

REMEMBERING DOC

Arthel “Doc” Watson, who passed away on May 29, 2012, at the age of 89, spent over half of his lifetime as America’s most renowned and influential folk guitar stylist. After more than five decades entertaining fans around the globe, his performances showed no sign that age dimmed his enormous talents. He always shined on stage. At any given Doc Watson concert, fans would not only see and hear a guitar player of the finest caliber, but they also saw an intelligent, witty, down-to-earth “man of the mountains” who loved to share the music of his heart and home. Doc was an extraordinary entertainer who never failed to capture the admiration and affection of his audience. His concerts were filled with hot flat-picking tunes, slow romantic ballads, gutsy blues numbers, delicately picked melodies and an old-time gospel song or two. Each song was sung with unmatched clarity and each tune played with a dexterity that inscribed Doc Watson’s name in the music history books.

Doc did not set out from his Appalachian mountain home to become a world-famous musician. In fact, if given a choice, he never would have struck it out on the road to make a living as a performer. Undoubtedly, music would have been a significant part of his life regardless of his vocation. Nonetheless, Watson’s calling of choice would have been carpentry, electrical work, mechanics or even engineering. Sadly, a childhood eye infection, exacerbated by a congenital vascular disorder near his eyes, took Doc’s vision by

the time he was a year old. Doc always referred to his blindness only as a hindrance, not a disability. He said that one of the very few regrets of his long and productive life was not having been blessed with the ability to see the smiles on the faces of his loved ones.

Arthel Lane “Doc” Watson was born on March 3, 1923, in the Stony Fork Township, near what is now Deep Gap, N.C. His father, General Dixon Watson, was a day laborer and farmer who actively sang in the Baptist church and played banjo. His mother, Annie, would often gather the family to sing hymns or read from the Bible. Doc’s family members were musically inclined. He said, “There was the old phonograph around the house, and, of course, I heard the singing at the church, and my mother sang a few of the old ballads when she’d be knitting some of the boys’ overalls or cooking or something or other. Never heard Dad, except when he was singing the good old gospel songs. He was singing when I was in church from the time I could remember, up until he made that little old home-made banjo and taught me a few tunes on it.”

Doc’s first instrument was a harmonica, a gift from his father, that he started playing when he was about five years old. Doc’s musical talent was growing and at age 11, he picked up the banjo, made with the help of his grandmother’s cat, whose skin became the instrument’s head. Doc’s conscience is clear on that point, however, because as he remembered, “I never knew



Doc Watson

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 \$12 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

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**- Doc Watson
(2006)**

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.”

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 1949, and Nancy Ellen, in 1951.

Throughout the 1950s, 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



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 icon Joan Baez. Greenhill’s firm, Folklore Productions, represented Doc until his death.

“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 said in 2006.

The Newport and New York City events put Doc before the public in a big way at the height of the folk revival. This gained Doc almost instant renown. As Doc recalls, “I suspect if it hadn’t been for Ralph’s encouragement, I wouldn’t be on the musical scene as a professional. Ralph helped me very much. He traveled with me a lot in the early days and taught me a whole lot about how to program sets from the stage until you

got to where it’s automatic; you don’t even have to think about it. He encouraged me an awful lot.”

The year 1964 marked another momentous event in Doc Watson’s rich life. Upon returning home from a concert tour, Doc found that his son Merle had taken up the guitar. Doc’s wife, RosaLee, taught Merle his first chords, and Doc remembers that the boy “just took it and went with it.” Doc had entered a period of extraordinary musical accomplishment.

Merle started recording and touring with his father in 1964 at the Berkeley Folk Festival, and for the next two decades they became opposite sides of the same coin. Doc was the front man who warmed the crowd and provided all the vocals while Merle let his guitar speak for him. Together they made 20 albums and won four Grammys, including one for “Then and Now” in 1973, and another for “Two Days” in November of 1974. “From the time our boy was a little child, that talent of being who he was, was the key,” Doc recalled. “Merle made his own tracks ... It was his mother who taught him his first chords

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- 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 to 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.”

Arthel “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 astonish-



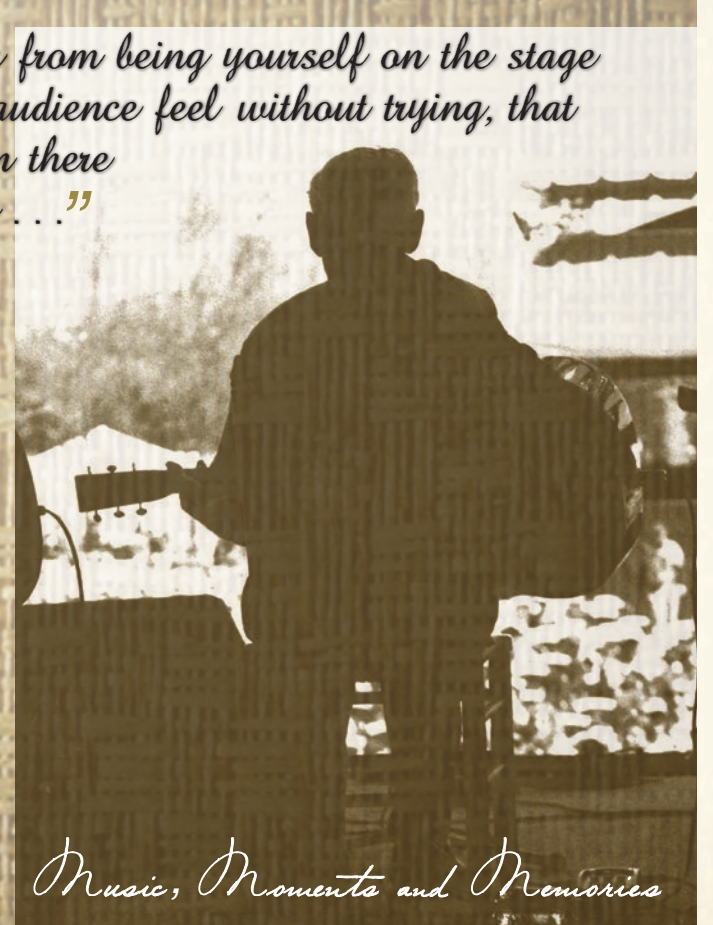
Doc and Richard Watson

ing 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.”

“Intimacy comes from being yourself on the stage and making the audience feel without trying, that you’re sittin’ down there with ‘em, playing ...”

Visit the Doc & Merle Watson Memorial Photo Display
(located in Lowe’s Hall)
while enjoying MerleFest.



Music, Moments and Memories

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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 ... 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 is 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-granddaughters, Candis Amber Watson of Boone, Chelsea Michelle Norris of Blowing Rock and Sarah Elizabeth Norris of Deep Gap; one great-grandson,

Michael Channing Norris II of Deep Gap; two great-great-grandsons, Tanten Webb of Boone and Brennon Kilgore of Blowing Rock; three sisters, Irene Lewis of Boone, Pearlee

Shipley and husband Howard of Lenoir and Marlene Marley and husband Charles of Ferguson; and one brother, Jay Carlton and wife Carrollyn of Boomer.



Doc and RosaLee Watson