A Biography of Doc Watson

by Dan Miller
Edited by Steve Carr

Introduction

Over the past fifty years the guitar has had a very powerful influence on American music. Predominantly a rhythm instrument at the turn of the century, the guitar began to step out of the rhythm section in the 1930's and 40's and has maintained a dominant presence in every form of music from rock, to folk, to country, bluegrass, blues, and old-time. While Elvis, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and other pop icons of the 50's and 60's certainly played a large role in bolstering the guitar's popularity, the man who has had the deepest, most enduring, and most profound influence on the way the acoustic flat top guitar is played as a lead instrument in folk, old-time, and bluegrass music today is Arthel "Doc" Watson.

To those of us who have spent hundreds of hours slowing down Doc Watson records in order to learn the tastefully selected notes that he plays and emulate the clear, crisp tone he pulls out of his instrument, Doc is a legend. However, Doc's influence extends far beyond the small niche of guitar players who try to faithfully reproduce his guitar breaks because Doc Watson is not just a guitar player and singer - he is an American hero. To be recognized as a "national treasure" by President Jimmy Carter, honored with the National Medal of the Arts by President Bill Clinton, and given an honorary doctorate degree from the University of North Carolina calls for being more than a fine musician and entertainer. Doc Watson received these accolades not just for his talent, but for the honor, integrity, humility, grace, and dignity which he has displayed throughout his long and distinguished career. While there are many, many great guitar players and singers; there is only one Doc Watson.

Fans love Doc Watson's smooth baritone voice, sharp wit and intellect, easy-going manner, good nature, country charm, and wonderful story-telling abilities almost as much as his guitar playing and singing. One fan commented, "I would pay to go hear Doc Watson read names out of the phone book!" Many other of Doc's admirers agree, saying that no matter how big the performance hall, Doc makes you feel as if you are sitting with him in your own living room. He is comfortable, relaxed, laid-back, and plays, sings, and speaks from the heart. He appears to be enjoying the show as much as you are, and he probably is. The tie that binds is his obvious life long love of music.

The Early Years

The sixth of nine children, Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson was born in Stoney Fork, Watauga County, North Carolina on 3 March, 1923, to Annie Greene and General Dixon Watson. When he was born, he had a defect in the vessels that carry blood to the eyes. He later developed an eye infection which caused him to completely loose his vision before his first birthday. He was raised, and still resides, in Deep Gap, North Carolina.

The Watson family lineage can be traced back to Tom Watson, a Scots pioneer who homesteaded 3000 acres in North Carolina around 1790. North Carolina homesteaders, like Watson, brought folk song and music to their new world and as it changed and evolved, passing from one generation to the next, it bound families, neighbors, and communities together through the best and the worst of times. In the introduction to the book The Songs of Doc Watson, folklorist Ralph Rinzler wrote, "Western North Carolina has long been recognized as one of the richest repositories of folk song and lore in the southeastern United States." In the liner notes to The Doc Watson Family Tradition, A.L. Lloyd writes, "The northwest corner of North Carolina is still probably the busiest nook in the United States for domestic music, singing, fiddling, banjo-picking, and it's no accident that when Cecil Sharp was collecting songs and ballads in the Appalachians (in 1916) it was precisely this small area that yielded the greatest harvest." Western North Carolina song and lore are contained in some of Doc Watson's earliest memories.

Doc's mother would frequently sing old time songs and ballads while doing chores during the day and she sung her children to sleep at night. In the evenings the family read from the Bible and sung hymns from the Christian Harmony, a shape-note book published in 1866. Doc's father, a farmer and day-laborer, also led the singing at the local Baptist church.

Doc has said that his earliest memories of music reach back to his days as a young child being held in his mother's arms at the Mt. Paron Church and listening to the harmony and shape-note singing. The first songs he remembers hearing are "The Lone Pilgrim" and "There is a Fountain." Singing led to an interest in making music and Doc says that he began "playing with anything around the house that made a musical sound." At about the age of six, Doc began to learn to play the harmonica and from that time was given a new one every year in his Christmas stocking. Doc's first stringed instrument, not to include a steel wire he had strung across the woodshed's sliding door to provide bass accompaniment to his harmonica playing, was a banjo his father built for him when he was eleven years old. His father taught him the rudiments of playing a fretless banjo, the rest Doc learned by trial and error.

