

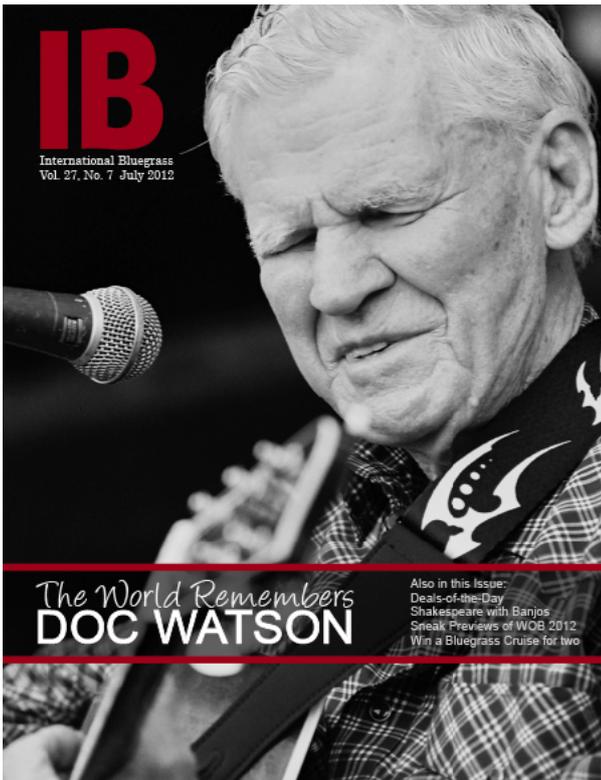


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Shortly after the great Arthel "Doc" Watson died on May 29, at age 89, we invited his friends and fans around the globe to share their thoughts and memories of him for this month's newsletter.

We were especially interested in hearing from people whose lives Doc changed in some way, by his music or his example. We also wanted stories that would illustrate his warmth, humility and his sense of humor and whimsy. The response was overwhelming. If only we could share them all!

There are treasures in each of the stories we've selected to include here. They reveal Doc as an artist whose singular influence has leapt genres and generations, whose simplicity and humanity profoundly moved the people who knew him well—and those who never got to shake his hand. For a humble man who was, as he called himself, "just one of the people," Doc Watson leaves an extraordinary musical legacy that seems timeless, indelibly etched on the pages of history.

We will miss him.

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Jeff Cardey, [Rawhide](#)^[2] (Brussels, Belgium)

I am a Canadian mandolin player living in Brussels, Belgium. On a warm summer evening in South Carolina around 1999, I was touring with a trio performing classical guitar music. I'd just begun to learn some mandolin for fun.

The people I was staying with had a little attic as a listening room to relax in. Each night we would retire to the listening room where he played Doc Watson and Ricky Skaggs CDs. I'd never heard of Doc and proceeded to have my mind blown away. I had no idea guitar could be played in such a way! Something about his singing went right to the bone. I went home and bought the same album, quit playing classical music and started learning to play bluegrass and trying to sing.

I now play in Belgium's oldest bluegrass band, an award-winning band that is still making waves throughout the festival circuit here in Europe after 35 years. I can say without a doubt that Doc profoundly changed my life forever and for the better. I've never shed a tear when hearing of other bluegrass stars passing, but on hearing of Doc's passing, the tears they fell like raindrops.

Cindy Baucom, [Knee-Deep In Bluegrass](#)^[3] (Elkin, North Carolina)

Having been raised less than 10 miles from Deep Gap, NC, there are many memories of Doc Watson I can recall. But I would like to share a memory that made a profound impact on me. It was around 1990 and Doc had spent most of the afternoon on-the-air with me, performing songs and chatting about his music and his gratitude for the Merle Watson Memorial Festival (eventually known as MerleFest).

Before leaving, he asked if I would have time to make some recordings for him from our production library at the radio station. I told him I would be happy to, but silently wondered: *What kind of music would Doc Watson want for his personal collection?*

He said to go to Sound Effects and gather birds, wind, the ocean and any other "nature" sounds I could locate.

