

DOC WATSON AT 100

Classics Never Go Out of Style

WRITTEN BY MIKE ENGLAND



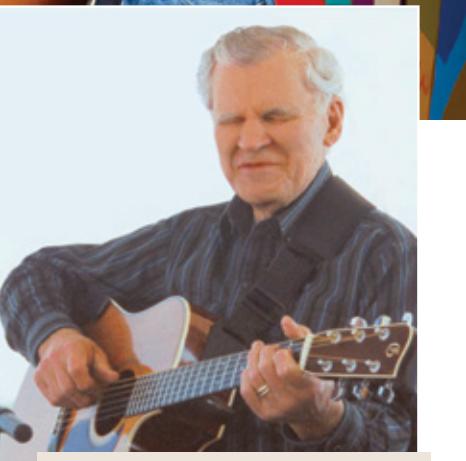
The Doc at 100 Group (left to right): Dr. Ted Olson, T. Michael Coleman, Jack Lawrence, Jack Hinshelwood, Wayne Henderson. // PHOTO BY DAN MIROLI

March 3rd, 2023 would have been Doc Watson's 100th birthday. His influence on bluegrass and old-time music is undeniable. For guitar players, learning to flatpick Doc's version of "Blackberry Blossom" and fingerpick "Deep River Blues" was almost considered a rite of passage. Countless players spent countless hours slowing Doc's records down so they could steal his silky-smooth licks. Doc has served as an inspiration and benchmark for musicians for well over 60 years.

The late Tony Rice recalled the first time he heard a Doc Watson record... "It was like God had come down and started playing a D-28." Flatpicking master Bryan Sutton cites Doc Watson as the single influence his guitar playing. "The way I think about things like clarity, speed and a good bit of my tone come directly

from Doc." Andy Falco, guitar player in the Infamous Stringdusters, recalls seeing Doc and guitarist Jack Lawrence at a workshop at Winterhawk Bluegrass Festival (now called Grey Fox'). At the conclusion of the workshop I walked back towards the campsite stunned. I decided I had to learn to play like Doc. I would not be here if not for Doc Watson, period. The list of guitarists citing Doc Watson's influence is truly extensive and continues to grow.

However, Doc's impact extended far beyond just guitar players and bluegrass music. He was a major force in preserving traditional folk music, championing songs that would have otherwise been lost to time, and introducing them to new generations of listeners. Doc's soulful voice combined with his ability to play guitar, banjo, harmonica and mandolin



Doc Watson performing at Merlefest.

PHOTO BY DAN MILLER

were the perfect vehicle for introducing mountain music to a new generation of listeners.

If there is one attribute that set Doc apart, it was his ability to take a variety of influences and styles...including traditional, bluegrass, country and rockabilly and make them his own. Throughout his career, he collaborated

with a wide range of musicians from Earl Scruggs, Bill Monroe and Ricky Skaggs to Chet Atkins, Jerry Douglas and The Chieftains. The number of well-known players that graced the stage and recording studio with Doc is too numerous to count. One of Doc's most notable collaborations was with The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band on their landmark album *Will The Circle Be Unbroken*. He brought his distinctive sound to the classics "Tennessee Stud" and "Keep On The Sunny Side" and the rest is history.

What is it about Doc Watson and his music that has captivated audiences around the world? Throughout his long and distinguished playing career, Doc made a concerted effort to learn and perform songs from a wide range of styles and regions. From ballads passed down through generations in his native North Carolina to blues tunes discovered during his extensive travels, Doc was a beacon that illuminated the way for a generation of musicians to follow.

It was not only his unquestionable musicianship that attracted people, his humbleness, wit and intelligence combined with his unique musical talents captivated people wherever he played.

Doc Watson died on May 29th, 2012 at the age of 89 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He left behind a rich legacy of over 50 albums, 7 Grammy awards as well as a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, in 1997 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts. In 2000, he was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Honor and in 2010, he received an Honorary Doctor of Music, Berklee College of Music.

Doc and his music survived the folk scare of the 1960's, the Summer of Love, Disco and Techno. Although he has passed, he and his music continue to entertain and influence music lovers everywhere. Doc's 100th birthday has generated a lot of interest and many events have taken place and are continuing to happen to acknowledge Doc Watson and his accomplishments.

THE DOC AT 100 PROJECT

One noteworthy endeavor highlighting the life and music of Doc is the Doc at 100 project. The website: docat100.com...describes it as a concert

program celebrating the life and legacy of Doc Watson by artists that performed with Doc and others that were profoundly influenced by his music. The people involved in this labor of love are:

Dr. Ted Olson is a professor of Appalachian Studies and Bluegrass, Old-Time and Roots Music Studies at East Tennessee State University. Ted is a Grammy Award nominated music historian that authored *Doc's World: Traditional Plus*, the book that accompanies the 4 CD compilation of recordings from Doc's career called *Doc Watson, Life's Work: A Retrospective*. The recording was released in 2021 on Craft Records and the book won Ted the 2022 International Bluegrass Music Association Industry Award for Best Liner Notes.

T. Michael Coleman is a guitarist, bassist and singer-songwriter. He played bass and toured with Doc and Merle for over 15 years. In 2020 he started to record some of his favorite Doc Watson songs, and it led to an album called *Sittin' in the Middle*.

Jack Lawrence is a well-known and respected guitarist and singer who performed with Doc for over 25 years. He has played and recorded with numerous well-known artists including Sam Bush, Del McCoury and Jerry Douglas. In 2013 he used the Martin guitar gifted to him by Doc to record an album called *Arthel's Guitar*. Arthel was Doc's given name.