Doc's new banjo had a fretless maple neck and friction tuning pegs. His father had first tried to make the head out of a ground hog hide, however, it didn't have good tone. When his grandmother's sixteen year old cat passed on, Doc's father used the cat's skin to make the banjo head. In an interview conducted by Frets magazine in 1979 Doc recalls, "That made one of the best banjo heads you ever seen and it stayed on that thing, I guess, as long as I picked it." Doc says that his father "got the notion" for using the cat skin from a Sears Roebuck advertisement of the Joe Rodgers banjo head made of cat skin. The first banjo tune Doc remembers his father playing for him was "Rambling Hobo."

Looking back at Doc's professional music career, it might be said that that little banjo his father built for him was the most important thing the elder Watson could have done for his blind son. However, when asked, Doc will say that the most valuable thing his father did for him was put him at the end of a cross-cut saw when he was fourteen years old. In the same Frets magazine article (March 1979), Doc reflects on the occasion by saying, "He put me to work and that made me feel useful. A lot of blind people weren't ever put to work." In Bluegrass Unlimited (August 1984) Doc once again remembers that important moment, "He made me know that just because I was blind, certainly didn't mean I was helpless."

The confidence Doc's father instilled in him at this young age, by putting him at the end of a crosscut saw, taught him not to be afraid to do anything. Over the years, among other things, he has re-wired his house, built a two room utility building, and he has even been known to climb up on the roof to adjust the TV antenna. Regarding the utility building Doc built completely by himself with a handsaw and mitre box, Doc's current partner, Jack Lawrence states, "I went there and looked at it and I was amazed. There was no way I could have built anything that looked that good. I was curious and I got a carpenter's square and started checking things and that whole building was only a half inch out of square. He is the most amazing man I have ever met in my life in that regard. He is not afraid to tackle most things in life. There is no stopping him when he has his mind set on something."

Doc's earliest musical influences came from his family, church, and neighbors (Carltons, Greers, Younces), however, by the time he was about seven years old his family had acquired a used wind-up Victrola and a stack of records from his mother's brother, Jerome Greene, and Doc was exposed to early county artists such as the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, the Carolina Tar Heels, and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers. His musical horizons were to broaden again when, at the age of ten, he entered the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina.

In Raleigh, Doc was exposed to classical music and big band jazz, and he also was able to listen to guitar players such as Nick Lucas and Django Reinhardt. When asked about his reaction to hearing the great gypsy jazz guitar player, Doc said, "I couldn't figure out what the devil he was doing he went so fast on most of it, but I loved it." It was while he was away at school that he also began to learn how to play the guitar.

Learning to Play the Guitar

One year at school, when Doc was about thirteen, a school friend, Paul Montgomery, had shown him how to play a few chords (G, C and D) on the guitar. A short time later, when Doc was back at home, he was "messing around" with a guitar that his brother Linny had borrowed from a neighbor, Spencer Miller. One morning his father heard him trying to play the guitar and, not knowing that Doc had already learned a few chords, told him that if he could learn to play one song on the guitar by the time he got home from work that evening he would take him down to Rhodes and Day's in North Wilkesboro that Saturday and combine his money with whatever Doc had in his piggy bank and help Doc buy a guitar. Since Doc already knew a few chords, it didn't take him long to learn how to accompany himself while singing a simple song. The song Doc learned to play that day was the Carter Family's "When The Roses Bloom In Dixieland." That Saturday his father, true to his word, helped Doc buy a twelve dollar Stella guitar.

Not long after Doc got his first guitar he and his brother Linny began learning how to play many of the old time mountain tunes that they had heard growing up, as well as some of the new songs they heard on the Grand Ole Opry. His early performances amounted to playing locally for family and friends. He also began to play music with another local boy named Paul Greer. When asked about his switch from playing the banjo to the guitar in an interview conducted by Dirty Linen Magazine (June/July 1995), Doc said, "The banjo was something I really liked, but when the guitar came along, to me that was my first love in music."

Doc initially learned to just "strum and play" the guitar, using a thumb pick, in order to accompany his singing. His first attempts to play a bit of lead were in the old Carter Family "thumb lead" style. After he had learned to play the Carter style with a thumb pick, Doc says, "I began to listen to Jimmie Rodgers recordings seriously and I figured, 'Hey, he must be doing that with one of them straight picks.' So I got me one and began to work at it. Then I began to learn the Jimmie Rodgers licks on the guitar. Then all at once I began to figure out, 'Hey, I could play that Carter stuff a lot better with a flat pick."

