

*John Duffey's Bluegrass Life: Featuring The Country Gentlemen, Seldom Scene and Washington, D.C. is the definitive biography of one of bluegrass music's most important artists in the history of the genre. His work as a founding member of these two pioneering bands, John Duffey urbanized bluegrass and introduced it to a broad new audience.*



## **JOHN DUFFEY'S BLUEGRASS LIFE: FEATURING THE COUNTRY GENTLEMEN, SELDOM SCENE, AND WASHINGTON, D.C.**

by STEPHEN MOORE and G.T. KEPLINGER

Foreword by TOM GRAY

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# JOHN DUFFEY'S BLUEGRASS LIFE:

Featuring the Country Gentlemen,  
Seldom Scene, and Washington DC.

**Stephen Moore  
and G.T. Keplinger**



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## Chapter 1: Humbird in the Nest

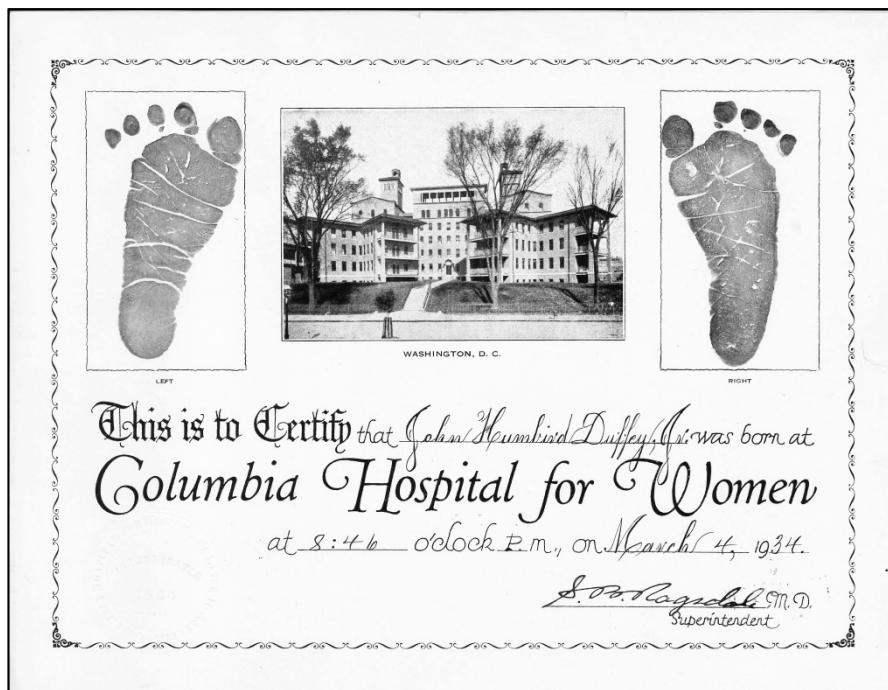
*Well, I always thought the name of this business is show business. Hear that word 'show?' That's what I think is very important. The typical bluegrass band early on stood on the stage and looked like they all died last week. It was improper to smile or if you got a hand from the audience—anything—you didn't acknowledge it with a 'Gee, thanks a lot.' You sneered and walked off in a corner. I just thought no wonder this music can't get out of the closet. I was concerned.*

John Duffey, 1984

**T**he need to provide health care for Civil War wives and widows led to the construction of Washington, D.C.'s Columbia Hospital for Women in 1866. It was one of the first maternity hospitals to provide classes for expectant fathers and the first to establish nurseries for premature infants.

By 1925, a greatly improved Columbia Hospital started logging inked footprints of babies as a way to uniquely identify them. This practice soon became commonplace in hospital maternity wards throughout the country.

Bandleader, Duke Ellington, actress Katherine Heigl, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, filmmaker Michael Dominic, and Vice-President Al Gore were born there as were some 250,000 other native Washingtonians until it closed its doors in 2002.



