



INTERNATIONAL BLUEGRASS MUSIC ASSOCIATION

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## [The World Remembers Doc Watson, Part 2](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

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### **Pamela Rice, Turtle Island, North Carolina**

The photo is of the guitar cake I made for Doc Watson's surprise birthday party one year. Everything was edible but the toothpicks holding in the edible tuning keys. Guitar was chocolate, base was vanilla; it weighed 79.8 lbs. and fed 1500 guests. Our daughter Mindy helped me make it. Photo was made just before I painted the strings with edible real gold and silver.

Tony didn't think it could be done. It was fully life-size and he was worried about where I was going to find a life-size Gallagher guitar pan to cook a monster cake in. He was torn up for months thinking I would fall flat on my face. If it had not been for Mindy, I might have taken a baseball bat to it. Tony measured it and it fit perfectly in the truck of his Presidential Town Car, so he drove it to the Walker Center in Wilkesboro himself, speeding as always even up the mountains. But we made it.

Doc could feel colors. He wired his own house and he could feel the colors of the wires and differentiate between the colors. Every time I hugged him, he said, "You have the prettiest

black hair.? He felt the color just by my hair brushing against his cheek. When he and Rosa Lee got their new red van, Tony and I came to their house on a visit. Doc wanted us to check out his new ride. He walked over to the van and put his hand on the fender. He said ?Tony, come over here and feel this red paint.?

That was the first time Tony ever tried to enter Doc's world of perception. He put his hand beside Doc's and closed his eyes for a while. Then he went over and put his hand on our blue Town car the same way. He said, ?The temperature of blue is different than of red, Doc!?

Doc said, ?Uh-huh. They sure are, son.?

Doc was superhuman? there is no other description for it. People missed that because they see blindness as a huge handicap. That keeps you in the dark about what is going on around you. Doc knew more about what was going on around him than anybody. He just didn't let on.

The first time Doc played the D-28 since Clarence [White] had owned it, we were at the Birchmere in Alexandria in the old green room. Tony handed the guitar to Doc and Doc kept running his hands over it. He said, ?This is the first time I've seen this guitar since Clarence owned it!?

Even if Tony had not been the one to hand Doc the guitar, he would have still known which guitar it was.

Once Doc started to play it, he just lit up. He would play something and just die laughing. He didn't want to give it up; he was having a blast. So Tony just kicked back and enjoyed listening and watching Doc laugh while he played it.

The Birchmere was famous for its after-parties with the staff and musicians once the doors were locked. If we left by 3 a.m., that was early. That night they finally wanted to close and go home around daylight, but Doc was still wide open, laughing and playing the D-28. They politely asked us to put the guitar away and leave several times. Doc ignored them, and Tony was not about to take the guitar away from Doc and spoil his partying with it. So Gary Oelze, the owner, finally kicked us three out. The only time in my life I have ever been kicked out of a club, it was for hanging with Doc Watson! I know that's one for the books.

Tony is just as devastated over losing him today as he was the day Doc left us. He says if it had not been for Doc, there would be no Tony Rice the musician. Doc had that much influence on his musicianship. I have to agree, when he says the words to him from Laura Cash say it all: *?How can we ever imagine a world without Doc Watson??*

**Art Dudley, columnist ([Stereophile](#)<sup>[3]</sup>); guitarist with the [Mountebank Brothers](#)<sup>[4]</sup> (Cherry Valley, New York)**

In the wake of his passing, a writer for the AP said that Doc Watson's music evoked the sound of a mountain stream; I couldn't put it better if I tried. To lots of us, there was something pure and relentless and clear about his singing and playing. Something *right*. Coming to Doc as I did, after years spent listening to rock and jazz and classical music, it seemed I'd discovered something that had been inside of me all along: something in my DNA, just waiting to light up the board when I first heard Doc Watson.

I bought my first Doc Watson record in the 1990s ? not long before I became a father ? and in the years after, I bought as many more as I could find. I saw Doc and his talented partner,

Jack Lawrence, in concert on many occasions, and when my daughter was old enough for a long drive, I brought my family to MerleFest. My love affair with bluegrass started with one man, and while my sorrow at his passing is deep ? like saying goodbye to the person who gave me my first book ? so is my gladness at having shared the earth with a giant.