When Doc was seventeen his Stella guitar was replaced with a Silvertone from Sears that Doc paid for by working "at the end of a crosscut saw." He and his youngest brother, David, cut wood for the tannery. Using the money they had earned, Doc bought a guitar and David bought a new suit of clothes. The guitar came with a book that contained various songs that you could learn to play with a flatpick. It had photos of Nick Lucas illustrating how to hold a pick and David showed Doc how the photographs in the book demonstrated the way to hold a flatpick. To this day, he still holds his pick as it was illustrated in that book.

Doc's first Martin guitar was a D-28 that he acquired from a music store in Boone, North Carolina, in about 1940. The store owner, Mr. Richard Green, allowed Doc to make payments on the guitar and gave him a year to pay it off. In order to pay for the guitar, Doc began to play music in the streets. When the weather permitted, Doc would play for tips at a cab stand in Lenoir, North Carolina, sometimes making as much as $50 in a day. He had the guitar completely paid off in four or five months. The street performing led to Doc being invited to play at some amateur contests and fiddlers' conventions. It was at one of these local shows that Arthel received the nickname "Doc."

Doc acquired his nickname when he was eighteen years old. He was playing with his friend Paul Greer at a remote control radio show being broadcast from a furniture store in Lenoir. The radio announcer decided that "Arthel" was too long a name to announce on the radio and suggested they think of another name to call him. A young woman in the audience yelled out, "Call him 'Doc'." The name stuck and has been with him ever since. When Dirty Linen Magazine (June/July 1995) asked Doc how he felt about his nickname, he replied, "I didn't pay much attention to it. If it hadn't happened . . . they probably would have called me Art for short, which is common, you know."

When Doc was around eighteen years old he traveled "way over across the mountain" to meet with an old-time fiddler named Gaither Carlton. While he was there he was introduced to Gaither's daughter, Rosa Lee. Since Rosa Lee was eight years younger than Doc, he didn't think much of the meeting at the time. However, six years later Gaither moved his family just a half mile down the road from Doc. Doc says, "I went out to their house and Rosa Lee and a neighbor girl were unpacking dishes. She turned around and said, 'Hello, I haven't seen you in a long time.' Somebody might as well have hit me with a brick. I lost it. I thought, 'Where have I been all these years! There she is!' It was like that, and it still is." Doc and Rosa Lee were married in 1947. Two years later, in 1949, their son Eddy Merle (named after Eddy Arnold and Merle Travis) was born, followed by their daughter, Nancy Ellen, in 1951.

The Birth of "Flatpicking"

After his marriage, Doc began tuning pianos in order to feed his family. It wasn't until 1953, when Doc got a job playing electric lead guitar in Jack Williams' country and western swing band, Jack Williams and the Country Gentlemen, that Doc began making money as a professional musician. It was during his eight year stay with Williams that he began to develop his ability to flatpick fiddle tunes on the guitar.

Doc was first inspired to learn how to play fiddle tunes on the guitar after he became frustrated trying to learn how to play the fiddle. He had obtained a fiddle when he was 18 years old, and says, "I used to try to fiddle. I had a fiddle for about eighteen months and my bowing hand weren't worth a stink. I stopped one day and said, 'Heck, I'm going to sell this thing. I can't fiddle'." Although the fiddle itself frustrated him, Doc liked the bounce and rhythm of the fiddle music, so he work to "put some of those tunes on the guitar."

Williams' band did not have a fiddle player about 90% of the time, however, the dance halls that hired the band would usually want them to do a square dance set. Jack Williams, who had heard Doc fooling around with a few fiddle tunes on the guitar, suggested that Doc learn how to play lead on some fiddle tunes on his electric guitar. Doc said to himself, "If Grady Martin and Hank Garland can do it, so can I." (Garland and Martin had played some fiddle tunes on the electric guitar with Red Foley.) Doc began to learn how to play tunes like "Black Mountain Rag," "Old Joe Clark," "Sugarfoot Rag," and "Billy In The Lowground."

