

CHAPTER ONE

John Stewart: 'Twixt Trio and Solo — What Was It *Really* Like?

After The Kingston Trio: John Stewart, “*Quo vadis?*”¹



How long a gap was there between leaving the Trio and starting to play again?

I had a year where I just wrote and tried to figure out what I was going to do. Was it going to be another group? Was I going to be solo? Would I play with another guy or a girl? I decided to sing with Buffy Ford, and we did one album for Capitol called *Signals Through the Glass*. The album sold 7,000 copies at the time, and I know *language* records that have sold more than that. We did a few concerts and club dates, but it didn't work too well. When you have a male and female singing together, you have to have songs that complement the two. I mean, you can't have a girl singing “July, You're a Woman.” So, I thought to myself, if I'm going to do it, do it. I went solo, and that's what I've been doing ever since and will do for as long as they let me.

— *Omaha Rainbow* #9/Summer 1976
“John Stewart — Interviewed
By Fraser Massey”
Malibu, California
February 12, 1976
[Emphases mine — FWK]

The period between the breakup of the Kingston Trio (most sources say late 1966 or early 1967) and the release of *Signals Through the Glass*, John Stewart's first “solo” career album (September 1968/Capitol Records), comprised — at the outside — only about a year and a half to two years.

I put quotation marks around “solo” in “solo career” because *Signals Through the Glass* was, after all, the product of a *duo* — John Stewart and Buffy Ford. It wasn't long before they decided that it would be better if John's post-Kingston Trio career would be more feasible with him as a completely solo artist — in the mold of the emerging “singer/songwriter” model of the late 1960s and early 1970s (James Taylor, Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Young, John Denver, *et alia*). (More about the decision to go completely solo later.)

I found myself quite intrigued by what that year and a half between The Kingston Trio

¹ This is a Latin phrase meaning “Where are you going?” or, more precisely, “Whither goest thou?”

The modern usage of the phrase refers to a Christian tradition regarding Saint Peter. According to the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, Peter is fleeing from likely crucifixion in Rome at the hands of the government, and along the road outside the city he meets a risen Jesus. In the Latin translation, Peter asks Jesus “*Quo vadis?*” to which he replies, “*Romam vado iterum crucifigi*” (“I am going to Rome to be crucified again”). Peter thereby gains the courage to continue his ministry and returns to the city, to eventually be martyred by being crucified upside-down. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quo_vadis

and *Signals Through the Glass* might have been like for John Stewart.

After all, by Paul McCartney's own admission, his transition from Fab Four Lad, a Beatle, a member of The Most Popular Group in the History of Pop Music, to a solo artist, "Paul McCartney," was not an easy one. He may have retreated with Linda Eastman, his wife, to the hills of Scotland, for "solitude," etc., but he was still drinking whiskey before he was out of bed every morning (*The Beatles: In Their Own Words*).

I wondered how a similar transition — from Folk Music Group Phenomenon to solo artist in search of a second career — had gone for John Stewart.

(Fraser Massey) **Did you have problems, because going from the Kingston Trio into what you do now must have been a very different scene? (John Stewart)** Completely, and the music had changed so drastically with The Beatles, Dylan, The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, that the Kingston Trio was more of a minus than a plus. When I went to get bookings, or to record companies, and said, "Former member of the Kingston Trio," it was like that was what I was going to do. It was no help except that I knew a lot of people in the record business and I could go and say, "You've got to listen to my stuff." ***It was hard starting over again. I got spoiled with The Trio. I'd just jumped in to the number-one group in the country, and then I had to start again from scratch, gradually building up a reputation.***

— *Omaha Rainbow* #9/Summer 1976
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[Emphases mine — FWK]



To The Kingston Trio's credit, their final albums contained songs by some of the more prominent emerging singer/songwriters of the time and, thus, showed the world that The Trio's (and Stewart's in particular) definition of "Folk Music" was changing, being stretched.

On the *Children of the Morning* (May 1966/Decca Records) album, Stewart, Reynolds, and Shane covered the hauntingly beautiful Lennon-McCartney sitar-cum-acoustic guitar Dylanesque gem from *Rubber Soul*, "Norwegian Wood." John said they did it just because they loved the song, and he and Nick wanted to sing it.²

One late album in particular, *Once Upon a Time: The Kingston Trio Live at Lake Tahoe* (recorded July 1–22, 1966 at the Sahara Tahoe, Lake Tahoe, Nevada; released June 1969/Tetragrammaton Records), contained one song by Donovan and two by Bob Dylan.

²*Omaha Rainbow* #34/Autumn 1984/"John Stewart — Interviewed by Spencer Leigh"/BBC Radio Merseyside/Liverpool, England/August 5, 1984

To be sure, the Donovan song, “Colours,” was, in reality, a traditional song given new life by the gifted and graceful Scottish troubador.

