

MerleFest Reflections



Music, Moments
& Memories



Mark O'Connor, Sam Bush, John Cowan, Tony Rice, Béla Fleck & Jerry Douglas perform in 1988.

David Holt playing rhythm on a paper bag; John Hartford tap dancing on his amplified step-a-tune; Chet Atkins explaining his picking technique; Tony Rice and Peter Rowan jamming with Sam Bush, Béla Fleck, John Cowan and Jerry Douglas; all the artists singing "Tribute to Merle" with Doc on harmonica—Music, Moments and Memories of the first Eddy Merle Watson Memorial Festival.

1988

It began in 1988 as a one-time Wilkes Community College Endowment Corporation event to raise funds for a campus garden for a rural North Carolina community college. A fine group of musicians donated their talents to memorialize a fallen friend and support his musician father. By 2011 the festival attracted nearly 80,000 participants over four days to hear 90 musical acts on 14 stages. How did MerleFest begin and how did it evolve into the greatest annual celebration of "traditional plus" music in the world and a fundraiser that has an economic

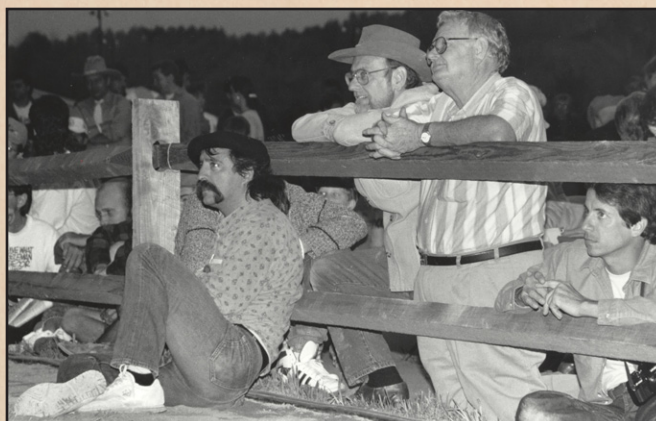
impact of more than \$10 million to the region?

MerleFest is the result of a serendipitous combination of individuals with vision, talent and perseverance. First among them is Frederick William Townes IV, nicknamed "B." In the '70s and '80s, "B" was a Wilkes Community College (WCC) horticulture instructor with a grand vision to develop the grounds of the two-year public institution. The campus was a blank slate of acres of lawn and a few trees, so "B" wanted to develop theme gardens to enhance the education of his students with hands-on planting that would

create a variety of landscapes for them to study. He developed "The Garden Master Plan," which included a walking trail and a wildflower walk, a Japanese garden, an evergreen garden and a garden for the blind, which would emphasize aromatic plants and feature Braille identification signs. The college budget was tight, so "B" took full advantage of a chance to present his fundraising plan at a WCC trustees' meeting. "B"'s talk resulted in enthusiasm, publicity, several donations and the creation of the WCC Gardens Board. A member of the board, Ala Sue Wyke, knew Bill Young, a close friend of Doc

Watson, and suggested asking Doc to play a "one-time, one-night, one-man show" to raise funds for the garden for the blind. In October 1987 Ala Sue, Bill and "B" met with Doc who generously agreed to do the concert in the John A. Walker Community Center (now referred to as the Walker Center) and had a November date available for the event. "B" admits freely to his naivety when he told Doc, "Great!" At this meeting Doc asked that the garden for the blind be named in honor of his late son Merle, and so it became the Eddy Merle Watson Garden for the Senses.

Back at the college, Bud Mayes, manager of the Walker Center, and President David Daniel informed "B" that a concert in November was totally unrealistic. Other concerts at the venue were planned a year ahead and did not fill the 1,100 seats. Bill and "B" had to meet with Doc again to tell him that the November concert could not happen. A few days later Doc called to say that his daughter, Nancy, and his wife, RosaLee, came up with the idea of Doc and some of his and Merle's musician friends playing a festival at the end of April 1988. While touring, Doc would call Bill Young and tell him about various artists, including Chet Atkins, Earl Scruggs, Grandpa Jones, Mac Wiseman and Sam Bush, who had committed to playing in memory of Merle for free. Bill wrote these names down on a napkin and handed them to "B." "B," a novice at festival planning, was starting to feel a little overwhelmed. Bill suggested another meeting with Doc and RosaLee to work out details.



Festival goers listen to music at the first festival.

At this meeting, since so many artists wanted to play, it was decided to make the one-night concert into a two-day festival and to name it the Eddy Merle Watson Memorial Festival. With Bud Mayes' blessing, the event was put on the calendar for Saturday and Sunday, April 30 and May 1, with all proceeds going to the Eddy Merle Watson Garden for the Senses.

As Doc promoted this event during his concert tour, one gentleman heard about it and wanted to become personally involved in helping to make it happen. Jim Rouse gave his name to Doc on a slip of paper, which Doc put in his pocket. As RosaLee was doing laundry one day, she came upon this slip of paper and called "B" to recommend that he give Jim a call to see how he could help. When "B" called Jim, Jim asked, "What is it that I can do to help you?" "B" explained that he really needed a monument to place at the Garden for the Senses recognizing that it was established in memory of Merle. Jim gladly made plans

to get this monument in place. From that point forward, Jim has been involved in promoting the festival. He has also become a valued and trusted personal friend to Doc.

RosaLee suggested having a workshop as well where artists could talk about their instruments and share ideas about their musical styles. This added a second venue to the festival; the workshop would be held in the Pit, now known as the Mayes Pit-Cohn Auditorium. At this point "B" admitted that he was not musically inclined and asked Doc, "What is a festival?" and "What kind of music do you play?" Needless to say, "B" was on a steep learning curve.

One night "B" woke up in a bit of a panic as he realized he could not be sure who would actually show up to perform. He had yet to talk to any artists or plan who would play when. So, he and Bill went back up the mountain to see Doc to work out some of these "details." Doc gave them

phone numbers for a few artists and, luckily, agent Keith Case. "B" called Keith and left messages but received no reply. "B" was persistent and eventually caught up with Keith who said, "I heard Doc was going to have a little festival for Merle. I book a lot of these people, and I'm not sure they have that date open." – "B"'s nightmare! But the nightmare quickly faded as Keith became a valued colleague in the artist booking process. In the meantime, Doc was talking up the festival at his concerts, so the Walker Center box office was getting many calls from all over the country for tickets, and the house sold out.

Now that they had artists, "B" asked Bud Mayes about the sound system. Bud told him that the Walker Center did not have a sound system, and it was too late to rent one. Back to Doc, who said his friend Cliff Miller, who used to play with him and Merle, would take care of the sound. Cliff had played with Doc and Merle and was in the sound system

business. Sure enough, when "B" called, Cliff said he would do anything for Doc. When Cliff visited the campus, "B" told him that the house was sold out. Cliff suggested that they have the festival outside to accommodate more folks to which "B" replied, "What do you mean, have it outside?!!!"

Cliff said, "Well, let's look around the campus." They came to the area in front of what is now the Watson Stage, and Cliff said, "You could have it in that field, have it inside and outside."

When "B" proposed the inside/outside idea to Bud and President Daniel, he recalls them saying, "Are you crazy? You have sold out the Walker Center. You need to cut and run." "B" persisted and with the backing of Bill and Doc, he went back to Bud and President Daniel, who eventually conceded that it was his show and okayed the outside venue idea.

So at this point, the event had evolved from a one-man, one-night show to a three-venue, multiple-artist, two-day festival, which led to another problem—how to schedule all of the artists who were going to show up for the festival. Almost none of them were in band configurations. Doc had said that his old friend Ralph Rinzler would help with the schedule. Ralph was a successful folk musician and music producer who had "discovered" Doc by getting him to the Newport Folk Festival in the '60s. At this time he was the curator of the Smithsonian Folkways Museum and happened to be working in France,



The 1988 audience awaits anxiously in front of the stage.

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which is why he did not immediately return "B"'s calls. Finally, the weekend before the festival "B" got a call at home from Ralph, who said, "I know Doc wants me to speak or do something at a memorial for Merle. Do you know anything about it?"

"B" responded, "Doc told me that you would schedule the musicians and tell them when and with whom they will play."

Ralph said, "Okay. I am flying into Greensboro on Wednesday. Can someone pick me up?"

Of course, "B" picked him up, and Ralph worked with college staff to develop a schedule for who would play with whom, when, where and for how long.