"That's my music," he said.

Michael Smith, [Reservoir Road](#)^[4] (Greely, Colorado)

As a young man, I was fortunate to have seen Doc perform in concert three times. This was in the early 1980's and Merle was still alive. Doc traveled and performed with Merle, who played fingerpicking and slide guitar, and T. Michael Coleman, who played electric bass.

The most amazing concert I've ever witnessed was a night Doc performed at a little theatre in Arvada, Colorado. Doc had laryngitis but he didn't let that stop him from meeting his obligations to the packed house. Except for talking through "Tennessee Stud," all songs played were instrumentals. Between Doc, Merle and T. Michael, they played a ten-minute rendition of "Wabash Cannonball" that defies human comprehension.

People who consider folk music a primitive art form should have witnessed this artistic and technical masterpiece. First, they played it at a tempo no train "even one pointed downhill with a strong tailwind" could have kept pace with. Doc would pick two verses, then Merle

would fingerpick a couple, then Doc let it rip, then Merle played slide. Even T. Michael ripped off a couple of solos on his fretless electric bass. Throughout every solo, you could pick out the structure of the tune, so the melody never got lost in the landslide of notes, and yet each verse was unique. I doubt those guys repeated a phrase. And I don't think they ever came close to hitting a clunker. Doc looked as if he had to put a little effort into playing that fast, but Merle looked relaxed ? almost bored.

It was one of those barnburners where the audience should have been whooping and hollering approval, but everyone was so stunned we simply stared in amazement. When they finally wrapped it up, there were a couple of moments of silence as the audience caught its breath. We erupted in applause. Doc grinned, but Merle never showed any emotion. Doc didn't have enough voice to tell us to settle down. T. Michael *attempted* to calm us down, but we couldn't.

I've seen people on TV get ?touched by the hand of God? and wig out. That night I was touched by artistic genius. I've attempted to describe it to people with little success. Even Doc Watson fans cannot grasp the feeling of that night. It was utter joy.



[5] [Dix Bruce, guitarist](#)^[5](Concord, California)

AT RIGHT: Doc at a concert in Berkeley, CA about 1975; courtesy Dix Bruce

In the introduction to my 1998 book of transcriptions of Doc Watson's early recordings [*Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley: Original Folkways Recordings 1960-62*, Mel Bay MB97056], I tried to assess Doc's importance to guitar playing and to American music in general. Here's what I came up with:

?These are Doc Watson's first commercially released recordings. And what an auspicious premier they make! His playing from this period turned the role of the acoustic guitar in traditional American music completely around, and elevated it to equal status with the fiddle and banjo as a lead instrument. Up to that time it had played mostly a supporting rhythmic role. Doc Watson truly revolutionized the role of the guitar in folk, old time, bluegrass, and country music.?

I also mentioned that those first recordings, not to mention Doc's subsequent recordings, served to introduce or popularize a large number of the songs that have become folk, bluegrass, old time, and country music standards: ?Crawdad Song,? ?I'm Sitting on Top of the World,? ?Lee Highway Blues,? ?The Coo-Coo Bird,? ?Rising Sun Blues,? ?Shady

Grove, ?My Home?s Across the Blue Ridge Mountains, ?Way Down Town, ?Will the Circle Be Unbroken, ?Amazing Grace, ?Sally Ann, ?Old Ruben? (?Reuben?s Train, ?Train 45?), ?The Old Man at the Mill, ?Troublin? Mind, ?Handsome Molly, ?John Henry, ?and ?Wayfaring Pilgrim.?

While my introduction sums up my appreciation of Doc as an icon who did much to shape the sound of contemporary folk, bluegrass, and country music, it doesn't cover my personal thoughts on Doc and what his music has meant to me as a guitarist, singer, and musician. In my estimation, Doc is THE giant of traditional American music.

