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TRADITION AND INNOVATION:
DOC WATSON AND THE FOLK REVIVAL
1960-1964

A Thesis
by
Jon M. Hill

Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

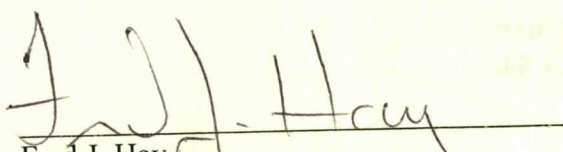
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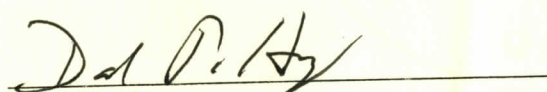
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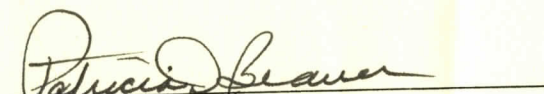
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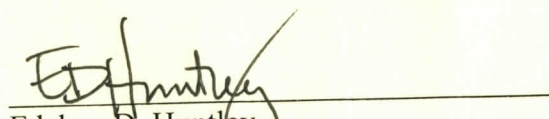
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ABSTRACT

TRADITION AND INNOVATION
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AN M.S. BY A. J. HILL

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ABSTRACT

TRADITION AND INNOVATION: DOC WATSON AND THE FOLK REVIVAL, 1960-1964 (MAY 2009)

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This thesis is an examination of the role of the folk revival in the beginnings of Arthel “Doc” Watson’s career as a professional musician from 1960-1964, as well as a survey of his different musical influences, with a focus on those seminal to his fingerpicking and flatpicking guitar styles. The primary historical events discussed include Watson’s discovery by Ralph Rinzler, his early concert appearances as part of Tom Ashley’s group in New York City and Los Angeles, his first solo engagement at Gerde’s Folk City at the end of 1964, and the beginning of the revival’s popular decline in 1965. In addition to his family, musicians he heard on recordings and the radio, such as Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, and Merle Travis, are also thoroughly discussed in relation to Watson’s musical style. The historical information presented is culled from several different sources; primarily album liner notes, published interviews, and a variety of books, journals, and reference works; and includes the author’s analysis of the data.

This thesis will show that in viewing Watson's musical persona within an historical context, it becomes evident the expectations of the audiences and key figures of the revival played an integral role in Watson's repertoire choices and helped shape the direction of his now distinctive sound. By revisiting the music he learned to play as a youngster, he was able to infuse his new style with a traditional quality valued by the revivalists while simultaneously incorporating his formidable guitar style. Honing his arrangements of fiddle tunes during his years playing electric guitar in a country swing band and performing them for the folk audiences, he introduced scores of guitarists to an innovative style that would help to redefine the role of the acoustic guitar in both folk and bluegrass music, cementing Watson's place among the icons of American music.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the Watson family and the memory of Eddy Merle Watson, my mother and father, my wife Emily, and Pooh.

Acknowledgements

The following individuals deserve recognition for their efforts in helping me complete this project: Dr. Fred J. Hay for his encouragement, patience, knowledge of sources, and letting me hear Doc Watson's first recording; Dr. Pat D. Beaver for her kindness, patience, and support; Dr. David P. Haney for sharing a bluegrass musician's and historian's insights, at short notice; Dr. Gary Walker for his generosity and open door; Dr. Sandy Ballard for her encouragement and making time to talk with me when I needed it; Matt Spade for graciously sharing recordings from his personal collection and countless hours pickin' and talking music with me; my parents Hallett and Beverly Hill for everything; my wife Emily for her support and listening to so much Jimmie Rodgers while we typed; and finally to Doc and Merle Watson for the music and the inspiration.

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Chapter I

Introduction

In his home state of North Carolina, Arthel "Doc" Watson's name is well known and he is widely celebrated as a cultural icon. His recognition as an important American musical figure along with his warm and gracious personality has allowed him to enjoy a highly esteemed position among fellow musicians and the respectful admiration of legions of fans. After nearly fifty years of an active professional career, he has earned a number of accolades including seven Grammy awards and the National Medal for the Arts awarded by President Bill Clinton in 1997. As further testament to his continued popularity and far reaching influence, in 2008 over 76, 000 people from all over the world attended Merlefest, which is held annually in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, to celebrate the life of Watson's son Merle who died in a tragic accident in 1985.

Although his legacy is now secure, until the early sixties and his involvement with the folk revival, Watson was an anonymous figure, struggling to make ends meet. This thesis is an examination of the factors and musical influences that converged from 1960-1964 leading to Doc Watson's discovery by folk revivalist Ralph Rinzler and his subsequent rise to a prominent place in American roots music. To understand the early years of Watson's professional career it is important to consider both the historical context and influences of the folk revival. More to the point, what role did the folk revival play in Watson's discovery and how did the revivalist's expectations help shape his musical identity?

Chapter II is a review of the available literature about Doc Watson's career in the early 1960s and the pertinent historical sources relating to this time period. Chapter III will explore this history beginning in 1960 when Rinzler first encountered Watson, who at that time was an electric guitar player in an all purpose country and western band and

guitar. In order to meet the musical requirements of the to reinvent his personal style and commit himself to child as well as exploring many other sources for new ire. As his career and popularity grew, Watson the solo ed during three years of frequent touring across the country. rst performed in New York City as part of Tom Ashley's s first solo outing in New York at Gerde's Folk City, to 1961 when he recorded his first solo album for Vanguard. As the commercial and political activist branch of the revival began to give way to popular musical trends exemplified by the Beatles and Bob Dylan, Watson was able to maintain a viable career in the music business, largely through his reputation as a superior guitarist and his captivating qualities as a stage performer.

Chapter IV documents Watson's many and varied musical influences, examining his traditional music education with his family and local community, as well as his love of the popular music he heard as a child on the radio and the family's phonograph. Growing up, his main sources of musical instruction consisted of his mother and father as well as singing sacred music at home and with his family's church congregation. When his family obtained a phonograph, a new world of possibility opened up for Watson with the influential recordings of an array of musicians, most notably for Watson's guitar style the

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Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Later, his mastery of the blues rooted fingerpicking of Merle Travis was a significant influence on Watson's style and would greatly contribute to his folk persona. Finally, a discussion of the circumstances and roots of the evolution of his adaptations of fiddle tunes will explain how Watson was not only the key innovator in a new style of guitar playing, but was its most influential practitioner by deeply impressing aspiring guitarists during his cross country tours in the early and mid 1960s.

Chapter II

Literature Review

American folk music icon Arthel "Doc" Watson's professional career now spans nearly fifty years with over seventy albums and numerous awards. Discovered in the early 1960s during the folk revival, Watson is closely identified with folk music, bluegrass, and old-time. An electric guitarist when he was initially brought into the folk movement, within a few years he would come to be known as a master of early country guitar styles played exclusively on an acoustic instrument and a pioneer in a style of adapting traditional fiddle tunes for guitar. Today he is widely recognized for his musical eclecticism, superior guitar playing ability, and seminal influence on bluegrass guitar style and acoustic guitarists specializing in old-time fiddle tune arrangements.

Numerous sources discuss his discovery, influences, and career path, but there is no one monograph or biographical work that brings together the information with analysis of the various factors that resulted in the creation of Watson's folk image and its influence on the development of his musical style. To find the most valuable information about Watson's influences, early career, musical style, and the historical elements involved, there are six primary types of sources: liner notes of his musical recordings, a handful of published books discussing Watson and the broader context of country music history, musical and Southern culture reference works, journals and magazines, guitar instruction manuals, and video recordings for the purpose of analyzing his guitar technique.