Another big help showed up the last week as well. Jim Matthews was a carpenter from Elkin, N.C., who had worked on festivals in California. He walked into "B"'s office two days before the festival and declared, "You need my help!" So "B" showed him the venues. When they got to the field, Jim asked, "Where are they going to play?"



John Hartford tips his hat

"B" said, "Somewhere out in the field."

Jim said, "You need a stage!"

As a result, Ralph Williams, a supporter of the college, helped "B" arrange to have two flatbed trailers delivered and placed side by side in front of the cabin. The 200-year-old log cabin was donated to the college by Joe and Lillie Brewer and placed in the field as part of the Garden Master Plan. Jim and several volunteers spent an all-nighter with hammers in hand turning the flatbeds into a serviceable stage. The audience sat on hay bales and their own folding chairs. The informal ambience was exemplified by a dog chewing on a bone in the front row. David Holt emceed and played on the outside stage while George Hamilton IV took care of



Bill Mathis & Doc Watson sing "A Song for Merle"

the Walker Center introductions. The concert was going extremely well until Sunday afternoon when New Grass Revival with Sam Bush, John Cowan, Pat Flynn and Béla Fleck rolled in just an hour before they were scheduled to go on stage. They were supposed to be the last group to perform in the Walker Center and then play the last

set outside. "B" explained the schedule to their road manager who said they needed an hour just to set up and would only appear on the outdoor set. "B" went backstage at the Walker Center to tell George Hamilton IV the news, and he responded, "Well, 'B,' you are just going to have to go out there and tell those folks that if they want to see New



Grandpa Jones performing in 1988



Bill Young, Doc Watson & George Hamilton IV



Mark O'Conner the Smith Sisters perform

Grass Revival, they will need to get out of their comfortable, reserved seats and walk on down the hill to the outside stage." With much trepidation "B" did just that and was relieved when everyone followed him down to the other venue to enjoy what turned out to be a legendary performance.

One of the great traditions of MerleFest, "Tribute to Merle," began as the finale of the first festival when all the artists gathered on stage to sing "A Song for Merle." Shortly after Merle's death, Wayne Hayes, a great friend of the Watsons, dealt with the pain he felt by composing the



Jerry Douglas signing the guitar made by Ralph Williams

touching tribute. Wayne and Doc led the singing in 1988 to the familiar tune of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" and guests are invited to join each year in singing the following for Merle:

A Song for Merle

*He learned to pick the guitar
while his dad was on the road.*

*Doc Watson was a model for his
son.*

*When Doc sat center stage and
sang,*

his son Merle picked out lead.

*But now we don't have Merle to
pick*

around with anymore.

*From the Blue Ridge Mountains
of Carolina*

to California by the sea,

*Doc and Merle made bluegrass
a way of life.*

*They never forgot their roots, nor
from*

where their music came.

*Now Merle's up in heaven, we'll
be singing once again.*

Chorus

Will the circle be unbroken,

Bye and bye, Lord, bye and bye.

When God's heavenly choir sings,

He'll have Merle pickin' the lead

In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

*Yes, Merle will be missed by his
loved*

ones left on earth.

His Gallagher guitar once

touched us all.

*His daddy is his daddy, but most
of all his friend,*

And someday we'll have Merle

to pick around with once again.

Yes, Merle's gone to heaven

to pick flattop for his Lord.

He'll play for Him

"Treasure's Untold."

He'll be missed by bluegrass fans,

just like you and me,

His daddy, but most of all

his momma, Rosalee.

Repeat chorus

Also, at the end of the first festival during the dedication of the garden, Bill Young spoke these words: "This evening we are here to celebrate the life of a young man who enriched the lives of all of us who have been present the last two days—Eddy Merle Watson. We remember him with love . . ."

The 1988 festival was a great success that raised money to add planters, walkways and other improvements to the Eddy Merle Watson Garden for the Senses. It was planned as a one-time event, but again "B"'s perseverance resulted in the festival we know today. Mule Ferguson, a local businessman and amateur musician, owned a video recording business, and he filmed the outside concert and the workshop in the Pit. WFMX radio recorded the audio. Mule encouraged "B" to sync the audio and video and try to sell VHS tapes of the concert to raise more funds for the garden. "B" and Mule spent evenings syncing the audio and video and then presented the idea of marketing the recording to Bill Young. Bill thought it was a good idea, but all the



Building the Doc Watson Theatre, a.k.a. Watson Stage, in 1989

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artists would have to give their permission. This was a daunting task that "B" worked hard on by making repeated calls to artists and agents.

In the meantime, there was a groundswell of enthusiasm for a second festival as evidenced by many calls to the Walker Center. Once again, Bill and "B" met with Doc and asked him about another festival. Doc agreed that it was a good idea, but this time he felt that the artists would need to be compensated in some way. Also at this meeting, they decided to have a small concert in the fall of 1988 to unveil the recording of the 1988 festival. This concert was called "Autumn Pickin' in the Gardens" and featured Doc and a few friends

playing on the cabin porch. Ultimately, 5,000 tapes were sold worldwide, which created great publicity for the 1989 festival.

1989

In preparation for the second festival, "B" researched bluegrass music and continued his work developing the college grounds. One big improvement was building the Doc and Merle Watson Theatre. Ralph Williams knew of a church that had bought trusses that were too small for its new building. "B" asked Dwight Hartzog, the WCC construction instructor, if he could build a stage and use the trusses to cover it. Dwight was amenable, and the trusses were



Dedication of Doc & Merle Watson Theatre



The first box office

donated. Dwight used volunteer and construction student labor to build the covered venue, so the 1989 festival was held on the skeleton of the original Watson Stage with the Cabin Stage serving as a "tweener" to cover set changes on its larger neighbor.

The 1989 lineup included fewer individual artists and more bluegrass bands, such as Hot Rize, Jim and Jesse and The Virginia Boys, Mac Wiseman and the Wildwood Express, Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys, and Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. Another historical moment at the '89 festival was EmmyLou Harris performing on the Watson Stage with a young Vince Gill

playing backup for her. Doc said it was a great festival, but he wanted a greater variety of traditional music and more opportunity for musicians to jam in unique combinations.

Motivated by Doc, "B" began researching folk music and contacted Robin and Linda Williams who knew the scene well. They suggested he call Pete Seeger to see if he would play. When "B" called, Pete's wife, Toshi, answered and said that they had always wanted Doc to play at Pete's Clearwater Festival in upstate New York. Pete agreed to play at MerleFest if Doc would come up to his event. When "B" asked Doc about it, he said he would be glad to play if "B" would take him up there. "B"



Vince Gill sings back up for Emmylou Harris in 1989

readily agreed and so began his intense exposure to the world of “traditional plus” music.

1990

The 1990 festival did branch out from pure bluegrass to include more folk music and blues with musicians such as Gamble Rogers, Happy Traum, Roy Book Binder, Etta Baker, and Robin and Linda Williams. This trend toward a wide variety of “traditional plus” music has continued and is a major reason

for MerleFest’s spectacular success. Other innovations in 1990 included big audience tents, many music workshops, mountain heritage craft demonstrations, nature walks and hay rides.

At the 1990 festival “B” asked Pete Wernick if he would host one of his banjo camps the next year. So the first MerleFest camp was in 1991 in the backstage room of the original Watson Stage. The camp soon outgrew the small backstage room and relocated to the Walker Center. Early on,



Little Pickers Family Area

campers got to play a number or two on the Cabin Stage for the Thursday crowd. By 1999 Pete had begun teaching bluegrass jamming on all instruments, not just banjos. The banjo camp became the world’s first bluegrass jam camp. In 2006, with the camp pushing the Walker Center’s limits, “B” suggested moving the jam camp to the beautiful new YMCA property called Camp Harrison at Herring Ridge in Boomer, N.C. The folks there offered a large meeting hall and a great layout of cabins where campers could stay, eat together, and jam at all hours, even by a campfire by the lake at night. In 2011, 60 musicians

honed their skills at Camp Harrison.

1991

The 1991 festival was the first four-day event and was the beginning of many other important additions and innovations that have become hallmarks of MerleFest, including the Little Pickers Stage, Caboose Concerts, Creekside workshops and performances in the Pit. When not in use, workshop stages were available for any artist or the public to use. This idea has grown into the Pickin’ Place, which is made up of the Traditional

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Parking lot jam



Midnight Jam with Pete Wernick, Peter Rowan, Alison Krauss and Tony Rice



Laurie Lewis

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Jammin' Tent, Bluegrass Jammin' Tent, Anything Goes Jammin' Tent, and Hands-On Tent. Starting on the Monday evening before MerleFest, everyone is encouraged to play, listen and dance.

