

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

Doc Watson *Blue Ridge mountain boy*

By Hannah Davis

The death of a family pet is sad. But for Doc Watson, it was a golden opportunity.

Watson, now 87 and a seven-time Grammy winner, got his start playing a homemade banjo made from wood, metal and the skin off his grandmother's dead cat.

That crude instrument sparked a lifelong passion that made a young boy from rural North Carolina a beloved and famous musician.

A boy from the South

Arhel Lane Watson was born March 3, 1923, near Deep Gap, in the heart of western North Carolina. He still lives there.

Early in his career, an announcer suggested he needed a catchier name. An audience member called out Doc. It stuck.

Doc and his eight siblings grew up around music. Their mother sang throughout the day, and at night the family sang hymns. Their father led the singing at their church.

An eye infection left Doc blind before he could walk, but didn't mask his love of music. By age 6, Doc played the harmonica. After that, he began crafting homemade instruments. At 11, his father made him the cat skin banjo.

At 10, Doc enrolled in the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh. There Doc heard new types of music – blues, jazz, classical. By 13, he began playing guitar.

Back home in Deep Gap, a town of maybe 2,300, Doc chopped and sold wood to pay for his first guitar.

He taught himself to pick the songs he grew up hearing. He learned Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers tunes by playing their records on the family phonograph.

"When the guitar came along, to me that was my first love in music," he said in a 1995 interview in *Dirty Linen* magazine.

Family and fame

Doc married Rosa Lee Carlton in 1947. Carlton also had a musical family. To this day, Doc insists she has the prettiest voice he's ever heard.

The Watsons had two children, Eddy Merle, in 1949, and Nancy Ellen, in 1951.

As his family grew, Doc's music career

took off. In 1953, he joined Jack Williams and the Country Gentleman as a lead guitarist. During his eight years with the band, he began playing traditional fiddle tunes on acoustic and electric guitar, an idea born from frustration with his less-than-impressive fiddle talent.

Learning fiddle tunes taught Doc to play guitar with incredible speed, said Bill Ferris, a Joel Williamson eminent professor of history at UNC-Chapel Hill and senior associate director of the Center for the Study of the American South. "Nobody can out-run Doc on the guitar."

While Doc traveled and performed, son Merle took up the guitar. After three months of study, Merle joined his father on tour. They released "Doc Watson & Son" in November 1965, eight months after Merle began playing.

Doc's career reached new heights with Merle in tow. Before the 1960s ended, Doc recorded eight more albums. In 1973, Doc won his first Grammy.

A festival for Merle

Then in 1985, Merle died in a tractor accident. After Merle's death, Doc decided to leave music behind. In a 1997 interview with *Acoustic Musician* magazine, Doc explained why he kept going:

"The night before the funeral I had decided to quit, just give up playing. Well, that night I had this dream. Now, usually I do have some light perception, but in this dream it was so dark I could hardly stand it. It was like I was in quicksand up to my waist and I felt I wasn't gonna make it out alive. Then suddenly this big old strong hand reached back and grabbed me by the hand and I heard this voice saying, 'Come on, Dad, you can make it. Keep going.'"

The music community mourned Merle's death. In 1988, Doc and several other artists founded the Merle Watson Memorial Festival, fondly known as MerleFest.

That first festival drew 4,000 people to the Wilkes Community College campus in Wilkesboro. Now in its 23rd year, MerleFest attracts nearly 70,000 people and brings an estimated \$17 million to the community.

One of the Southeast's largest music festivals, MerleFest is a four-day celebration



Hugh Morton Photographs & Films, © N.C. Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill

of music, with styles ranging from country and bluegrass to Celtic and jazz. MerleFest draws hundreds of local bands, plus major artists such as Elvis Costello, Dolly Parton and John Paul Jones.

A musician's legacy

In addition to his Grammy awards, Doc received the National Medal of the Arts from President Clinton in 1997 and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Recording Academy. He has received honorary degrees from Wilkes Community College, UNC-Chapel Hill, Berklee College of Music and Appalachian State University.

He is featured on 67 albums, 28 of which are his own. His influence spans genres from country and bluegrass to rock and roll and the blues.

Doc has launched the careers of artists such as the Avett Brothers, Gillian Welch and Nickel Creek. Through his music and MerleFest, Doc gives millions of dollars back to his beloved western North Carolina each year.

Doc has brought respect to North Carolina folk music and created bluegrass fans around the world. "He's one of the most beloved musicians to come from the South," said Professor Bill Ferris. "He is a true North Carolina icon."

Turns out, losing the cat may have been worth it.

www.docsguitar.com

www.merlefest.org

Interview: Bill Ferris, wferris@unc.edu

Miller, Dan. *A Biography of Doc Watson*.

Gustavson, Kent. *Blind But Now I See*.

Profile written by a student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-CH. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, www.ncpress.com.