My personal acquaintance with Doc began in the late 1960s. I knew him from his recordings and reputation as a wonderful guitarist and folk musician. His guitar playing was truly unexplainable, unbelievable, unfathomable. How could anyone play that fast and that precisely? I certainly couldn't, even when I slowed the LPs from 33 1/3 rpm down to 16 rpm. He seemed unknowable.

In 1972 friends recommended a three-disc album by The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band that featured the contemporary rock band playing music with an astounding number of the most important country and bluegrass musicians, from Maybelle Carter to Roy Acuff to Jimmy Martin to Earl Scruggs. Doc was among them. On the recording, one can hear him talk and play music with the other musicians in a relaxed and casual atmosphere. At this point I had not seen Doc perform live but listening to the recording, hearing his humility as he laughed and joked with the other musicians, made me feel like he was an old friend.

The whole project, and Doc especially, changed my direction musically. It opened up whole worlds of music to me, all of them subsets of the general country and folk universe, but new and newly dear. It inspired me to learn new songs, techniques, and styles. It also made me want to see and hear Doc play in concert and possibly meet him.

At the time I went to the University of Wisconsin, not exactly a regular stop on the bluegrass or folk tour. I figured the only way to hear Doc would be to get the student union to sponsor him in concert. Before I knew it the concert was scheduled and we were on our way. My next concern was whether enough people would want to attend. Doc's traditional music didn't have quite the pull on my generation as, say, The Jefferson Airplane or Led Zeppelin. I needn't have worried; the concert quickly sold out.

I conned the entertainment committee into buying dinner for Doc and Merle. I figured this might be a great way to hang out with them, talk with Doc, and learn the secret of his virtuoso playing. Though I never discerned that ?secret,? the dinner was a dream come true. Several of my fellow students tagged along and we all had a wonderful time. Doc and Merle were both incredibly friendly and very nice to us all. Doc was jovial and casual, just like I'd heard on the ?Circle? recording. He happily answered all our questions about playing and music and life. Just like an old friend.

I remember being surprised at his ease and sophistication. He was a country gentleman, perfectly at ease and welcoming, very well informed about everything ? current events, politics, and on all sorts of music from jazz to rock to rockabilly. He seemed to be very much a renaissance man, at least musically speaking. That, in and of itself, was a lesson to me ? to be open to all types of sounds and to try to understand and enjoy them all. He had kind words

for us all and for everyone else we asked about in the music business.

The concert that followed was bliss. He and Merle played all the songs they were known for and many more. It was one of those events that you didn't want to end. And he was the same friendly, casual, joyful Doc I'd come to admire.

When I heard of Doc's illness, I began to list in my mind all the tunes, all the songs, all the techniques and styles that I'd learned from him. The number of songs alone was staggering. I realized that I'd included over fifty tunes I'd directly or indirectly learned from Doc in my "Parking Lot Picker's Songbooks," (Mel Bay Pub.) from "Amazing Grace" to "Columbus Stockade Blues" to "Way Downtown" to "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" To say that he greatly influenced me, and my music, is a gross understatement.

He also influenced the way I think about music and my audience. I witnessed, through the years, Doc welcoming all kinds of music and musicians into his fold. I saw him encourage younger folks and musicians trying to do things a little differently. I watched him on stage and television, heard him on recordings and felt that he truly loved being there and sharing his music with the people that came to see him. He was good man and a good role model and I want to be like him.

Andy Agardy, Salt Lake City, Utah

My favorite Doc memory was from a show in downtown Salt Lake City about six years ago. Huge crowd, a beautiful night, everyone on blankets, quiet and relishing in the Americana soul.

Some drunk fool sits on our blanket, right up front, and starts babbling to everyone obnoxiously. I politely tell the dude, "Shhhhh!" To which he responds, "Oh... this is ACOUSTIC music!" And then he stands up, walks to the stage in front of 10,000 people, and lets out a primal scream.