It was in 1991 that the MerleFest Outreach Program began. At an International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) conference in Owensboro, Ky., "B" learned about the IBMA Outreach Program with area schools. "I was impressed with that program, and it fit the mission of the college, so we applied the idea to MerleFest." The Outreach Program began

with a few performances at Wilkes County elementary schools and grew to as many as 30 performances over a two-day period. Logistics for the program in the early years took many hours of preparation securing sound systems, sound technicians and a transportation guide or a van pickup at local hotels to transport the bands to the schools. The program has been streamlined over the years.

Artists that have performed include MerleFest favorites Béla Fleck and the Flecktones, The Avett Brothers, The Waybacks, the John Cowan Band, Donna the Buffalo, Old Crow Medicine Show,



Food vendors

Ricky Skaggs, Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings, and Nickel Creek. The years have included many memorable performances, riveting tales of lost artists trying to find a school on the outskirts of the rural county, and students overwhelmed to hear songs performed in Spanish at their school.

Some special highlights included a performance by Béla

Fleck and the Flecktones at a junior high school that ended with the principal and students crowding the gym floor to dance. Another memorable performance featured Doc and Richard Watson and Charles Welch performing at a nursing home to a room packed with residents, doctors, nurses and staff overwhelmed by such talented musicians. Ricky Skaggs wrote a letter after an outreach performance recall-



Crowd gathered at the Watson Stage



Doc Watson with Ronnie Milsap



Kathy Mattea

ing it as the best experience he ever had. Mark Richards, current production technician for the Walker Center and MerleFest, began his career at the age of 16 at a small elementary school when he ran the sound system for an outreach performance by Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings. A few years after that performance, Gillian approached Mark at MerleFest and offered him a job touring with her, which he was delighted to accept. Shortly after that, Mark was introduced to Cliff Miller of SE Systems and was hired to run the sound for the Walker Center performances during MerleFest. MerleFest 25 welcomes Mark as a full-time employee of Wilkes Community College and MerleFest, and he recalls fondly what brought him here.

Since its inception, the Outreach Program has been offered to area schools at no cost. The program has introduced tens of thousands of children to the rich musical heritage of this region. It has enriched their lives and exposed them to genres of music that many would never

have the opportunity to experience.

The first Midnight Jam was held in the Walker Center in 1991. The idea of a Midnight Jam was conceived during a midnight conversation between "B" and Tony Rice at an IBMA conference. They were trying to come up with something new that could be added to enhance MerleFest. Tony suggested a jam at midnight – The Midnight Jam. Tony agreed to co-host the set with Peter Rowan, and the Midnight Jam was born. Grammy Award-winning musician Laurie Lewis says it well: "You never know what's going to happen.

You get the chance to play with people you don't usually perform with."

Still today, Midnight Jam exemplifies the fact that jamming became a defining feature of MerleFest from the beginning as the mix of artists collaborate in unique ways. In 2011, Casey Driessen brought unprecedented life to the Walker Center stage during the Midnight Jam. He incorporated artists from every genre, including jugglers, cloggers and Grammy-winning jammers, into the action. Fans never knew what was going to happen next on stage.

In 1991, ten nonprofit groups from the immediate area sold food. The college could have managed all the moneymaking aspects of the festival, but, in keeping with the mission of the college, it was decided to help the community by encouraging the participation of local nonprofit groups. MerleFest has become the major fundraiser for several of these groups. The first for-profit vendors selling musical instruments, CDs and accessories came that year. Since then other vendors are approved and set up to sell many other items, including crafts, clothing and jewelry, in what is now known as The Shoppes at MerleFest.



Alison Krauss & Union Station with Doc Watson

The 1991 lineup included Ronnie Milsap, Kathy Mattea, Marty Stuart, EmmyLou Harris, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Jerry Douglas, Roland White, Béla Fleck, Tony Rice Unit, Sam Bush, Peter Rowan, and the Red Clay Ramblers. Some notable artists played for the first time in 1991. Pete Seeger made good on his promise to play, and Alison Krauss got a boost early in her career by playing with her band, Union Station.

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After the 1991 festival “B” received a call from the University of North Carolina Television (UNC-TV). “B” agreed to let UNC-TV film the festival for eventual broadcast. They brought eight cameras and videotaped all four days of the 1992 festival, capturing high-quality recordings of concert performances, artist interviews, workshops and fun activities. Much of this footage was shown on public television stations nationwide over a three-year period in a series entitled “Pickin’ for Merle... Doc Watson and Friends.” In addition, UNC-TV worked with WCC staff to create a spectacular two-hour videotape of festival highlights, including a jam with Doc Watson and Tim O’Brien singing “Blue Moon of Kentucky” backed by Jerry Douglas on Dobro, Pete Wernick on banjo, and the incredible triple fiddles of Stuart Duncan, Mark O’Connor and Rickie Simpkins. In another great jam, “Bluegrass Breakdown” is played by Ricky Skaggs, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, David Grisman, Del McCoury, Pete Wernick, Mark O’Connor and Rickie and Ronnie Simpkins.

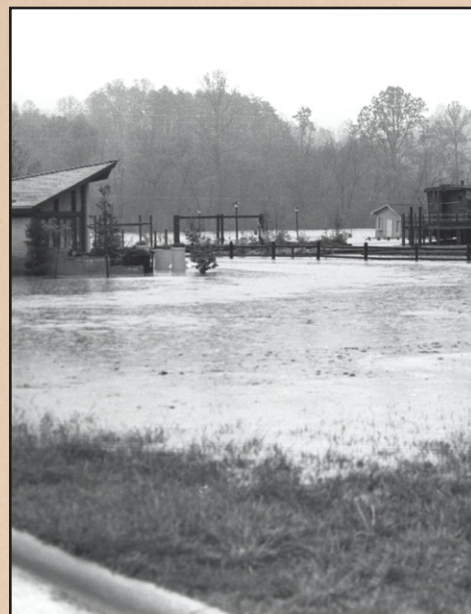
1992

Rain plagued several festivals in the early years. Merely days before the 1992 festival, Moravian Creek flooded the festival grounds and the lower campus buildings. The Boomer Fire Department helped pump water away on the Monday and Tuesday before the festival.

Along with being filmed, the 1992 festival introduced



1992 flood almost ruins the grounds for the festival



the MerleFest mascot—the big, friendly raccoon you see ambling around the grounds. Why a raccoon? Based on his suggestion, Merle’s band, Frosty Morn, used a raccoon as its logo. A naming contest gave Flattop his name – a truly fitting one because of Merle and Doc’s mastery of the flattop guitar. The Doc Watson Guitar Championship began in 1992 as well.

1993

For the 1993 festival the shuttle bus system began, which made it more convenient to park and camp off campus at the former airport area. MerleFest partnered with area Boy Scout troops, who use their buses to provide the shuttle service to free parking at the Blue Lot. With the addition of all-day concerts in the

Walker Center and the Austin Stage, there were eight venues.

Another significant addition in 1993 was designating Thursday night of the festival as Bill and Evelyn Young Night to honor the late Bill Young and his widow Evelyn. “I really don’t know what I would have done without Bill over the years,” says Doc Watson. “The friendship he and Evelyn showed to me and my family meant so



Evelyn & Bill Young look on as Chet Atkins plays.



Boy Scout shuttle bus

much to us. A day does not go by that RosaLee and I don't think of Bill and remember something we shared. We sure do miss him." Bill Young was instrumental in laying the foundation for MerleFest by suggesting to Doc that he perform for a one-time fund-raising event for the college.

The debut of the Chris Austin Songwriting Contest (CASC) occurred in 1993. The contest was established in memory of Boone, N.C., native Chris Austin, a talented songwriter and multi-instrument musician who was killed in a plane crash in 1991 along with six other members of Reba McEntire's band and her tour manager. Proceeds from the contest were designated to establish the Chris Austin Memorial Scholarship to benefit students of Wilkes Community College and build the Austin Stage. To date the scholarship has helped 74 students.