**John Sharon, [Disabilities Understood](#)<sup>[5]</sup>(Chelmsford, Massachusetts)**

It was the summer before my 9th grade year, and my sister and I went to see Doc Watson at the Rehoboth Beach Convention Hall in Delaware. I didn't know much about him at the time, only that he had a rich baritone voice and played a mean flat-pick guitar. As he came out on stage that night with his son Merle, I noticed that he grasped Merle's arm as he walked gingerly to his seat. Whoa. The dude was blind.

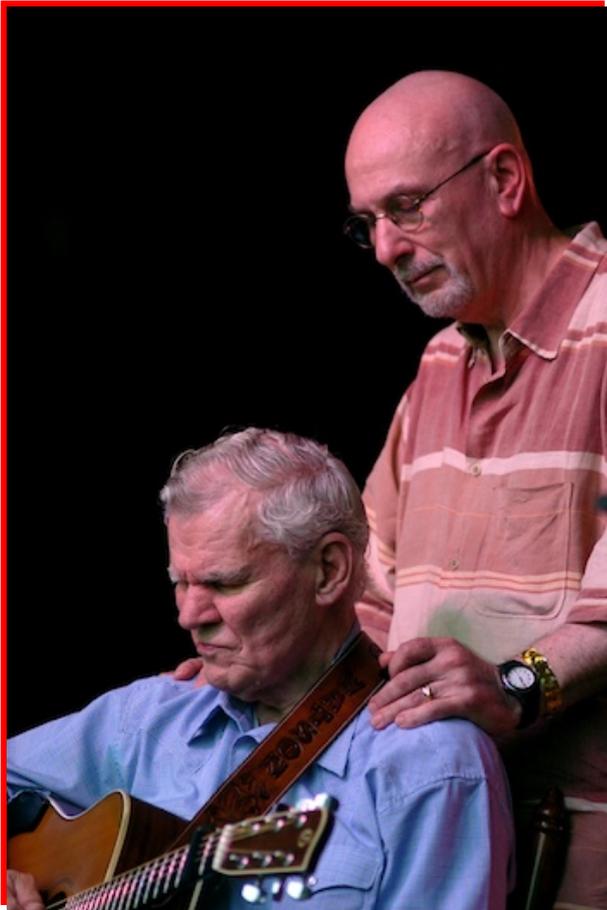
The concert was a stunning blur of talent and playfulness. Early on I had noticed a harmonica holder on stage, but nobody touched it all night long? *until the encore*. Merle led his dad back out on stage, and Doc picked up that harmonica holder and did a medley of harp tunes that didn't end for what seemed like 30 minutes. His lips flew across the harmonica like it was greased with butter, and he wailed and bent notes and brought us all to tears and to our feet. When it was all over, I leaned over to my sister and said, ?I want to learn how to play that thing.? A week later, I went to a music store and bought my first harp, a Hohner Marine Band in the key of C.

Doc Watson died yesterday at the age of 89, and I can't help thinking about that concert back in the summer of '78. What if I had missed it? What if Doc hadn't done that encore medley? And what if Doc had never lost his sight? Would he have ever started playing music at all? Would I?

It seems that when he lost his sight at an early age, Doc turned to music. But he was no mediocre musician whose talent got recognized because of the obstacles he had overcome. Rather, he was an astoundingly talented fellow who happened to be blind. Maybe his blindness pushed him to excellence; maybe it had nothing to do with the remarkable successes he attained.

I get frustrated sometimes when the human interest stories in the media focus on all the amazing things a person with a disability can do, like somehow we're better than other people because of? well, because of what, exactly? Because we choose not to swim in the pool of self-pity? Because it looks from afar like we struggle all the time? Because we're just getting on with our lives?

Doc, you were an amazingly gifted musician, and I don't really care whether your blindness had anything to do with it. You inspired me to pick up a harmonica, not because you had a disability too but because your God-given talent got under my skin and gave me an idea. After all these years, it's clear to me that no, I'll never play like you. But you know something? I don't have to. I'll just keep playing for the love of it and I'll think of you every time I strap on that harp holder and purse my lips.