The two Dylan songs were very telling, very revealing about what The Trio considered fair to include within the general Folk spectrum — of which, they were, after all, still a part. The first, “Baby, You’ve Been on My Mind,” was a smoothly soulful rendition of Bob’s solo tune (an outtake from 1964’s *Another Side of Bob Dylan*/Columbia Records), with the lead sung by John and featuring ascending background “Oooooohs” by Bob and Nick — very Pop/Folk. It was not at all like Linda Ronstadt’s slightly later version, heavy with French horns and Dolly Parton-arrangement ripoffs. The Kingston Trio’s arrangement of this song was the one that served as the basis for The Dinosaurs’ rendition — my last (now defunct) acoustic duo (1996 to 2009). I never had access to this version in order to play it for Doug Breckenridge, my partner in that group. I taught Doug the song, winging it, from my faint memory of Leland Rucker playing it for me back in Roselle, Illinois in 1971–1972. (This is as good an example of *The Folk Process* as there ever was — a completely remembered/oral transmission after 35+ years.) It was a favorite of mine in The Dinosaurs’ 150-song repertoire.

The other Dylan song on *Once Upon a Time* was “One Too Many Mornings” (from *The Times, They Are A-Changin’*/June 1964/Columbia Records), originally a somber, sedate reading by Dylan about a bittersweet breakup. On *Once Upon a Time*, it was given a revved-up pop treatment by John, Bob, and Nick — a version which, I’m positive, served as the inspiration for The Association’s rip-roaring electric version a year later, and which, for both The Kingston Trio and The Association, became the song they chose to open their live concerts with during that period.

There was another LP — *The Lost 1967 Kingston Trio Album: Rarities, Volume I* — recorded in 1967 but not released until 2007, that consisted *primarily* of covers of contemporary singer/songwriters’ material: “Homeward Bound” (Paul Simon); “The Other Side of This Life” (Fred Neil); “The Dolphins” (Neil); “To Try for the Sun” (Donovan); “Elusive Butterfly” (Bob Lind); “Nashville Cats” (John Sebastian); “Don’t Make Promises” (Tim Hardin); “Catch the Wind” (Donovan); “Reason to Believe” (Hardin).

“Uniquely Positioned” #1

In this matter, I found myself totally sympathetic to Stewart’s general mood — “Genres and Musical-Style Labels Don’t Matter/Genres and Musical-Style Labels Be Damned.” If you like the song, and it fits, do it. Tradition — and Traditional Folk Music — be damned. (Other notable Folksingers of the time went through this same dilemma: Do I stick with Traditional Folk songs, or branch out, make changes, write my own, cover newer songwriters? Bob Gibson, in particular, had very strong feelings in this regard.)

I headed up a five-man Folk group that was based in Chicago in 1965–1966 called The Summertime Singers (five voices, one instrument — me, on guitar — and matching pants and shirts; we did a lot of Kingston trio songs). I still wince at the reaction that at least

one of the guys gave me when I tried to introduce another Dylanesque tune, The Beatles' "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" (from *Help!*/August 1965/Parlophone Records) into our repertoire. I thought it was a great song, with John Lennon doing his best Bob Dylan — and that our version of it did it justice. One of the tenors, Ron Krohse, a dear friend from church and high school, said he "...hated it..." and that he thought we should stick with Traditional Folk songs. He said it emphasized too sharply the waltz tempo of the song and that he, as tambourine player on it, was embarrassed at what he heard as its musical plodding-ness.

This caught me unawares and blindsided me. I never expected any discord or opposition over a simple repertoire selection. It's not easy bucking Tradition — even among your bandmates. *Audiences*, however, enjoyed our version of that song. My favorite of all the Summertime Singers' songs was our rousing, three-part harmony rendition of Bob Dylan's "The Times, They Are A-Changin,'" which we would perform to thunderous applause at church-youth conventions in the Midwest.



As it turns out, that year-and-a-half-to-two-year stretch 'twixt Trio and solo was an incredibly wild, roller-coaster period of hiatus for John Stewart. In my wildest imagination, I couldn't have concocted any more unlikely spate of almost-possible improbabilities, bizarre near-misses, and off-the-wall attempts to fashion the next phase of his career.

Try this on for size:

1. He tried to form a trio with two West Coast Folk legends.
2. He tried to form a duo with a future Pop/Folk megastar.
3. He almost became the producer for a Folk-Rock supergroup.
4. He wrote and sold two songs to two different groups — The Monkees ("Daydream Believer") and The Lovin' Spoonful ("Never Goin' Back [to Nashville Anymore]") — that turned out to be million-dollar sellers for them and — ultimately — the last songs they had hits with before they broke up.³
5. He got divorced.⁴

³ See the next installment in this series, "**CHAPTER TWO: False Start/Mixed Signals,**" for an anecdote from a live performance of Stewart's at a coffeehouse in Kansas City in December 1970 that Leland Rucker attended in which Stewart wryly muses — and takes a swipe at Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew in the process — on the "Kiss of Death" quality that certain of his songs seem to have taken on when recorded by other groups — FWK.

⁴ I've never been unable to unearth much about John Stewart's first wife — only that her name was "Julie" [coincidentally, the name also of *my* first wife] and that she bore him three children. She is, presumably, the woman being referenced in "Julie, Judy, Angel Rain" from Stewart's July 1970 LP for Capitol Records, *Willard*.