The CASC consists of four categories: bluegrass, country, gospel/inspirational and general. Entries are judged by a panel of professional songwriters, publishers or other music industry professionals from the Nashville music community who volunteer their time.



2011 CASC Finalists

The 12 finalists participate in the on-site contest to choose a winner from each category. The winners then have a Cabin Stage performance of their song. The contest receives approximately 800 entries each year.

Gillian Welch won the first country category of the CASC, which gave her career a significant boost. Other winners have included Tift Merritt, Michael Reno Harrell, Adrienne Young, Martha Scanlan, David Via, Sam Quinn and Johnny Williams. The contest has always had a reputation of having top songwriters to judge the on-site contest. On-site judges have included Darrell Scott, Gillian Welch,

Guy Clark, Sarah Lee Guthrie, Laurelyn Dossett. Hayes Carll, James Nash and Wyatt Durrette.

Many new family activities, such as face painting, crafts, penny dig, juggling, sand art, storytelling and sing-alongs, were added to the Little Pickers Family Area. More recently, the Youth Showcase, hosted by Andy May, on the Little Pickers Stage has grown in popularity. Musicians aged 16 and younger of any talent level are encouraged to display their pickin' skills.

Beausoleil, Mary Chapin Carpenter and bluesmen Cephas and Wiggins were among the 1993 first-timers.

Other MerleFest regulars included, of course, Doc and Richard Watson along with T. Michael Coleman, Joe Smothers, Bob Hill, Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, Tony Rice, Peter Rowan and Pete Wernick. Merle's band, Frosty Morn, is a regular feature at MerleFest.

1994

In 1994, the main festival entrance was moved to its present location in front of the pond. This added much needed space to the growing festival. The Dance Stage was separated from the Traditional Stage, and the Hillside Stage debuted, making a total of 10 venues. Doc's three-hour All-Star Jam on Friday night ended with a lively set featuring bluesmen John Cephas and Phil Wiggins. Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys also played at the festival that year. During a special set on Sunday they were accompanied at different times by Doc, Larry Sparks, Ricky Skaggs and EmmyLou Harris. Newcomers to the 1994 festival included Sweethearts of



Little Pickers Family Area offers face painting and children's activities.



Donna the Buffalo

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the Rodeo, Junior Brown, J.D. Crowe and the New South, Iris Dement, Eustace Conway and MerleFest favorite Donna the Buffalo.

For the first five years the festival was known as the Eddy Merle Watson Memorial Festival. However, that was about to change. After playing at the 1994 festival, the band Strictly Clean and Decent broke down in Boomer, N.C. While waiting to get back on

the road, band member Kay Crouch wrote a song called "Boomer Breakdown." Crouch wrote a letter to "B" that included the song and asked "B" for the dates for the next "MerleFest." "B" was intrigued by the term and brought the idea of renaming the festival to the Watson family. With their blessing and enthusiasm, "MerleFest" stuck and is now recognized worldwide.

1995

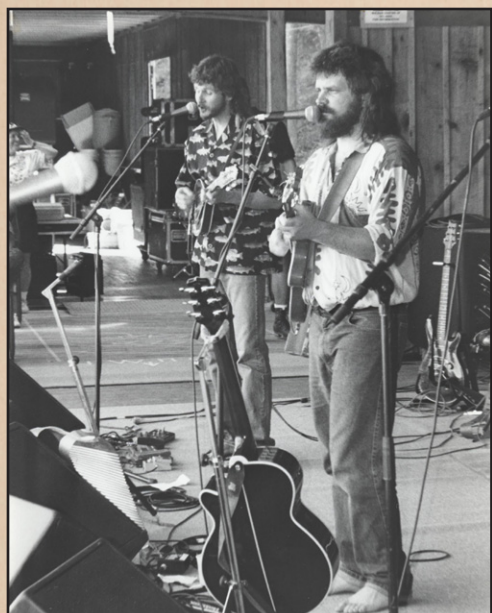
Four days of great weather and great music characterized MerleFest 1995. A huge crowd of fans, many dancing, filled the Hillside Stage area to hear newcomer Leftover Salmon. Other first-timers included Nickel Creek, Chesapeake, Robert Earl Keen and Gillian Welch, who returned as an extremely successful artist after having won first place in the first CASC-country category. The 1995 lineup included Ricky Skaggs, The Tractors, Alison Krauss & Union Station, Junior Brown and the legendary John Hartford.

Inspired by audience surveys, letters from participants, and observation of other festivals, MerleFest has implemented many changes that have enhanced the festival experience. The MerleFest Gift Shop began selling all things MerleFest in 1995 and expanded in 1996. Also that year's program promoted the new and growing website,



Ricky Skaggs

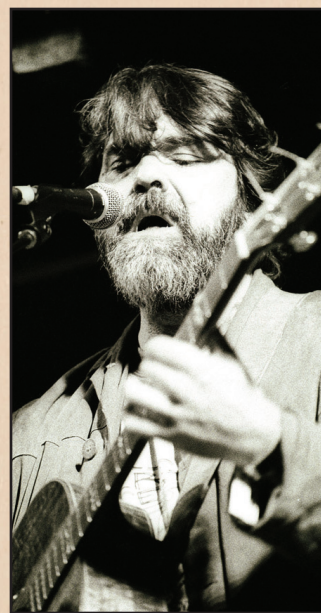
which provides a wealth of MerleFest information and a forum for audience feedback. Since then, the website has become increasingly sophisticated and now allows fans to buy tickets over the Internet. It also is used to promote other MerleFest social media venues: Facebook, Twitter and an e-newsletter. MerleFest's 22,000 Facebook friends have lively discussions and share photos, and the MerleFest electronic newsletter, which began in 2008, delivers fes-



Leftover Salmon



Gillian Welch



Darrell Scott

tival information monthly to 18,000 fans.

1996

On Friday evening, April 26, 1996, the great music was exemplified by a solid two-hour performance of folk music by first-timer John Prine. Other new faces included Alvin Youngblood Hart, the New Lost City Ramblers, Darrell Scott and Dave Van Ronk. Of course, MerleFest welcomed back many of its longtime friends like John Cowan, Peter Rowan, Ricky Skaggs, Frosty Morn, Jerry Douglas, David Holt, Sam Bush, Cephas and Wiggins, Tony Rice and Bill Monroe and The Bluegrass Boys. The acoustic blues show emceed by Roy Book Binder on the Austin Stage began in 1996 and has become a favorite of the festival. According to a local newspaper report, Alison Krauss, a big draw on Sunday, called MerleFest the best festival in the country as she signed autographs and spoke to fans after playing with her band Union Station.

In addition, beginning in 1996, MerleFest began welcoming more than 3,200 public school students on Friday of the festival as part of School Day. The students arrive on buses with their teachers and chaperones to experience the festival first-hand and learn about the musical heritage of this region. School Day was an addition to the Walker Center School Events Program, which started in 1984 and offers plays or musical performances throughout the year that relate to the curriculum in area schools.



Dixie Chicks

Volunteers serve in various capacities during School Day to help ensure the safety of all children while on the festival grounds. Many have volunteered with this program from its inception and always want to have a role in such a vital part of MerleFest.

1997

In 1997, the 10th edition of MerleFest featured the new Americana Stage, which brought the number of venues up to 11. Despite freezing

temperatures Friday night and steady rain on Sunday, paid attendance of 26,853 was up 18.5 percent over 1996's total of 22,650. Overall participation was 45,122, including 2,100 volunteers and 10,000 public school students who saw entertainers at their schools on Thursday and Friday through the Outreach Program. Some 40 area nonprofit organizations netted more than a quarter of a million dollars through their involvement in the tenth festival. Over the first 10 years, the proceeds from MerleFest funded \$238,135 in scholar-

ships and permitted the college to make \$1,104,233 in capital improvements.

In addition to artists like the Dixie Chicks, EmmyLou Harris, Arlo Guthrie, Alison Krauss, Béla Fleck and the Flecktones and Ricky Skaggs, MerleFest 1997 celebrated the diversity that it is known for by showcasing the "Afro-Celtic" sounds of the Laura Love Band, the Scottish folk music of the Rankin Family and Natalie MacMaster, and the Cajun sounds of Steve Riley

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Béla Fleck & The Flecktones

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and the Mamou Playboys, and the traditional sound of The Kruger Brothers.

