

Doc & Merle Watson

In Concert



Ramblin

DOC & MERLE WATSON IN CONCERT

by Mark Humphrey

"Onstage I often was astounded by the amazing musical interaction between Merle, Doc, and T. Michael Coleman. Working with them I experienced the finest old-time music I ever heard, and I had the best seat in the house. Boy, did it groove."

— Mark O'Connor recalling accompanying the Watsons on their 1983 European tour in the January 1986 Frets magazine tribute to Merle Watson.



Groove they surely did, though calling the music Doc and Merle Watson made in the early 1980s ‘old-timey’ would be problematic for some purists. Most, however, would readily concede that the Watson’s old-timey roots were never given short shrift, even as the past’s music was brought briskly into the present tense by these remarkable musicians. The onstage team of Doc and his son Merle spanned twenty-plus years of performance before being tragically ended by a tractor accident which claimed Merle Watson on October 24, 1985. (He was 36.) “After Merle’s death,” bassist T. Michael Coleman recalled, “Doc said to me that it was as though in one blow three dear people in his life had been taken away: a business partner, a very close friend, and most of all, a son.” After a hiatus, Doc resumed performing with guitarist Jack Lawrence, but in recent years he has been in semi-retirement. You can, however, still see him playing brilliantly at the annual

Merle Watson Memorial Festival, which has become one of the major folk music festivals of the Southeast.

The interviews with Doc and Merle interspersed through this video preclude the necessity of extensive biographies here: they tell their own stories quite effectively. Suffice it to say that Arthel “Doc” Watson was born in Stoney Fork, North Carolina, on March 23, 1923. His parents, General Dixon and Annie Watson, were musical, as was much of his entire extended family. Doc’s early encounters with harmonicas, banjos, and guitars were entirely natural, and in early adulthood music developed into a meager vocation for him. He was nearing 40 when folklorist Ralph Rinzler and collector Eugene Earle discovered him in the company of veteran singer-banjoist Clarence Ashley in East Tennessee and suggested he might play a role in the burgeoning folk revival. By contrast, Merle Watson (born February 8, 1949) began appearing with his father during the peak of that revival at age fifteen. His formative influences took in not only the music of his father but that of his maternal grandfather, Gaither Carlton, music learned from figures with whom he and his father shared concert and festival stages, such as Mississippi John Hurt, and sounds any self-respecting Southerner was attuned to in the early 1970s, such as the Allman Brothers. Father and son were very different personalities, yet the music they made together blended with a precision and perfection that suggests something especially musical in their genes.

Doc and Merle Watson shared the triumph of two Grammy wins, the monotony of endless miles on the road, and all the bonds and conflicts fathers and sons share magnified by their very public partnership. It ended too tragically soon, so we can be grateful that their musical team started so early. The Watsons’ impact on folk, bluegrass, and country audiences was always a tremendous joy, and those of us who had the pleasure of being in those audiences will delight in reliving that experience via this video.



THE SONGS

Doc Watson came to the folk revival with a far more wide-ranging background of musical experience than the stereotypic rustic retrieved from Appalachian isolation. If the older men in whose company he was discovered such as Clarence Ashley played music little changed from their youth in the 1920s, Doc was clearly cut from more modern cloth. He came of age in the 1940s when Roy Acuff was country music's king and when the popular country music of the day was widely disseminated via radio. Some of it, such as the mandolin-and-guitar brother duos like the Blue Sky Boys, was wistful and pure, but accordions and clarinets could also be heard blending pop with country whenever Pee Wee King appeared on the Grand Ole Opry. The 1940s was the era when bluegrass, Western Swing, and honky-tonk were newly distinct sounds heard under the umbrella of what we now call country music (and what then was labeled hillbilly or, more politely, folk music). Doc took note of it all. He tuned in Merle Travis's broadcasts over Cincinnati's WLW and was no different from aspiring guitarists of later generations in absorbing and emulating the latest 'hot' styles. He grew up in a family and community rich in various strains of what we commonly call 'old-timey' music; the impact of that music shared via family and community was considerable on the musical personality Doc developed. But unlike rural North Carolinian artists of the generation prior, his family and community (and, to a lesser extent, the phonograph) did not encompass Doc's entire musical world. There were radios even in Deep Gap, and Doc could hear the changing shape of country music as readily as any other Southerner of his generation.

