

LET'S ROLL

Doc Watson Remembrance

Pete Wernick

These last few months have been quite a time of loss in the world of acoustic string music. Earl Scruggs, Doug Dillard, Everett Lilly, and Doc Watson have passed, all in a two-month period. Earl and Doug have been remembered well in these pages.

The passing of Doc Watson seems

He was a country guy from the mountains in a corner of North Carolina, and for the first 40 years of his life he hardly traveled out of the area. But he was a man of the world musically.

He couldn't see, but could play cleanly all over the neck, with confidence, subtlety,



especially momentous to me. Though his banjo playing was wonderful, he was of course known primarily as a guitarist and singer. But I think his significance goes far beyond what instrument he played. Doc was a pure musician, and his music affected me as a banjo player even when he wasn't playing the banjo. His grace and humanity affected me as both an entertainer and as a person.

Doc can be said to be the greatest folk performer of all. He was 100% musical... everything he played and sang was clear with full tone, perfectly timed, and just plain sounded good. I remember Earl Scruggs' comment that no one could get the tone out of an instrument like a blind man or a woman.

Doc's versatility and depth as a musician continually amazed me. He knew the old country songs, the mountain songs, and the hymns. He could play fiddle tunes on the guitar, and jazzy pieces like *Summertime* and *Sweet Georgia Brown*. He would do Elvis and rockabilly (remember the "Docabilly" album?) and tell stories. He knew more verses of some songs than I knew existed. This fullness of his knowledge was inspirational to be around.

Doc's last Saturday night jam at Merlefest, April 28, 2012. Mitch Greenhill, Sam Bush, Doc, and T Michael Coleman. Photo by Pete Wernick

and power...and the very best of taste.

The place where I practice has no electricity, a little cabin I built near the creek that crosses my property. At night I use a couple of candles to see. Sometimes they go out and it's dark. I keep playing, and I always think of Doc. I tell myself, my hands should know where the notes are. Doc couldn't see, why should I have to?

The man himself was in some ways even more impressive than the musician. He was thoughtful and gracious both on and off stage. For someone born to virtually illiterate parents, one of nine kids, and with only a few years of schooling, he was strikingly cultivated in the way he spoke and treated those around him.

When Hot Rize became regulars on the music circuit in the 1980s, we'd often cross paths with Doc. It took me a while to get to know him because I just couldn't get out of the persona of "awestruck fan". He didn't have much to say in that mode.

Once he even asked if I minded letting him listen to Norman Blake, who was on stage. But one day backstage we started talking about...shirts, of all things! He had a lot to say about shirts, believe it or not, and that's when I realized that Doc was more comfortable being "just a guy" than a music icon. Much like Earl, in fact. So often when I'd see him by himself backstage, I'd go over and have a chat with him about whatever came to mind, and we'd both be at ease.

One thing he was unbelievably good at was running a jam session, even when surrounded by as many as 10 or 12 musicians. He was super-aware of the sounds around him, even if he didn't know who was playing. He'd just say, "Let's hear some fiddle now," or "pick that banjer" right at the right time, and he could pull off that sort of spontaneity quite readily even in front of a large audience. Of course the musicians were super-tuned into him, so they could react quickly.

Once I was in a big jam with him at Merlefest when his perennial bass player/right-hand man T Michael Coleman wasn't there, and I was asked to stick close and help him as needed.

First off, he asked me who was on stage. I told him who was on his left and his right, and he took it from there. It's hard to express the pride and honor I felt in that simple act of being helpful to Doc Watson.

There was just one time I heard him cuss, when I asked after his first set at a festival how the sound on stage was. After he told me(!), I brought the sound man over to talk to him, and the wide-eyed guy was very concerned to make it right for the second set, which he did. I was surprised that Doc didn't make this effort himself, but came to realize he was so used to sound problems on stage he had given up trying to work it out and was prepared to just tough it through, as he must have done innumerable times.

At the 25th annual Merlefest, the festival created to honor his late son, the 89 year-old legend did his last performances. It was just last April 28, in his last month on earth, I sat with my wife and David Holt at the back of the Watson Stage, thinking back to seeing him in the early 60s, when he first started taking a bus alone from North Carolina to New York City, playing solo at the folk mecca, Gerde's Folk City. Now some 50 years later, the great hands

still made magic on the guitar. The great voice still resonated. Exiting the stage, he was humming happily and savoring the music he'd just been part of. But visiting with him later, I knew it was probably my last time to see him.

Doc had a wonderful life. Though he often said he would have been glad to stay home with his family and be a local musician, I know he really enjoyed and was proud of his performing career, and loved playing with the world-class musicians who were eager to pick with him. No denying the travel over that 50 years must have been hard, but the music couldn't have been better.

What gifts he gave us! Deep River Blues is worthy of being in any time capsule for what human beings could accomplish on this planet. Any banjo player can listen to Doc and learn something about how good music can sound.

Pete highly recommends the newly revised in-depth biography of Doc Watson, Blind But Now I See, by Kent Gustavson. Visit DrBanjo.com, and view a video of Pete jamming with Doc on Farewell Blues.