The Folk Revival

One of the more important factors in Watson's discovery and career development was the so called urban folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s. There is a vast amount of literature about the many musical styles, artists, and social aspects encompassed by the revival and its proponents. Bill Malone offers an informative overview of the revival within the context of country music in his *Country Music, U.S.A.*, considered by many as an authoritative monograph on the broad scope of the genre. Discussing Doc Watson, he summarizes Watson's discovery, omitting the details for the sake of brevity. He notes Watson's influence on bluegrass guitarists as well as Watson's own claims that he does not play bluegrass himself. Malone does not discuss Watson's influences in much detail, focusing more on his association with the folk revival and influence on other guitarists (281). Neil Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* also gives useful information about the folk revival and bluegrass music, focusing almost exclusively on Watson's influence on bluegrass guitarist Clarence White (192-93). Other good sources for folk revival history include David Gahr and Richard Shelton's *The Face of Folk Music* and the biography of Moses Asch, *Making People's Music* by Peter Goldsmith.

Transforming Tradition edited by Neil Rosenberg and *Romancing the Folk* by Benjamin Filene both offer more thought provoking, critical treatments of the folk revival. Rosenberg's edited collection of engaging essays range from the sixties through eighties and provide several valid perspectives intended to stimulate new ways of thinking about the folk revival. Filene's analysis of the creation of a folk music considered purely American through the efforts of people like Cecil Sharp, combined with the impacts of the "folk promoters" on the careers of the musicians and tastes of the

public, offers a sobering view of the business of a sometimes overly romanticized period in American musical history. Using the relationship between celebrity folk personalities Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan he attempts to deconstruct the theory that Dylan's electric set at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival symbolically marked the end of the folk revival. Instead, he argues that Dylan's split with the folk revival marked a new direction for roots influenced music that was divorced from the political activism that marked much of the folk music of the time. While both texts have many merits, they sometimes walk perilously close to the edge of being overly analytical.

Discovery and Career in the Early 1960s

Information about Ralph Rinzler's first encounter with Doc Watson is found in many sources as it was a key moment in Watson's career. Rinzler himself reports the story in multiple texts with little variation in his story. The most detailed and entertaining is found in the liner notes for *The Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley*. He also writes in less detail about his first meeting with Watson in the introduction to *The Songs of Doc Watson* (Watson and Rinzler 10). The story is recounted with minute differences in several other places including Goldsmith (262-4), Nicholas Dawidoff's *In the Country of Country* (151-2), and David Holt's liner notes for *Legacy* (28-30). Watson himself talked about his discovery in Barry Willis's *America's Music: Bluegrass* (367) as well as in the interview sections on the three CD set *Legacy* (CD 2, Track 8), but surprisingly makes no mention of the electric guitar or the story of how he impressed Rinzler by playing "Tom Dooley." Rinzler's liner notes for *The Original Folkways Recordings* give even more extensive coverage of Tom Ashley's musical career in the twenties and thirties and Malone also gives a limited but useful

amount of material on Ashley (58-9). After recording with Tom Ashley, Rinzler proceeded to make recordings of Doc Watson and members of his family that was originally released as *The Doc Watson Family* in 1963. Jeff Place's liner notes for this album contain invaluable information about the family members, the family history, and their songs, as well as transcriptions of the words.

When Watson began to travel to New York for concerts with Ashley's group, the seeds of his solo career were sown. Peter Siegel's liner notes for *The Friends of Old Time Music* discuss the establishment and the details of concerts sponsored by the organization, partly founded by Rinzler, which was instrumental in bringing Watson to New York the first time and several times more afterwards. In his notes for *Bill Monroe and Doc Watson and The Original Folkways Recordings*, Rinzler tells of his work establishing a national folk concert circuit and of his work as Ashley's and Watson's booking agent and manager. Much treatment has also been given to Watson's trips to the Ash Grove music club in Los Angeles because it was here that many better known musicians first heard him, including Clarence White, and as earlier noted, this fact is mentioned in Malone (281), Rosenberg's *Bluegrass* (192), and Willis (372). For more information about the Ash Grove during the folk revival, Peter Feldman gives a good overview of the club's atmosphere, performers, and audiences in his article for *The Old Time Herald* while Holt also briefly addresses the club's significance (33). Siegel's notes for *Doc Watson at Gerde's Folk City* and Rinzler's for *The Original Folkways Recordings* each give accounts of Watson's experiences as a band leader in Los Angeles, with Siegel offering a little more detail from Watson's point of view.

Watson's first appearance as a solo performer in 1962 at Gerde's Folk City marks an important step in his career and Siegel's liner notes for the CD *Doc Watson at Gerde's Folk City* are comprehensive and detailed with many quotes from Watson concerning his preparation, his fear of not being accepted, and his reactions to the audiences' enthusiasm for his performances. The notes also include a good accounting of Watson's varied repertoire and the historical factors that were involved in his decision to go solo. The music comprising the CD obviously is the most valuable tool in making determinations about Watson's instrumental technique, types of repertoire, and his level of showmanship as it was in 1962.

To help expose both artists to new audiences, Rinzler realized a dream of pairing Watson with Bill Monroe for a number of duo concerts that were truly highlights of the entire folk revival. Again, Rinzler's voice in his liner notes for the *Bill Monroe and Doc Watson* CD is the authority on the history and circumstances that allowed him to bring the two musicians together and the way they worked together to arrive at repertoire choices. In Richard Smith's biography of Bill Monroe, *Can't You Hear Me Callin'*, there is more to discover about how Rinzler established his working relationship with the distrustful Monroe and his failure to work out a recording deal for the duo (180-1). As with the Gerde's Folk City concerts, the music contained on the disc offers much more than words.

Recording his first solo album for Vanguard in 1964 marked the next upward step for Watson's career. In one paragraph, Rinzler's liner notes for *Doc Watson* acknowledge Watson's wide ranging musical interests and stylistic abilities, saying in terms of traditional music he is not "the real thing," going so far as to attack the hillbilly

stereotype. In the next he paints a romanticized portrait of his down home personality and his love of "treasures of the country life." Nonetheless, there is quality information on Watson's early musical experiences, influences, and his work with a country swing band, as well as brief notes on each of the songs on the album. The song "Tom Dooley" by the Kingston Trio was one of the most popular singles of the revival and it is no coincidence that Watson's version closes the album. Watson reports the story's relation to his own family's history in *The Songs of Doc Watson* (Watson and Rinzler 20) and relates the story to David Holt on *Legacy* (CD 2, Track 6). In *America's Music*, Watson reports to Willis that also in 1964, his son Merle began playing guitar (370). Within six months, Merle would join his father to create one of the most talented and recognized father and son duos in country music history. Merle Watson's life, influences, and musical relationship with his father have unfortunately thus far received scant scholarly attention and more work in this area is sorely needed.