So the fact that Doc was playing country dance tunes, rockabilly, and whatever else was then popular on electric guitar in a dance band at the time of his discovery should come neither as surprise nor be regarded as an ignoble (or at least ironic) fate for such a remarkable folk artist. Given his handicap (blindness), his musical talent and the need to support a family, it would have been surprising had he done otherwise. The 'old-time' tunes had long been consigned to back porch picking sessions and gatherings of 'old-timers' – Doc enjoyed their music, but saw no profit in being a folk purist among the citizens of rural North Carolina. His incred-



ulity at the interest of Northern urbanites in such music was, given his experience, entirely reasonable. His statement in one of this video's interview segments about participating in the folk revival "against my better judgment" is no exaggeration.

But once he realized the significance of the opportunity presented him, Doc threw himself wholeheartedly into the task of finding material which would satisfy his new audience. "Doc was active in the quest for repertoire," his discoverer, Ralph Rinzler, wrote in the notes to *The Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley: 1960-1962* (Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40029/30). Rinzler recalls Doc collecting some songs from older members of his family and others from printed collections of folk songs as well as from tapes supplied by collectors such as Gene Earle. Some, of course, he remembered from childhood, but little of the 'old-time' music he was suddenly asked to play was anything he had performed (except informally) for a long while. In a 1983 *Frets* magazine interview, Doc told Rick Gartner: "Ralph told me, 'Doc, now when you get your foot in the door, you can expand your sets and play some of the other things that you enjoy playing, but during this period play the traditional music, lean on it.'" Doc became a folk artist in a rather different way from such 'rediscoveries' as Clarence Ashley, whose 'act' was an act of recollection. There was some of that for Doc, too, but there was also the process of learning new-old material and adapting to a new role as folk singer.

Doc was a professional musician who, under different circumstances, might have become a sideman to a Nashville country star. Instead, Doc learned the expectations of his new audience and fulfilled them brilliantly.

None of this is said to belittle Doc's achievement during the folk revival, which was deservedly a triumph. It's said only to point out that he brought an entirely different set of cards to the table than did the folk 'rediscoveries' whose artistic growth essentially ended with the advent of the Depression. Doc may have been presented as a related rustic from the hills, but he was a rustic who, not unlike the urban folk enthusiasts who were his audience, learned some of his 'old-time' repertoire from the tapes of record collectors. Musically he was a product as much of his experience playing 'hot' breaks during country shuffles as he was of the ballads and hymns learned from ancient kinsmen. Artistically, Doc was the perfect bridge between the 1960s folk urbanite and the Appalachian 'old-timers' seemingly sprung from 1920s time warps. He was precisely midstream between their worlds and partook freely of both.

The songs performed on this video reflect the extension of Doc's eclecticism and musicianship twenty years up the road from his discovery in 1960. Initially he was presented (as was the wont of the day) as a musical living fossil, and there is a careful hesitance in some of his early performances which suggests his pangs at adjusting to this role. Surely there were times, answering a request for a North Carolinian variant





of a Child ballad, that Doc yearned to be back in Johnson City, Tennessee playing *Blue Suede Shoes* loud on his Les Paul Gibson for dancing drunks. By the late 1960s, however, the ‘authenticity’ noose had loosened sufficiently for Doc to record a neo-country album (*Good Deal*) in Nashville, and from then on he appears to have felt free to publicly witness to the wider perimeters of his musical world.

The rousing set-opener of this performance, *Way Down Town*, reflects Doc’s childhood influences. Ralph Rinzler wrote of it: “Doc heard Uncle Dave Macon’s Opry broadcast and recorded performances of this tune as a boy, but his verses for the song were learned from his cousin Dudley Watson, a fiddler and guitar player.” The development of Doc’s style from his early appearances before urban audiences is evident when you compare this brisk and polished 1980 performance with those of the same song from the early 1960s on Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley: *The Original Folkways Recordings, 1960-1962* (Smithsonian/Folkways CD SF 40029/30) and *Bluegrass at Newport* (Vanguard VCD 121/22) in which Doc appeared with fiddler Fred Price and singer-guitarist Clint Howard.

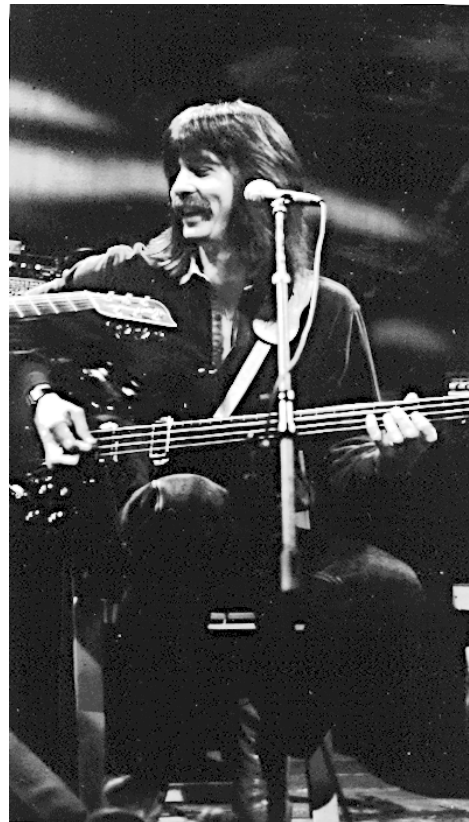
Bassist T. Michael Coleman served several years as sideman to the Watsons before joining the pioneering urban bluegrass group the Seldom Scene. Coleman wrote *Sadie*, which shows Doc’s knack for weaving a new (but nicely old-sounding) song into his repertoire.