One set of fresh hospital footprints on March 4, 1934, belonged to John Humbird Duffey Jr., who would become a founder of two of the most influential bands in modern bluegrass music, The Country Gentlemen and The Seldom Scene. John's tribute in the 1997 *Congressional Record* described him as "a remarkable singer, possessed of a powerful vocal instrument, one that could soar to impossibly high notes or become the soul of harmony and touch the heart. He was an excellent performer with mandolin and guitar, and he was the prince of wit and laughter." He influenced string band musicians and singers across the Nation and around the world. Both of his bands helped bluegrass reach a wider audience. Like John Duffey, "Modern or Urban Bluegrass" was also born in Washington, D.C.

On stage Duffey was a dynamic force of nature, both irrepressible, engaging, and compelling. He sang in four octaves. His top note was the second F above middle C. That high note was recorded in The Country Gentlemen song, "New Freedom Bell." His lowest note was the second E below middle C.

Offstage he was surprisingly fascinating and complex. Enormously popular, he was a very private person with only a few close friends.

*"You can write that I was born in 1934 if you want, or you could make me younger,"* quipped John as he settled in his Arlington, VA home in 1984 to discuss his life story.

John was the only child of John Humbird Duffey Sr. (1879-1973) and mother, Florence (Ryan) Duffey (1899-1988). John Sr. was the son of a Methodist preacher who didn't approve of popular, secular music. John sang in his father's church choir as a youngster. When a new organ arrived in the church, John Sr. "borrowed" his father's keys and made duplicates so he and his pals could sneak in during the week and experiment with the various organ sounds they could produce.

By age 18, John Sr., secured a respectable job in a Washington, D.C. railroad office. He was probably smart enough to eventually become the railroad president, but one incident changed his life.

Operas didn't come to Washington, D.C. often in those days, so he was excited to see an ad promoting some glorious music on the way. He saved enough money to treat himself and his two "organ burglar" pals to this evening at the theatre.





John Humbird Duffey, Sr.

© G. Allred

However, with three tickets in hand on the afternoon of the opera, his boss told him he had to work overtime.

He pleaded for the night off, but was told, “You either work tonight, young man, or you don’t work here at all.”

After the curtain closed on the opera that night, he shared the news with his friends that he had quit his job. Moreover, he told them he was “off to Broadway” and thinking about “a career on the stage.”

John, Sr. first became a tenor in the chorus with the Schumann-Heink Opera company. Shortly after followed roles in *The Lilac Domino*, *Sari*, *The Rose Maid*, *Going Up*, *The Chocolate Soldier* and at least one Broadway musical, *Love’s Lottery* in 1904. Long tours with the

Metropolitan, Gallo English, and De Wolf Hopper opera companies produced reviews confirming that John Duffey, Sr., was as well known in New Orleans and Vancouver, and applauded as much in San Francisco as in New York.

By 1902, John Sr. returned to D.C. to play the Saengerbund Concert at The National Theatre. Writing in the July 1926 *High Hat* ["Long Island's Lively Review"] reviewer Thilman Orr said: "Mr. Duffey has indeed sung the country over in many and varied roles, his voice ever increasing in range and quality. To hear him at the zenith of his career in his perfect characterization of the Earl Tolloler in *Iolanthe* is a treat. His acting, diction, dancing, comedy sense are all the equal of the melody of his voice, and that ladies and gentlemen, is praise indeed."

John Duffey Sr. was a member of The Lambs' Club, America's oldest organization for actors, songwriters, and others involved in the theatre. The Players Club, The Lamb's Club and The Friars Club were three separate organizations at that time. When asked what's the difference between the clubs, playwright George S. Kaufman quipped, "The Players are gentlemen trying to be actors, the Lambs are actors trying to be gentlemen, and the Friars are neither trying to be both."

John Sr.'s first wife, Margaret Smith, was from San Francisco. As a young girl she came to New York to be a concert singer and for a short time was a member of the Augustin Daly theatrical company where she met and married the light opera tenor and actor. The Duffeys were divorced in 1920, with a daughter, Allan, and a son, Jefferson, known to John Jr. as "Jeff."

