Incredible and Merle's slide work was embedded itself in the muscle of hardwood splintered off and grain and a good-sized piece hit an undetected fault in the house, and a down-to-earth guy.” -- Joe Smothers

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 was misgrooved, thus unable to sleep. Sometime around 3:30 a.m., Merle left on his tractor.

As Merle drove down the steep hill, the tractor brakes locked, sending it over the high embankment. As the tractor approached the road, the animal was Stickley's guitar. 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 homes 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 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.

As Merle drove down the steep incline of his neighbors' drive on his way back home, the tractor brakes locked, sending it over the embankment. Merle was thrown off and the tractor landed on him, killing him instantly. The life of one of acoustic music's brightest and most beloved musicians came to a tragic 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 worth 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 become 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 today, 27 years later, to honor the memory of a great talent silenced too early.

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I often say if people find out when you’re on the stage not putting on an act, when you’re just being who you are … they're gonna like you. And if they like your music, well good!—Doc Watson (2006)

Doc and his guitar blossoms, bringing the sounds of Appalachia to the North. The performance catapulted Doc Watson to the forefront of the folk revival. That appearance and a historic concert with the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, at Town Hall in New York City in 1964 paved the way for Watson's first recording contract with Vanguard. Soon Doc found himself with the same agent, Manny Greenhill, as folk legend Joan Baez. Greenhill’s firm, Folklore Productions, represented Doc until his death. Doc remained one of the most richly expressive voices of contemporary acoustic music. He learned more in two months than I learned in my first five years.“ — President Bill Clinton

There may not be a serious, committed baby boomer alive who didn't at some point in his or her youth try to spend a few minutes at least trying to learn to pick a guitar like Doc Watson. — President Bill Clinton

... He learned more in two months than I learned in my first five years. In spite of a surge in the popularity of rock music and a division of the folk revival into many genres in the 1970s, Doc and Merle continued to play dedicated audiences and to win critical acclaim until the dark hours of October 23, 1985, when Doc and RosaLee’s lives were shattered by Merle’s tragic death. The intervening years notwithstanding, the pain continued to resonate in Doc Watson’s voice. “I didn’t just lose a good son,” he said. “I lost the best friend I’ll ever have in this world.”

Artie! “Doc” Watson was clearly a folklife and acoustic music icon of legendary proportions who richly deserves his place in history. He performed and recorded for five decades and during that time won seven Grammy Awards. Watson received the first ever honorary Associate in Arts degree at Wilkes Community College’s 2005 commencement. On February 8, 2004, he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by NARAS, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. When President Bill Clinton presented Watson with the National Medal of Arts in 1997, he said, “There may not be a serious, committed baby boomer alive who didn’t at some point in his or her youth try to spend a few minutes at least trying to learn to pick a guitar like Doc Watson.”

Despite his enormous success, Doc remained one of the most fundamentally modest and humble men ever. He enriched countless people from all walks of life with measures of music and wisdom of astonishing clarity. When asked how he would like to be remembered, he responded by saying, “I would rather be remembered as a likable person than for any phase of my picking. Don't misunderstand me; I really appreciate people’s love of what I do with the guitar. That’s an achievement as far as I’m concerned, and I’m proud of it. But I’d rather people remember me as a decent human being than as a flashy guitar player. That’s the way I feel about it.” And, since his death on May 29, 2012, that is how he will forever be remembered: “Just one of the people.”

When Watson was 19, he got a gig performing for a radio show. The announcer felt the name “Arthel” was too stuffy and was searching for an alternate name when someone in the audience shouted, “Call him Doc.” The name stuck.