6. He met Buffy Ford (who was, at the time, part of a singing group called The Young Americans and being courted as the female lead singer for Jefferson Airplane before Grace Slick⁵). They met when he was leaving the Kingston Trio and was looking for a female singing partner. After he came to see her in a musical comedy show at the Festival Theatre in San Anselmo, he offered her the job.⁶

7. He formed a duo with Ford.

8. They played some live dates.

9. Stewart and Ford hunkered down in their Mill Valley, California, hideaway, surrounded themselves with different slices of Americana — reproductions of paintings by the Wyeths and novels and poetry by some of the greatest American writers in the modern era (Steinbeck, Updike, Wilder) — and began writing and rehearsing tracks for an LP.

10. Stewart and Ford went into a recording studio to begin laying down tracks for a wildly experimental album.

11. They interrupted that project to accept an invitation from one of the most powerful politicians of our times — Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York — to accompany him on his ill-fated campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

12. Stewart and Ford endured about a three-and-a-half month grueling series of one-night stands and whistlestops in countless cities across the country as the warmup celebrity

Ray Coleman of *Melody Maker* Magazine wrote, after Stewart was divorced, “Divorced, with three children, and living in a small home, with a 1965 Ford and no concern for possessions except a love for his holy guitar, Stewart is very close to his own ideal of the troubador. “Anchors scare me,” [Stewart] declared. “I’ve always loved to be able to put all I own in a case and take off. I don’t like the idea of roots.” (Quoted by Peter O’Brien in *Omaha Rainbow* #1, December 1973.)

If Luke (see the quote from Buffy Ford’s website later in this chapter) is John and Buffy’s only child, then the three he had with “Julie” are Jeremy, Michael (sometimes seen as “Mikael”) and a third, whose name I have never come across. John Stewart was, apparently, an intensely private man when it came to family matters.

⁵ Janet Davis: “John Stewart: Poet With a Guitar,” <http://www.beautifulbotany.com/Latest-Latest-Stories-2008/Feb-John/Stewart/John/Stewart.htm> [If you haven’t visited Ms. Davis’s site, do yourself a favor and do so. The video of The Kingston Trio’s letter-perfect, completely acoustic, in the true-Folk Tradition of *one-microphone*, live-television performance of Gordon Lightfoot’s “Early Morning Rain” on *The Andy Williams Show* in the mid-1960s is priceless. Bob, Nick, and John each tackle one verse vocally and join in harmony for the refrains. When John Stewart swings his 12-string around to clear Nick Reynolds and get closer to the mic to play the lead instrumental outro at the end, it is one of the Great Moments in Acoustic Music History — FWK.]

⁶ <http://buffyfordstewart.com/bio.html> If the total number of years that John and Buffy stayed together (43) is accurate — and it should be, as it is lifted from Buffy’s own website — that puts their meeting each other in early 1965, as Stewart died in January 2008. Thus, they were a couple for 10 years before they got married in 1975.

musical act for Kennedy's presidential campaign.

13. They suffered the agony of Robert Kennedy's assassination while they were on the road with him — in their home state of California.

14. They retreated to their Mill Valley home and resumed the intense wood-shedding necessary to produce an album's worth of songs.

15. They returned to the studio and finished the album.

16. They broke up the duo.

Whew!

Lesser artists never undertake that much activity over the *entire course* of their careers — let alone as something to fill up a year-and-a-half-hiatus between being in a supergroup and starting over again as a solo singer/songwriter.



“Ladies and Gentlemen: Presenting — John, Buffy, and ... Henry Diltz!”

(Spencer Leigh) **When The Kingston Trio disbanded, am I right in saying that you teamed up as a duo with Buffy Ford?**

(John Stewart) No, I didn't work with Buffy until about a year and a half later. I was looking to put a group together, and I was looking to sing with a female voice. I loved the female quality that the Weavers and Peter, Paul, and Mary had. I'd been part of three men singing together for seven years, and I was real tired of that sound. I wanted the upper color that you get with a female⁷, and I looked all over — girls from Canada and New York — but couldn't find anyone. Then I finally found Buffy eight miles away from where I lived.

Had you known her for some time?

No, never met her before. The group was going to be me and Buffy and a fellow named Henry Diltz, who became a member of the Modern Folk Quartet with Chip Douglas and is now one of the really well-known photographers.

⁷ ***A “Uniquely Positioned” Footnote:*** I can appreciate this perspective. As a vocalist, I have a very limited range (a weak-to-mediocre baritone), no grasp on the finer points of technique (use of diaphragm, tremolo, vibrato, etc.), and absolutely no facility with harmonies. For 20 years (1963–1983), I sang exclusively with male voices. Most of the guys I sang with had better voices than mine (*that* didn't take much) and could produce harmonies on the spot. It wasn't until I started singing with Anita Shore in 1983 (in an acoustic group that was sometimes three and sometimes four in number and underwent several name changes — *The Gang, Cat's Paw, Fine Line*) that I came to know the beauties and wonders of female alto-range harmonies. She made me a better singer, and I have the recordings to prove it — FWK.