On March 6, 1930, Margaret Duffey, 45, was burned to death in a fire. She had been in Arizona visiting her daughter, Allen Deppe, for two months. *The New York*

*Times* reported the cause of Margaret's death: "She is said to have escaped her daughter's burning house and returned evidently to save \$10,000 worth of diamonds."

Duffey Sr. told the *Times*, "It was quite possible she had returned for her diamonds. She possessed considerable jewelry."



Duffey, Sr. and Jr. © G. Allred

In the 1930s, with his New York years behind him John Sr. returned to Washington. In his early 50s, and still involved in music, an ad in the December 2, 1938, *Evening Star* revealed the singer had taken on new roles.

A Woodward & Lothrop full page ad included: "You are invited to hear a 15-minute program of songs presented by the Potomac Electric Company glee club, under the direction of Mr. John Humbird Duffey."

He participated in many of these glee club events around town and also served as choir director of Washington's Fifth Baptist Church.

*My father sang opera for 25 years. In 1913 he cut six sides for Columbia records. Dad was 54 years old when I*

*was born and had long left the Met company when he moved back to Washington. I have the records by my father, but they are very old and thick 78rpm's and are warped so badly. Plus, they play backward to the way records play today. I got to hear one of them at a recording studio, Capitol Transcriptions, on 11th Street. where The Country Gentleman recorded. They had a machine there that played the old-timey records. One record was all I ever heard him singing. Unfortunately, it wasn't a solo, but rather a duet with a woman.*

The woman was Ernestine Schumann-Heink famous contralto at the turn of the century and star of the Schumann-Heink Opera.

John continued: *"My father was teaching as a boys' choir director at Fifth Baptist Church down in Southwest D.C. That's where he met my mother Florence, in the church there. He later worked for Grayline Tours."*

The 1940 Census Bureau lists John, Sr. then 61, having a day job at the Census Bureau. He also gave private voice lessons in his home to students.

Florence was divorced from a man named Herbert Reamy when she married John Sr. Florence was a petite, quiet woman who worked in the dress department of downtown D.C.'s Garfinckel's department store. She served many wealthy customers including Shirley Temple Black. As a child actress Shirley Temple was the number one box office movie star in 1934, the year John was born. Black would call and ask Florence to gather orders for her. John Jr. was their only child. His favorite cologne was *English Leather* and his mom would buy it for him from Garfinckel's.

If the Great Depression and subsequent war years were hard on the Duffey family, then John was cavalier in discussing his upbringing in 1984: *"My parents told me we lived on 14<sup>th</sup> Street right off Chapin Street when I*

*was born. I do have a recollection of living on Rock Creek Ford Road near Military Road. We were never able to buy a home, and always rented and made out as best we could. I don't know why we moved so often—every time the rent was due I guess,” John joked. “But at one point I counted up to 13 different places in the Washington area that we lived.”*

The last house where John resided during high school and a few years beyond was on Verne Street, just off River Road in Bethesda, Maryland.

John remembers when the Metropolitan Opera was broadcast on the radio every Saturday at 2 pm. *“My father would sit me down beside the radio and say, ‘Now listen. This music is good.’ I was a little kid barely speaking English. I didn't know what was going on because the operas were in a foreign language. He knew because he had played the parts in the opera. Perhaps if I could've seen them live it would have made a difference to me.”*

John's father disapproved of Duffey's popular musical tastes but when asked if his father gave him any musical encouragement, John answered: *“Not really encouragement. He once asked me, ‘Why don't you put that mandolin down and go out and get a job?’ But he could tell that I had a bit of musical interest as a little kid because I used to go around the house humming, singing, and squalling (sic).”*

*“But he once told me, ‘you have a diaphragm down there so make that thing work and push the singing out your throat. If you're going to sing, you might as well do it right.’ He showed me some breathing I could try to help me, and that taught me the feel of getting it out from my gut.”*

John listened to Frank Sinatra on the Saturday night radio show, *Hit Parade*, during World War Two,

and was struck by hearing the girls swooning over Frankie. John's favorite singer throughout his life was Dean Martin, a member of Sinatra's swinging, hard-partying Rat Pack. John's 1973 recording of Martin's "A Small Exception of Me" on The Seldom Scene's *Act II* album is an example of John's affinity with "Old Dino."

