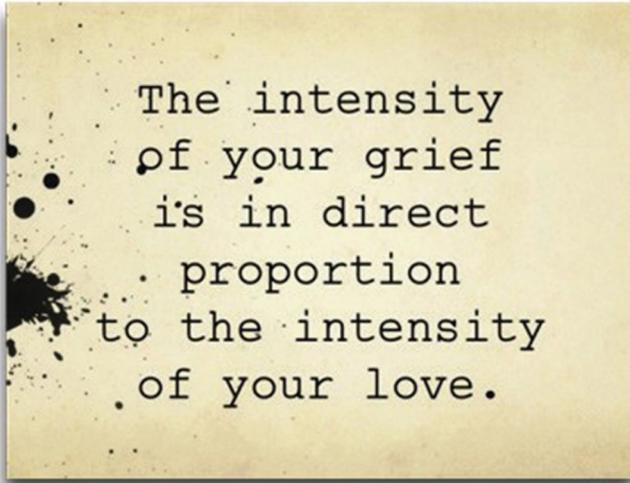
stage with (sometimes) millions of people in his audience, and it also felt wrong; he seemed vulnerable. Then people standing around him in line started to recognize him and I thought, *he's alone, he should run to the gate before he gets mobbed*. But John put his bags down and started to sign autographs, gracious even though he was tired, even though no one was there to assist him to the gate for a plane he was going to be late for, again. His fame in the charts may have declined, but this scene showed how much his fans still loved him and his spirit rose to the occasion, a man on a mission with a big heart, not just for the benefit of his family and friends, but for his fans, for our beautiful planet and for humanity at large, whether they knew it or not. Four months later, he was gone.

*If I should live forever
and all my dreams come true,
my memory of love will be of you.
Perhaps Love by John Denver*

John channeled his poetry from his special place. He used to say (during his live show) that musical ideas were always floating by and sometimes he could grab them. Ideas float by in boats of imagination, a magical event that beckons us to come and sail. In writing about John, I am reminded of my own dreams, my own desires and imaginings, and the story that is bigger than me: life. And thanks to you, John,⁷ I experienced oceans of love and life. Maybe reincarnation is true and I'll get to be with these people again whom I've loved (and loved me). I hope so. Immersed in that thought, I face the abyss. *Keep reminding*

⁷ John recorded a song we wrote titled *Thanks To You* on his album, *The Flower That Shattered The Stone*. (co-writers Johnny Christopher & Sam Hogin)

myself that the good thing about grief is the grief. I try (and sometimes fail) to think of this awful feeling of grief as good because it means I've been blessed by an experience of love. I try, if only for that moment to remember:



Wheels roll on concrete and I look out the window to see Blonde Johnnie Brah skateboarding through a parking lot dwarfed by tall swaying palms and sweet-smelling Plumerias with Yellow The Dog running behind him, just inches behind. Plumerias that barely thrive anywhere else, grow to thirty feet here in the volcanic soil: pinks, whites, orange, dual colors, all with a distinctive sugary smell. Johnnie skateboards 'round and 'round on this figure-eight of an island. From an aerial view, Maui looks like a big 8. This Johnnie probably doesn't know much about my John, now dead almost fifteen years. Sometimes, Johnnie drives an old battered truck, but I only hear reggae hip-hop tracks buzzing through his blown speakers.

Memory Clouds

The picture all fits: dreads, reggae, Maui cruiser, skateboard in the backseat, and a yellow mutt riding shotgun. Oh, I'm sure he's heard some of John's songs. I hear them when I go to any grocery or Big Box Store. This Johnnie seems so much younger at 22 than when I was 22 and living on my own, performing in shows and in the middle of a divorce from my childhood sweetheart who had just finished his three year disaster as a 101st Screaming Eagle Airborne Army soldier. More rememberings, more memory clouds....

No way would I have lived at home with my parents at age 22. Of course, they lived in Ohio, not Hawai'i, like Johnnie's. But if my parents were still alive, I probably wouldn't want to be this far away from them, either. No, I'm here on a dot in the Pacific because they're all dead: my parents, Roger, John, Paul, Murphy (dog), Winnie (dog), Spookie (dog), Diamond (cat)—okay, I loved my animals, too. My daughters are in LA, which in Hawai'i is considered next door—especially if I am “next door” to an airport. I don't know how people traveled here on ships. Sounds like torture to my landlocked stomach. Some days I feel like I've been sent to my room. (Well, Virginia, I got some of it right: *a woman must have money and a room of her own to write fiction* (Woolf, *A Room*). At least I can check the box in front of *room*, but this writing is non-fiction.)

John and Roger dove the reefs and caverns together in these Hawaiian waters. I try to see them, laughing, playing with their scuba gear or cameras. John overdubbed tracks for various projects at Lahaina Sound in West Maui. My first trip to Maui with my small girls in tow was because of John's project. Sitting in the studio in Los Angeles one day, almost half-joking, John said, “I could do these overdubs anywhere in the world.” Roger said, “Then let's go to Maui.” And, we did. *Thanks John. I miss you, too, a lot. I'm still here and back on Maui—who knew this would happen.* The memories come and go,

playing tricks with light and dark. *They slept on the abyss without a surge—the waves were dead; the tides were in their grave* (Byron, *The Darkness*). Stuck in beauty or stuck in grief. Which one will prevail? And is *stuck* the verb I want to be? Sobbing. Can't get out of bed....

Note to Self: Mantra

Say three times: Om Namah Shivaya (Ohm Nah-mah Sheh-vi [long i] -yah) and sing, hum or whistle a melody, any melody. Get the vocal chords vibrating or write a poem. It doesn't matter what it is or how it sounds, just do it.



Me & John. 1983, England. Photo by Roger Nichols.