Mitch Greenhill, [Folklore Productions International](#)<sup>[6]</sup>

(Santa Monica, California)

*AT RIGHT: Mitch with Doc; photo by Jon Hancock*

For over thirty years, Doc Watson has been an important and constant presence in my life. Every couple of weeks the phone rings. "How's Doc?" I begin. "How's Mitchell?" he responds. And we're off.

First we talk business – my company, Folklore Productions International, has been representing him since 1964, when Ralph Rinzler handed the job over to my father, Manny Greenhill. But eventually the conversation turns to music, or family, or how to wire a house.

It's hard to accept that those days are gone, that Doc won't be answering the phone. Or telling a story. Or singing about Omie Wise or Milkcow Blues or Summertime. Or, honor of honors, inviting a guitar solo with those magic words, "Take it, son."

I first met Doc at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. He came with others, including Tom Ashley, Fred Price, Clint Howard. Doc's wife Rosa Lee sang, as did his mother Annie. Rosa Lee's father Gaither Carlton played fiddle. It was a little Watauga County ecosystem, right there amidst the mansions and tennis courts of Newport, Rhode Island. And to me, a Northeastern city boy just entering college, it provided a window into a beautiful world of Southern mountain music, deep and wide family ties, and a close relationship with rural nature.

Later Doc would lament that he could no longer hear the birds and insects of his youth, those sounds that had guided his sightless wanderings through the Blue Ridge hills of his youth. And once he brought me up short by musing, "If my father hadn't bought my uncle's car, I

don't know when I'd ever have got to town. Meaning Boone, some ten miles away from the family home in Deep Gap.

A short while after Newport, Doc performed at the Club 47, the coffee house near Harvard Square where many of us cut our musical eyeteeth, learned our first guitar chords, and played before our first audiences. This time there was no Watauga County ecosystem; Doc played solo. Solo performers were common at the 47, but this was different, a whole other level of connection, commitment and musicianship. When Doc tore into "Black Mountain Rag," I thought the plaster would peel off the walls of that venerable room. And when he sang of Tom Dula, it was clear that he, unlike the Kingston Trio, felt a personal stake. (Doc knew the Dula family and held strong opinions on who was to blame for Laurie Foster's murder.) He was clearly nourished by some powerful wellspring, even as he eagerly ventured outside its musical boundaries.

Now, many years later, I'm a good deal older than the Doc Watson I first met. I've experienced the sad honor of serving as pallbearer to both Doc and, back in 1985, his son Merle. My own father has passed, and I run the family business with my son Matt. Family connections run deep between the Watsons and the Greenhills.

In his later years, Doc's religious faith became even more important to him. He donned overalls to get baptized again, in a mountain stream. And not long ago, he ignored our tacit agreement to avoid talk of religion or politics, and expressed his concern for my immortal soul. For him it was maybe a bit awkward, but necessary; for me it was a moment to treasure, an emblem of his regard. And even if I did not follow his literal prescription, I feel that my spiritual life has been nourished by the decades of Doc Watson's friendship. His example of fair and ethical dealings in this world, his fidelity to who he was and where he came from, and his sense of staying on the right path — in music and in life — are not going away. They are permanently embedded in those who were fortunate to know Doc Watson.

**Nancy Cardwell Erdos, IBMA** (Nashville, Tennessee)

My late husband, Frank Erdos and I were lucky enough to be invited to warm up for Doc Watson and Jack Lawrence at a concert in Springfield, MO in 1986, with our bluegrass band, Homegrown. Originally from Connecticut, Frank was born with a type of eye cancer called retinoblastoma and ended up losing his sight at age three. (He always said he was grateful for three years of vision, because he could understand the concepts of things like color and perspective -- as well as just knowing what a human face really looked like.) Frank was a gifted banjo, guitar and mandolin player, singer and songwriter who loved bluegrass and country music, and Doc was always one of his heroes -- as a musician, and as a good role model: a hardworking man making his way in the world without sight. I think they had similar talents in the areas of woodworking and building and fixing practically anything.

