

Merle Watson: Remembering Merle



In the early, dark hours of October 23, 1985, Eddy Merle Watson rolled his farm tractor down a steep hillside near his home, ending the life of one of the world's great musicians in a tragedy worthy of the blues ballads he loved. Some people knew Merle Watson well; some were acquainted with him as a consequence of brief interactions; some had only the privilege of seeing him perform his musical wizardry on stage or listening to one or more of his many recordings. Everyone loved and respected him.

Merle touched lives world-wide as shown by the more than 700 cards, letters, and other written condolences as well as the numerous phone calls and personal visits received by his family after his tragic accident. This tremendous outpouring of support was not engendered by a love of Merle's music alone but also by the way his charisma and kindness transcended his fundamental shyness and silence on stage to reveal themselves in his exquisite finger work and gentle smile.

Merle Watson was born in February 1949 on a beautiful spring-like day. During his 21 year career he traveled more than four million miles by automobile in addition to the many thousands of miles he flew. Ultimately, Merle and his legendary father, Doc Watson, would tour the U.S. many times performing in all but two states. They performed in Africa, Japan, Canada, Mexico, and most European countries and took pride in sharing their musical talents and heritage from the stages of some of the most celebrated theatres in the world's largest cities to the dusty, remote villages of the South African bush.

At six years of age, Merle fell victim to the polio epidemic and was paralyzed from the waist down for almost two months. The illness left him with hip and joint damage and a bad limp. Howard Campbell, a friend of Doc's, gave Merle a used bicycle and the therapy of riding significantly reduced his limp. As a consequence of his childhood illness, Merle would often experience pain throughout his adult life but his spirit and determination allowed him to persevere in a musical career that delighted fans of acoustic music, time and time again.

Merle was 14 years old in 1963 when Doc Watson took the stage at the Newport Folk Festival where he was embraced enthusiastically by the folk community. This performance and a historic concert with the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, at Town Hall in New York City in 1964, catapulted Doc Watson to the forefront of the folk revival. It

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was at this point in his legendary father's blossoming career that Merle, at home with his mother and sister, made a momentous decision.

"Mama," he said, "I've decided what I want to do."

"What's that, honey? Play the drums?" RosaLee asked since Merle had received a set of drums the previous Christmas.

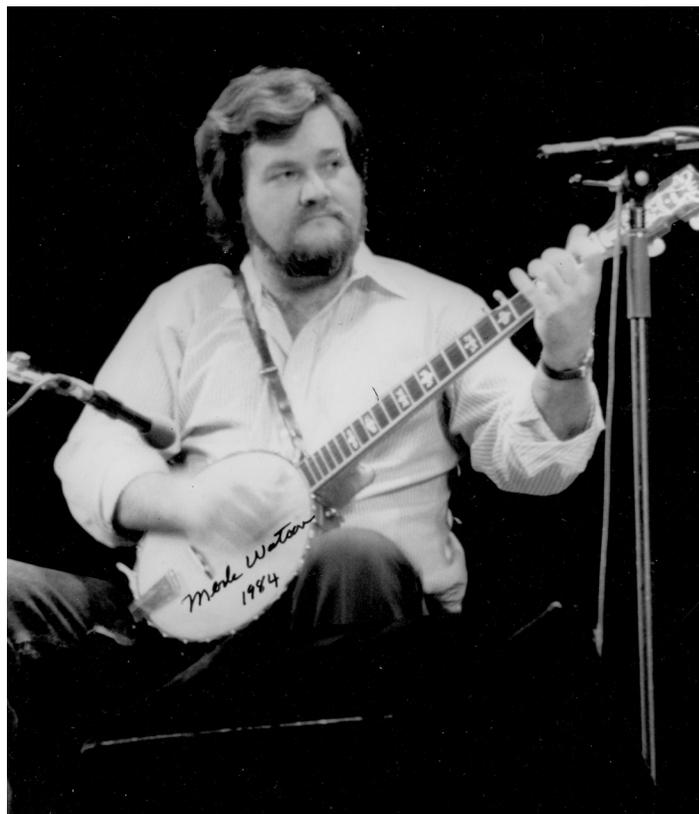
"No. I've got nobody to play drums with except a George Jones record. I want to play the guitar." Merle said.

With that RosaLee took out a guitar and taught Merle his first basic chords. In June of 1964, he accompanied his father to concerts in Berkeley and San Francisco, CA, performing for the first time before an audience of 12,000 people. In November 1964, he and Doc recorded their first LP album, *Doc Watson and Son*.

Merle grew up quickly. He married at age 16 and his first child, Richard Eddy Watson was born when Merle was 17. Two years later, Merle welcomed his daughter, Karen Annette Watson, to the world. Merle was devastated when his marriage broke up several years later and never truly recovered from the loss of his family.

Despite his personal pain, he was excelling professionally. In 1985, Merle won the "Best Finger Picking Guitarist-Folk, Blues, or Country" award from *Frets Magazine* to accompany the Grammy awards he had earned in his young career.

On the night of October 22, 1985, Merle was restless and unable to sleep. Sometime after midnight, he went to the basement, tied on his nail apron, and proceeded to trim some red beech paneling that had been misgrooved, making it ready to panel his basement walls. The saw blade hit an undetected fault in the grain and a good-sized piece of hardwood splintered off, embedding itself in the muscle of Merle's upper arm. He grabbed his all-weather jacket, fumbled around in the pocket for the key to his farm tractor, and left to seek help. Merle went to the houses of three of his neighbors, all of whom knew him well, but no one came out to help. Seeing a lighted house at the summit of



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a steep hill, Merle continued in that direction, hoping for better luck. The people who lived there were afraid to attempt to remove the embedded wood from his arm.

“Maybe I can get it out,” Merle said, “I’ve got to have my arm. I have to pick the guitar. Have you got a knife and something for the pain?” They didn’t have anything for the pain except for some wine. Merle sterilized the knife with the wine, drank some as an anesthetic, and successfully removed the huge splinter. The couple wrapped a bandage around his arm to cover the wound. Despite being weak from the trauma and loss of blood, Merle left on his tractor.

On the way back down the steep incline of their drive, the tractor brakes locked, leading it over the high embankment. Merle was thrown off and the large tractor landed on him, killing him instantly. The life of one of acoustic music’s brightest and most beloved musicians came to a premature end.

Three weeks before the accident that ended his life, Merle was coming home from Nashville with Doc after finishing a segment of a Nashville Network show with David Holt. “Son,” Doc said, “I know I’m the last person in the world that’s worthy to talk to you about this, but how is it between you and God?”

Merle assured his father, “Dad, you don’t have to go to church to make it right. I’ve been on my knees in the woods, and I’ve made my peace with God, and if I have to die, I’m not afraid.” Neither man could know how soon those fateful words would be relevant.

As a testament to Merle’s popularity and musical accomplishments, one of the world’s most renowned gatherings of acoustic musicians began two and a half years after Merle’s death and continues, 23 years later, to honor the memory of a great talent silenced too early.