When Doc began playing with Williams he still owned his Martin D-28. He tried to play the Martin with a pick-up installed for a while, but eventually traded it in for a 1953 Les Paul Standard. Later, when the folk revival began, Doc transferred the licks and techniques for playing fiddle tunes on the electric guitar over to the acoustic guitar. Doc recalls, "The technical practice on the electric guitar helped me greatly in learning those fiddle tunes. It was harder to do on the flat top when I went back to it, but the basics had already been learned."

The Folk Boom

During his time with Williams' band Doc had kept his hand in old-time music by playing with his family and friends, which included Clarence "Tom" Ashley, one of the original members of the Carolina Tar Heels. In 1960, as the "folk boom" was blossoming, two musicologists, Ralph Rinzler and Eugene Earle, traveled to North Carolina to record Ashley. Ashley had gathered together some of the best local musicians, Doc being among them, for Rinzler to record. During that trip Rinzler recorded what was later to be released as Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley's, Volume 1 (Folkways, FA2355).

Rinzler, who was impressed with Doc's banjo and guitar playing abilities, went over to the Watson home several days later and recorded Doc playing with Gaither Carlton and several of Doc's other family members. At the session, Doc and Gaither expressed that they could not believe that people from the Northern cities were interested in their music, which had gone out of style since World War II. Ralph let them listen to a Folkways recording of early "hillbilly" music and Gaither said, "Sounds like old times."

One problem Doc had when Rinzler first came to record him at Tom Ashley's was that he did not own an acoustic guitar. He suggested to Rinzler that he could play his Les Paul with the volume turned down low. Not crazy about the idea of having an electric guitar on these recordings, Rinzler convinced Doc that it would be best to have an acoustic guitar and so Doc borrowed a Martin D-18 from his friend Joe Cox. Doc says, "That was a fine old D-18. I wish I owned it." Doc recollects that it was either a 1942 or 1943 model D-18. In 1961 Doc, Gaither, Tom Ashley, Fred Price, and his neighbor Clint Howard traveled to New York to perform a concert sponsored by Friends of Old Time Music. Doc's guitar breaks were enthusiastically received.

The word about this talented group of musicians spread and they were invited to perform at a number of colleges, folk festivals and clubs. With Rinzler's encouragement Doc eventually began to also perform as a solo act, playing mostly coffee houses like Gerde's Folk Club and the Gaslight in New York City while "trying to get a start in the business." His early career was boosted when he was invited to perform at the Newport Folk Festival in 1963 and 1964.

Rinzler also paired Doc with Bill Monroe together for a number of shows. Doc and Bill traded licks on hot fiddle tunes and recreated that old Monroe Brothers sound with their duet singing. Recordings from these shows, which were desirable bootleg items for years, were released by Smithsonian Folkways in 1993 as Bill Monroe and Doc Watson: Live Duet Recordings 1963-1980. In the very early days of his solo career, Doc traveled by himself on a bus when he wasn't accompanied by Ralph Rinzler. Later, when Rinzler became involved in work that didn't allow him to travel, Doc's life traveling to shows by himself got real tough. However, in 1964, Doc's life on the road improved considerably when his son Merle joined him as his picking partner.

Doc and Merle

Doc has said that when Merle was young he had shown no interest in playing the guitar. However, when he was about 15 years old, Merle had his mother show him a few chords while Doc was away on a road trip. From there Merle's playing took off like a rocket. After Doc returned from his road trip, road weary and almost ready to quit, he heard his son play the guitar for the first time and said, "Son, you're going to California with me." Amazingly, the first time Merle went on stage with his father he had only been playing the guitar for three months.

The first show Merle performed with his father was the Berkeley Folk Festival in 1964. The first album Merle played on was Doc Watson & Son recorded (in November 1964), just eight months after he had begun to learn how to pick the guitar. For the first two years Merle played rhythm and just went out with his dad on weekends and during the summers. When he graduated from high school, he began working with Doc full time. In an article printed in Bluegrass Unlimited magazine (November 1997), Doc is quoted as saying, "There's no way that I could have done the hard part of the dues paying days without Merle's driving and help on the road and taking care of business. Most people don't realize what it come to. He was doing the hard driving and things I could not do as far as the business." With Merle on the road with him and Manny Greenhill, of Folklore Productions, booking gigs, Doc's career began to take off.

Although Merle Watson had been listening to his father play the guitar all his life, he did not copy his father's guitar style. He had his own interests, his own influences, and his own style. Merle loved the blues and one of his first influences was Mississippi John Hurt. He also learned some blues scales from a black bluesman named Jerry Ricks. Merle took what he heard and made it his own. In 1973, inspired by the playing of Duane Allman, Merle began learning how to play the slide.