The same year of Watson's first solo album saw the first coming of the Beatles and the British invasion to America and with them came many negative effects for the folk revival. The Beatles have no shortage of biographical attention and their first American exploits have most recently and thoroughly been documented by Bob Spitz in *The Beatles*. Bob Dylan's involvement first as the folk revival's new champion and its eventual pariah is given extensive treatment both by Clinton Heylin in *Behind the Shades Revisited* and Filene's *Romancing the Folk*. Filene's examination of Dylan's relationship with Pete Seeger and his arguments concerning Dylan's position as a continued purveyor of folk tradition as opposed to one responsible for its popular decline is both interesting and convincing (183-232). David Dunaway's biography of Pete Seeger, *How Can I Keep*

from *Singing*, also has a detailed view of Seeger's role in the folk revival as well as his relationship with Bob Dylan.

Influences

Doc Watson's musical influences are wide ranging and can be divided between those in his family and those from recordings and radio. Rinzler (*The Original Folkways Recordings* liner notes, and *Doc Watson* liner notes), Watson and Rinzler (6-9), Willis (369), Lloyd, Siegel (*Doc Watson at Gerde's* liner notes), and Holt all discuss Watson's early musical experiences with sacred music, his banjo instruction from his father, and the stories of acquiring his first banjo and guitar. Rinzler, Watson and Rinzler, and Holt are the most comprehensive and detailed in dealing with Watson's first banjo and his father's influence, while Lloyd gives more information about his experiences with sacred music. Also on *Legacy* (CD 1, Track 13) and in Holt's liner notes, Watson's time at The State School for the Blind in Raleigh is more fully discussed than in any other previous source (15-7).

Watson soon progressed to the guitar when he was thirteen. Information about the guitar's history in the South is found both in Malone (24) and Rosenberg's *Bluegrass* (21) with Malone pointing more to the influence of African-Americans on whites' guitar styles. Also, in *America's Music*, Willis's essay on the history of C.F. Martin and his guitar company's legacy gives a good discussion about how improvements in guitar construction and sound quality coincided with the guitar's rise in popularity in the South (543-5). To discover more about the role of African-Americans, Fred Hay offers a comprehensive and detailed overview of the scholarly literature concerning black musicians in Appalachia in his article for the *Black Music Research Journal* (1-19).

The recordings made of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers by Ralph Peer in 1927 had profound effects on the state of popular music, especially in the Southeastern U.S. Malone gives a good introduction to this landmark moment in country music, but due to the comprehensive nature of his text does not go into much depth (64-5). For more detailed work on this important event in country music history, *The Bristol Sessions* edited by Charles Wolfe and Ted Olson is a comprehensive examination of the subject with informative essays ranging from biographical sketches to musicological studies. Malone's chapter on commercial hillbilly music is a thorough treatment of the artists and music of this important genre which certainly impacted Watson's style (31-75). For general history involving the Carter Family, again both Malone and Rosenberg's *Bluegrass* are good sources with which to start. Malone's bibliographic essay gives a good indication of the primary sources for information about the Carters (438). Zwonitzer and Hirshberg contributed the first full length monograph on the Carter Family with *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone* and it is a valuable source for a wide variety of details about every aspect of their career, including A.P. Carter's song collecting trips and origins of Maybelle Carter's guitar style. Unfortunately there is no bibliographical documentation of any kind included.

For the scope of this research, Malone's chapter on Jimmie Rodgers provided the essential historical information (77-91), but for further information his bibliographical essay points to several sources (440-42). The definitive monograph on Rodgers is Nolan Porterfield's *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*. For further discussions about Rodgers and his popularity with African-American musicians, Elijah Wald in *Escaping the Delta* and Francis Davis in *The History of the Blues* both offer

interesting anecdotes concerning Robert Johnson, John Hurt, Howlin' Wolf, and other blues musicians.

Besides his family musical experiences, the phonograph and radio would both prove to be significant influences on Watson. For a general discussion of the phonograph industry, the rise of radio in the 1920s and 1930s, and their effects on the careers of hillbilly musicians, Malone is the best place to begin (93-103). There is more specific information on the impact both mediums had on Watson in Watson and Rinzier's *The Songs of Doc Watson*, Rinzier's liner notes for *The Original Folkways Recordings*, Willis's *America's Music*, and Holt's *Legacy* liner notes. In Willis, Watson reports which records affected him the most, and while there is a wealth of information in the section on Watson, frankly the writing style is less than disciplined with some historical facts that are inconsistent with other more reliable sources. Whether reported in *America's Music* or A.L. Lloyd's liner notes for *The Doc Watson Family*, the most reliable source for the influence of phonograph records and radio is Watson himself.

Malone's *Country Music, U.S.A.* is the most accessible source for information about The Grand Ole Opry and its important role in Southern culture (95-6). His discussion of country music during the Great Depression also provides a good introduction to the brother duet acts popular in the 1930s, with basic information about the Delmores and Monroes (108-16). Much attention has been given to Bill Monroe and Richard Smith's monograph is the most thorough treatment of his full career with a good deal of information about his time with Charlie Monroe. In *Bluegrass*, Rosenberg also gives a good account of the Monroe Brothers and their influence (28-36).

The evidence of the early influences on Watson's guitar style are on display in what is likely his first recording made by William Amos "Doc" Abrams in 1941, which is housed in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Later in his teens, the music of Merle Travis heavily influenced Watson's style. The first extensive treatment given to Travis was by Archie Green in *Only a Miner* which formed the basis for many of the details in Malone. In his essay included in *A Sense of Place*, William Lightfoot documents the influence of African-American musician Arnold Schultz on Travis's mentors Ike Everly and Mose Rager, who taught him the basics of the two-finger picking technique they picked up from Schultz (120-137).

Recent scholarship by Lightfoot in "The Three Doc(k)s" in the *Black Music Research Journal* sheds more light on Watson's blues influences and the role the music plays in his style (167-93). By the standards of a very narrow definition of "core or primary blues" (168-72), Lightfoot makes a compelling argument that the music Watson plays and considers blues is actually a poor representation of the genre and displays few, if any, of the rhythmic and stylistic characteristics of core blues. For purposes of scholarly analysis, Lightfoot's definition, which includes very specific requirements for texts, harmonic and formal structure, textures, and tempos, provides a useful framework for identifying a consensual academic definition of the blues. The casual observer will likely have little use for or agreement with these specialized distinctions as it excludes many popularly conceived notions about the blues and its valid repertoire.

According to Lightfoot, Watson "simply does not do primary blues" (189) and by his definition he is correct, although it seems likely Watson and even performers of core

blues would point more to the concept of the blues as an emotional state which is reflected in the music. Lightfoot points to the importance of a melancholy text, and core blues performers often identify hard economic times, loss of a romantic partner, and death as reasons for the blues. A hard economic time was an idea with which Watson surely identified and it is the emotion, not the academic parameters, that is important to his conception of the blues. Lightfoot concedes Watson's idea of the blues is liberally unspecific, arguing that since he absorbed the blues mainly through white musicians, he "stands, in all respects, as a champion, an emblem, of Appalachian white blues" (189) an argument with which few would likely disagree although they might reach the conclusion in a different way.

The last important aspect of not only Watson's influences but his impact on other guitarists concerns his adaptations of fiddle tunes for guitar. The roots for this style are traced to Don Reno, Hank Garland, and Stanley Brothers guitarists Bill Napier and George Shuffler. Willis's *America's Music* includes good profiles of Reno, Napier, and Shuffler. The section on Reno includes key historical facts including his distinction as the first to record a bluegrass guitar solo with a flatpick (149-59). The interviews with Napier and Shuffler deal specifically with their guitar work and the differences between their styles of cross-picking (364-67).