### **Five-string Banjo**

*"One day I happened to be cruising the dial. I was about 13 [1947] when I heard the sound of a banjo. A five-string banjo. I thought, 'Boy that's a neat sound.' And I started listening to that station. In those days they called it 'hillbilly music.'*

*"It was Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys that really turned me on—music that caught my ear. And Flatt & Scruggs, Hank Williams, and Carl Smith. The music I'm involved with now.*

*"Other than just the sound of the banjo that appealed and fascinated me, I began to appreciate the fact that there was a lot of talent there. And once I saw an act that I'd been listening to on records, and then I went to see them live—gee, everything was right there. It sounded just like it did on the record. That's impressive."*

Soon after, he became a fan of deejay Cactus Matt's program on Arlington, Virginia radio station WEAM. Matt's show featured old timey hillbilly music with a little of the music that would come to be known as "bluegrass." The label "bluegrass" did not come into use until 1957.

Cactus Matt had started as a news reporter on station WOL in 1945 using his real name, Matthew Warren, and began his WEAM country music radio show in 1949.

Other influential radio personalities John cited were Fiddlin' Curly Smith and Don Owens on station WGAY,

and later WARL. Both had begun in radio as part of a performing trio with Owens on bass and another player, Charlie Fetzer on resonator guitar. Don was also a “Bayou Boy” in local mandolin player, Buzz Busby’s D.C. bluegrass band.

Don Owens would play a pivotal role in promoting bluegrass in the Washington area when he moved to station WARL. The late John Fahey, another Washingtonian guitarist growing up the same time as Duffey—who once worked at a gas station in Takoma Park just over the D.C. Maryland line—told the following story about Owens in his 2000 book, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*:

“After Owens arrived, WARL DJ Mike Hunnicutt put on an obviously black [artist’s] record, played it for about 45 seconds, then took it off and abruptly said, ‘No. We don’t play that kind of music on this radio station.’

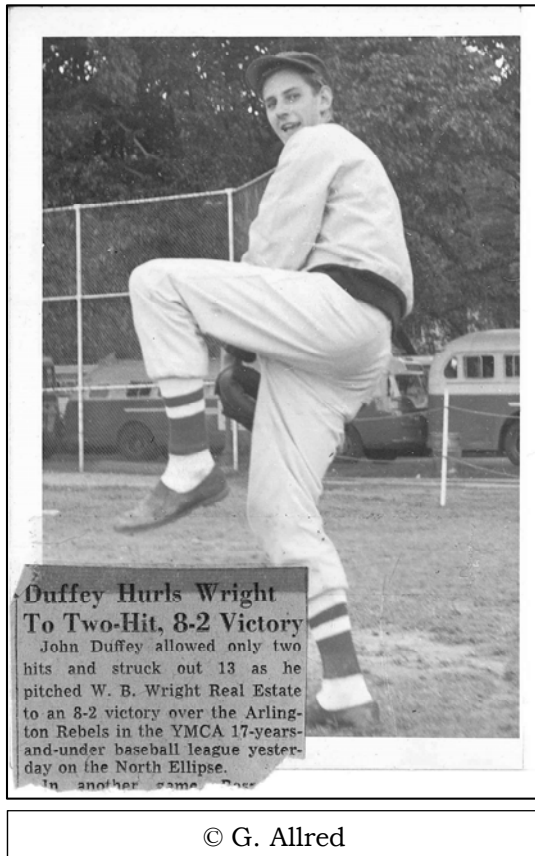
“Why the hell did he do that? Hunnicutt didn’t know anything about country music. All he knew about was popular music. I know all this because my father was a friend of Hunnicutt and helped him out a lot. Mike had a big problem with alcohol. A big Jones. He was a great talker. But he knew nothing about music. Nothing.