Not only did Doc Watson come from a musical background, but he married into another family of music when, at the age of 23, he wed his 15-year-old third cousin RosaLee Carlton. Her father, Gaither Carlton, was a fiddler with whom Watson played regional hymns and ballads. Doc and RosaLee had two children, Eddy Merle (named after country music legends Eddy Arnold and Merle Travis), born in 1940, and Nancy Ellen, in 1951. Throughout the 1960s, Doc supported his family by playing music, tuning pianos and, with great reluctance, accepting some financial aid for the blind. He worked primarily in a country dance band, playing an electric Gibson Les Paul model guitar with pianist Jack Williams. During this period, he continued to play the traditional acoustic music of his home with friends Clarence “Tom” Ashley, Clint Howard and Fred Price, all accomplished musicians in their own rights. While competing with Ashley, Howard and Price at the Fiddler’s Convention in Union Grove, N.C., in 1960, Doc Watson was part of the now legendary meeting with Ralph Rinzler and Eugene Earle.

Rinzler was a musician with The Greenbriar Boys and artist manager of Bill Monroe and had sought out Ashley, who introduced him to Doc. Rinzler was impressed with Doc’s talent, and his “discovery” of Doc led to a tour of coffeehouses in the Northeast and eventually took him to the stage of the Newport Folk Festival in 1963, where he was embraced enthusiastically by the folk community, young and old.

On the stage of this historic festival, the blind guitar player from the mountains of North Carolina sat down and began to play. At 40 he had wavy dark hair, a gentle laugh and a rich, warm baritone that enveloped his audience like a grandfather’s hug. He sang songs about lost lives and lost loves, murders and muskrats, shady groves and blackberry duets, like the Blue Sky Boys, the Monroe Brothers and the Delmore Brothers. “I just loved the guitar when it came along, I loved it,” Doc recalls. “The banjo was something I really liked, but when the guitar came along, to me that was my first love in music.”

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This world bid farewell to RosaLee Carlton Watson on Thanksgiving morning, November 22, 2012. She joined her husband of 65 years, Arthel “Doc” Watson, who died on May 29, 2012, and their son Eddy Merle Watson, who was killed in 1985 in a tractor accident.

RosaLee was born February 5, 1931, in Watauga County, N.C., a daughter of the late Gaither and Lucy Robbins Carlton.

Although RosaLee’s husband, Doc, was an internationally-celebrated musician, RosaLee came from a musical family and had her own musical gifts to offer, including singing, playing the guitar and songwriting.

She performed with Doc Watson during early stages of his career, and she and Merle took turns driving to Doc’s performances around the country. By the late 1960s, Merle joined Doc full-time on the road and stage. The father-son team won “RosaLee Watson was always sweet and gentle, and yet she was always supportive. RosaLee was a loving mother to Merle and Nancy and a hard worker, raising a large garden every year to keep food on the table. Later on, she helped Doc manage the business side of his growing career. RosaLee was a wonderful mountain singer who only wrote one song, and yet it is one of the great songs of all time, ‘Your Lone Journey.’ It will be sung long into the future.”

Doc and RosaLee co-wrote and recorded “Your Lone Journey,” one of the most cherished songs of all time, which has been recorded by John Hartford, Emmylou Harris, and Robert Plant and Alison Krauss on the Grammy Award-winning album “Rough and Rocky Road” in memory of the great songs of all time, “Your Lone Journey.” It will be sung long into the future.”

When Doc Watson’s invitations to musicians for the first event drew a strong response, it was RosaLee who suggested that it become an annual festival.

“A lot of times when we went to their home to discuss the festival, RosaLee would have suggestions for programming...and she and Doc worked together as a team and would discuss things,” said Hagaman, a Watauga County native.

“She was a very fine lady. We will miss her but she and Doc are together again and that’s the way it ought to be.”

RosaLee was buried beside Doc in the Doc & Merle Watson Family Cemetery in Deep Gap, N.C.

She is survived by one daughter, Nancy Ellen Watson of Deep Gap; one granddaughter, Karen Watson Norris of Deep Gap; one grandson, Richard Eddy Watson and wife Annette of Deep Gap; three great-grandsons, Tanten Webb of Boone and Brennon Kilgore of Blowing Rock, three sisters, Irene Lewis of Boone, Pearlie

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