Doc feels that Merle was the most talented picker in the family. In an article printed in Acoustic Guitar Magazine (March/April 1993) Doc says, "What impressed me the most about Merle's guitar playing was the tasteful style that he had developed and his ability to learn very quickly." Doc has a number of interesting stories about Merle's ability to play a beautiful solo on a complex tune shortly after learning the melody.

While Doc and Merle remain the Watson family musicians who have been in the focus of the public's eye, Doc's wife Rosa Lee, who was responsible for teaching Merle his first guitar chords, is also a fine singer and his daughter Nancy plays the hammered dulcimer. When asked about his wife's music, Doc said, "I still think she has the prettiest singing voice I have ever heard. Simple, country, down to earth." Merle's son, Richard, is also a very fine guitar player and has been performing with his grandfather at shows close to home for the past several years.

Landmark Recordings

The album that inspired thousands of folk and bluegrass guitarists to lock themselves in their rooms with their turntables slowed down to 16 rpm was recorded in February 1964 on the Vanguard label and simply titled Doc Watson. This album was followed by seven more Vanguard releases:

- Doc Watson & Son (1965)
- Southbound (1966)
- Home Again (1967)
- Good Deal (1968)
- Doc Watson On Stage (1970)
- Ballads From Deep Gap (1971)
- Old Timey Concert (1977)

Selected songs from these projects, along with Doc's performances at the 1963 and 1964 Newport Folk Festivals, can be heard on the 4 CD Vanguard Doc Watson compilation called The Vanguard Years (1995).

Incidentally, the Martin D-18 that Doc played on the Doc Watson album was the earlier mentioned D-18 he had borrowed from Joe Cox. Doc had actually tried to buy the guitar from Joe, but Joe never wanted to sell it. Doc later acquired a 1945 Martin D-18 from Mark Silber, a store owner in New York City, which he used until the late 1960's when he began playing a Gallagher. The '45 D-18, which Doc played on such great recordings as On Stage and Strictly Instrumental (with Flatt and Scruggs) is currently owned by Jack Lawrence.

For those of us who were not fortunate enough, or old enough, to be playing the guitar when Doc Watson recorded his first Vanguard release, our ears were first graced with the sound of Doc's voice and guitar on the Will The Circle Be Unbroken album (1972). When Doc was invited to participate in this recording with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and other country and bluegrass legends such as Mother Maybelle Carter, Merle Travis, Roy Acuff, Earl Scruggs, and Jimmy Martin, he almost refused at first because his son Merle was not invited to be involved. In an interview printed in Bluegrass Unlimited in November of 1997, Doc explains, "Merle got me off in the corner and said, 'Dad, it did hurt my feelings, but do it. It will get us in audiences that have never heard us before.' He had a head on his shoulders, buddy. Let me tell you that. He said, 'Do it.' He said, 'I believe you ought to. It will help us out in the long run even if they didn't invite me.' Now that was being a man."

The exposure Doc received as a result of participating on the Will The Circle Be Unbroken LP did exactly what Merle had predicted it would do. Doc and Merle's career, which had been in a slight slump, picked up considerably. For a year or two Doc and Merle put together the Frosty Morn Band with Bob Hill, T. Michael Coleman, and Joe Smothers. After that group disbanded Doc and Merle began playing as a trio, with T. Michael Coleman on bass, in 1974. The trio toured the globe during the late seventies and early eighties, recorded nearly fifteen albums between 1973 and 1985, and brought Doc and Merle's unique blend of old time mountain music, folk, swing, bluegrass, traditional country, gospel, and blues to millions of new fans.