He took the cover of *Trancas*.⁸

Yeah. Anyway, it just wasn't working out with Henry. He was really a photographer, and my writing had become more personal, more my own vision. Buffy and I sounded really good together, and, so, at that point, it became a duo with Buffy and me.

The album you made together, *Signals Through the Glass*, still sounds good today....

— *Omaha Rainbow* #35/Autumn 1984
“John Stewart — Interviewed by
Spencer Leigh”
For BBC Radio Merseyside
Liverpool, England
August 5, 1984

BBC interviewer Spencer Leigh had better luck than his Capital Radio counterpart Roger Scott, in that Stewart did not immediately jump down Leigh's throat with his appraisal of *Signals Through the Glass* as “...a dreadful album, just dreadful...” as he did with Scott⁹. Stewart showed no reservations with Leigh, however, when, later in the same interview, he applied the same no-confidence vote — in exactly the same terms — to his own performance on *California Bloodlines*.¹⁰



So, although the duo “John Stewart and Buffy Ford” apparently, had started out as a very feasible idea, it turned out, ultimately, to be unworkable, and the decision was made to go another route.

Who knows what that decision was based on? We may never know.¹¹ Maybe it's just that — in the unpredictable arena called Popular Music — a professional relationship with your Significant Other has too many inherent drawbacks. Most, like Canada's Favorite Folkies Ian and Sylvia (or James Taylor and Carly Simon), while successful for a while, seemed usually to result in the relationship giving way. Even the supreme, archetypal example — John Lennon and Yoko Ono — had long, on-again, off-again periods of difficult estrangement and separation before they got married, settled down, and withdrew from the music business for a number of years to become parents and get their

⁸ *Trancas* was the name of Stewart's June 1984 LP on Affordable Dreams Records — FWK

⁹ See the next installment in this series, “**CHAPTER TWO: False Start/Mixed Signals**,” for Stewart's sour appraisal of what was, in the end, not quite the abomination-of-an-LP that he thought *Signals Through the Glass* was — FWK.

¹⁰ See a later installment in this series, “**CHAPTER THREE: California Dreadlines**,” for the excerpt from this interview that clearly shows how John Stewart was his own harshest critic, really hard on himself.

¹¹ Then again, we might. Through some e-mail exchanges with Buffy in late 2012 and early 2013, I learned that she, too, has a book about John Stewart in the works. From her *nonpareil* personal perspective, it's entirely possible that some light could be shed on questions like these — FWK.

financial foundation under control. They were poised to resume their place in musical history with their successful comeback album *Double Fantasy* when a deranged fan shot and killed Lennon outside his New York Dakota Hotel/Condo on December 8, 1980.

Maybe ending the duo preserved John and Buffy's relationship. Buffy Ford turned out to be the love of John's life, and John Stewart turned out to be the love of Buffy's life. They lived together until they formally tied the knot in 1975. Call me sappy, but I rank the Stewart-Ford relationship right up there in Pop Music's Pantheon of Legendary Successful Couples with John and Yoko and Paul McCartney and Linda Eastman — who never, in all the years they were together, spent one night apart, except for the one, unexpected overnight stay Paul had to endure in a Tokyo jail cell, having been detained on suspicion of possession of marijuana.

John Stewart and Buffy Ford may have had a rocky period here and there — they were separated for a short time in the early 1970s — but, like those other couples mentioned above, they ran against the grain of the usual Pop Music Couple Paradigm (short, red-carpet, photo-opportunity celebrity marriages, punctuated by sometimes very public spats, quarrels, fights, and in-your-face affairs). John and Buffy were committed to each other and stayed together for 43 years — right up to the night of Stewart's death. Some captions accompanying photos of them taken over the years even remark on how apparent their love for each other comes across.

Mementoes of their life together are everywhere in the cheerful Spanish-style house she moved into after his death. The walls are decorated with his paintings and artwork, and there are many photographs of them when they were a beautiful young couple making music and raising their son, Luke.

"John was my first love," she says, "my one and only love."

One of the songs [Buffy] wrote [for a recent CD of her own], "Find Your Shoes," is about fighting through the debilitating grief she suffered after his death.

"People say, 'It's been five years, so why are you still grieving for John?'" she remarks. "But I think I'll always grieve for him."¹²



"Ladies and Gentlemen: Presenting — Two Johns and a Scott — The Journeymen +"

(Roger Scott) **Before *California Bloodlines* [actually, before even *Signals Through the Glass* — *FWK*], you did have a couple of close scrapes with success. There was John Phillips and Scott McKenzie, and there was the "California Dreaming" story, wasn't there?**

(John Stewart) Oh, yeah — where'd you hear that? John Phillips was

¹² <http://buffyfordstewart.com/bio.html>

an old, old friend of mine I met before I joined The Trio. I was a big fan of his and Scott McKenzie¹³ — John was one of the brightest and most talented songwriters around.