Conclusion

There are not a large number of scholarly sources concerning Doc Watson's early career, influences, and impact. Despite this, there are several sources, mostly CD liner notes, book chapters, and encyclopedia articles that offer a broad biographical sketch for the casual fan. Details about the musicians that were important to Watson, the mutually

beneficial relationship he had with the folk revival, and his motivations to begin a career in music are spread across the literature or non-existent. As of now, the various writings of Ralph Rinzler are the primary sources for Watson's discovery and early career while Bill Malone remains the definitive voice on the many aspects of country music history which played key roles in the musician Watson would become. There is much to be discovered from a variety of commercial sources with varying levels of quality, but there is little in the way of scholarship. William Lightfoot's recent journal article about Watson's relationship with the blues is hopefully the beginning of a trend involving scholarly research and debate for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of Watson's musical roots and his impact on American music.

Chapter III

The Folk Revival

In 1961, Arthel "Doc" Watson was far from the national figure he would become. He would soon be forty years of age and was more concerned with how to support his family and find employment lucrative enough to stop taking state aid for the blind to help make ends meet. He had a varying array of technical skills, having worked for years on the family farm and had received electrician training, but his blindness made it impossible for him to find employment with these skills. As a naturally gifted musician, Watson had a source of talent he could turn to his advantage and in the 1940s and early 1950s was not an uncommon sight busking on the streets of nearby Boone, trying to earn a few extra dollars or at least a free meal. He also played electric guitar in a country swing band called the Country Gentlemen, beginning in 1953 and staying on for eight years, playing every kind of paying gig imaginable, honing his guitar skills and bringing home a little extra money in the process. He surely assumed little if anything when in late summer 1961 an old timer and well known musician from Mountain City, Tennessee named Tom Ashley showed up with fiddler Fred Price and guitarist Clint Howard asking if he wanted to play with them for a Yankee coming down from New York City to make a recording (Holt 29). The stage was set for Watson to meet the man who would play the most significant role in helping to launch his career and propel him to the level of a recognized national musical treasure.

Perhaps the most important factor in Watson's development as a successful solo musician and entertainer was the emergence in the late 1950s of a strong interest in traditional and early country music of the rural south by a growing number of young people in urban centers in the northeast, most notably New York City. This new wave of interest came to fruition through a few key factors. First, in the late 1950s and early 1960s many liberal minded young people were drawn into the strong social movements exemplified by the Civil Rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. Folk music played an important role in these movements, providing a vehicle for messages of protest, defiance, and equality. Entertainers like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who set many famous social anthems to folk song melodies in the earlier revival of the 1940s, were important voices in the new movements. They and their inspiring protest songs became heroes of sorts to the younger New York intellectuals who heard them.

In 1958, the Kingston Trio had a number one hit song with their recording of the old regional North Carolina murder ballad "Tom Dooley." According to Bill Malone, this was the single most important recording to the "urban folk music boom" and soon after its release, a number of entertainers formed groups in imitation of the Kingston Trio (279). In the early 1960s the folk revival reached its apex with a "boom in folk festivals, records, broadcasts, and concerts" (Rosenberg 170). Despite its roots in the left-wing political ideals of activists like Guthrie and Seeger, by the 1960s mainstream folk was essentially pop music, with the rawness and grit of the music removed in favor of a slick saccharine sound more palatable to mainstream audiences. For a branch of the new revivalists, this brand of folk music did not suffice and they sought a sound more genuine.

It is hard to underestimate the importance of the Folkways 1952 release *Anthology of American Folk Music* in generating a strong interest in traditional music among the people who became the key performers and documenters of the new folk revival. The three two-record sets consist of material recorded between 1927 and 1933 and feature a wealth of material collected from race, hillbilly, and Cajun recordings compiled by Harry Smith (Malone 280). This collection served many aspiring musicians as their first hearing of "Mississippi" John Hurt, Dock Boggs, the Carter Family, and Clarence Ashley, and many spent hours practicing the music just as they heard it on the recording, aiming to achieve a more authentic representation of the music, if not a complete duplication. Not only did this contribute an improved quality in the sound of their music, but some were inspired to make treks south in the steps of Alan Lomax, seeking the surviving musicians on the *Anthology* for the purpose of recording their music, documenting their stories, and, most importantly, exposing them to a much wider public eye.

Two of the most relevant and influential bands to arise from musicians of this mindset were the New Lost City Ramblers and The Greenbriar Boys. The Ramblers were a trio consisting of Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley, while the members of The Greenbriar Boys included Cohen, Eric Weissberg, Bob Yellin, and Ralph Rinzler, each of whom were accomplished multi-instrumentalists that strove to emphasize an exact adherence to performance styles of the music they played. Perhaps the best known of the Ramblers, Seeger had an encyclopedic knowledge of folk music and tirelessly worked to discover and record as many old-time, blues, and bluegrass musicians as he could find. Most important to Doc Watson's career, Ralph Rinzler played mandolin and was a

devoted advocate of traditional and bluegrass music. In addition to his important role in Watson's career, he also helped to start an organization called the Friends of Old Time Music with the purpose of sponsoring concerts in New York City by popular rediscovered artists. Rinzler was also a key player in the reemergence of Bill Monroe and his elevation to "Father of Bluegrass" status in the early 1960s.

One vital conduit for the younger northern musicians into the world of traditional music was the annual fiddler's convention. Although these events revolved around the instrumental and band competitions, the social side of the conventions is truly where the action took place. Fiddler's conventions enjoy a long history and tradition in the South where "acquaintances were renewed, tunes swapped, drinks taken (often clandestinely), and new musicians (often youngsters) initiated" (Rosenberg 145). Here Yankees like Seeger and Rinzler could meet different generations of traditional Southern musicians, hear their stories, learn tunes face to face, hone their craft, and possibly set up an informal recording session with some forgotten hero.

One such event that would prove fateful to Doc Watson's career was the Old Time Fiddlers Convention held annually in Union Grove, North Carolina. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the convention expanded to include separate contests for fiddle, banjo, an old-time band contest, and a modern band contest to accommodate those groups with electric instruments. While local musicians might compete in the modern band or old-time contests, more and more northerners were showing up to participate in the old-time contests. Mike Seeger and The Greenbriar Boys both made their Union Grove debuts in 1958 as the first contestants from outside the region and both would continue to attend and compete at Union Grove throughout the 1960s (Rosenberg, 146-47).

In April 1960, Ralph Rinzler attended Union Grove to play the mandolin for the Greenbriar Boys in the traditional band competition. After hearing a band that caught his ear, Rinzler sought them out and received an introduction to Clarence "Tom" Ashley from a band member who said, "This guy here is a neighbor of ours, and he kind of coaches us on his songs" (Goldsmith 262). Recognizing Ashley's name from the Folkways *Anthology*, Rinzler wasted little time in asking him to do a recording session. Ashley agreed but requested a few months to practice his banjo picking in hopes of getting it into better shape. When Rinzler made the trip in September with fellow folklorist Eugene Earle to Ashley's home in Shouns, Tennessee he found that Ashley had not practiced, much less picked up his banjo, since their encounter in April. Instead, Ashley told Rinzler, he had arranged for a band of local musicians to provide accompaniment to his singing.