Frank was so excited to meet Doc in person, finally, and he was proud to share the news that our daughter, Erin Faith, was on the way. (Erin's 25 now. She also has had to deal with retinoblastoma, but because it was caught so early she is still with us, still has good vision and has been in remission for 24 years.) Frank had forgotten, in his excitement, that Doc had just lost his son, Merle, in an accident the year before. A brief shadow crossed Doc's face and voice, and then he smiled and said, "Children are a great blessing."

I don't remember much more about that night, other than Jack Lawrence's green, high-top

tennis shoes; how the sound of their two guitars were different in the mix so you could differentiate them even if you couldn't see who was playing; that one of the songs Homegrown did was 'Dig a Little Deeper in the Well'; and that I was struck by the power of Doc's vocals and soulful French harp as much as by his phenomenal guitar playing. Also, there was always something about Doc's emcee work that drew listeners in and made them feel like they were sitting across the living room on a couch, rather than in a grandstand among thousands in Winfield, Kansas or scattered across a sea of lawn chairs at MerleFest or in a big, fancy performing arts center. Doc's music has always dazzled me and made me feel at home both at the same time.

[Laurie Lewis, singer/songwriter/musician](#)<sup>[7]</sup>(Berkeley, California)

At the magical age of 14, I went to the Berkeley Folk Festival for the first time and heard Doc Watson. I flipped for the guitar, and with the help of a friend a few years older than me and much more accomplished, I started struggling through 'Deep River Blues' and Doc's early Vanguard recordings, and the Folkways 'Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley's' may be the first albums I ever bought. They are still some of my favorites.

I was lucky enough to get to see Doc a number of times in Berkeley when I was a teenager. One of the most memorable was the day I walked into Lundberg's Guitar Shop, and saw a man with his back turned to me, playing a gorgeous gold-plated banjo. At the end of the tune, he said, in that unmistakable voice, 'Yessir, that is a fine banjo.' It was Doc, right there, only about three feet away from me. I just stood there quiet as I could be and listened.

When I met Doc years later, it was because of my recording of 'Who Will Watch the Home Place', which he said his wife, Rosa Lee, loved. I remember playing at the Dahlonega Bluegrass Festival and seeing Doc sitting in the wings listening to us onstage. I happened to glance back when Tom Rozum and I were singing 'Teardrops Falling in the Snow,' and Doc had tears running down his cheeks. I could barely make it through the rest of the song.

[Niall Toner, singer/songwriter](#)<sup>[8]</sup>(Dublin, Ireland)



I was at MerleFest last April where I had the good fortune to hear and see Doc Watson playing his regular stint. He played, as always, superbly, displaying all of his awesome talent, and there was no sign that he might be slowing up or contemplating retirement.

I was back in RTE Radio One on Wednesday last, recording my first 'Roots Freeway' show

for next Saturday evening, when I heard the news about Doc's passing. I was, like so many others, very saddened, and I wanted to rush to my computer and write a tribute, right away.

However, I got distracted by other sad news when I learned that Irish blues legend Red Peters also passed away recently. Both of these men had a huge affect on me and my music. May they rest in peace.

In 1981, I was involved, with a couple of Doc fanatics, in putting Doc Watson and his band on at Liberty Hall. Doc and Merle and T. Michael Coleman accepted my invitation to dinner at our house in Knocklyon, and Doc spent the afternoon playing my battered old 1938 model Army and Navy Gibson guitar for the neighbour's kids, before tucking in to a feast of wild Irish salmon prepared by Moira and Carol Hawkins. We felt at the time that it might show disrespect to a blind man to be taking photos, so the only memory of his visit is in our own hearts, and the hearts of the folks who shared that precious evening with us.

I have, however, one surviving shot from Doc's visit that I can include here. It was taken in the dressing room at Liberty Hall, and shows, from left to right, Doc, Me, Bill Whelan, and our MC on that night, Liam Nolan of RTE Radio. As you can see, we were a lot younger, thinner and hairier... and totally stricken.