John and Scott had a Folk group called The Journeymen, and we had talked about “Why don’t we get a Folk group together?” We rehearsed a few tunes, and it sounded really good. I told The [Kingston] Trio I was leaving — gave them my notice. I get a call from John Phillips that Scott has locked himself in the hotel room and has not come out for three days, and he thinks it would be a good idea if we didn’t do this. So I did a quick toe dance — I had to work my way back into the group [*The Kingston Trio — FWK*] without seeming like I had been left with nothing or they’d chew me up alive. I said, “I’ve reconsidered — I’m gonna stay with the group. Maybe we can work out something with money or something.”

Then Frank Werber, who managed the Trio, also managed The Journeymen and John Phillips. John did not give Frank any quarter at all — he did not take any guff from Werber. John, at that time, said, “I’m gonna go to the Virgin Islands.” I said, “Great — call me when you get back.” He went down there with his wife, Michelle, and Denny Doherty, who was with — I can’t remember the Canadian group he was with [*The Hepsters, The Colonials, and The Halifax Three — FWK*] — and Cass Elliot, who was with the Big Three. If I get into that, we’ll be here forever.¹⁴

It’s all in “Creeque Alley.”¹⁵

Right — it’s all in “Creeque Alley.” It is, really. They took acid for a year, and he came back and said, “John, I’ve got a group that I think you should hear.” He came up to the office in San Francisco. I said, “Great, John, what have you got?”

He sat down and sang me “California Dreaming” with the three of them, and I literally fell off my chair. He said, “Would you be interested in producing us?” I said, “Interested? Let’s do it today!” I went up and told Frank Werber, and he said, “Get John Phillips out of this building.” I said, “Frank, you’ve got to hear this.” He said, “I don’t want him in the building.” I said, “Frank, you’re being crazy. This is a goldmine.” I went down and told John, “We just can’t do it. Frank doesn’t want you in the building. Why don’t you go down to LA and see Lou Adler?” He went down there and saw Lou Adler, and that was The Mamas and Papas.

¹³ The reader will, no doubt, remember Scott McKenzie as the West Coast artist behind one of the most beautiful and defining songs of “The Summer of Love” (1967) and of the Acoustic Folk Rock genre, “If You’re Going to San Francisco (Flowers in Your Hair)” — think “Big, Phil Spector-sized drums and wall-of-sound production meets 12-string guitar and a world-class Folk Music voice” — FWK.

¹⁴ Denny Doherty died January 17, 2007, almost one year to the day before John Stewart, leaving Michelle Phillips the only surviving original member of The Mamas and Papas — FWK.

¹⁵ The autobiographical hit single written by John and Michelle Phillips of The Mamas & the Papas in 1967, narrating the story about how the group was formed — FWK.

“Ladies and Gentlemen: Presenting — John Stewart and ... Henry Deutchendorf, Junior.”¹⁶

There was also your close encounter with John Denver.

John Denver was a good friend of the Trio’s. He would always hang around the gig when we were there. He was a fan and a friend in town. When we’d get in town, John would come on over, and we’d hang out, and Nick would always steal his girlfriend. John was just an incredible singer and had a great way with an audience. I said, “This guy is gonna be a big star.” I said, “John, why don’t we sing together? because we get along really well.” So he said, “Great idea!” He came up and stayed at my house for a month, and we rehearsed “Daydream Believer” and “Leaving on a Jet Plane” and two other songs and did demos of them.

It was obvious that John was writing in one direction, and I was writing in another one. I said, “John, this is not gonna’ work out. We are both kidding ourselves. We both really want to be solo performers. We’re just sort of hedging our bet until we can do that. A duo is less people than a trio, so let’s really just go out and do it.” He said, “Yeah, you’re right.” He knocked around for maybe a year recording albums, and then, I guess, “Country Roads” came out. He had played me “Country Roads” in New York and said, “John, I’ve got a smash,” and played it for me. I gave him the Woody Allen smile, and to myself, I thought, *John, there is no way in hell that song will ever make it as a hit. You poor guy!* Of all the people I’ve known for years, the one person who has helped me out whenever I was in a jam was John Denver, so I owe him a lot of favors.

You mentioned “Daydream Believer” there, which was the best song The Monkees did, which, of course, you wrote. How did you actually get that to The Monkees through everything that surrounded them?

It’s who you know. A friend of mine, Chip Douglas — it’s all very cyclical — was one of three people who auditioned for the Kingston Trio. He had a Folk group in Hawaii. He came to the States and got to be friends with Mike Nesmith. Said he had some great ideas on how The Monkees should be produced and then became producer of The Monkees. He said, “John, do you have any songs for The Monkees?” I said, “Well, I’ve got this one that might do,” and played him “Daydream Believer.” He said, “Yep, that’s the one.” They recorded it, and I didn’t think too much about it. Thought, *Nice album cut, probably*. Then he said, “John, it’s gonna be the single.” I said, “Oh, my God!” and, within three weeks, it was at number one and stayed at number one for a month, I think, worldwide. ***That song kept me alive for three years. It happened just at the right time, because I was making no money, and I could sit and write for a good two years without having to worry about going out to work. Once again — as with the Trio — one song. There was so much money I made off that one song, I was able to buy time. I***

¹⁶ John Denver’s real name — FWK.

was able to hang in there for the duration.