According to his liner notes for *The Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley*, the first time Rinzler met Doc Watson in Tom Ashley's living room, he was shocked to see him holding an electric Gibson Les Paul guitar connected to an amplifier. His shock turned to horror when he learned Ashley intended to sing with an electric guitar. Rinzler tried to convince Watson to switch to an acoustic instrument but Watson replied he did not possess an acoustic guitar and would rather not record with an unfamiliar instrument. Feeling defeated and refusing to record Ashley with Watson's electric guitar, Rinzler decided to leave Earle behind and travel to Mt. Airy, North Carolina to seek out the banjo player Jack Johnson, with whom Ashley performed at Union Grove in April, in hopes he would be willing to accompany Ashley for the

recording. Rinzler later recalled, "Just the idea of having to deal with an electric guitar so depressed me" (Goldsmith 263).

Ashley had arranged for the recording to take place at his daughter's home in Saltville, Virginia and the following day everyone, including Jack Johnson and Watson, to Rinzler's surprise, piled into a pick-up truck and began the two hour journey. Rinzler ended up sitting in the bed of the truck and decided to spend the time practicing his banjo playing. According to Rinzler, not long into the ride the truck stopped and Watson jumped out of the front to join him in the back saying "Let me see that banjo, son." Watson began playing his version of "Tom Dooley" and "proceeded to play the hell out of it" (Goldsmith 263), deeply impressing Rinzler with his command of the instrument and strong baritone voice.

In the ensuing conversation Rinzler discovered Watson not only knew several of the tunes on the Folkways *Anthology*, but he also knew some of the performers during his childhood. Rinzler's initial disappointment turned to hopeful excitement when he considered the possibilities and implications of his new discovery, writing in his notes for *The Original Folkways Recordings*:

This seemed to me remarkable. An electric guitar player who was also deeply versed in the repertoire and styles of the *Anthology* and the Lomax Library of Congress recordings. Doc was only eleven years older than I, but this was his living tradition. For me it was an archival treasure; hardly the music I expected to hear from a near contemporary who played Nashville hits on an electric guitar. (11)

After a productive session in Saltville, Rinzler arranged to return to Deep Gap with Watson the following day to not only record him, but also document his family's musical traditions. The recordings he made would later be released in two volumes in 1963 as *The Doc Watson Family* and included tracks with Doc's mother singing her version of "The House Carpenter," many outstanding examples of Doc's father-in-law Gaither Carlton's fiddling, and Doc performing "Rambling Hobo" on banjo, which he claimed was the first tune he learned from his father (Place 7). For Rinzler "the meaning of these experiences was clear and powerful. Here was the context of the folk music I had heard in recorded and concert performances for twenty of my twenty-six years" (Rinzler, *Original Recordings* 12). In his search for a connection to the music of the past, Rinzler stumbled onto a musical crossroad with Tom Ashley representing a fading link to the music of a different era and Doc Watson representing the bridge between musical tradition in the Appalachian mountains and a world with a wealth of musical influences more accessible than ever before.

Despite the commercialization of mainstream folk music, a number of revivalists were also devoted to bringing "authentic" performers before larger audiences. Larger festivals, most notably the Newport Folk Festival held annually in Newport, Rhode Island since 1959, and Greenwich Village coffeehouses such as the Gaslight Café were ideal vehicles for introducing southern artists like Tom Ashley and Doc Watson to a new urban audience, thereby increasing their popularity and demand as performers. In New York the Friends of Old Time Music was one of the more effective organizations in providing financing and arranging concerts for obscure southern and mountain musicians. A non-profit organization founded by Ralph Rinzler, John Cohen, and Israel Young, who owned

the Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, The Friends of Old Time Music sponsored concerts by Dock Boggs, Roscoe Holcomb, Maybelle Cater, the Stanley Brothers, Bill Monroe, "Mississippi" John Hurt, and Fred McDowell to name but a few. All of these musicians would also appear to much acclaim at Newport in the early and mid 1960s.

The second show sponsored by the Friends of Old Time Music occurred on March 25th, 1961 and featured Tom Ashley accompanied by Fred Price, Clint Howard, Gaither Carlton, and Doc Watson (Siegel, *Friends* 11). Also appearing on the bill were Virginia ballad singers Horton Barker and Annie Bird. Held in the 450 seat auditorium of Public School 41 in Greenwich Village, the show sold out, received a glowing review in the New York Times from critic Robert Shelton, and led to invitations for the group to appear at the University of Chicago Folk Festival in February 1962 and the famous Los Angeles club the Ash Grove in April of the same year, as well as several more trips to New York. After the first performance in New York, and with a rapidly forming tour schedule, Watson was still in need of an acoustic guitar he could take on tour and was forced to find one he could borrow. "After I stopped playing electric and went out on the road, I borrowed a Martin from a boy named Joe Cox who couldn't play a lick. He gave me that guitar to play as long as I wanted and I used that for quite awhile" (Sievert 78).

Nineteen Sixty-Two proved a pivotal year in Doc Watson's life and one in which his career would begin to diverge from the accompanying role with Tom Ashley into a position as a main audience attraction. During the first week of the trip to Los Angeles for the Ash Grove concerts, the cloud of smog in the city adversely affected Ashley's vocal cords and the resulting laryngitis forced him to miss a few concerts the following week. Clint Howard shared the emcee responsibilities with Watson, but with his superior

singing and playing abilities, Watson was the natural choice to assume the role as leader of the group (Rinzler, *Original Recordings* 8). With a wealth of material and styles at his fingers, Ashley's absence opened the door for Watson to display his rich baritone voice on solo pieces like "Sittin' On Top Of The World," his amazing ability to blaze through a fiddle tune like "Fire On The Mountain" with a flatpick, and his style of the blues on tunes such as "Carroll County Blues." Of his chance to take the lead role Watson remembered "The boys Fred and Clint kind of looked up to me, but they were willing, and ready, and raring to go do their part" (Siegel, *Gerde's* 11).

The Ash Grove was the center of the folk movement in Los Angeles and the club was often crowded with the area's best and most famous musicians. On any given night one might see members of The Byrds, Taj Mahal, Jim Morrison, and other local rock celebrities listening intently to the latest traditional performer to come out West. Clarence White, the celebrated bluegrass guitarist with The Kentucky Colonels, first heard Watson here, finding inspiration in his impressive guitar work (Rosenberg 192). The quality and success of Watson's performances at the Ash Grove helped to extend his popularity and influence to future members of the folk rock movement as well as the California bluegrass scene.

Realizing the group's appeal and recognizing the lack of interest from established booking agents and record companies, Ralph Rinzler became the band's booking agent and greatly utilized the contacts he made as a Greenbriar Boy while working and touring with Joan Baez on the college and concert hall circuits (Rinzler, *Bill Monroe and Doc Watson* 3). More interested in promoting the music to an urban audience than in his own commercial success, Rinzler helped to create a national booking network for traditional

musicians. This network of contacts and Rinzler's tireless efforts would greatly bolster Watson's growing popularity and expanding career over the next four years until a professional booking agent took over Rinzler's assumed responsibilities.

After returning from California, Rinzler arranged for Doc Watson and his father-in-law Gaither Carlton to appear at two Friends of Old Time Music sponsored concerts in October at New York University and a small coffeehouse in Greenwich Village called Blind Lemon's. Rinzler, cognizant of Watson's command of a variety of musical styles and his growing comfort in the role of emcee, convinced Watson the time was ripe to present himself as a solo artist. In December 1962 Watson returned to New York City for his first series of concerts as a solo artist in a two week engagement at Gerde's Folk City. Still lacking ownership of an acoustic guitar, this time he borrowed a Gibson acoustic from a friend in Deep Gap named Ray Handy. If any confirmation of Watson's ability as a captivating solo entertainer and commercial potential was needed, it was given at Gerde's. His warm, inviting stage persona combined with his widely varied, continually growing repertoire made him appealing to audiences of practically all genres of popular music in the early sixties and helped to sustain his career throughout the next four decades.