Nothing here is probably of any greater vintage than *Frosty Morn*, which showcases Merle’s talent as ‘old-timey’ banjoist. (Doc recalls Merle learning this style from his grand-

father, Gaither Carlton, and says his son was also an excellent bluegrass style banjoist.) Merle and Doc recorded *Frosty Morn* on The Doc Watson Family (Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40012), in which Smithsonian Archivist Jeff Place noted: “This was learned from the playing of Jim Collier, who in turn learned it from Bayard Ray, a fourth generation fiddler from Marshall, North Carolina.” The Celtic revival was a still-thriving (and relatively new) part of the American folk scene at the time of this 1980 performance, and this apparently Celtic-rooted tune was surely a crowd pleaser then. Certainly the tune’s modal basis is kindred to many Irish tunes. *Frosty Morn* is built on what is essentially a pentatonic scale, albeit one in which a sixth note (in this case the scale’s sixth degree) appears in passing. The third is eliminated, the seventh is flatted, and the resultant ‘high lonesome’ sound is very ancient indeed, a sound appearing in sundry forms all the way from China to North Carolina.

Doc may not have been the first to flat pick fiddle tunes, but his agility and grace set the standard to which every subsequent flatpicker aspired. Performances like the medley in this video of *Big Sandy/Old Joe Clark* illustrate how brilliantly he and Merle meshed. Especially noteworthy is Doc’s harmony line to Merle’s lead on *Old Joe Clark*. Doc reportedly developed much of his dazzling technique when playing electric guitar for square dancers in the 1950s.

The influence of the folk revival is evident in the performance of *Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright*, which Bob Dylan recorded on his 1963 *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* album. (It was also a top ten hit that year for Peter, Paul & Mary.) Doc must have heard many performances of the song during his 1963-64 appearances



at the Newport Folk Festival, and incorporated it into his repertoire.

George Gershwin's 1935 'folk opera,' *Porgy and Bess*, yielded many songs which have become staples of the jazz and cabaret repertoires, of which none is more popular than *Summertime*. If Gershwin's 'art-pop' songs appear to be a stretch for a folk artist like Doc Watson, consider that *Summertime* is drenched in blues, an idiom Doc has always loved. He also plainly loves a good song, and *Summertime* has long been a highlight of his performances. (He recorded it on 1972's *Elementary Doctor Watson!*, reissued on CD in 1993 by Sugar Hill.) Along with Doc's honied vocals, Merle's superb blues guitar lines shine in this video performance.

Merle Travis's *Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)* became a number one hit for Tex Williams (who died of lung cancer in 1985) during the summer of 1947. Williams' hit became the Capitol label's first million seller, and this comic 'talking blues' (inspired by Bert Williams's *The Darktown Poker Club*) would be revived in the 1970s-80s not only by Doc but by Commander Cody and Sammy Davis, Jr. Don't look for it again in the nicotineless '90s.

Swing guitar legends Django Reinhardt and Oscar Aleman both recorded *Sweet Georgia Brown* in the 1930s-40s, and the 1925 pop tune would be recorded by Chet Atkins (with Lenny Breau) in 1976. Country pickers had been absorbing jazz tunes and licks since the 1920s, Western Swing bands were vamping around *Sweet Georgia Brown* in the 1930s, and it's likely it had been a familiar jam tune in Doc's musical circle of the 1950s. (He recorded it on the 1966 Vanguard album, *Southbound*.) Here he sprints through it at three varied tempos.

Pallet On Your Floor is a rousing rendition of a song learned during the folk revival from Mississippi John Hurt, whose impact on both Doc and Merle is evident in their interview comments in this video. The gently charismatic Hurt was one of the most serendipitous rediscoveries of the early 1960s folk and blues revival. He had originally recorded *Pallet On Your Floor* in 1928 for Okeh as *Ain't No Tellin'* (no pallet is mentioned in that first recording).