— *Omaha Rainbow* # 22
Autumn 1979
“John Stewart — Interviewed
by Roger Scott”
For Capital Radio
London, England
September 21, 1979
[Emphases mine — FWK]

No source that I have researched has given the *exact* dates for when John Stewart and Buffy Ford were out on the presidential campaign trail with Robert Kennedy.

“I met Bobby Kennedy when he was Attorney General, and I was in the Trio; I used to send him Trio albums and go see him when the Trio was in town. Then, when he ran for Senate in New York, he asked me if I would campaign with him, which I did. And there were a lot of people trying to get him to run for President. He didn’t want to do it because he thought it would splinter the Democratic Party. There were two camps, and I was in the camp that said, ‘You gotta’ run.’ When he decided to run, Buffy and I got a call at the studio. Kennedy says, ‘Will you come out on the campaign?’ We played the Corn Palace in South Dakota the next night. I had a song where we could put any city in there. Then ‘Omaha Rainbow’ and stuff. Some Dylan songs. Whatever would get them going.”

— Leland Rucker
(Quoting John Stewart)
“Jukebox in My Head”
Web Log Posting
Saturday, January 26, 2008
www.lelandrucker.com

What we *do* know for certain is that RFK did not formally declare his candidacy until March 16, 1968, holding off mounting a challenge to sitting president Lyndon Johnson on the advice of fellow Democrats who saw his entry into the race as splitting the anti-Viet Nam-war vote and taking away potential primary victories and delegates from then-Democratic-frontrunner Eugene McCarthy. In waiting to announce his candidacy until the outcome of the New Hampshire primary was known, it was said that South Dakota senator George McGovern’s advice was particularly influential. (Lyndon Johnson won the New Hampshire Democratic Primary but only by a slim margin, boosting McCarthy’s profile in the primaries — and demonstrating that Johnson was vulnerable to challenges from within his own party.)¹⁷

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_F._Kennedy, quoting Spencer C. Tucker (September 10, 2009). *U.S. Leadership in Wartime: Clashes, Controversy, and Compromise*. google.books.ocm.

Although this resulted in exactly what the Democratic leadership was trying to avoid — the splintering of the anti-war vote between Kennedy and McCarthy — in just a few weeks, the point became moot as, on March 31, 1968 Lyndon Johnson stunned the nation when he announced that he would not seek or accept the Democratic nomination.

And we know for sure that, if John Stewart and Buffy Ford were on the scene during the intense California primary, they wouldn't have had far to go to get back home after RFK was shot at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles following his victory in that state on June 5, 1968 and died the day after. John and Buffy, of course, both lived in California.

Whether they made the trip to New York for RFK's solemn requiem mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral is not clear. If they did make that trip, it is not clear whether they were on board the train that carried Robert Kennedy's body from New York to Washington, DC.¹⁸ (Many, many of their campaign appearances for Kennedy were whistlestops, where they performed from the platform on the last car of the campaign train.)

Signals Through the Glass, John's first LP release after the breakup of The Kingston Trio, was released by Capitol Records in September 1968. John and Buffy had begun the work for the LP — the writing, the composing, the arranging, the rehearsing, and even, perhaps some preliminary studio work — *before* they left California to campaign with Robert Kennedy. Thus, after his assassination, it is not hard to imagine them returning to seek the solace of seclusion in the beauty and familiarity of their home state.



After the Flames: Hunkering Down in Mill Valley

It has been documented that Robert Kennedy, in the weeks and months following the assassination of his own brother, the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, spent long periods of time reading the Greek tragedies and poets like Aeschylus, wanting to embrace his grief, not hide from it. He needed the wisdom and guidance of the creative minds who had come before him in order to gain a sense of what it means to deal with tragedy, to make sense out of it and learn from it — rather than be crushed and annihilated by it.

Similarly, the weeks and months following Robert Kennedy's assassination must have been the same kind of mind-wrenching, soul-searching, pit-of-darkness hell-hole for John Stewart and Buffy Ford. Not only was John dealing with what direction to take in his own life and career after the breakup of not only his first marriage but also of The Kingston Trio, now he had been dealt a blow of the most terribly personal kind.

¹⁸ It is difficult to imagine that this funeral-train cortege — even if John and Buffy were not on board — did not inspire or influence Stewart's writing of "Mister Lincoln's Train" on *Signals Through the Glass* during the period following Robert Kennedy's assassination. See the next installment in this series, **CHAPTER TWO: Mixed Signals**, for a detailed discussion of this remarkable song.

But if meeting Buffy Ford was the most important thing that John Stewart did during the period following the breakup of The Kingston Trio — followed by 1) accepting Robert Kennedy’s invitation for them to go on the campaign trail with him and 2) writing “Daydream Believer” and it becoming a runaway million-seller — the fourth-most important thing may have been John and Buffy’s decision to move to the creative and artistic, cloistered environs of Mill Valley, California.

I’ve never been there, but from the descriptions I’ve read of it, Mill Valley, in Marin County, about 14 miles north of San Francisco via the Golden Gate Bridge, is like several other small communities up and down the California coastline — small, tucked-away communities that seem to attract people with an artistic bent to them, like unofficial artists’ colonies. In Mill Valley’s case, it was a well-kept secret that soon leaked out, and things were never the same again.