“So, Don Owens started making the radio song selections. We heard music chosen by Don Owens. He started playing more and more bluegrass and other acoustic, country music. In fact, he started each show with a Bill Monroe record. He played Molly O’Day a lot. Grandpa Jones, Carl Story, Jimmy Murphy, Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper, Flatt & Scruggs, Jim Evans and people like that.”

Owens went on to a National broadcasting career and he was inducted into the Country Music DJ Hall of

Fame in 1989. Like Fahey, John Duffey was listening to Don Owens's morning show.

Curly Smith took over after Don left this morning show: Duffey commented, *"A little later on when I got into music and started to learn to play something myself, I met these people. In fact, Curly Smith used to play with us on Saturday nights at the Beltsville, Maryland Fire House dances. Actually, I didn't learn to play anything until I was 17 years old."*



© G. Allred

John began school at Westbrook Elementary—still there today at the intersection of Alan Road and



Baltimore Ave—and Leland Junior High in Bethesda, Maryland. Leland offered duckpin bowling in John's physical education classes at the nearby Chevy Chase Ice Palace. John began his lifelong devotion to this sport then.

About high school, John said, *"I started at Wilson High School because we were living in the District, but then we moved back to Bethesda. I stayed at Wilson until they found out I moved and wanted the tuition, so I transferred to Bethesda-Chevy Chase around February of my sophomore year."*

John excelled at baseball at BCC and pitched a "two-hitter" in his senior year. He also became good friends with Dick Lightfoot, a fellow team pitcher who passed away shortly after high school of a suspected suicide. John's childhood friend, Bill Blackburn remembers John as "very broken up" when Dick died.

Hearing the banjo on the radio was a pivotal point for John. When asked if there was a great first experience hearing live music, he said:

*I can't remember the first band or person of note that I saw. I can remember some shows I saw early on. I did see Flatt & Scruggs on the Wilson Line at one of Connie B. Gay's shows. And the first time I saw Bill Monroe was also on that Wilson Line thing. In fact, Elvis played it.*

### **Down on Elvis**

The Wilson Line boat cruises traveled from the D.C. Southwest dock on the Potomac River for two afternoon trips to George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, and one evening trip with a music show to the Marshall Hall Amusement Park.

Elvis Presley and his Blue Moon Boys, as they were billed, were booked on Friday March 23, 1956 to launch the new season of the '56 *Country Music Moonlight*

*Cruise* concerts, but the four-deck, 200 ft. *S.S. Mount Vernon* blew a valve that the crew couldn't repair by show time. Some of the hundred folks waiting in line on the Maine Avenue dock asked for their \$2.00 admission back. But the show went on—for an unexpected three hours.

Opening for Elvis was local D.C. player and radio star, Jimmy Dean. Dean, a native Texan, started playing D.C. bars when he was stationed at Bolling Air Force Base in the D.C. neighborhood of Anacostia. Jimmy Dean worked the clubs and earned a hosting spot on Gay's radio show, *Town and Country Time* where he helped local musicians Patsy Cline and Roy Clark get their start. The radio show moved to local TV Channel 7 and became *The Jimmy Dean Show*. Elvis dropped by before his 1956 Wilson Line concert to provide Dean with a slightly nervous TV interview.

The 21-year-old Elvis had just released "Heartbreak Hotel" two months earlier—his first million-dollar record. His back-up studio band included Chet Atkins on guitar and Floyd Cramer on piano. This record was No. 1 on the Country and Western charts when Elvis boarded the old ship that night, accompanied by his classic trio of Scotty Moore, Bill Black, and D.J. Fontana.

Writer Peter Golkin creatively chronicled the evening in a *Washington City Paper* article (2/15/2007). Peter cleverly ended his story with "The show, unlike the boat, rocked."