Wayne Henderson is renowned both as a luthier and as a fingerstyle guitar player. His instruments are highly coveted and can be found in the hands and collections of players around the world. As a performer he has played at Carnegie Hall, on Prairie Home Companion radio show and the International Masters of the Steel String tours. In 1995, he was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Wayne C. Henderson School of Appalachian Arts was opened in Marion, North Carolina in 2015 in his honor.

Wayne was a close friend of Doc's, and he would often come by Wayne's shop to talk and pick.

Jack Hinshelwood is the former Director of the Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. He is an accomplished musician and performer and has produced and recorded music

from the Appalachian region for over 40 years. He is a guitarist, fiddler and singer and has won numerous contests to include the Knoxville World's Fair Guitar Championship, the Wayne Henderson Guitar Championship and is the two-time winner of the Galax Fiddler's Convention guitar contest. Additionally, Jack produced *50 Years in the Making* a 21-track recording and concert of old-time, blues and bluegrass music with some of America's finest artists in those genres.

One would expect, given the impressive resumes, that their concerts promoting the music and life of Doc would be a must see...and you would be right! The show begins with Dr. Ted Olson giving about a 30-minute presentation about Doc's life and music with attendees highly encouraged to ask questions and share any stories they have about Doc. The music portion of the program begins with one or two of the group coming out and playing a few songs and sharing their personal stories about Doc and culminates with all of them playing together. The concert is a "DocFest." Additional information about scheduling a concert or upcoming shows can be found on their website. I have attended two of their concerts and highly recommend you catch one of their shows if you have the opportunity.

THE KRUGER BROTHERS

Another group of folks celebrating Doc's 100th birthday is The Kruger Brothers. "The Kruger Brothers are just about as fine a band as I've ever played with...I love to play music with them." – Doc Watson.

Originally from Switzerland, brothers Uwe and Jens Kruger came under the spell of American traditional music particularly that of Doc Watson, Flatt and Scruggs and Bill Monroe and other practitioners of country, bluegrass and folk music. Uwe plays guitar and sings and Jens is a banjo virtuoso who also sings. They spent their youth busking around Europe and eventually landed a recording contract and a radio show. They added American bass player Joel Landsberg to form a trio in 1995 and have not looked back. The Kruger Brothers made their American debut in 1997 at MerleFest and met and played

The Tradition

The Kruger Brothers (left to right): Uwe Kruger, Jens Kruger and Joel Landsberg.

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRADLEY



with Doc and that encounter began a close relationship that continued until Doc's passing. Uwe and Jens remain friends with Doc's family and have played at various family gatherings. The brothers were so taken with the mountains of northwest North Carolina that they moved there in

2002 and settled just a few miles from the MerleFest grounds at Wilkes County Fairgrounds.

The Kruger Brothers are devoted to the music and memory of Doc Watson and released a 2013 album titled *Doc: Remembering Doc Watson*. So, it should come as no surprise that they could be found and playing a sold-out show celebrating Doc's 100th on March 3rd at the A.J. Fletcher Theater in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The trio are a fan favorite at MerleFest and this year the festival celebrated its 35th year and The Kruger Brothers hosted the always popular Saturday Night Jam. This year it was rightfully called the 100th Doc Watson Birthday Jam and the participants were a Who's Who of musical excellence and left a capacity crowd shouting for more. The Kruger Brothers are continuing to celebrate Doc Watson and more information about upcoming dates can be found at their website: <http://krugerbros.com>.

BILLY STRINGS

The Kruger Brothers were not the only group celebrating Doc Watson's 100th birthday. None other than Billy Strings hosted a memorable show on March 3rd at the Lawrence Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I was lucky enough to be among the 12,000 people in attendance at this once in a lifetime event. Billy enlisted the help of some notable heavy weights to assist him in paying homage to Doc Watson. Bryan Sutton, Molly Tuttle, Wayne Ellis and the Doc at 100 group joined Billy at various points during the evening and the music was even better than you can imagine.

Billy has said "Doc will always be my favorite" and his fondness for Doc was clearly apparent as he and his guests played 47 songs from Doc Watson's repertoire. Billy opened the show with Doc's tune "Way Downtown" and that set the mood for the rest of the show. Molly Tuttle joined in on a number of songs to include "Blue Railroad Train" and "Going Down The Road Feelin' Bad." The Doc at 100 group came on and played "Sadie What A Lady" and spirited versions of "Deep River Blues" and "Steel Guitar Rag." Then mandolin phenom Wayne Ellis came out and joined in on "Watson's Blues" and "Nashville Blues."

Bryan Sutton was on hand to lend his considerable flatpicking prowess and played blistering versions of "Black Mountain Rag" and "Salt Creek." Billy and his band closed out the evening with a beautiful performance of "Mama Don't Allow No Music." After three hours of music dedicated to an American icon, the evening ended and those in attendance left knowing they had taken part in something special.

Doc Watson's influence and contributions over a long and distinguished career are a cornerstone of Americana and Roots music. With the power vested in me as a lifelong fan and devotee of traditional music, I hereby declare 2023 as "The Year of Doc Watson." As such you are encouraged to seek out a concert celebrating Doc and spend time reacquainting yourself with Doc's music... because classics never go out of style. 

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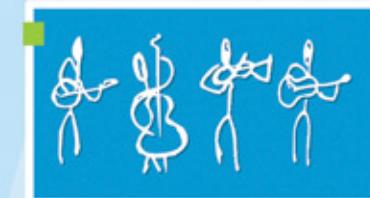
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