



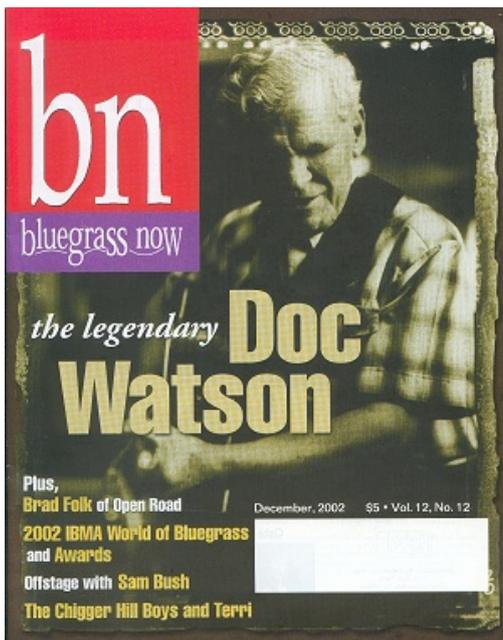
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Caroline Wright interviews the legendary guitarist



Caroline: Doc, you've been around for a long time.

What, in your opinion, has changed most about American folk music in the past quarter century or so?

Doc: Well, in the sixties, American folk music -- the so-called old-time music -- stuck strictly to the ethnic music, mostly from the Appalachian area. Some of it came from other areas. Then there was a modern folk trend, with folks like Peter, Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie and those people, who did some different kind of things. Nowadays, seems like traditional music came back to the "down-to-earth" music, or bluegrass, everybody wants to call it. I think the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* movie and the music that went along with it kinda pointed everybody's nose in that direction. Seems like people who'd never heard anything about the music love it. It's different from what it was in the sixties, and the interest is more widespread.

C: You've explored many American musical genres. Which has been most interesting, and why?

D: I will answer that question kinda indirectly. If a song has something to say -- it might be out of the pop field, or a blues song or something; it might not be out of the music that people connect me to, you know -- I like a lot of different songs, and here lately, I've been doing things that range all the way from "The Little Telephone Girl" song from the '30s, which is a real simple down-to-earth song, all the way over to "Knights In White Satin." I've been doing

that song out on the stage.

C: That's a pretty diverse range of material!

D: Back in the Fifties I used to sing things like 'Stardust' and 'Getting Sentimental Over You' with a local dance band. <chuckles>

C: Sounds like no door is closed to you, Doc.

D: No. If a song has something to say, I'm liable to sing it if I like it.

C: Is there any music you're still curious about?

D: I don't know... I'm gonna let that question hang with a big question mark.

C: What's your favorite MerleFest memory?

D: Oh... Yep! I can tell you. My favorite memory happened recently. Mitch Greenhill presided over the My Friend Merle segment, which is a thing we do, remembering things about Merle's life, the music he did, the pleasant and the fun things... I have two favorite memories! This last year was one of them, the My Friend Merle set that we did on the main stage on Saturday. A lot of Merle's friends were there.

Another one of my favorite memories about MerleFest is when the late Bill Young, and Mr. B. Townes, who for years has been the dean of development down there at Wilkes Community College, came up to our house, and suggested that I do a concert and put in a memorial garden in memory of Merle. And I really appreciated that, but there's a little more to it. My wife and my daughter spoke up after we'd talked a while, and said Why don't you hold it over till spring, and do a little one- or two-day festival, so Merle's friends can come? They jumped on the idea with both feet, as the old saying goes! It was such a success, they decided to have it one more year, and then it mushroomed and they had to keep on with it. They just couldn't quit

C: It certainly has mushroomed! I actually honeymooned at MerleFest back in 2000.

D: Well, bless your heart.

C: I love MerleFest so much! I heard there were crowds of 80,000 this year.

D: Yep, over the four-day period. Did you hear tell of any disorder? It's very well-run, I think.

C: It always is. There's the usual grumblings from people who would like to see it stay small. But when something is that good, it's hard to keep it a secret.

D: Impossible to keep it <a secret>! Eventually, if it gets much bigger, they may have to limit the number of tickets, though. Leave a certain leeway for walkups, but limit that. They may have to do that. I don't know what they'll do with the crowds.