In 1900, the population had not yet reached 900. A significant population boom occurred after much of San Francisco and Marin County were devastated by the Great Earthquake of 1906. Many former city-dwellers who fled to Mill Valley stayed, and, by 1950, the population was 7,000, and, in 2010, it was almost 14,000.¹⁹

The arts had flourished in the area since the turn of the century. But it was in the 1950s — despite some Cold War paranoia that saw the military build an Air Force Station there during the Korean War (“...to protect the area...” — that a certain bohemian element started gravitating toward the unique still relatively rural (no traffic lights) hamlet.²⁰

In 1955-1956, a group of Beat poets and writers — most notably Jack Kerouac and San Francisco Renaissance Beat poet Gary Snyder — lived briefly in the Perry house, a cabin around 370 Montford Ave. in Homestead Valley. The house and its land are now owned by the Marin County Open Space District.

The cabin’s coincidental location in Marin County and its adjacent location to a meadow where horses grazed, combined with Snyder’s expertise in Asian languages and cultures, lead to Snyder naming the cabin *Marin-An*, which is Japanese for “Horse Grove Hermitage.” It was during this stay in Mill Valley that Kerouac’s recent budding interest in Zen Buddhism was greatly expanded by Snyder’s expertise in the subject. Kerouac’s 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, was consequently composed while living here and contains many semi-fictionalized accounts of the lives of Kerouac and Snyder while living at Marin-An. Part of Kerouac’s 1951 novel *On the Road* takes place in a “Mill City,” which is a fictionalized reference to Mill Valley.

By the beginning of the 1960s, however, the population swelled. The Mill Valley Fall Arts Festival became a permanent annual event and the old Carnegie library was replaced with an award-winning library at 375 Throckmorton Ave. Designed by architect Donn Emmons, the new library was

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mill_Valley,_California

²⁰ *Ibid.*

formally dedicated on September 18, 1966.²¹

With the 1960s population boom, the inevitable gentrification of areas like these started taking hold — you know, where wealthy people come in and start buying up “getaway” properties, pushing up real-estate values, and slowly but surely, driving out the older, poorer bohemian element.

In 1968, John Stewart and Buffy Ford seemed to have been caught up in the middle of this transformation, on the cusp between the end of the artists-colony atmosphere and the beginning of yuppified getaway turf.

The 1970s saw a change in attitude and population. Mill Valley became an area associated with great wealth, with many people making their millions in San Francisco and moving north. New schools and neighborhoods cropped up, though the city maintained its defense of redwoods and protected open space.²²

While Mill Valley retained elements of its earlier artistic culture through galleries, festivals, and performances, its stock of affordable housing diminished, forcing some residents to leave the area. This trend also affected some of the city's well-known cultural centers like Village Music and the Sweetwater Saloon. As of April 2007, only one affordable housing project was underway: an initiative to raze and rebuild an abandoned motel called the Fireside.

Mill Valley's ease of access to nearby San Francisco made it a popular home for many high-income commuters. Following a trend that is endemic throughout the Bay Area, home prices climbed in Mill Valley (the median price for a single-family home was in excess of \$1.5 million as of 2005), which had the effect of pushing out some earlier residents who could no longer afford to live in the area.

In July 2005, CNN/Money and *Money* magazine ranked Mill Valley tenth on its list of the 100 Best Places to Live in the United States. In 2007, MSN and *Forbes* magazine ranked Mill Valley seventy-third on its “Most expensive zip codes in America” list.

Ironically, the newer, wealthier profile of the population did not deter a certain artistic and nonconformist element from taking up residence there. Especially attracted to the area were wealthy Rock Music figures, authors, and actors.

Mill Valley has also been home to many musicians, authors, actors, and TV personalities. The actress and comedian **Eve Arden** was born there in 1908. **Jerry Garcia** — who recorded music in a Mill Valley recording studio — also once called Mill Valley home. **John Lennon**²³ and **Yoko Ono** summered

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

in a Mill Valley home on Lovell Ave. near the library in the early 1970s; John left some of his own graffiti on the wall of the residence: “*The Maya, the Merrier.*” Other rock stars such as **Michael Bloomfield, Huey Lewis, Bob Weir, Lee Michaels, Sammy Hagar, Bonnie Raitt, Pete Sears, Clarence Clemons, John and Mario Cipollina,** and **Janis Joplin** have also called this small town home. Authors such as **Wright Morris** and **Jack London** (fictional character Charley Furuseh in Jack London's 1904 novel *The Sea-Wolf* apparently had a summer cottage in Mill Valley) have also lived here, as have **Joyce Maynard**, and actors **Peter Coyote, Dana Carvey, Jill Eikenberry, Kathleen Quinlan, Michael Tucker**, and it was the place of birth for actors **Mariel Hemingway** and **Jonah Hill**.²⁴

The community's Chamber of Commerce website says Mill Valley “... has the charm of a small European village, surrounded by towering redwoods and legendary parks...”