**Henri Deschamps, [Mast Farm Inn](#) (Valle Crucis, North Carolina)**

I initially thought I had known about Doc Watson my whole life. After all, I grew up in the South, in a manner of speaking. And while the Allman Brothers came just after the Beatles in my cherished stack of 33's in high school, thanks to a friend named Rick Shore, Doc and The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band were also there by the time I got into college. Music mattered a great deal in our lives at that time. And perhaps then, more than now, music was where we got our education.

My earliest recollection of Doc is while doing my best to be a hippie at Boston University, where knowing about Doc meant you were cool. No apologies, we all start out shallow. Forty-two years later, the only music I really listen to now flows from Celtic, through old-time, to bluegrass and acoustic roots. Bill Monroe, Earl Scruggs, Dr. Ralph Stanley, The Carter Family, Blue Highway, Alison Krauss and The Avett Brothers all make a lot of sense to me, and there are so many outstanding artists in bluegrass & roots music today I see little reason to seek my solace elsewhere.

And while I thought I knew about Doc before, I realized I knew very little until we moved to the Western North High Country about seven years ago. I kept hearing, in hushed reverential tones from a lot of friends and neighbors, "Did you know that Doc Watson lives here?? It was said in much the same way folks would ask if you knew the Dalai Lama or Albert Schweitzer lived here.

Although I met and spent some time with Doc, and once spent a few hours alone with him chatting about all kinds of things, I cannot say I knew him well. He was actually quite hilarious, much like Dan Tyminski, with "out-of-the-blue" quips followed by explosions of mirth that you never saw coming because you were in the middle of something serious. But then again I knew him very well for two reasons. First and foremost, with Doc what you see is what you got in every way, and second, his spirit was so present in our world, it's almost like you felt he was just out of sight, just over yonder, but right there.

And for me, because Doc embodied so perfectly so much of what I love about Western North Carolina, I was with him a lot every day. Ask almost anyone who knows our mountain region and villages, and knows Doc, and they will tell you the same thing. That is no minor matter. At least for us. But it is very hard to explain or describe because it is so personal and intimate. While I don't think he ever farmed, he grew up like all here surrounded by small family farms. So to me, clear as day, Doc was a North Carolina Mountain Farmer? farmer in the sense that you can take the artist out of the farm, but you cannot take the farm out of the artist. And if you know a North Carolina Mountain farmer, you know someone a lot like Doc.

He was about a lot of things, but what I remember most today are his humanity, compassion, his humility and simplicity. It was not his image or brand; it is who he was.

There is a simplicity that comes from ignorance, like the simplicity of a young child, but there is a simplicity like a farmer's that comes from profound understanding. Chopin said of music what can also be said about people and their struggles to become all they can be: "Simplicity is the final achievement. After one has played a vast quantity of notes and more notes, it is simplicity that emerges as the crowning reward of art."

In that respect, Doc was a simple man, much like Charles Church, Tommy Walsh, Keith Ward and John Cooper are simple men.

A poet's job in this world is to say everything about something in a phrase; to help us see how the proverbial drop contains the entire ocean. And what did Doc have to say about himself? "Doc Watson, Just One of The People," and he meant it in ways more profound than one might garner at first glance. He meant a lot to us here, and he will always be with us, just over yonder. While his music will continue to speak for itself, here we have a profound and intimate affection for Doc, and we are above all grateful for who he was as a man.



*L-R: Tommy Walsh, Willard Watson III, Doc; courtesy Willard Watson III*

**Willard C. Watson III (Boone, North Carolina)**

My first encounter with Doc Watson was a CD, *Black Mountain Rag*, a "best of" CD of his and Merle's on the Flying Fish label. This CD tickled my ears as a freshman in college, and I never in my wildest dreams thought I would ever get a chance to meet this famous relative. Doc was a favorite cousin of my great-grandfather Willard Watson, whom I am named after. To boot, I never even knew about my heritage until I moved up to Boone for college from Fayetteville, NC. My father never thought it important to mention until he found out I was accepted to Appalachian State University! I was privileged to work as an intern for ASU's Sustainable Development program's Community Outreach on the Musicfest 'n Sugar Grove in 2010. This gave me a chance to learn about Doc's history and meet the man himself.