1998

Major improvements occurred at the Doc and Merle Watson Theatre prior to the 1998 festival. Construction crews raised the entire structure approximately six feet, which greatly improved visibility, and added new wings to make more space for audience seating and artist hospitality. The raising of the stage proved to be well-timed because the lower campus was flooded by heavy rains just days before the festival started. "B" said he was impressed that festival organizers were able to overcome the flooding problems and be ready for the crowds. He said, "It's a challenge to pull it off anyway. I was just amazed at how smooth it all went. That goes back to people planning. We already were ahead of schedule before the rain came."

A big improvement in 1998 was the assigned seating section in front of the Watson Stage. About 3,000 chairs sold out in advance. This alle-



Hootie & The Blowfish with Doc Watson & friends



viated the mad rush to get good seating in front of the Watson Stage and solved the problem of chairs that were too high and blocked views. "I remember having to stand at the entrance gate and measure the height of festival goers' chairs as they entered the gates to ensure that fans could see over each other with an unobstructed view of the stage," says Sherry Dancy, who has been a part of the MerleFest team since the beginning. "We had a height limit so that everyone would be able to see the stage from the field."

"Adding the reserved seating also made entry into the fes-

tival a much safer process," says Kathy Gray, a member of the MerleFest team since the festival's first year. "I'll never forget watching the crowd waiting at the festival gates, and as soon as the gates would open, the sea of people would literally flood onto campus. It was exciting!"

The newly constructed Alumni Hall introduced two new venues to MerleFest 1998—the Plaza Stage and the Lounge. The Lounge hosted Friday Night Coffeehouse, a gathering place for singer-songwriters to socialize and display their talents, and the Saturday Night Teen Dance.

The creation of the Lounge gave the Instrument Contests a new home. By this time, the Instrument Contests included the Doc Watson Guitar Championship, the Merle Watson Bluegrass Banjo Championship and the Mandolin Championship (discontinued in 2011 due to lack of participation).

Good weather and a record number of fans from around the country (and the world) combined to make MerleFest 1998 perhaps the best edition to date. On Saturday afternoon Leftover Salmon played to thousands of people on the Hillside Stage; a thousand fans



Before reserved seating, chairs were measured to ensure festival goers could see the stage.



Sandy Feat sand sculpture



Sam Bush, Hootie and Chris Thile

packed the Walker Center for the Nashville Bluegrass band; blues artists Catfish Keith and Roy Book Binder were on the Austin Stage; and Doc Watson led "Doc's Jam" on the Watson Stage.

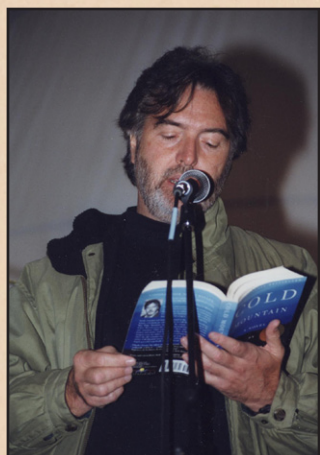
Another regular feature at MerleFest began in 1998: Sandy Feat's incredible sand sculpture. Every year the artists amaze festival goers with intricate sand art on display in front of the Visitors Center. The massive sand display takes 16 tons of sand and approximately 25 hours to create. In the weeks after the festival, as the last signs of MerleFest begin to fade away, Sandy Feat's sand sculpture remains to endure the test of weather and wear.

Hootie and the Blowfish, joined by Chris Thile, ushered in MerleFest 1999 by offering a free concert for Wilkes Community College students. "This band's generosity truly represented the spirit of MerleFest-giving in order to enrich the college and community," says Ted Hagaman, festival director. "In this case, the students who always endure

some displacement during the weeks leading up to MerleFest as the entire campus is transformed into festival grounds."

1999

MerleFest 1999 opened with two days of cold wind, heavy rain and mud. As rain poured down in sheets, Hootie and the Blowfish, completely unfazed by the weather, set the tone on Thursday evening, giving bluegrass interpretations to their hit songs. The band was joined throughout by Sam Bush on the fiddle and Chris Thile on mandolin. At one point Doc and Richard shared the stage.



Charles Frazier



Willie Nelson

While Doc sang, lead singer Darius Rucker stepped to the background and danced with his four-year-old daughter. The rains gave way to glorious Carolina blue skies and warm, comfortable weather on Saturday and Sunday.

On the Traditional Stage, Charles Frazier read from his bestselling novel "Cold Mountain." Frazier said the book was inspired by listening to "My Home Is Across the Blue Ridge Mountains" sung on the Creekside Stage during an earlier MerleFest. Saturday night, North Carolina native Earl Scruggs, considered the father of bluegrass banjo picking, told the story of the five-string banjo and talked of musicians taking the instrument in new directions.

Joining Doc and Earl on the Watson Stage were Béla

Fleck, John McEuen, Pete Wernick, Jens Kruger, Tom Adams and Tony Trischka. Doc joked that he was overwhelmed by banjo pickers. Rounding out the sound were Stuart Duncan on fiddle and T. Michael Coleman on bass. After a rousing standing ovation from a packed audience, the musicians encored with the Scruggs tune "Foggy Mountain Breakdown."

2000

On Thursday evening of MerleFest 2000, Willie Nelson sang non-stop, song after song, during freezing temperatures, giving a most memorable performance. He wowed the Watson Stage crowd by playing hits that spanned his career. The large crowd's enthusiasm earned him three encores. Sam Bush accompanied Willie and added a little bluegrass flavor. This was the last year that Grammy Award-winning artist John Hartford would perform at MerleFest; he died on June 4, 2001, after a long battle with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. It also was the year that Old Crow Medicine Show appeared in the lineup.

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Gillian Welch with David Rawlings



Tift Merritt

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Many MerleFest fans were already familiar with the group; a few years previously, they made an unscheduled appearance at the fountain, performing as fans tossed change into an open guitar case. The group dubbed this area "The Fountain Stage" and even made their own cardboard sign indicating such. Others in the 2000 lineup included Rhonda

Vincent and the Rage, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys, Peter Rowan and the Free Mexican Airforce, Nickel Creek, Claire Lynch, and Frosty Morn, the band established by Merle Watson. A special MerleFest all-star jam included Alison Brown, Laurie Lewis, Rhonda Vincent, Missy Raines, Claire Lynch and Sally Van Meter. Tift Merritt, who won the 2000 Chris Austin



Watson Stage and audience

Songwriting Contest-country category, noted, "Winning the contest was the first time I was noticed outside of Chapel Hill. I had such a good time and made so many friends here."

2001

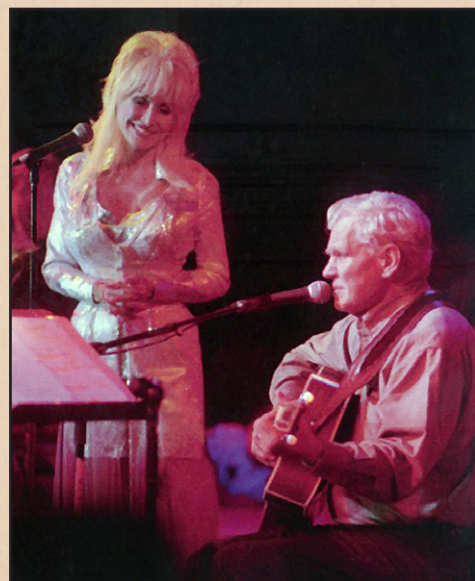
MerleFest 2001 set the record for largest single crowd as 16,000 participants enjoyed a bluegrass-flavored performance by country music legend Dolly Parton on Saturday night. On Friday Dolly took a tour of the area, which included the view from the Brushy Mountains and lunch at Glenn's Restaurant, a.k.a. Glenn's Taste Freeze, a Wilkes County landmark. In fact, she loved Glenn's so much, she returned there to eat a few times during her visit to MerleFest.

A memorable moment during Dolly's performance was when Doc joined her on stage. A funny thing happened as she performed; she swallowed a bug. According to Ted Hagaman, festival director, "Dolly was just getting started when she choked a little bit, gave her famous giggle, and said, 'Oh my, I think I just swallowed a bug.'" The rest of her performance went off like fireworks as she completely charmed the audience.

Following on the heels of the tremendous success of film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" The Dan Tyminski Band mesmerized crowds with the blended sounds of bluegrass, country, gospel, blues and folk appropriate to the time period of the Great Depression in the Deep South. It was Dan Tyminski's voice that was



Dan Tyminski



Dolly Parton with Doc Watson



Alison Krauss & Union Station



Wylie Gustafson

dubbed over George Clooney's in the 2000 American film on "Man of Constant Sorrow."