C: Doc, if you could pick any five people to play music with, who would they be?

D: Oh, lord, honey. You've asked me just about an impossible question. So many musicians

that I like, if I took a notion to jam some, it could be any two or three - if you get too many, it's not fun - it could be any two or three musicians of fifty or sixty different ones. That's the best answer I can give you on that.

C: That's just fine. Let's see... Donald, your cutaway guitar, was given to you in 1991 by Don Gallagher --

D: Right at the end of '90. It was actually the fall of '90 when he brought it up. I liked it so good that I took it on the road immediately, with a pickup in it, so I could be heard without feedback. <chuckles>

C: What do you like best about that guitar?

D: Tone, and easy playing. Two good things. And that's very important in a guitar. And it's held up well. It's been on the road ever since.

C: You've been recognized as a "national treasure" by President Carter, honored with the National Medal of the Arts by President Clinton, given an honorary doctorate from the University of North Carolina, and you've won five Grammy awards...

D: With Merle's help. They never seem to give him credit, honey. Merle helped me win most of those. Include that in your article.

C: You bet I will, sir. You bet I will. What achievement are you proudest of?

D: Well, I'll have to think about that just a minute. It isn't the Medal of Arts, though I'm proud of that. The Medal of Arts, and things like the doctorate degree, those are kind of icing on the cake. I guess it would be between two things: the Grammy awards that we worked hard for. Merle helped me pay the dues. Without him, and without my little wife to back us up and do a lot of the hard work and the business things here at home, we could never have made it. You owe a lot sometimes to just a few people. Mainly, those are the things I'm really proudest of.

[The second thing...] There's a thing they did for us here, that I was as proud of as any award or anything like that we ever got. They designated a segment of the new 421 highway as the Doc & Merle Watson Highway. And I'm really proud of that.

C: That's pretty significant!

D: You can figure out what you want to say about what I just said. That's the best I can do with the question.

C: That's fine, Doc. Let me ask you... what's your greatest professional regret?

D: Well, there's one - no, that's not a regret, it's just a hurt. I'm gonna give you a nothin' answer on this. I didn't regret my and Merle's decision on this. When we did the Memories album, there was some rumblings about going commercial. And Merle said, 'Dad, what do you think about going commercial?' And I said, 'Son, we could probably do it, but I don't believe I want any part of that rat race!' He laughed and said, 'I don't either. We've got our hands full the way it is.' I don't regret that decision.

You know, I'll probably think of something that I regret as you're working on the article, after I finish the interview. Right offhand, I can't think of... no real regrets.

C: Well, if you do think of one after our conversation, I hope it's just a small one. Let me ask you this: What, in your opinion, is the essential Doc Watson recording?

D: Ohhhh...

C: If you needed to tell a young fan what to listen to from your remarkable body of work...

D: It depends on what part of what I've done they're interested in. That's a hard one! I can give you one... If they're interested in flatpicking the guitar the way I do, and really want to try to learn something from it, there's a thing called *Foundation* they've put together from the Vanguard recordings, with just about all the flatpicking tunes that I've recorded on it. That would be a good one, if there's something they want to learn from.

And if it's something expressing what Merle and I did in the music, there's three albums that they could listen to to learn about music in general. There's one called *Southbound*, which is the first one Merle played over half the lead guitar on, and he'd only been playing a few months. This was very early, when he was still in his teens. Then there's an album called *Ballads From The Deep Gap*. We both, if I can brag a little bit, do some pretty good picking on it, but there's a lot of good ballads on it. Then there's another one that Merle produced, the last record he produced and helped me make, in 1984 - I believe it was done in '84 - called *Down South*.

C: That was a Sugar Hill record, I think.

D: Yes, it was. *Ballads From The Deep Gap* was Vanguard, and *Southbound* was Vanguard.

C: I've read that you asked Merle to come on the road with you after he'd only been playing for three months.

D: Yeah, he went with me to the Berklee Folk Festival at the end of June that year. Rosa Lee, my little old honey girl, started him on it, showed him a few chords on the guitar, and he just took it and went with it.

C: What about his picking impressed you at the time? Do you remember?