When asked if he saw the Elvis boat show, Duffey said, "No, I didn't see Elvis on the Wilson Line, but Elvis didn't hit [impress] me. I know many people love the '50s music. I can appreciate some of that music now, but at that time I hated it. I know when that happened: It was when I went to my neighborhood jukebox to play the 'Pike County Breakdown,' and my bluegrass song had been

*replaced by Presley's 'Blue Suede Shoes.' It bugged me because it was taking music that I liked off the jukebox and, really off the radio."*

However, Presley recorded a robust version of Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" for the "b" side of his first single and sang that tune instead of his hit song, "That's Alright" for the millions of listeners on his debut at WSM's Grand Ole Opry.

It was Connie B. Gay who brought Elvis Presley to the Wilson Line for Presley's first and only Washington D.C. appearance on March 23, 1956 [although Elvis did play nearby Landover, Maryland's Capital Centre twice in 1976 and '77]. Connie demonstrated country music's respectability by selling out Constitution Hall for 27 straight Saturday nights in 1948 with his country music shows, a record that still stands. Some called the place "Connie's barn."

About Connie, John declared, *"I don't give Connie B. Gay much credit for bringing bluegrass to Washington. If it wasn't commercial from Nashville, he usually wasn't interested even though he started Jimmy Dean off. He discovered him over at the Harmony Club bar by Union Station. I played the Harmony once. They had a bandstand and it was a typical bar, but they had a heavy mesh wire in front from floor to ceiling and around the sides, and a caged door. The first time I saw this I asked the bartender 'What the hell is this for?'"*

*"The bartender said, 'Well, we don't want the band to get hit by flying debris.' Yeah, that's for real. And that's where Jimmy Dean got his start. Personally, I'm not a country music fan. I stopped listening to it when Hank Williams died."*

John watched Roy Clark—later of *Hee Haw* TV fame—playing banjo on Dean's local TV show. Clark, a year older than Duffey, hailed from Meherrin, Virginia and

lived as a teenager in Southeast D.C. while his father worked at the Washington Navy Yard.

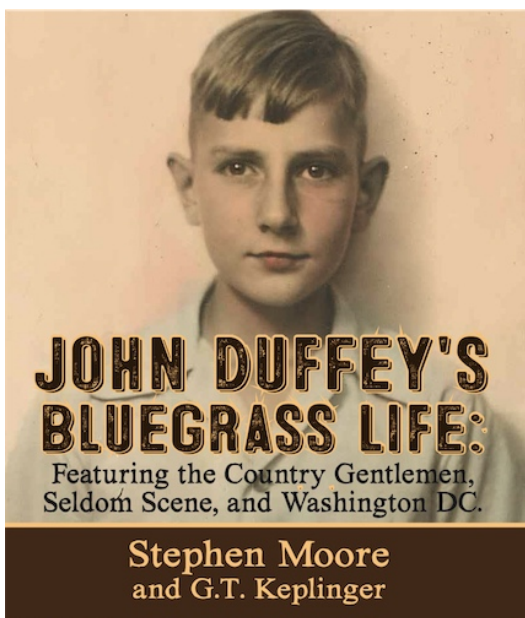
*“So, on the wild side, I decided to learn how to play five-string banjo,” John revealed, “It took me about a month to figure out that I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t catch on. And there were no instruction books and nobody that I knew could teach me. I just couldn’t get anything out of it.”*

### **First Guitar**

*“There was a little kid that lived around the corner from me who had an old Kay acoustic guitar and he could play it. He taught me about nine chords and let me borrow his guitar to take home. I’d run home from school and beat that guitar until I had to go to bed. It took me about a week to learn the chords and how to change from one to another.”*

John’s interest in the guitar motivated his mother, Florence to buy him a Harmony “Orchestra” model guitar that cost 19 dollars. It didn’t last very long as it got so warped that John couldn’t play it.

John was now hooked on music and determined to upgrade his instrument. Fortunately, he knew how to achieve his goal.



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