Then, out of Doc's mouth? "I remember when I had my first beer too, son!"

That night, listening to him play, I felt more soul in the music than I ever have. It was inspiring, amazing, beautiful. What a gift he gave us all. I am so thankful for him! Sure will miss the old boy, but he is pickin' again in the pines with Merle now.

[Dan King, guitarist](#) (Scottsdale, Arizona)

Back in the late 1960's, there wasn't much to do in Phoenix, where I lived. On summer afternoons, the mercury would routinely spike to 110 degrees plus and the prevailing wisdom was to take dental records along if you were foolish enough to engage in any outdoor activity. I was a young boy then, but I had already plunged headlong into the inviting world of performance music.

I was a guitar player.

My musical heroes at the time were electric rock guitarists with long hair and loud amplifiers. They were glamorous sorts who were long on image. Some were very talented and some, I concluded later on, were not.

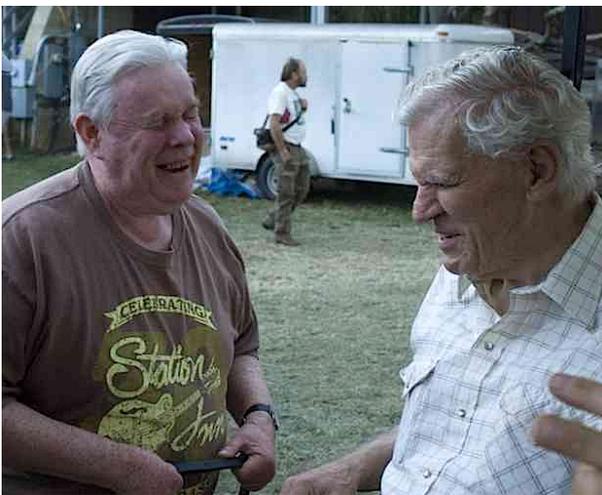
So here I was holed up in my parent's swamp cooled home on a summer day, bored to tears. Desperate for entertainment, I decided to check the local PBS station to see what was on.

Doc Watson was on.

Here was a man with a guitar. He was blind, older than my heroes, and not glamorous by any stretch of the imagination. But man, was he blazing on that acoustic guitar!

I sat mesmerized for the entire program while Doc's fingers and voice made the sweltering Phoenix summer heat seem tepid by comparison.

Doc Watson lived to be 89 years old, a true legend in his own time. All the superlatives apply to this fine, fine musician, but the one description to me that encompasses what Doc was all about is this: *Doc Watson was the Genuine Article*. Rest in peace, teacher. May your good Lord grant you the sight, in heaven, to see how many people's lives you changed during your brilliant shining stop on planet Earth.



Geoff Morris, [Wall-To-Wall Bluegrass](#)^[7] (Victoria,

Australia)

AT LEFT: Geoff and Doc in 2007

It has been a very heavy-hearted and emotional time these past few days. Doc was a lifelong hero of mine, ever since I first held that big solid twelve-inch mono Folkways recording of the Watson family and heard "Everyday Dirt," with that staggeringly unbelievable, scintillating guitar. Never heard anything like it in my life before or since — except, of course, for more Doc!

In 2007 I and seeing-eye dog Milo came across to bluegrass America, largely to hear Doc play. We arrived very late and the Black Mountain festival had ended but luckily Doc was still there, so we raced up the hill, past sundry bemused officials, and jumped out of the electric cart. I joked that I had come ten thousand miles to meet him, and indeed I did... for all of perhaps 25 seconds, before his minders whisked him away.

This Monday night, during my usual show time, I am doing a substantial tribute to Doc. I'll find it a very difficult thing to do, but I truly want to have the privilege to send the old bloke out in style. Doc as a human being, and his peerless playing, means so much to me and always will.