Doc was a humble man who only took pride in things that he built, such as the best porch swing I ever sat in, with ball bearings from a WWII-era tank. He was the best person I ever had a chance to share a breath with, and he would tell you what it meant to be a man. As a young man in love myself, I asked him what his secret was, that kept him in love with Rosa Lee all these 60+ years. He said "Son, when it's real, you don't need a secret!"

After lunch on the day of our visit, I took Doc to get some shampoo, pick up his dry cleaning, and to see his dear Rosa Lee in the nursing home. We went with Doc's long-time friend Tommy Walsh, my internship adviser during my time with the Sustainable Development program. He has some trouble walking, so when we went to the nursing home, he needed a wheelchair.

As I pushed Tommy's wheelchair, Doc held on to my elbow, and we made our way to Rosa Lee's room. Doc spoke up and said, "Son, I bet this is the first time you've ever had to take care of two handicapped people, huh?"

I replied, "Yes, but I've always heard many hands make the load lighter so it's no problem to me."

He just laughed his full-bodied laugh and said "Well, I guess you're right there, son!" We went to Rosa Lee's room and all cried as Doc and Rosa Lee tried to speak to each other, but she had suffered a severe stroke and all they could do was hold hands.

I will never forget Doc's laugh, or their love, which was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.

[Mark Cosgrove, guitarist](#)<sup>[10]</sup>(Doylestown, Pennsylvania)

I was just discovering how much I loved the guitar in general when I discovered Doc Watson. I was a child in the '60s and a teenager in the '70s and came through rock 'n' roll music having discovered Clarence White with The Byrds just around the same time the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band gathered people for *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* record. One listening to Doc's "Black Mountain Rag" made me an instant convert to flatpicking guitar forever. His tone and precision, coupled with his enormous feel and musicality, to this day places him in a category of guitarists and entertainers all his own. There will never be another one like him, and his loss leaves a giant void.

I owe so much to this man. The times I was fortunate enough to be around him were always backstage somewhere, and it's unthinkable, in that environment, to burden a person with gushing about how they've changed your life. You just don't do that. But I kind of wish I had

found a way... I would not be making my living as a musician if it weren't for you, Doc.

Thank you, Arthel ?Doc? Watson. I will miss you forever.

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**We are grateful to** Jeff Cardey, Cindy Baucom, Michael Smith, Dix Bruce, Andy Agardy, Dan King, Geoff Morris, Rémy Baïlla, Becky Johnson, Michael Irwin, Paige Anderson, Tom Wolf, Len DeVries, Pamela Rice, Art Dudley, John Sharon, Mitch Greenhill, Laurie Lewis, Niall Toner, Henri Deschamps, Willard C. Watson III, and Mark Cosgrove for sharing their thoughts and memories of Doc Watson.

### Recommended

- [Fred Bartenstein's biography of Doc Watson at the International Bluegrass Music Museum](#) <sup>[11]</sup>
- [Henri Deschamps' Doc Watson tribute page](#) <sup>[12]</sup>
- [Doc Watson, Blind Guitar Wizard Who Influenced Generations, Dies at 89 \(from the New York Times\)](#) <sup>[13]</sup>
- [Doc Watson, Clarence Ashley Footage Unearthed for New Documentary \(from Billboard.com\)](#) <sup>[14]</sup>
- [Fred Robbins' Bluegrass Picking Page](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

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[3] <http://www.stereophile.com/>

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Mountebank-Brothers/153282068135853>

[5] <http://www.disabilitiesunderstood.com/>

[6] <http://www.folkloreproductions.com>

[7] <http://www.laurielewis.com/>

[8] <http://www.nialltonerband.com/>

[9] <http://www.themastfarminn.com>

[10] <http://www.mcosgrove.com>

[11] <http://www.bluegrassmuseum.org/general/zbioDocWatson.php>

[12] <http://www.themastfarminn.com/docwatson-in-memoriain/>

[13] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/arts/music/doc-watson-folk-musician-dies-at-89.html?pagewanted=all>

[14] <http://www.billboard.com/news/doc-watson-clarence-ashley-footage-unearthed-1007362352.story#/news/doc-watson-clarence-ashley-footage-unearthed-1007362352.story>

[15] <http://frobbo.org/picking.html>

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