While on stage, Tyminski recalled that when he found out that his voice would be dubbed over George Clooney's, he called his wife and told her, "George Clooney is going to have my voice!" He said that she answered, "That's my dream!"

Others gracing stages at MerleFest 2001 included the Kruger Brothers, Nickel Creek, Sam Bush, Earl Scruggs Family & Friends, Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder, Del McCoury and Marty Stuart.

MerleFest added the large video screen near the Watson Stage in 2001. Various camera

angles and magnifications are projected on the screen so that everyone can see the action.

2002

The 15th edition of MerleFest in 2002 was a great success setting an overall attendance record but less crowding. Following the crowding of the largest single day ever the previous year for Dolly Parton's performance, organizers added general admission space at the Watson Stage and worked on minimizing the golf carts and other vehicles on the grounds. Volunteer headquarters moved from the front entrance to the Caboose, further relieving congestion.

John Cowan dedicated his per-

formance of "Good Woman's Love" to RosaLee, Doc's beloved "Sweetie." Patty Loveless, Peter Rowan and Crucial Reggae, Wylie and The Wild West, Alison Brown Quartet, Sam Bush, Leahy, T. Michael Coleman, Alison Krauss & Union Station, The Kruger Brothers, The Waybacks, and Gillian Welch and David Rawlings appeared at MerleFest 2002.

Saturday night featured a great MerleFest Jam with Doc, Richard, Sam Bush, John Cowan, Alison Krauss, Jerry Douglas, David Holt, Tony Rice, Peter Rowan, Earl Scruggs and Nickel Creek. This jam was recorded, and on April 1, 2003, MerleFest released "MerleFest Live! The 15th Anniversary Jam." This

project was produced as a DVD, VHS and music CD.

2003

Crowd control for MerleFest 2003 was further improved with new concrete sidewalks and a 50 percent reduction in the number of commercial vendors, which added to green space. Also, as crowds grew and fans were forced farther from the Watson Stage, sound quality deteriorated for those far away. To ameliorate this problem, delay speakers were installed behind the sound mixer tower. These speakers correct the sound attenuation problem and ensure great sound production regardless of the distance between fans

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Leahy



Rhonda Vincent



Jon Randall, Sam Bush and Emmylou Harris



Vassar Clements

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and the stage. Special performances included Vassar Clements' 75th birthday jam, the Acoustic Blues Showcase, and "Follow Me Back to the Fold: A Tribute to Women in Bluegrass," performed by Kristen Scott Benson, Dale Ann Bradley, Sally Jones, Kathy Kalick, Laurie Lewis, Lynn Morris, Mark Newton, Missy Raines, Tony Rice, Ron Stewart and The Whites.

MerleFest 2003 also welcomed Asleep at the Wheel, EmmyLou Harris, Leahy, Ricky Skaggs, Rhonda Vincent and the Rage, Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Del McCoury.

This was Leahy's first performance at MerleFest. A terrible

lightning storm struck just as they came on stage. The show must go on, and it did with the pizzazz that only Leahy can deliver.

2004

Before MerleFest 2004 the college built two new parking lots on the north side of Alumni Hall. By moving the festival check-in to the new lots, organizers significantly reduced the amount of traffic and congestion along the shuttle route at the festival entrance, which improved the safety of pedestrians and the efficiency of the shuttle service.

Occasional rain on Friday, Saturday and Sunday did not



Loretta Lynn

stop a record-setting attendance. Saturday's lineup was particularly outstanding with a special Earl Scruggs birthday set. Earl was joined by Doc and country music star Vince Gill. They played favorites such as "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" and "The Ballad of Jed Clampett." Rosanne Cash performed Sunday afternoon to a stalwart audience that ignored the rain. Doc joined her on two Johnny Cash

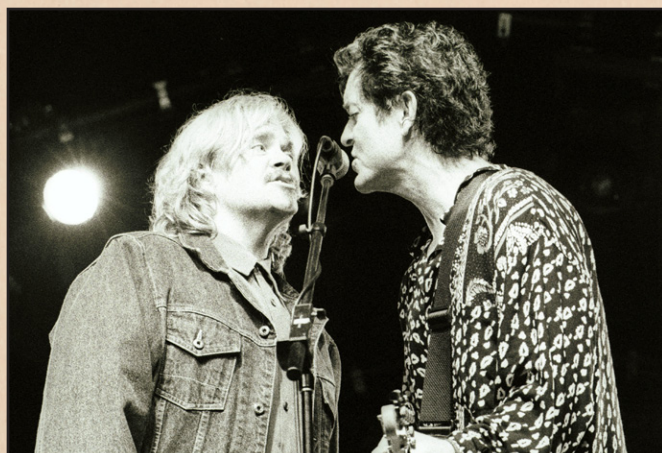
classics, and she also sang a song she wrote in memory of her father. The Avett Brothers took their show beyond the stage ... they strolled through the vendor shops singing to the fans. Natalie MacMaster wowed the crowd with her fast-paced Celtic fiddle on the Cabin Stage.



Natalie MacMaster



Earl Scruggs and Vince Gill



John Cowan and Rodney Crowell

2005

MerleFest 2005 celebrated the beginnings of bluegrass by hosting a reunion of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys. Many former members played, including Earl Scruggs, Bobby Hicks, Wilkes County native Jim Shumate, Richard Greene, Tony Ellis, Del McCoury, Roland White, Blake Williams and Peter Rowan. The variety of MerleFest music was evidenced by first-timers such as the Chieftains, Robert Lockwood Jr., Rodney Crowell, Railroad Earth and The Duhks. Others making 2005 appearances at MerleFest included The Avett Brothers, Loretta Lynn, Hayes Carll, Darrell Scott, Buddy Miller, Béla Fleck, The Greencards, Ricky Skaggs and the Kruger Brothers.

MerleFest 2005 took home four awards at the North Carolina Association of Festivals and Events Showfest, including the premier accolade, the Kay Saintsing Award for Event of the Year.



Tony Rice and Alison Krauss

2006

Singer, guitarist and songwriter Bob Weir, a founding member of the Grateful Dead, drew one of the most spirited crowds in years at MerleFest 2006. He performed with The Waybacks on several Dead classics on Friday afternoon, the moment that inspired the creation of Hillside Album Hour. During the performance a number of artists including Sam Bush, Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings spontaneously joined the set. Pete and Mike Seeger were both at the festival. Pete along with Sarah Lee Guthrie, Johnny Irion, Slaid Cleaves, Guy Clark and Jimmy



Increased green space

LaFave appeared on Saturday night in the Woody Guthrie tribute, "Ribbon of Skyway: Endless Highway." Another great "MerleFest Moment" that both enlivened and ecstasized festival goers was when Nickel Creek broke out in the Brittney Spears number "Toxic." More than ever MerleFest 2006 represented the evolution and connectedness of musical styles that define the festival. This just goes to show that you never know what you'll hear during those spontaneous, unrehearsed "MerleFest Moments" that create never-ending "MerleFest Memories."

Other performers at MerleFest 2006 included Doc and

Richard Watson, Béla Fleck & The Flecktones, The Avett Brothers, Tut Taylor, Hot Tuna, John Prine, Chatham County Line, the Ditty Bops, The Duhks, Alison Brown Quartet, Joe Smothers, Steep Canyon Rangers, Sam Bush, John Cowan and The Isaacs.

2007

In 2007, the 20th edition of MerleFest saw impressive infrastructure changes, including the completion of Lowe's Hall, which links the lower campus to the Walker Center with two elevators. Also, staff worked diligently to increase green space and reduce the amount

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Nickel Creek



Doyle Lawson



Doc Watson with Elvis Costello



John Cowan at Album Hour 2008



Andy & Janice after proposal

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of cars parked within the festival grounds. Organizers moved vendors onto a parking lot to create The Shoppes at MerleFest, which then created a domino effect of relocating parking and other services. The end result was extremely positive, and staff and volunteers were proud when they saw their hard work come to fruition. "Once the festival started, we saw people doing exactly what was expressed in the original vision—people reading and lounging on the lawn and children playing in the grass. It was exactly what

we wanted to achieve," commented festival director Ted Hagaman.