Rémy Baïlla, [Mister Jay's Band](#)^[8] (Marseilles, France)

I'm just a little French who loves your old music! Doc Watson was a great guitar player. I would to say a big thanks to my father. He introduced me to Mister Doc Watson. What a great idea!

I heard Doc's songs to learn acoustic guitar. And now I play country in two bands in France. I am a part of "Mister Jay's Band" (contemporary country, many original songs with bluegrass and folk influences). We have many shows and festivals in France. It's so amazing when we play! (Sorry for my English...)

He was a mentor for me. R.I.P. Mister Watson, thanks for your music and your talent.

Becky Johnson, author, [Inside Bluegrass: 20 Years of Bluegrass Photography](#)^[9] (Chapel Hill, North Carolina)

For 15 years, I was a staff photographer for MerleFest, the annual music festival in memory of Doc's son, Eddie Merle Watson, in Wilkesboro, NC.

I consider myself one of the luckiest people in the world to have had the honor and privilege of not only being able to capture magic moments on film, and to be backstage with my friends and colleagues, musicians, tech people, and the like? but also to spend quality time with Doc Watson himself.

One of my responsibilities early on at MerleFest was to drive musicians in a golf cart to various stages on the Wilkes Community College Campus. Doc was one of my regular passengers. One time, as we were driving along the crowded gravel road from the backstage area to the upper campus, we talked about how I had become close with his daughter, Nancy Watson, over the past few years.

"Nancy thinks the *world* of you, you know," Doc said. I was taken aback by his directness, and thrilled at the same time. I couldn't believe Doc Watson was sitting next to me, saying this. It was one of the biggest moments in my life, a real affirmation that I was on the correct life path. I have often thought about that golf cart ride, and the powerful impact it has had on me, through the years.

Later on, a friend of mine overheard Doc's words backstage: "I like Art Menius. He's a good MC, but I *really like* that Becky Johnson!"

Micheal Irwin, Winter Park, Florida

I saw Doc the first time when I was 15 years old at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. This would have been about 1968. He was with Merle. Anyway, during a break between songs, someone dropped an empty bottle and it rolled a long way down to the front of the stage. Everyone was really quiet.

Doc stopped for a second, raised his head, and said, "I hope it wasn't expensive." The place erupted in laughter.

The last time I saw him was at New Orleans Jazz Fest. He tore it up. I cried, it was so good. God bless you, Doc.



Doc with Daisy Anderson at Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, 2010; photo by Aimee Anderson

Paige Anderson, singer/guitarist, [Anderson Family Bluegrass](#)^[10] (Grass Valley, California)

I was 9 years old when I heard my first Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson album. My Dad would take me to guitar lessons on Monday nights, and on the way we'd listen to *The Best Of Doc Watson 1964-1968*. Hearing that album inspired me, as I told myself, "I want to play like that someday!" I still tell myself that to this day.

Back in 2010, our family band Anderson Family Bluegrass was invited to play at the 10th Annual Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. At that festival, we were able to see so many of our musical heroes right in front of us, singing their hearts out and playing their music with such soul... it was amazing! Before we had to head to our stage and get ready to perform, my siblings and I had the chance to watch Doc perform on the Banjo Stage. The festival had a seating area on the side of the stage where we all sat to watch Doc Watson, David Holt, and Richard Watson. Being so close, seeing, hearing, and feeling the music of this amazing person, was humbling. It seemed surreal to my siblings, and myself especially.

Doc was such a legend and inspiring person to so many people in the world, and that will always continue. We can't thank him enough for what he contributed in the musical world. Rest in peace, Doc.

Tom Wolf, Benson, North Carolina

The first time I saw Doc was in 1964, when Ralph Rinzler was promoting both Doc and Bill Monroe, often at the same venues. This was the case when they came to our college, Oberlin.

As I recall, Doc did a set first, then Bill and the Blue Grass Boys came on with a set to finish the first half. To start the second half, Doc and Bill did some wonderful duets, mostly (if not all) Monroe Brothers' tunes. Too bad their respective record companies never let them record together and the tape of that concert was stolen from my stored belongings a few years later.