D: His ability to learn very quickly! When I came back on the road, he was already fingerpicking stuff. That was just... Well, I went on the road on the 17th of March on my first solo concert tour. At Easter time that April, my friend, the late Ralph Rinzler, called me and said, "I've got some news for you, Doc!" And I said, "Well, if it's bad, lay it on me... and if it's good, lay it on me." He did. He said, "Merle has started playing the guitar, and you're not going to believe how fast he's going." Well, by the time I got home on the 22nd of May, he was already picking things like the chorus from "Never On Sunday" and "The Riddle Song", fingerstyle. I couldn't believe it! And it wasn't very long till he was flatpicking the fool out of the guitar.

He played backup on every tune I played on the Berklee Folk Festival at the end of June that year. I asked him how we felt when we went on the stage. There was 12,000 people out there.

He said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I wanted to run!" I guess I felt that way a few times in the early days.

C: How intimidating that must have been.

D: It was, but you know, I don't think he ever felt like he was in my shadow. He was just the kind of fellow who kinda stayed in the edge of the foreground, if you will, and let his music say what he wanted to say on the stage.

C: That's lovely. Doc, throughout music history, there've been some extraordinary blind musicians. In acoustic music, you and young Mike Cleveland come quickly to mind...

D: *He is a fiddleplaying bull!*

C: One of my favorites! In other genres, there are Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles... How do you think blindness has affected your music?

D: It caused me to use the music as a way to provide for my own, and as a way to entertain people. If I could see, I might have been a carpenter. If I could have found the money to go to school, I might have been an electrical engineer. I like to go home every night. I don't like the road, never did. But I needed something that I loved, that I could do, and I developed, without thinking about it much, the talent, in the '40s and '50s, to the point to where, when the folk revival came, I went back to the good old traditional music in the early Sixties, and jumped into it. The blindness probably caused me to develop a talent I already had. That's a roundabout answer, but that's the best I can do.

I love carpentry; I do a little rough carpentry work. And I love electrical things, but when they came out along with this solid-state equipment, I quit!

C: I was amazed to hear that you'd actually built a utility shed.

D: I'll describe it to you. It's a well-built little building, 12'x16', it has siding on the outside; it has a vapor barrier under the siding, and it's sheeted with good heavy lumber, covered with a good roof. Hugo didn't even make it leak! It has a custom-made door that I built on it, 52 feet wide. It's so well built, you can hang up your saw inside of it. <chuckles>

C: Do you keep tools in the shed?

D: Yeah, you can keep about anything you want in there. You can take your guitar in there, in the case, and keep the door closed, and it wouldn't damage.

C: How much do you listen to music when you're not playing it?

D: Every now and then, I'll surprise you. I'll listen to good classical piano music.

C: Musicians always seem to give up so much for their art. What keeps you going, Doc? Why do you stay on that journey?

D: Well, I hate to just sit down. A lot of people think Doc Watson's rich. We've got moderate savings. I don't know what might come on us for medical needs, or health problems. I'll be 80 next year, and Rosa Lee's a few years behind me, but I don't want to spend the savings.

If I'm able to work, why, I'll get out there. My grandson's earning a few bucks, working with me, and Jack Lawrence has been with me, ever since we lost Merle, and I reckon he appreciates the work. I split what I earn with those two boys. I'm not money-hungry. If I had a million dollars, I'd give a lot of it away. For good causes -- I wouldn't just throw it out, like feeding the chickens.

And I do it for the love of the music.

C: My last question: if you could have Merle back for a day, how would you want to spend that day?

D: Oh, God, honey. Yeah, I can answer part of it. I don't know what we would do, but I'd certainly want to spend it with Merle, his children, his sister, and my little Rosa Lee. That's the way I'd want to spend that day. I'd have to go along with whatever they decided they wanted to do.

We might not play a lick of music, or we might sit down and pick a few. I don't know. I'd just want to be with them.

This article appeared in the December 2002 issue of Bluegrass Now. Reprinted with permission from the author and the publisher.

An invitation to Doc's fans

IBMA staffer Caroline Wright, who wrote this article ten years ago, would like to hear from Doc's fans. If you have a special story, memory or reflection of the beloved American legend, please send it to caroline@ibma.org ^[2] (about 100 words or less would be fine; use more words if you need them). A selection of tributes will appear in the story Caroline is planning for our July edition. Deadline for submission is June 15.

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