His experience at Gerde's Folk City was vital in proving his potential for commercial success to many, including Watson. Remembering the appreciative New York audiences he said he "could not believe the attentiveness of the little audience there. I was under the impression a man had to see and put on a big act on stage to get people's attention. It was unbelievable how people would sit intent and listen to those old time tunes" (Siegel 14). His enthusiastic reception was also a revelation as he humbly remembers, "It was

the most amazing thing in the world, when people applauded and hollered and yelled for more. I thought 'Did I really do that good?'" (Siegel, *Gerde's* 14).

During 1963 Watson continued to perform with Ashley, Howard, and Price and the group made their first appearance at The Newport Folk Festival. Earlier in the year Watson had once again made the trip to Los Angeles to perform at the Ash Grove and this time Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys were also in town to play there. By this time Rinzler had painstakingly worked out a trusting relationship with the notoriously suspicious Monroe and was working full time as his booking agent. During their overlapping stay in Los Angeles, Monroe and Watson got together and worked up some songs to perform as a duo at Rinzler's suggestion. With Watson already familiar with many tunes from the Monroe Brothers' repertoire, the two pickers had a good foundation of songs on which they could build. Indeed several Monroe Brothers' songs found their way into Monroe and Watson's stage show but Monroe was interested in working out newly written songs he had not performed with The Blue Grass Boys. This collaboration included "You Won't Be Satisfied That Way," "Memories of You," and an instrumental Monroe entitled "Watson's Blues" as a result of a distinctive guitar run Watson added to the tune (Rinzler, *Bill Monroe and Doc Watson* 4-6). This mutually beneficial partnership would continue with a handful of shows in the 1960s, achieving Rinzler's goal of bringing Monroe more recognition from Watson's fans on the folk circuit and Watson more recognition from Monroe's bluegrass and country audiences.

Realizing his goal of successfully pairing Watson and Monroe, and ever the opportunist, Rinzler hoped to work out a recording deal between Monroe's recording company, Decca, and the company Watson worked for, Vanguard. To no avail Rinzler

made his case to a Decca executive who told him "I wouldn't ask you to loan me your toothbrush. You shouldn't ask me to loan you a Decca recording artist" (Smith 181). Vanguard was not interested in a deal without Decca's full cooperation and the recording sessions never came to pass. Fortunately Rinzler recorded many of the duo's concerts from which several selections were finally released by the Smithsonian Folkways label in 1993.

After playing on the national folk circuit for three years Watson was finally in a position to record his first solo album with Vanguard Records in 1964. The eponymous release contained material typical of Watson's concerts with a widely varied set of tunes showcasing his many talents. The album contained stellar examples of Watson's mastery of flatpicking on "Black Mountain Rag" and his ability to utilize Travis style picking on his composition "Doc's Guitar." In addition, he adapted the Mississippi Sheiks' tune "Sittin' on Top of the World" and the Delmore Brothers' "Deep River Blues" to the two finger Travis style as well. The stark Dock Boggs tune "Country Blues" and "Georgie Buck" demonstrates Watson's clawhammer banjo skills. On "Country Blues" his sound is distinctly different than the sparseness typical of Boggs's banjo style and instead he plays the tune with a more conventional drop thumb technique without losing the characteristic blues inflected modal harmonic structure. Also included are light-hearted humorous songs like "The Intoxicated Rat" and "Six Thousand Years Ago" which display the playfulness that would help endear Watson to live audiences.

It seems appropriate that Watson's version of "Tom Dooley" closed his first solo album. To draw comparisons between this version and the number one single released by the Kingston Trio in 1958 is like dividing pearls from paste and reveals differences

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between the commercial and traditionalist sides of the revival. The Kinston Trio's version begins with a dramatic spoken introduction and plods along at a relaxed tempo with three gently sung verses and four harmonized choruses that become staggered between the voice parts as the song progresses. The instrumentation is two softly strummed guitars and a lazily plucked banjo. This was folk music made to sell. It is little surprise the mainstream record buying public was so taken with the white, clean cut group's watered down take on hillbilly music and that more devoted revivalists were so repelled by it.

Watson was familiar with the story of the ballad through his grandparents, who were acquaintances of the principal characters in the song, and states to David Holt on the 2002 CD release *Legacy*, that he based his version of the song on the one he learned from his grandmother. The superiority of Watson's version likely owes less to tradition than it does to his performance skills and keen senses of interpretation and song adaptation. He plays the song solo with his guitar and harmonica, alternating solos on each instrument between each set of verses. The guitar accompaniment to his singing is up tempo with a driving feel and alternating bass line reminiscent of a quicker Jimmie Rodgers while his guitar solos in between verses is reminiscent of Maybelle Carter's melodic style, albeit much faster.

In 1964 Watson's career took more than one important turn and one of the most fortunate was his son Merle's decision to join him on the road and begin a career in the music business. From the spring of 1964 when he began learning to play the guitar Merle would become an indispensable part of his father's career as a road manager, driver, and musical collaborator. Within eight months of picking up the guitar he would appear at

the Newport Folk Festival with other members of the Watson family and record his first album with his father, *Doc Watson and Son*. Merle started full time once he graduated high school, quickly blossoming into a musician with skills equal to his father, facily switching from precise flatpicking, to a smooth fingerpicked blues derived more from John Hurt than Merle Travis, and developing a mastery of playing the guitar with a slide. Doc Watson's current partner, Tom Ashley, was reportedly a difficult man with a quick temper, and Watson had been encouraged by Bill Monroe to leave Ashley and go out on his own (Holt 35-6). He would make a few more appearances with Ashley, Fred Price, and Clint Howard but his time to pursue his own fortunes in the business had come precisely at the time his son was ready to take over the duties his blindness prevented him from performing.

In the mid 1960s major changes in American popular culture and musical tastes would have profound effects on the second wave of the folk revival. On February 9, 1964 The Beatles appeared for the first time on "The Ed Sullivan Show" to 74 million viewers and unleashed a cultural phenomenon in which, among many other effects, electrified rock and roll would become the dominant force in popular music and assume a representative role in the 1960s counter-culture. The Beatles had their first number one single on February 1, 1964 with "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and after appearances at Carnegie Hall and at the Hollywood Bowl they dominated the Billboard singles charts in 1964 and 1965. Much like Elvis Presley before them, the overwhelming popularity of the Beatles would be a major contributing factor in the decline of folk music's popularity with the main record buying public.

This shift in public taste became most manifest to revivalists with Bob Dylan's appearance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. In many ways Dylan was presented as the heir apparent to Woody Guthrie by the political and most purist of the revivalist movement. Pete Seeger, especially fond of the young Minnesotan's brand of protest song and Guthrie inspired performance style, had taken Dylan under his considerable wing and began performing his songs "Who Killed Davy Moore" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." By 1965 Dylan was one of the most commercially successful artists associated with the folk revival and many saw his voice as potentially the most important in the Civil Rights and Vietnam War protest movements. The only problem was he did not want that distinction and already had his eyes on a new direction that involved electric guitars and a lyrical indifference to the causes his folk audience demanded he write about.