I'm guessing that the natural scenic beauty and secluded nature of the place is what provided most of the attraction for the creative people who chose to live there. Certainly the American and British *literary* traditions are full of examples of writers who esteemed natural and beautiful outdoor settings as particularly conducive to finding and releasing their Muse. It's hard to imagine Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thoreau, and Whitman producing their soaring and majestic works from the confines of a dank basement or garret.

But in the American *musical* tradition — it's maybe *not* so much of a given that “Nature + Beauty = Inspiration.” Some of the best modern popular music is the product of days, weeks, months in confined, dark, dimly lit studios and endless rehearsals in garages and warehouses.

There is even an example of an experiment on the part of some enterprising Rock 'n' Roll producer setting his artists up in a beautiful, pastoral area near Big Sur at the end of the 1960s or in the early 1970s. *With fresh air, Nature's Own Inspiration, and no big-city distractions*, thought the producer, *the more likely these modern-day poets are likely to gush out million-sellers by the handful, in record time.*

It was a spectacular failure.

Without the “...60-cycle hum...” of the bustling, electric, and gritty street life of Los Angeles or San Francisco, the recording artists lost their edge and became complacent, unable to summon their Muse.

There are always exceptions to the rule, however, and some singer/songwriters turned Nature into their stock in trade — John Denver comes to mind.

²³ Remarkably, according to *Wikipedia*, there was *another* artist named “John Lennon” who was raised in Mill Valley — American classical guitar composer John Anthony Lennon. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Anthony_Lennon]

²⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mill_Valley,_California

For John Stewart and Buffy Ford, the appeal of Mill Valley was probably somewhere in the middle. For their frayed nerves and frazzled emotions resulting from the four months of campaign-trail hell — not to mention its awful, ghastly surprise ending — the quaint remoteness of Mill Valley might have presented itself as just what the doctor ordered.

But it was not like they were looking for inspiration *from nature*. It's not like they spent their days holding hands and wandering in Pollyana-like perambulations through meadows the likes of which is pictured on the cover of the LP that would result from their sojourn in Mill Valley, *Signals Through the Glass*.

[T]he album cover featured John and his young singing partner, Buffy Ford, standing in a golden field behind the sun-refracting lens of rock photographer Henry Diltz. I was fascinated by a shot on the album of a smoldering, dark-haired Stewart standing behind Buffy with her long, thick bangs, straight blonde hair and kohl-lined eyes. They seemed the essence of the post-Seeger folk era, with some California hippie thrown in.²⁵

This description by Janet Davis is a wry testimony that she was not fooled by the pastoral setting of the LP cover. John and Buffy are not smiling. Buffy's black, lead-based eyeliner and John's "...smoldering..." appearance suggest not no much raw, movie-star, Hollywood good looks as a sober, realistic "don't-get-too-close/we-need-our-space" attitude (indeed, the shot by Diltz is anything but a close-up; John and Buffy are almost buried in the background, a virtual afterthought in the focal point, which seems to be the dreamy, mysterious, flyaway quality of the flowers in the foreground).

No. John and Buffy spent weeks and weeks *inside* their cabin, hunkered down in their grief and determination to sort it all out.

.... it was while sitting in his Mill Valley home studio for weeks in the mid-'60s, reading John Updike and staring at paintings by Jamie and Andrew Wyeth — including Jamie's iconic "Draft Age," with its leather-bound lad — that John was inspired to pen the lyrics for one of the first LPs this music-lover ever owned, *Signals Through the Glass*.²⁶

Signals Through the Glass: "When Buffy and I sang the songs, we had colored slides behind us, Wyeth prints. It was like a visual thing, an album based on Steinbeck and Wyeth...."²⁷

— Leland Rucker
(Quoting John Stewart)
"Jukebox in My Head"

²⁵ Janet Davis, "John Stewart: Poet With a Guitar," <http://www.beautifulbotany.com/Latest/Latest-Stories-2008/Feb-John/Stewart/John/Stewart.htm>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See **CHAPTER TWO: False Start/Mixed Signals**, the next installment in this series, for a detailed discussion of how I first perceived Stewart's and Ford's surrounding themselves with these icons of the American artistic and literary landscape while fashioning the genesis of their first, ground-breaking LP *Signals Through the Glass*.

Web Log Posting
Saturday, January 26, 2008
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Thus, the stage was set: A year-plus of the mind-bending turmoil of the ending of one career and the casting about for a new artistic vision, a new creative direction, the fire of high-ideals and new love, three-plus months of the exhaustion and devastation of a golden-dream hope shattered, the retreat to the solitude of not only a beautiful, bohemian retreat in their own home state, the emotions simmering just below the surface, and the inspiration that surrounded them that issued forth from the icons of the highest expression of American artistic endeavor adorning the walls behind which they had retreated.

A heady mix, an angel's brew.

The mood in the Mill Valley cabin must have alternated between somber and joyful, pensive and carefree, hopeful for themselves and anxious for the country they loved so much.

John Stewart and Buffy Ford were ready not only to begin their life together in earnest but also to finish their first LP together. *Signals Through the Glass* had entered the gestation period — and John Stewart's solo career was about to be born..

Next: CHAPTER TWO: False Start/Mixed *Signals*