About six months later, Doc again came to our college to perform. This time, he was scheduled to play with his old-time fiddling father-in-law, Gaither Carlton. However, when Doc arrived (driven down from Cleveland by a bunch of 'Watsons' relatives who all looked more or less like him!), he explained that Carlton was ill, so couldn't travel on this tour.

Fortunately, we had a wonderful old-time musician in the class just behind mine at Oberlin—the late Andy Woolf, a fiddler from New York, who actually did his doctorate in Folklore at MIT on the subject of 'Musical Etiquette in Jamming at Old Time Music Festivals in Appalachia,' or some such title! After a wonderful first half, when Doc was resting backstage, I suggested that he start the second half by having Andy join him for a few fiddle tunes.

Not wanting to accept such a proposal without knowing the quality of Andy's fiddle-playing and not realizing that Andy was standing right next to me, fiddle and bow in hand, Doc paused for a minute and said, 'You know, when I go a-fishin', I don't like to pull up my line until I've got a good, strong nibble, so I know there's something there.'

I turned to Andy and said, 'I think he wants to hear what you can do.'

Andy launched into 'Soldier's Joy.' After two bars, Doc exclaimed, 'Hold it right there! That's good enough for me. We'll start off with that one, and then you can just tell me what you want to do for a little encore.'

Len de Vries, Leiden, Netherlands

It was the mid- or late seventies, before disco, an era when the Flying Burrito Brothers, Country Gazette, Johnny Cash and even Hoyt Axton were touring Europe. As a teenager I found a beautifully packaged triple album called *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* in the sales bin in a record store. There was this man called Doc Watson playing on it, with lightning guitar licks, great voice and spontaneous dialog between songs. Wim Bloemendaal played some Doc Watson on his 'Nashville' radio show when a new album came out.

Then I moved to the big city (The Hague) for my studies and found a specialty record store that sold piano rolls by Scott Joplin, speeches by Churchill, sounds of steam locomotives and jets taking off, and 'all of Doc's records!' I was a happy teenager.

So what was the connection between this pimpled teen from the lowlands and a mountain man from North Carolina? Darned if I know. I just liked his music. It was honest: what you hear is what you get. Every album I bought, I carried home in pleasant anticipation, a feeling I have not had for decades. His warm and pleasant voice, his playing, the selection of songs—from down-home mountain music to Gershwin, from Tom Paxton to John Hurt. Let's not forget Merle's playing—he caused me to start fingerpicking and trying to play slide. Doc's albums with Merle are my favorites; they were bluesy and soulful.

In 1979 or '80 I walked home one afternoon and saw a poster pasted on a wall. I stood there

for at least a minute, trying to comprehend that Doc and Merle were actually going to perform in my town. It was a long few weeks! Finally the day arrived.

I can remember the skipping of my heart when Doc walked out with his hand on T. Michael Coleman's shoulder. The show was over in two blinks of an eye. Boy, was I a happy puppy. Wim Bloemendaal had the show recorded and a few weeks later it was aired. I still have the recording, transferred to CD.

I finished my studies, moved to a part of the country without serious record stores, listened to the dozen or so Doc records I had, and tried to steal one of his licks on guitar. I heard of Merle's death on the radio one day and there were tears stinging in the back of my eyes then. He and Doc had touched my life with their music.

Life went on, and in the parts where I lived there was no country music anywhere. The radio went from disco to glam to whatever and I ceased listening to music for a decade or so.

That was, until we got a computer and Internet. About the first thing I searched for was Doc. He was in his seventies, still playing and performing! That first Google search was a perfect moment of joy.

Before going to sleep, my wife and I are more than happy to sit in bed, watching MerleFest or the *Three Pickers*, time after time. After more than 40 years of listening to Doc Watson, I still appreciate and enjoy his music.

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