

John McCutcheon is America's balladeer.

His songs sing of the nation's heritage. His words channel the conscience of our people into streams of poetry and melody. He writes about subjects small and great, from a child's haircut to freedom and human dignity – issues equally eternal and enduring. Think of McCutcheon as an incarnation of Pete Seeger and Mr. Rogers, Will Rogers and Bruce Springsteen, and above all Everyman, righteously passionate and impishly playful, blessed with gifts as a songwriter, historian, musician and storyteller that have won him praise in Australia as “the most overwhelming folk performer in the English language,” from a Russian critic as “the most versatile and compelling performer this reviewer has ever seen,” and from Johnny Cash as “the most impressive instrumentalist I've ever heard.”

Add to that the 31 albums in his catalog, and the six Grammy nominations and multiple Parent's Choice and American Library Association awards they've won, stir in the diverse and growing following that has flocked to his shows, around the world and as nearby as a school or concert venue near you, and the point is made clear: John McCutcheon is as timeless as tradition, as immediate as tomorrow's headlines, and as vital as any artist who seeks to enlighten as well as entertain.

By the time of his first album, *How Can I Keep from Singing* in 1974, McCutcheon as a young man had already drunk deep from America's well. Born in Wisconsin, he enrolled at St. John's University in Minnesota and almost immediately felt the call to seek a broader curriculum beyond the classroom walls. “I had discovered these old Folkways records of people like Roscoe Holcomb and Clarence Ashley,” he remembers, noting just two of the many American folk artists who piqued his imagination. “And when I realized that they were still alive, I decided I wanted to learn all I could about them. From them.”

This meant, he continues, “walking out to the end of the college drive as a 19-year-old kid and sticking out my thumb. I thought I was going off on a three-month, independent study to find banjo players. Even then, I knew it was the ultimate in cultural denial to play banjo in Minnesota,” he remembers, laughing. “What I didn't realize was that this music needed to be learned in its context. After all, I'd come out of academia, where they compartmentalize life into boxes like Biology 101. But you learn about this music by going into people's homes and going with them when they play at dances, in churches or on the picket line. And the more I did this, the more I understood that this music isn't just about putting your finger on the right part of your instrument, singing the right note or writing the right word.”

That three-month independent study project is still underway, with no end in sight as McCutcheon continues to draw from our history while replenishing that well with reflections on the concerns of our time. From his childhood strums on a mail-order guitar, he achieved a matchless command of hammered dulcimer and exceptional facility on multiple instruments, including that banjo that first lured him into the wide world. His intellectual curiosity grew, kindled initially by Woody Guthrie and John Steinbeck and set aflame through songs that ranged from “Christmas in the Trenches,” a profound

antiwar mini-documentary, to the tender “Simple Man,” the uplifting “Hope Dies Last,” and the hilarious “Oprah Seat,” all three featured on his recent CD, *This Fire: Politics, Love and Other Small Miracles*.

With each year, his horizons stretched further, leading McCutcheon to write acclaimed children’s books, publish songbook compilations, record spoken-word albums to benefit the Grassroots Leadership community-building organization, appear repeatedly at the National Storytelling Festival, collaborate with some of our greatest literary artists on his 2006 release *Mightier Than the Sword*, and dedicate CDs to themes as varied as the seasons of the year and the magic of baseball.

Perhaps the greatest among McCutcheon’s gifts is to bring his listeners together, including those who might not otherwise share common generational or political ground. “Some of them know me through my albums for children,” he explains. “Some know me as a hammered dulcimer player. Some know me for writing topical songs. Yet all of these people find themselves sitting next to one another at my shows. They laugh and cry. They get nostalgic and they think about the future. They think about their kids and their ancestors. They get inspired and energized. And this inspires and energizes me too”

For all that he has accomplished on the page and in the studio, McCutcheon is above all else a performer. “My work isn’t based on any particular album or hit single,” he explains. “Rather, it comes from playing in theaters, clubs and anywhere else I can get together with an audience. And the audience, on the best nights, lets me in. Let me tell you a story: I’ve traditionally begun my Alaska tours in Cordova, a fishing town on Prince William Sound. Been there 6, 8 times at least. Over the years I’ve listened and I’ve learned a little about life there. Those images end up in songs that somehow find resonance when I’m playing for, say, a farm community in Kansas; the people there recognize themselves in songs about other people’s lives. And then, I go back to Cordova next year, and I’m singing that song that I’d written from being there the year before, and I hear this eight- or ten-year-old girl in the front row, in the middle of this song, say, ‘Mom, he’s singing about us!’ That’s my Grammy. That’s when I’m doing my job.”

This is true, too, in songs McCutcheon has written about heroes, known and unknown, whose legacies might ring true to all who hear his music. He points, for example, to “Cross That Line,” from his most recent paean to the lessons of baseball, *Sermon on the Mound*, which cites the familiar epic of Jackie Robinson breaking the color line but looks further, to the impact of his action on one of his teammates. “During a game in Cincinnati, the southernmost major-league city at the time, Pee Wee Reese made the gesture of putting his arm around Robinson, as if to say to the rest of the Brooklyn Dodgers and to everyone who was watching, ‘I’m a white man from the South. I’m standing with a black man from the South. Welcome to the future.’ The point of the song is that you and I can never imagine being a Martin Luther King, a Mother Teresa, a Gandhi or a Jackie Robinson. But every one of us, every day, has a chance to make somebody’s load a little lighter.

“This notion of telling stories of ordinary people who have done great things, and carrying those stories from one place to another, of telling people ‘this is where I’ve been, these are the stories I can bring you,’ is the heart of what I do,” McCutcheon sums up. “That’s my goal. If you can recognize yourself in my songs, then I’ve done my job.”

Cited as “the perfect example of the modern folk musician” by **Sing Out!** magazine, lauded by **Utne Reader** for conveying “his message about the amazing endurance of what’s best in American culture,” McCutcheon lives in Georgia but keeps moving, toward wherever he senses there’s still a story yet to be told.