As Doc points out, Roy Acuff's *Streamline Cannonball* originally chugged at a less frenetic pace. Doc's driving delivery with rack harmonica recalls other train tunes in his songbag: Frank Hutchison's *Train That Carried My Girl From*



Town and the Delmore Brothers's *Freight Train Boogie*. Like Acuff, Doc's made train songs something of a specialty: his *Riding The Midnight Train* (Sugar Hill) claimed the 1986 Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Recording.

The haunting a capella *Wild Bill Jones* is the sort of grim booze and blood ballad which was once prevalent in Appalachia. Dock Boggs and Roscoe Holcomb were two of the notable 'mountain blues' singer-banjoists who served chilling doses of such dark wonders to folk audiences in the 1960s.

I'm a Natural Born Gambler is the second example of Merle Travis's wit to surface in this performance. Travis recorded it for Capitol in 1947, and Doc, who doubtless heard it then, may have become reacquainted with the song during one of his 1970s appearances with Travis, whose influence is evident both in Doc's fingerpicking and in his Western Swing-inspired 'hot' breaks here.

Got the Blues Can't Be Satisfied is another song Doc and Merle learned from John Hurt, who first recorded this for Okeh in 1928. Merle's exquisite slide guitar work, influenced in part by his admiration for Duane Allman, is featured to good effect here.

His slide work turns from bluesily strutting to wistful on *Miss the Mississippi And You*, first recorded by the so-called 'Father of Country Music,' Jimmie Rodgers, in 1932. (It was one of four songs the Mississippi-born 'Singing Brakeman'

would record during his brief career with 'Mississippi' in the title.) Doc's vocals effectively convey the homesickness Rodgers surely felt recording in New York and which Doc often felt on the road.

By contrast, the ebullient come-on of '*Rangement Blues* leaves little room for sentiment. Originally recorded in 1940 as *Arrangement for Me Blues* by Bo Carter of Mississippi's celebrated musical Chatman clan, the song likely came to Doc via his contacts among record collectors and blues aficionados. (Carter's original recording was reissued on Lp by Yazoo Records in the 1970s.)

The medley which closes this video presents what is surely the most archaic instrumental style in Doc's varied bag. Ralph Rinzler once wrote: "A harmonica was given to Doc every Christmas as far back as he can remember." The medley of *Yankee Doodle/Dixie* showcases a style of harmonica playing which you hear on recordings of harp players (both black and white) from the 1920s. Bluesy yet not strictly the blues, it's a style which Doc likely learned from old men who had played much like that when they themselves were boys. As for the background of the tunes, *Yankee Doodle* is of disputed origin but is known to have been popular with rebelling American colonists by 1775. *Dixie* was the rallying cry of Southern secessionists of the 1860s, much to the chagrin of its composer, minstrel performer and songwriter Daniel Decatur Emmett. The song had been so popular on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line that, after the defeat of the Confederacy, President Lincoln declared it was once again permissible for all Americans to sing *Dixie*.



Doc Watson is widely regarded as the finest flat-picking guitarist and preeminent folk artist alive today. He is a living musical treasury of Americana. In this *Ramblin'* concert recorded in 1980, Doc is joined by his son Merle on guitar and banjo and Michael Coleman on bass. Their performance is a showcase of native folk traditions and a display of distinctive stylistic inventions. Doc and Merle Watson's repertoire encompasses country ballads, bluegrass, gospel, jazz standards, contemporary songs and blues. A visit with Doc and Merle at home in Deep Gap, North Carolina and in concert in Rock Hill, South Carolina is also included.

Titles include: Way Downtown, Sadie, Frosty Morn, Medley: Big Sandy/Old Joe Clark, Don't Think Twice, It's Alright, Summertime, Smoke, Smoke, Sweet Georgia Brown, Pallet On Your Floor, Streamline Cannonball, Wild Bill Jones, Natural Born Gambler Man, Got The Blues Can't Be Satisfied, I Miss The Mississippi And You, 'Rangement Blues and Medley: Yankee Doodle/Dixie **BONUS MATERIAL:** 1999 *Interview with Doc*

Produced by Ohio University Telecommunications Center

Directed by Greg Hill * Running Time: 70 minutes • Color

Front Photo: Mitch Greenhill

Back Photo: Jim Crouse & Janet Thompson

Vestapol 13030

Nationally distributed by Rounder Records,

One Camp Street, Cambridge, MA 02140

Representation to Music Stores by

Mel Bay Publications

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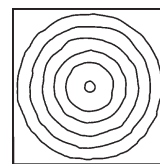
A division of

Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, Inc.

ISBN: 1-57940-964-4



0 11671 30309 3



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