Several differing accounts exist on what happened when Bob Dylan played his first electric set at Newport the evening of July 25, 1965, but certainly many prominent revivalist personalities were upset and angered by what they felt was a betrayal of a fundamental principle forbidding electric instruments. Although he may not have tried to cut the power cords with an axe as legend has it, Pete Seeger was absolutely saddened, not necessarily because Dylan used electric instruments, but by what he felt was the commercialization of the movement's most favorite son. He wrote about his disappointment in his journal, using cancer as a metaphor for the effects of what he felt were Dylan's commercial interests, and went so far as to quit the Newport board of directors, later saying Dylan's performance was "some of the most destructive music this side of hell" (Dunaway 247-49).

Symbolically many feel this marked the end of the folk movement in the United States, and on the surface that may be true, but the musical roots at the heart of the revival were the same as those of rock and roll. Indeed, Dylan's music continued to be steeped in the same traditional forms and harmonic progressions heard on his first four albums while more and more white rock bands from England and America found unending inspiration in the electrified blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Doc Watson's appeal was wide enough that he was able to continue a profitable career with his son Merle, releasing a consistent stream of albums and making frequent concert appearances, while his technique of flatpicking fiddle tunes would profoundly influence many aspiring bluegrass guitarists and help establish his legacy in American music.

One of the enduring effects of the early 1960s folk revival was the defining of certain types of roots music as something uniquely American, successfully elevating the music in the public's conscious to a cherished part of the national identity. Another lasting impact of the revival was the identification of a roster of musicians and performers who met specific criteria to represent the authentic sound of a certain genre. Of course in so doing, the selection of musicians was subject to the limitations of the biases contained in the revivalists' definition of authenticity and this helped to shape the public's opinions about what constituted folk music (Filene 5). To most of the musicians these distinctions had little meaning. John Hurt and Son House did not fashion themselves as "bluesmen," the term "blues" was little more than a marketing tool, just as Tom Ashley would have thought himself more a vaudevillian entertainer than an old time musician in the academic sense.

Besides the romanticized aesthetic pursuits of these musicians, a simpler motivation to record and perform was financial. Ever since the invention of the phonograph and the ability to make recordings for the intention of marketing and sale to the public, a great majority of recorded musicians were trying to make music that would sell a large number of copies in the hopes of attaining some economic benefit. Radio appearances and traveling to different areas for live performances were the most assured ways to gain wider popularity and better record sales. For many rural southern musicians, a career as an entertainer was much more attractive than working in the timber industry, coal mines, or any other type of hard labor. With the aim to sell records, the performers had to record material that appealed to their intended audience and had to be attuned to the musical trends of the day. The ones who made the cut for the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, as well as many that did not, were all sophisticated, accomplished musicians and performers who were far from the commonly perceived backwoods impoverished hillbillies, or delta slave descendants, on the back porch wiling away the time singing the songs of their ancestors, sawing fiddle, and picking banjo.

Certainly the record company scouts' ideas about what a certain performer should play affected each performer's choice of repertoire for a recording session. If African-American musicians wanted the company to release their record, they did not record a cowboy yodeling tune; they offered what was in demand. If a musician wanted to record a song outside of their expected style, the engineer would ask them to play something more predictable. The same type of discrimination occurred with the folklorists as well. The story of Ralph Rinzler refusing to record Doc Watson with an electric guitar serves as a typical example. Although Watson did record a rockabilly album in 1995, Rinzler

missed an opportunity to document his electric style in 1960. The folklorists making recordings for the sake of documenting or marketing a certain style simply ignored musicians who played what they did not want to hear. If Doc Watson had not been as persistent in trying to impress Rinzler his career may have had a very different outcome.

As a blind man living in the rural mountains of North Carolina, Watson had few options for steady employment. To support his family he tuned pianos, played local school dances, busked on the streets of local towns, and received state aid for the blind. In 1953 he met a honky-tonk pianist named Jack Williams and soon joined his country-western band, The Country Gentleman, trading his acoustic guitar for a Gibson Les Paul electric model. In this group Watson learned the popular hits of the day like Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti," and the Carl Perkins hit for Elvis Presley, "Blue Suede Shoes." The band played VFW halls, bars, square dances, and anywhere else they could get paid in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. As a result of the band's lack of a consistent fiddler, he began working out fiddle tunes on his electric guitar so the band would have more appropriate material for square dances. Playing the fiddle tune melodies repeatedly over a long period of time for the dancers helped Watson perfect his picking skills and lay the foundations for his future acoustic guitar style. Ironically, Watson began developing his incredibly influential acoustic flatpicking style on an electric guitar.

Watson was a fiercely proud man and was unhappy with the fact he received state aid to make ends meet. Although Rinzler is often given credit for the discovery of Doc Watson, in a way Watson discovered Rinzler and saw an opportunity to earn some much needed money. When Rinzler arrived on the scene to record Tom Ashley, Watson was

certainly aware of the newest folk revival and its commercial potential as evidenced by The Kingston Trio's hit with "Tom Dooley." It is surely no coincidence the tune he chose to play for Rinzler when he had his ear on the ride to record with Tom Ashley was "Tom Dooley." In addition to the Kingston Trio's popular recording, the earliest known version comes from a 1929 Grayson and Whitter recording that was included in Harry Smith's beloved *Anthology of American Folk Music*. The fact that a version of the ballad existed in Watson's family history also lent that desirable element of tradition that had become fashionable to the key figures of the folk renaissance. When Rinzler learned this, and that Watson was familiar with many of the artists on the *Anthology*, some personally, he swallowed the proverbial bait whole.

Watson's choice to bring an electric guitar to the initial meeting with Rinzler does suggest he was not aware of the revivalists' desire to record what they perceived as "pure" folk music and also suggests the concept was not as dear to Ashley. He had lived and worked his whole life in northeastern Tennessee near Mountain City, supplementing his income from sawmill and farm work by traveling as an entertainer, often in blackface, with the popular medicine shows. Traveling from town to town in the Southeast, Ashley warmed up crowds for the snake-oil hawkers with comedy routines and songs. For thirty years he worked in the medicine shows, recording in the 1920s and 30s both with the Carolina Tar Heels, and as a soloist, producing his most identifiable recording "The Coo Coo Bird," which was especially popular with revivalists (Malone 59). In the 1940s with the decline of the medicine shows and a shift in the tastes of the record buying public, Ashley gave up music to go into business with his son.

By the time Rinzler found him in 1960, electric instruments were prominent in the popular music of the time. Merle Travis, Chet Atkins, Johnny Cash's lead player Luther Perkins, Chuck Berry, and a host of influential guitarists all played electric instruments. Mississippi blues artists like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and B.B. King also had turned from acoustic instruments, preferring the exponentially increased volume only possible with electric guitars and amplifiers. The Nashville sound pioneered by Chet Atkins, which attempted to make country music more appealing to a larger mainstream audience by eliminating the rough edged characteristics more identifiable with hillbilly music, was flourishing. Two of Atkins's many innovations were to feature the electric guitar in solo breaks and eliminate the twang of the fiddle and banjo because of their association with harder country music and bluegrass.

Whatever Ashley's motivations and expectations in agreeing to a recording session with Rinzler, it is clear that he felt an electric guitar was an acceptable form of accompaniment to at least some of his repertoire. Because he did not perceive his music as something purer than any other form of pop music, he did not feel the use of an electric instrument would somehow defile the quality of the music or even fundamentally change it. After all, Ashley worked as a professional entertainer for years and understood audiences would only pay for what they wanted. What he did not understand at first was Rinzler's intended audience indeed wanted to hear the music as close to its original sound and context as possible. Of course Ashley was ready to give them whatever they wanted to pay for and did not care if it was electric or acoustic or if it was marketed as hillbilly or American roots music.