Elvis Costello and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band performed at the Watson Stage on Friday night, followed by Sam Bush, Tony Rice, Alison Krauss and Jerry Douglas on Saturday. The Infamous Stringdusters, Crooked Still and Uncle Earl were among a new wave of bands that wowed audiences.

"One of the greatest MerleFest moments for me happened in 2007," explains Allison Phillips, executive director

of the WCC Endowment Corporation. "New Grass Revival reunited for one song. The story goes that Sam Bush, Béla Fleck and John Cowan were on stage with Pat Flynn backstage looking on. Sam asked Pat if he had time for just one song. And there it was, all of the members of New Grass Revival on stage performing together, just as they had done in 1988 when they first appeared at MerleFest. It was incredible! And, I think everyone in the audience was just as thrilled about this moment as I was!"

2008

MerleFest 2008 kicked off the new era of a greener MerleFest as the organizers and volunteers began to work toward reducing the environmental impact of the festival and setting a positive example of responsible environmental stewardship by adding more recycling bins. Musical "moments" included: The Welcome Home Super Jam featuring The Duhks; Jim Lauderdale performing with Peter Rowan; Donna the Buffalo with Jim Lauderdale;



20th Jam with members of New Grass Revival



Scythian

The New Generation Super Jam featuring The Steel Drivers, The Belleville Outfit, The Dixie Bee-Liners, The Farewell Drifters and Cadillac Sky; "The Greatest Acoustic Blues Show on Earth" featuring Roy Book Binder, Mitch Greenhill, Happy Traum and Pat Donohue; and the Spirit of Sunday set with Doc and the Nashville Bluegrass Band. The inaugural Hillside Album Hour took place on Saturday afternoon as The Waybacks and John Cowan performed all the songs on "Led Zeppelin II." It was great to hear the familiar riffs being played on banjo by

none other than "Dr. Banjo" himself, Pete Wernick.

The Avett Brothers drove the crowds wild during their Friday night performance at the Watson Stage. It was literally standing room only when suddenly the fans creatively cleared a space for dancing. They started passing chair after chair from reserved seating backwards from row to row. In the dark, only the shadows of chairs dancing above the crowds were visible until the impromptu dance floor was created.

The morning after The Avett Brothers' performance, a band of volunteers swept onto campus to put things back in order before fans arrived to celebrate more music, moments and memories.

Other 2008 performers included Sierra Hull & Highway 111, The Dan Tyminski Band, Marty Stuart, Nashville Bluegrass Band, Carolina Chocolate Drops, Hot Buttered Rum, The Infamous Stringdusters, Old Crow Medicine Show, Levon Helm and the Ramble on the Road, Ricky Skaggs

and Bruce Hornsby with the Kentucky Thunder, and Scythian, making their debut appearance at MerleFest.

Speaking of The Stringdusters, band member Andy Hall created quite a memorable MerleFest moment in 2008 when he proposed to Janice Young, his future wife, during a performance on the Watson Stage.

"I remember he was just a little ways into the set, and he seemed to be a little nervous about something," says Allison

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Marty Stuart with Doc Watson



The Avett Brothers



Old Crow Medicine Show

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Phillips, executive director of the WCC Endowment Corporation. "Finally he stopped and asked Janice to come onto stage with him. I think everyone knew what was about to happen. He got down on one knee and popped the question. And the crowd went crazy."

MerleFest added the Welcome Stage in 2008. This stage is located at the main festival entrance. Fans are able to enjoy great entertainment while waiting for the gates to open or to get through the festival lines. On late Saturday afternoon of the festival, a major

storm came through the area. The band Scythian, making its debut at MerleFest on the Welcome Stage, soon had to move under the box office tent to weather the storm. As the band continued to play, the audience continued to grow and soon the tent was packed shoulder to shoulder with folks enthralled with the sounds of Scythian. "That year made them a MerleFest favorite, and they haven't missed a festival since. This is just one example of the kind of excitement a special MerleFest moment can bring," says Kathy Gray, Director of Events and Hospitality.



Levon Helm



Album Hour 2009



Linda Ronstadt and Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano



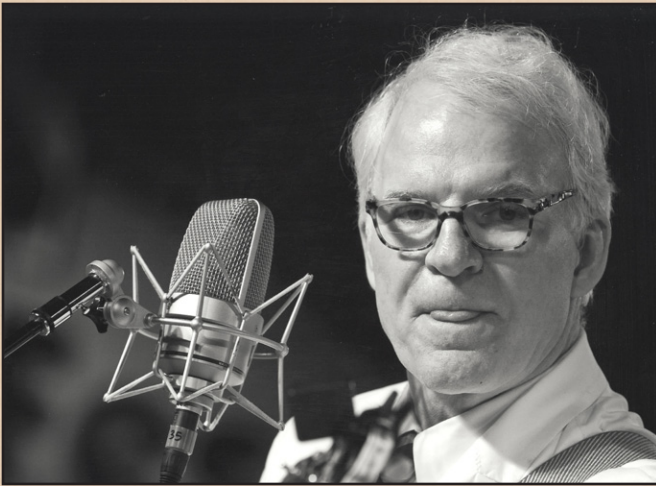
2009

On Saturday evening at MerleFest 2009, the second highly anticipated Hillside Album Hour was hosted by The Waybacks and featured the Rolling Stones' "Sticky Fingers" with EmmyLou Harris turning in a surprise performance of "Wild Horses." Also joining The Waybacks were Sam Bush on electric guitar and lead singer John Cowan. As usual, the hillside was packed with delighted music fans who gathered to find out what album that would be featured, which is always a closely held secret until the show begins.

Music icon Linda Ronstadt made her first appearance by closing the festival on a high note with a performance of traditional mariachi songs on the Watson Stage. She was joined by the Grammy-winning Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano for a set of songs from her 1987 release, "Canciones de Mi Padre," sung entirely in Spanish.

2010

As the economic recession had harsh effects on the nation, it also had a bitter impact on the festival. MerleFest 2009 was the first year that more tickets were given away than were sold. This led to a serious



Steve Martin



Taj Mahal



Zac Brown Band



Album Hour 2010



Elvis Costello enjoys
Album Hour 2010

evaluation of the festival's future. It was an extremely rough time for MerleFest as hard decisions had to be made. As a fundraiser, the WCC Endowment Corporation had to assess what to do to get back on track. With the support and understanding from the community, sponsors, vendors and media, the festival was able to turn things around in 2010. And, WOW, did things turn around. The weather was rosy, the lineup stellar, and the fans were destined for fun. A new day awakened for MerleFest.

Performers who turned in riveting performances included Doc and Richard Watson, Elvis Costello and the Sugarcanes, Steve Martin and

the Steep Canyon Rangers, The Avett Brothers, Dierks Bentley, Little Feat, Great Big Sea, Rhonda Vincent & the Rage, Scythian, The Travelin' McCourys, and many more. As usual on Saturday, a sea of fans enjoyed another great Hillside Album Hour hosted by The Waybacks who played every song on The Beatles' album "Abbey Road." Joining The Waybacks were Sarah Dugas, Shannon Whitworth, Byron House, Jerry Douglas, Jim Lauderdale and Elvis Costello. Other significant performers on the lineup included Zac Brown Band, making their first official MerleFest appearance after attending as a fan for a number of years, and Taj Mahal, who MerleFest had

courted for years and finally got to Wilkesboro.

One special memory from 2010 was Steve Martin & the Steep Canyon Rangers ending their set with a bluegrass rendition of Martin's classic spoof "King Tut."

At this point MerleFest was receiving so many requests from students wanting to perform on stage that the festival expanded the Youth Showcase at the Little Pickers Stage. This is not a contest; it is an opportunity for youth ages 16 and under to display their skills on stage at the festival.