Over the past three decades Doc Watson has won Grammy Awards for the following five projects:

Year	Album	Grammy Award
1973	Then and Now* Poppy LA022-F	Best Ethnic or Traditional Recording (album)
1974	Two Days in November* Poppy LA210-G	Best Ethnic or Traditional Recording (album)
1979	Live and Pickin' United Artists LA943-H	Best Country Instrumental Performance (song) "Big Sandy/Leather Britches" medley
1987	Riding the Midnight Train Sugar Hill 3752	Best Traditional Folk Recording (album)
1991	On Praying Ground Sugar Hill 3779	Best Traditional Folk Recording (album)

*both of these albums were reissued by Sugar Hill in 1994

The Watsons and Gallagher Guitars

Doc Watson has been playing Gallagher guitars since 1968. J. W. Gallagher, of Wartrace, Tennessee, and his son, Don, had first met Doc and Merle at a festival in Union Grove, North Carolina in the spring of 1968. On the way home from the festival, J.W. and Don stopped by Doc's home in Deep Gap and showed Doc several of their guitars. Don Gallagher recalls, "Merle and I were just teenagers. Doc was sitting down playing one of the guitars and said to Merle, 'Son, come over here and play one of these guitars.' Merle said, 'I can't daddy, there is a ground hog out here. Where is my gun?' "

Doc was impressed by a mahogany G-50 that the Gallaghers had brought with them. That particular guitar had had a crack repaired in its side and thus the Gallaghers had not intended to sell it. J.W. said Doc could keep the guitar and play it as long as he wanted with "no strings attached other than those on the guitar."

The G-50 that Doc was given in 1968, nicknamed "Ole Hoss," was the one that Doc played on the Will The Circle Be Unbroken album. In a conversation captured on that record between Doc and Merle Travis listeners heard Travis exclaim, "That guitar rings like a bell." That guitar, which Doc returned to the Gallaghers after receiving his second Gallagher guitar, now rests in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

After playing "Ole Hoss" for six years, Doc expressed interest in having a new guitar built which had a neck shaped like his old Gibson Les Paul. The Gallagher's built Doc a mahogany guitar with the desired neck and also added appointments such as an ebony fingerboard, voiced bracing, bound headstock and herringbone trim. This guitar was the prototype for the Gallagher Doc Watson model. The guitar Doc currently plays is a cut-a-way that was built by Don Gallagher and delivered to Doc in 1991. Doc has nicknamed this guitar "Donald."

Doc had received his first Gallagher in April of 1968. Shortly thereafter Merle had expressed interest in one and received his first Gallagher, a G-40, in October of 1968. At Merle's request the Gallaghers also built him a classical guitar in 1973. In 1974 Merle expressed interest in owning a guitar like his father's, only with a cut-a-way. The new guitar was delivered to him in September of that year. A second cut-a-way was built for Merle in 1976 because he wanted to set it up for playing slide guitar. Two other cut-a-way guitars were built for Merle (1977 and 1980).

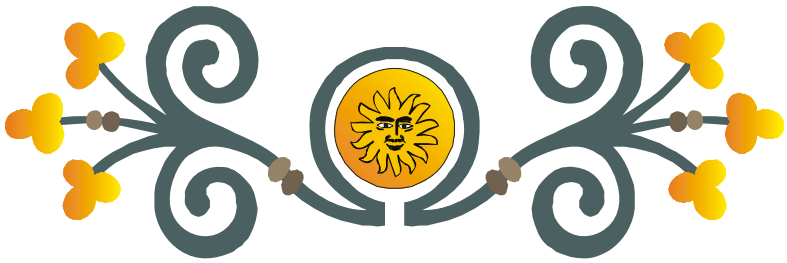
Life Without Merle

In October of 1985 tragedy struck the Watson family when Merle was killed in a tractor accident at the age of 36. Doc Watson not only lost his son and partner, he lost, as Doc says, "the best friend I ever had in this world."

After Merle's passing, Doc found it difficult to go back out and play music, however, in an interview conducted by Acoustic Musician magazine (August 1997), Doc tells the following story, "The night before the funeral I had decided to quit, just give up playing. Well that night I had this dream. Now, usually I do have some light perception, but in this dream it was so dark I could hardly stand it. It was like I was in quicksand up to my waist and I felt I wasn't gonna make it out alive. Then suddenly this big old strong hand reached back and grabbed me by the hand and I heard this voice saying, 'Come on dad, you can make it. Keep going.' Then I woke up. I think the good Lord was telling me it was all right to continue with my music. It's been a struggle, but I still have the love for the music."

About a year prior to Merle's death, he had become road weary and was not going out to perform with his father on many of the road trips. Merle's friend Jack Lawrence had been filling in for him and since Merle's passing, Jack has been Doc's consistent partner on the road.

