

Behind the Scenes: Isao Yoshino and John Denver

As you discovered in the book "Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn," Isao Yoshino (a huge country music fan) enjoyed a front-row experience at a John Denver concert in the mid-1980s. What wasn't included was the full story of this experience, and how he came to have — and lose — John Denver's autograph. What follows is Isao Yoshino's account (only lightly edited).

— Katie Anderson

This is a short memo of my first and the last encounter of John Denver.

It was soon after my assignment to Toyota's San Francisco Liaison Office in 1987 that I was invited to John Denver's outdoor concert held at the Fishermen's Wharf in San Francisco. I believe it was in late April or early May. I was given a chance to sit at the first row of John Denver's concert by a security guard (body guard) for all the Toyota executives and employees in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those security guys were ex-police officers. Every time Toyota top executives traveled to the U.S., it was customary for the Toyota Secretary's Office to ask the SF-based security company to take care of the security job throughout the executives' U.S. travel. Usually four or five security guards travelled together with the top executives from morning 'til night staying at the same hotels. When ultra-top executives (i.e. Mr. Eiji Toyoda or Shoichiro Toyoda) traveled to the US, they always took their wives with them. So, it was pretty a big event for the security guard team and also Toyota expatriates like us in the Liaison Office, as we also accompanied them very tightly during their stay in our area. Toyota top executives came to the U.S. two or three or times a year and in most cases, they tried to drop by in SF.

Those same security guards also took care of celebrities like John Denver when these super stars came into town. One of the security guards, Mike McKelligot, and I became friends. He was tall and big, but he was quite a gentleman. He liked me and I liked him. As he lived in San Mateo, which is very close to Burlingame where I used to live, we used to get together often and talk. I believe Mike decided to include me to be one of the attendees to the party. After John Denver's concert was over, we were invited to the party room of the nearest hotel — I think it was Hyatt Regency Hotel at the Embarcadero Center — and we joined the informal party. John Denver came to join us after he took a shower and wore casual clothes.

While he walked around and came to my area, I introduced myself and explained that we came from Japan for the NUMMI project, and John and I had a short chat. The photos you have are the two my friend took during our chat at the party. John said he was thinking of replacing his offices' old vehicles (pick-up trucks) to new ones. I recommended Toyota pick-up trucks to him. He agreed and said he would like to get some. So, right after the party, I called a Toyota car dealer located in Aspen, Colorado, namely Stevenson Toyota and explained that John Denver's plan. The dealer people were very excited about it.

A few days later, I received a call from the dealer and said John's staff had placed

orders for the pick-up trucks. As far as I remember correctly, he ordered four new pick-up trucks with a good discount. John Denver's manager called me and thanked me for the quick action to talk to the dealer and asked what he could do to appreciate my quick arrangement. I asked John's manager, "I am a great fan of John Denver. I would like to have his autograph." His manager said, "Mr. Denver usually doesn't give autographs, but I will try to get it especially for you because your action was so quick and John was happy to know that." A few weeks later, his manager sent me two sheets of John Denver's autographs and a free concert ticket to any of his tour. John was having a big tour that year visiting more than 15 different places in the U.S. The tickets allowed me to get in to any of his concert locations.

John's autograph was awesome! He wrote some short words of appreciation, just like "Thanks for your help" or something. He also put some Japanese writing in kanji, like "tomodachi" (friend). I don't remember the exact word. His autograph was a very rare one as his manager said he usually never give any autographs. I was so happy with their special arrangement.

The biggest mistake I made was that I did not explain to my wife how I got his autograph and how great John Denver was as a country singer at that time. My wife is not a big fan of country music and showed little interest in my very unusual experience running into Mr. Denver and talking face to face. Later I found out that she had thrown away that precious autograph paper without knowing it was hand-written by John. To her, the hand-written Japanese word looked so sloppy that thought it was something that I had forgotten to throw it way to the garbage, and so she did it for me.

— Isao Yoshino



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