The Doobie Brothers



Jerry Douglas & Sonny Landreth

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2011

Tornados threatened Wilkes County on the Wednesday night before MerleFest 2011 began. Volunteers and staff scrambled to take down signage and roll up tent sides in preparation for the worst. RV campers were encouraged to sleep in the Randolph Hall gym. Fortunately, no tornados appeared, and the show went on without a hitch with four days of beautiful weather and a diverse and fully-loaded schedule of artists. An amazing

lineup (considered the best ever by many MerleFest Facebook fans) included Doc and Richard Watson; Randy Travis; The Doobie Brothers (with newest member John Cowan); Lyle Lovett; Zac Brown Band; Robert Plant and Band of Joy that included MerleFest favorites Darrell Scott, Buddy Miller, Byron House and Patti Griffith; Nashville Bluegrass Band; Blind Boy Chocolate and the Milk Sheiks; Sonny Landreth; Jerry Douglas featuring Omar Hakim and Viktor Krauss; Tim O'Brien; Alison Brown Quartet with Stuart Duncan; Del McCoury

Band; The Kruger Brothers; and many more. The Waybacks hosted the fourth consecutive Hillside Album Hour by playing the Allman Brothers' classic recording, "Eat a Peach," in its entirety, along with a version of "Whipping Post" for good measure. Joining them were their good pals Joan Osborne, John R. Burr, Larry Atamanuik and The Wailin' Jennys.

For more than 10 years MerleFest tried to get Randy Travis to the festival, at a special request from Doc and RosaLee. His appearance in



Tim O'Brien



Lyle Lovett



Robert Plant & The Band of Joy



Doc with Randy Travis



The Waybacks at Hillside Album Hour 2011



Tut Taylor at Tribute to John Hartford

2011 was special to Doc on many levels. Most significant to Doc was when Randy traveled with him to Boone for a short visit with RosaLee, who was unable to attend the festival due to health concerns.

A "Tribute to John Hartford" included The John Hartford String Band, Alison Brown, Sam Bush, Tim O'Brien, Peter Rowan, Tut Taylor and other special guests. John Hartford died ten years earlier in June 2001.

Nestled away in a classroom in Lovette Hall, unbeknownst

to festival goers, "B" Townes and a video crew spent the entire weekend interviewing one artist right after another, capturing their favorite memories of MerleFest over the years. Sam Bush recollected special moments happening throughout the festival, as he has attended all of them; Doc Watson talked about the love that MerleFest artists have for his son Merle; and over 20 others included in the interviews mention their indebtedness to what this festival has meant to their careers. These interviews will be used as a special treat, video vignettes

broadcast on the big screen at Watson Stage, for MerleFest 25 guests.

One significant change at MerleFest 2011 was the relocation of Austin Stage into Alumni Hall. Due to increasing concerns of safety at the Austin Stage, festival organizers agreed that the stage needed a new home. Alumni Hall was the perfect fit for the CASC, the Greatest Blues Show Ever, and continuing with the Instrument Contests and the Songwriters Coffeehouse.

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Tribute to John Hartford



Del McCoury Band



Doc and Nashville Bluegrass Band



Chris Thile

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"What a great weekend!" exclaimed festival director Ted Hagaman. "With over 90 artists playing on 14 stages, representing everything from bluegrass and blues, to gospel, country and Americana, we feel that we succeeded again in giving our festival guests a great value for their entertainment dollars. I'm always so pleased to see how respectful, friendly and courteous the festival attendees are. MerleFest fans have no equal! It is our hope that everyone who comes

to MerleFest has a one-of-a-kind experience."

The total participation over the four days of MerleFest 2011 was 77,459. Fans came from 48 states, the District of Columbia and 12 foreign countries. Over 75 civic, community and institutional entities earned an estimated \$428,108 through their participation. More than 4,600 volunteers made the festival possible by contributing over 49,000 hours. More than 2,800 school children from Wilkes and surrounding

counties attended through MerleFest School Day. More than 10,200 students enjoyed performances through the Outreach Program.

Since the inaugural event in 1988 MerleFest has endeavored to improve each year, based on comprehensive review and evaluation with input from artists, patrons, sponsors, vendors, volunteers, staff, and, most importantly, loyal and dedicated fans. Additionally, MerleFest staff and volunteer leaders draw upon the exam-

ples set by their friends and colleagues who produce other respected and loved festivals known for both the quality of their music and the first-class treatment of their participants. Several artists have said that MerleFest pays close attention to detail and has the best technical and sound production in the industry.

Since its inception, volunteers have been integral to the success of MerleFest. Individual volunteers, volunteer stagehands, and volunteer groups, including college and community organizations, help to make the festival a success. Also, food booths are run by local non profits, with proceeds going to further their work and mission. "Quite simply, MerleFest would not be possible without the support of our 4,000-plus volunteers," says festival director Ted Hagaman. "Some of these individuals and organizations have given of their time since the festival began, and we are so grateful to them."

The benefits of MerleFest to WCC were best summed up



Jerry Douglas



Volunteers enjoying the music of MerleFest



"My Friend Merle" set on the Watson Stage



MerleFest Crowd

by President Gordon Burns: "It's monetary, but it is greater than that. It's a culmination of many years of work between the college and the community. It represents the fruition of cooperation over the years to develop the college and help it better serve the community. MerleFest complements the mission of the college by allowing it to enjoy additions like Lowe's Hall and our beautiful gardens. The festival plays a supporting role in helping the college achieve its goals. This event reflects the tremendous community support the college enjoys. And that is because we have been one with the community."

The music of MerleFest is best explained by Doc himself: "When Merle and I started out, we called our music 'traditional plus,' meaning the traditional music of the Appalachian region plus whatever other styles we were in the mood to play. Since the beginning, the people of the college and I have agreed that the music of MerleFest is 'traditional plus.'"

MerleFest marks the beginning of the festival season and is an annual homecoming for

musicians and music fans. This was nicely expressed by Jerry Douglas: "It's the first festival of the season, and it's a great time for musicians to come out of hibernation and have a reunion to kick off the season." Chris Thile adds, "You get to see everybody you want to see here, and then perform with them. The whole MerleFest experience is great. It's the fans, the musicians, the organization. It all converges at this place. It's so exciting."

No MerleFest is complete without the "My Friend Merle" set. This tradition began in 1988 with Merle's dear friends gathering on stage to reminisce on his life and how he enriched their careers and lives. The artists performed the set for Doc and RosaLee. After the first year, Doc wanted to be a part of this wonderful tribute. This set is a favorite for loyal Merle Watson fans, and it is a favorite for Doc, too. Today, Doc, T. Michael Coleman, Jeff Little, Cliff Miller, Bob Hill, David Holt, Joe Smothers, Sam Bush, John Cowan and, of course, Merle's son Richard Watson continue the tradition.

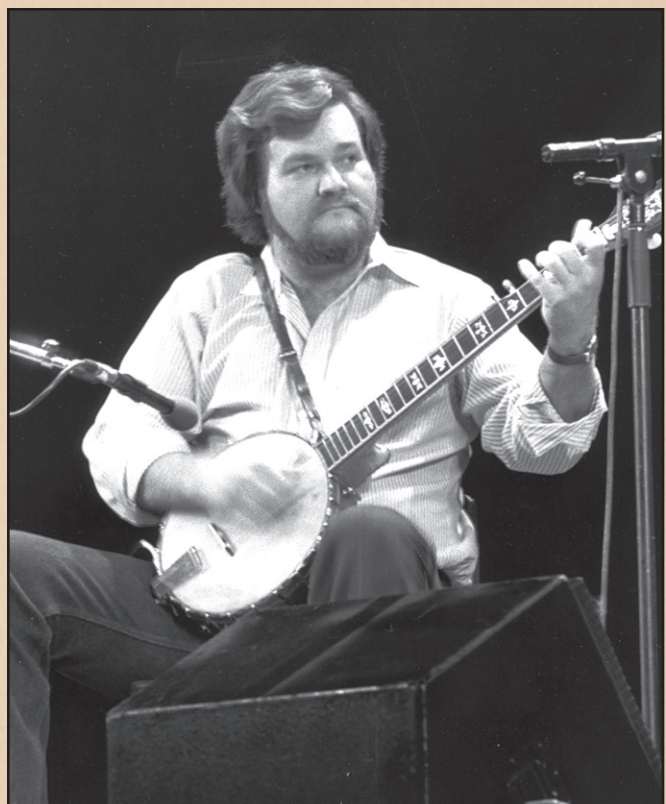
Reflecting on MerleFest year's past, "B" recalls a conversation

he had with Ralph Rinzler as they worked on the schedule for the very first festival. He says that Rinzler told him, "At some point and time the festival will take on a life of its own." How prophetic a statement that was.

As we gather to enjoy the Music, Moments and Memories of MerleFest 25,

let us remember to "celebrate the life of a young man who enriched the lives of all of us — Eddy Merle Watson."

** Most of the information about early festival years is based on an interview with "B" Townes.*



Eddy Merle Watson