

Guitar and folk music great Doc Watson dead at 89

By Hiram Lee
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Legendary guitarist Doc Watson died May 29 at the age of 89 at the Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Watson had undergone colon surgery earlier that week following a fall at home.

A pioneer in the flatpicking style of guitar playing, Watson was an iconic figure in folk, bluegrass and country music. Hundreds attended his funeral service on Sunday in North Carolina, many standing in line for hours to pay their respects.

“Doc” Watson was born Arthel Lane Watson on March 3, 1923. He grew up in the small Appalachian community of Deep Gap, North Carolina, near the Tennessee border. An eye infection impaired Watson’s vision in his infancy, and the future musician would be completely blind before the age of one.

Watson’s father, General Watson, was a farmer and a sawmill worker, and the family lived in a log cabin that the elder Watson built with his own hands. The large family, with nine children in all, did not have much money and were crowded in the small home. As a boy, Doc had to share a bed with two brothers. He later recalled it would get so cold that frost formed on the pillow.

The Watsons were a musical family. General Watson led the choir at the local church and played “old time” banjo at home. Watson’s mother sang folk ballads and hymns. By the age of five, Doc was also playing a banjo his father had made for him.

North Carolina law at the time mandated education for the blind from the age of seven and provided poor families unable to send their children away to school with financial assistance. On this basis, Watson began attending the Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh at the age of 10. The school had an extensive music program, and the young Watson was

exposed to new kinds of music, including classical and jazz.

A friend at school had a guitar and allowed Watson to play it. Watson fell in love with the instrument and before long would have his own, purchased by his father with a week’s wages from the sawmill. Watson would eventually become a skilled fingerstyle guitarist, but it would be his dynamic playing with a flat pick that would prove to be so influential.

Watson began playing with a flat pick after listening to early country music star Jimmie Rodgers (1897-1933), known as “The Singing Brakeman,” who also played with a flat pick, as opposed to a thumb pick or his bare fingers. The flat pick brought with it a particular feel, a bouncing quality and sharper articulation of notes.

Watson was working as a piano tuner in the early 1950s when he took his first steps as a professional musician. He joined a regional country swing and rockabilly band led by Jack Williams, in which he played electric guitar. The band did not have a fiddle player, and to accommodate the demand for fast-paced fiddle tunes and square dances, Watson gradually developed a virtuoso guitar technique that incorporated the fast tempos and dancing rhythmic qualities of Appalachian fiddle music.

While he honed his technique on stage with the electric guitar, Watson never left behind acoustic music. The folk songs of his youth remained close to his heart, and he continued to perform “old time” music with his family and neighbors in Deep Gap.

In spite of his talents, it’s possible no one outside of North Carolina would ever have heard of Doc Watson had he not been “discovered” by folklorist Ralph Rinzler in 1960. Rinzler had traveled to North Carolina to record Watson’s friend and neighbor Clarence

“Tom” Ashley, a remarkable old-time banjo player and folk singer who had once been a member of the famed Carolina Tar Heels.

Together, Ashley and Watson, along with multi-instrumentalist Gaither Carlton (Watson’s father-in-law), violinist Fred Price and guitarist Clint Howard recorded a wealth of traditional folk songs for Rinzler. These very valuable recordings, collected today on *The Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley, 1960-1962*, merit repeated listening.

Rinzler brought Watson and his fellow musicians to New York City in 1961, launching a national and global career in music that would last half a century. Watson’s debut album as a solo artist, simply entitled *Doc Watson*, appeared in 1964.

Doc Watson felt a deep connection to the Appalachian folk songs in his repertoire, as well as the many blues and standards he recorded. These old tunes were given new life by Watson. Never mere novelties, the songs had meaning for him, and he communicated that meaning to his listeners.

The tragic ballads Watson sang and played—such as “Omie Wise” and “St. James Hospital”—were imbued with an intense sadness. Watson’s resonant baritone voice was capable of the most haunting expression. On the lighter songs and the fiddle tunes, his performances, even at the fastest tempos, could be playful and appeared almost effortless. His performance of “Black Mountain Rag” at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival deserves special mention for the sheer delight one hears in his playing.

Though Watson is best known for his flatpicking, many of his best recordings feature his exceptional fingerstyle guitar work. Among the latter are recordings of “Deep River Blues,” “Blue Railroad Train,” “Doc’s Guitar,” “Sitting on Top of the World” and “St. James Hospital.”

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Watson was joined on the road and in the recording studio by his son Merle Watson, an accomplished guitarist in his own right. The duo’s 1971 album, *Doc Watson Live on Stage, featuring Merle Watson*, features some genuinely exhilarating moments. Merle also wrote one of Watson’s better-known songs, “Southbound,” included on the 1966 album of the same name. Watson would often describe his son as the best friend he’d ever had.

Merle Watson died tragically in 1985 at the age of 36 in a tractor accident on the family farm. It was an enormous personal and artistic loss. Three years later, Doc Watson founded the annual MerleFest in his son’s honor. The festival, held each year at Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, continues to be a major event, drawing large audiences and presenting musicians from a variety of genres within the world of “roots music.”

Though he often spoke of retirement during his long career, Watson was still active at the time of his death. He was scheduled to perform later this month at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. The planned concert will now be a daylong tribute to the late artist.

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