

REMEMBERING MERLE

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 coincidental 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.

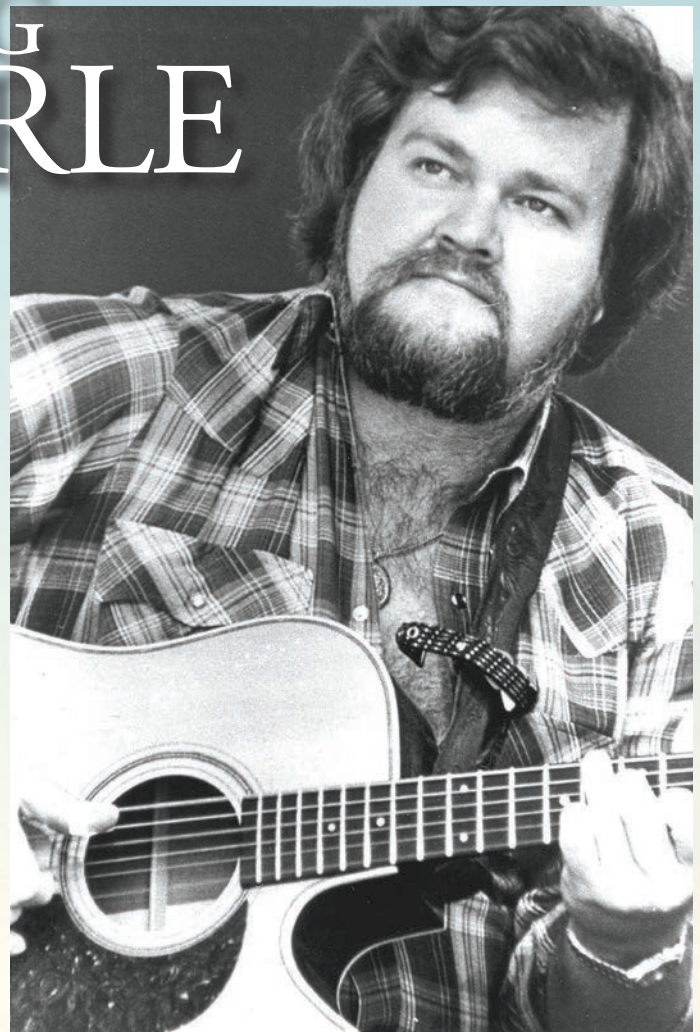
Merle touched lives worldwide as shown by the more than 700 cards, letters and other written condolences as well as the numerous phone calls and personal visits received by his family after his tragic accident. This tremendous outpouring of support was not engendered by a love of Merle's music alone 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. It was at this point in his leg-



Eddy Merle Watson

endary 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.

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

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- Merle Watson

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“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 impeccable. 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. 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, thus 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 and embedded 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 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 success-



Merle and Doc Watson

fully 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 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 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 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.

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.



Merle and Doc Watson - Early years