Regarding Merle's death, Jack recalls, "We were supposed to go out on a two week trip the day after Merle died. I did not know what was going to happen and of course Doc didn't either. A couple of days after the funeral, Doc called me and said, 'I only cancelled the first week of that trip. Are you ready to go out and work? So we went back out on the road and that is how Doc dealt with it. He said, 'Merle would have not wanted me to just lay down and quit on this.' He is a very strong-willed man.



Merlefest

Doc, Jack, and T. Michael Coleman continued to play together until Coleman left to play with the Seldom Scene in October of 1987. Since he left, Doc and Jack have continued, to this day, to perform together as a duo. Although Doc does not tour as much as he used to, one event that he has hosted every April since 1988 in honor of his late son is the Merle Watson Memorial Festival, better known as "Merlefest." Held on the campus of Wilkes Community College, the event was initiated by Doc's close friend Bill Young and the director of development at Wilkes Community College, B. Townes. Young and Townes wanted to raise money to construct a memorial garden in honor of Merle by putting on a benefit concert. They approached Doc with the idea and Doc's daughter, Nancy, suggested that they also invite other artists, who where close to Merle, to perform.

At the first Merlefest event, the performers played on the back of two flatbed trucks to a crowd of about 4,000. In the ten years since the first Merlefest, the festival has become one of the largest traditional music events on the East coast. The four day event supports 13 stages and the total attendance in 1997 was close to 45,000. Today the performances include a wide range of musical styles including: folk, country, bluegrass, blues, Cajun, Celtic, old-time, gospel, and acoustic jazz. Like Doc's music itself, there is a little something for everyone to enjoy.

One of the highlights of Merlefest for any avid guitarist is the opportunity to see Doc perform with his grandson, Merle's son, Richard. While Richard does not actively tour with his grandfather, he does occasionally play dates that are close to home and he can always be found at Merlefest. Of seeing Richard play a set with Doc in 1994, a correspondent from Mother Earth News (February/March 1995) writes: "Like Merle he was quiet, almost shy on stage. Like Merle, he sat on his grandfather's right hand. Doc, especially, notices the similarities. 'We sit here and practice and it's like looking at Richard and thinking, 'Son, you favor Merle' because Richard loved Merle's music and it comes out through his fingers.' " Richard is indeed his father's son when it comes to playing the guitar as anyone who has had a chance to hear this young man pick will tell you.

The Doc Watson Guitar Style

Doc's guitar style was certainly founded in the music that influenced him in his youth. He first learned to pick following the Maybelle Carter inspired thumb lead. Jimmie Rodgers music inspired him to try to use a "straight pick." The playing of Hank Garland and Grady Martin introduced him to fiddle tune leads on the guitar. He loved Riley Puckett's rhythm work and he worked to copy the "ripply licks" of Ernest Tubb's guitar player Fay "Smitty" Smith.

Then there was the influence of Chet Atkins, Merle Travis, and the Delmore Brothers. In an interview conducted by Acoustic Guitar magazine (March/April 1993) Doc says, "I guess I liked every guitar player that I listened to, but there's some at the top of the list, like Chet, Merle, Smitty, Hank Garland . . . I like George Benson pretty much. And my son, Merle, of course. He was the best slide player I ever heard in my life."

While the aforementioned influences put ideas in Doc's mind, I think that the music he makes with his guitar can be primarily attributed to the traditional music that he grew up hearing around his home. His wide ranging repertoire certainly does not confine itself to that music, however, the feeling, intensity, personality, and character of any tune Doc Watson plays comes from that place. It was there at home that Doc learned how to play from the heart and therefore, make the music his own.

In an interview conducted by Ron Stanford in August of 1970 and printed, in part, in the introduction to the Oak Publications book The Songs of Doc Watson, Doc is quoted as saying, "When I play a song, be it on the guitar or banjo, I live that song, whether it is a happy song or a sad song. Music, as a whole, expresses many things to me—everything from beautiful scenery to the tragedies and joys of life. . . . Whether I'm playing for myself or for an enthusiastic audience, I can get the same emotions I had when I found that Dad had seen to it that Santa Claus brought exactly what I wanted for Christmas. A true entertainer, I think, doesn't ever lose that feeling." Later, in an interview printed in Frets magazine (March 1987), Doc says, "There are so many players that play for show; and then there are some that play for the love. Man, you sure can tell the difference when you sit down and listen to them." Playing for the love of music is what has sustained Doc Watson through the ups and downs of a professional career that has spanned nearly 50 years.

Dan Miller
Editor and Publisher
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