MerleFest 2014

In the dark dawning 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 knew Merle Watson well; others made acquaintance with him through incidental brief interactions; some witnessed him performing his musical wizardry on stage or by listening to one or more of his many recordings. Everyone loved and respected Merle.

Merle touched lives worldwide 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. He won hearts with his exquisite musical finger work and gentle smiles.

On a beautiful spring-like day in February 1949, Arthel “Doc” and RosaLee Watson welcomed infant Eddy Merle to their family. During Merle’s 21-year career, he traveled more than four million miles by automobile in addition to the many thousands of miles by plane. Ultimately, Merle and his legendary father, Doc, would tour the U.S. many times performing in all but two states. They performed in Africa, Japan, Canada, Mexico and most European countries. The Watsons took pride in sharing their musical talents and heritage on celebrated theatre stages from the world’s largest cities to the dusty, remote villages of the South African bush and everywhere in between.

At age six, 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, gave Merle a used bicycle. The therapy of riding significantly reduced Merle’s 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. The folk community enthusiastically embraced Doc. The Newport 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.

“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.

Hearing 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, C.A., performing for the first time before an audience of 12,000. 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 became a father at 17 with the birth of his first child, Richard Eddy Watson. 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, Merle was excelling professionally. In
“Merle was one of the kindest musicians on the road. The precision of his and Doc’s guitars was incredible and Merle’s slide work was impecable. Truly a masterful player and a down-to-earth guy.”

— Joe Smothers

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. Sometimes after midnight, he went to the basement, tied on his nail apron, and proceeded to trim some red beech paneling that had been misgrooved, thus making it ready to panel his home. As a testament to Merle’s popular-unity 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.

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 become relevant.

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“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 animal. I never petted it. I never heard it howl or anything that I remember of it. It just got old and decrepit and couldn’t eat and was blind, and it was miserable. Dad persuaded my brother to put it out of its misery. And he did it without making it suffer.”

While Doc attended the North Carolina Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh as a young teenager, he learned a few guitar chords from a friend. This accomplishment created the impetus for his father eventually buying Doc his first guitar. As Doc recalled, “My real interest in music was the old 78 records and the sound of the music. I loved it and began to realize that one of the main sounds on those old records I loved was the guitar. One of my brothers had borrowed one from a cousin, and I was foolin’ with it, and Dad just says, ‘If you’ll learn to play a song on it by the time I get in from work this evening, we’ll go into town and get you one.’ Well, I knew some chords, and I just played the rhythm chords to ‘When Roses Bloom in Dixieland.’ I had some money saved in my piggy bank, so we took that and he finished it up and got me a $2 Stella, which was a pretty good little guitar at the time.”

Later in his teenage years, Doc earned enough money sawing wood to buy his own guitar from Sears and Roebuck. He began playing music with his older brother, Linney, in the style of the old-time brother