Similarly, Watson did not think of himself as the bearer of some great and sacred musical tradition with a set of strict parameters to which he must always adhere. In 1960, his talent had become something of a commodity with the potential, however slight, to allow him to earn enough money to support his family without the help of state aid. Up until that point his best economic opportunities consisted of odd jobs and playing electric guitar with Jack Williams's band and that income alone was not sufficient. When Rinzler displayed his reluctance to record him, his blindness did not keep Watson from sensing an opportunity slipping away. He tried to convince Rinzler his electric on a lower volume setting would be little different from an acoustic instrument, and when that failed, Watson still showed up the next day determined to somehow participate in the recording session. One can imagine Watson sitting in the pickup truck, devising a way to impress Rinzler enough to allow him to record with Ashley, when he heard the ring of the banjo from the truck bed and got an idea. If he wanted someone who could play a banjo and sing "Tom Dooley," Watson could do that as well as anyone else Rinzler intended to record that day. Although he was pleased with the Tom Ashley recordings, Rinzler was clearly more excited about the prospects of Watson's appeal to the folk revival. From that day on Rinzler worked hard promoting Doc Watson to the folkies on a national level, essentially launching his career. After returning to New York, Rinzler told John Cohen, "I found a guitar player who's going to set the world on fire, who the world is not going to believe" (Siegel, *Friends of Old Time Music* 12). While Watson could not have known the course or magnitude of near future events, many great careers in the entertainment business began as a result of fortunate timing and making the most of a single small opportunity that ultimately opened the door to greater recognition.

During the first New York concerts of Ashley's group, Rinzler's expectations about Watson's effect on audiences were proven true. Ashley was presented as the leader of the group but Watson's lead guitar breaks often stole the spotlight, eliciting applause and cheers from the audience. With his combination of musical skills and charisma, Rinzler knew Watson could easily make the transition into a successful solo entertainer on the folk circuit and after his experiences as part of Ashley's group, Watson needed little convincing. Speaking of his first solo concerts at Gerde's Folk City, he said "We were poor folks. Rosa Lee and I had a rough time making ends meet...there was a double motive in my being up there in the first place. I had to do something to get off the charity list in North Carolina and make enough money to take care of my family" (Siegel, *Gerdes* 4-5). Working as a soloist would demand more of Watson but he would also have no band members to share in the profits.

Preparing himself to perform for the discerning folk audiences demanded serious effort from Watson. He claims while he was in Jack Williams's band he was just a casual musician who really enjoyed playing but was not "totally absorbed in it" (Willis 367). He was familiar with a wealth of old folk songs, ballads, and popular commercial recordings from the 1920s through the 1950s, but he had forgotten or never learned material his audience would find appealing. At that time he was more familiar with popular country and rock music and was more accustomed to playing an electric guitar. To refresh his memory Watson returned to the old recordings of artists he remembered hearing growing up, such as the Carter Family and Delmore Brothers, consulted Cecil Sharp's *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, and even visited family

members to learn new songs and more verses to ones he knew (Rinzler, *Original Recordings* 8).

Rather than try to imitate, he adapted his choices of songs to his style and created unique versions that bore an immediately identifiable personal sound. Because he had so many versatile guitar styles at his disposal, and was more than proficient on clawhammer banjo and harmonica, he had the freedom to arrange old folk songs in a number of different ways. By the time of his first performance as a soloist at Gerde's, Watson's repertoire included his modern arrangements of traditional ballads like "The House Carpenter" and a more traditional a cappella rendition of "The Lone Pilgrim;" lightning fast Travis style fingerpicking tunes like "Blue Smoke;" old blues tunes like "Milk Cow Blues;" as well as old country songs like "Tragic Romance" written by Grandpa Jones. Added to this was his ability to cleanly play up-tempo fiddle tunes like "Black Mountain Rag" with a flatpick which would directly influence a new generation of bluegrass guitarists. This amount of musical variety performed at a high technical level combined with his amiable personality were key to his initial success and help to explain how he has maintained a significant degree of popularity and influence for the last four decades. To gain a more thorough understanding of the musician that emerged from Gerde's Folk City, it is necessary to consider both the family and commercial music he heard growing up and how it influenced his stage repertoire and guitar style.

Chapter IV

Influences

Looking at the music that influenced Doc Watson's guitar style one must examine both his early musical experiences with his family and the different styles of music he heard on recordings and the radio. In the academic sense of the word he was a traditional musician, receiving his first musical instruction from his father. His first instrument was a harmonica which was soon followed by a fretless banjo his father made by hand with a cat skin head. The first song General Watson taught his son was "Rambling Hobo." Doc obviously could not learn his father's technique just by watching and his father certainly would have had to use a truly hands on approach, placing Doc's fingers on the correct spots on the fingerboard and carefully explaining the right hand technique. After getting the basics, learning to play songs he had to rely heavily on his ear, as he described the process, "He'd play and I'd listen and I'd figure out what he's a-doin'. He showed me the best he could how to play a few of the old frailing licks on the banjo" (Willis 368). Learning this way, Watson developed into a more than proficient banjo player, mastering the clawhammer style and the more advanced drop-thumb technique.

Part of a devoutly religious family, sacred music also played an important role in his early musical education. Watson reports remembering hearing his mother singing from a very early age as well as the rich sound of his church congregation's singing from a shape note hymnal (Watson 6). By all accounts his father was a strictly pious man, gathering the family around the table for nightly bible readings, prayer, and hymn singing.

According to Watson he never heard his father “sing more than just a little jingle of some oldtime tune, other than the sacred songs” (Lloyd 6). The large number of hymns Watson sang as a youngster certainly contributed to his great singing abilities, the development of his ear as an important musical tool, and later his choices of performance material.

When he was ten years of age, Watson was sent to the School for the Blind in Raleigh. While not the most pleasant experience for him because of the abuse of a mean spirited teacher, he was introduced to a variety of musical styles and learned his first guitar chords from a fellow student named Paul Montgomery who was left handed and played with the guitar turned upside down. Taking what he learned from Montgomery, he turned the guitar around and figured out how to play the chords right handed (Holt 15-17). Doc reports hearing big band jazz, popular white jazz guitarist and crooner Nick Lucas, and the exotic gypsy jazz of legendary guitarist Django Reinhardt and violinist Stephane Grappelli (Watson and Rinzier 7). These experiences stayed with the impressionable young Watson, and hearing Reinhardt’s fingers sprinting up and down the fretboard opened his mind to the many possible and exciting sounds an inventive player could make with the guitar.

After learning some banjo, his next logical step was the guitar. In the early twentieth century, the fiddle and banjo were the most common instruments played in the Appalachians. As the guitar more and more permeated the rural south, it became a standard and vital part of the stringband tradition exemplified by groups like the Skillet Lickers. In the 1920s and 1930s, the guitar had become more popular as an accompaniment instrument than the banjo because of its versatility and its lower range

made it possible to play bass lines. String basses were rare in the mountains and the guitar became the instrument that provided the harmonic foundations of the songs which were usually some arrangement of the primary chords (I-IV-V) in any given key. Much like the banjo, the playing innovations of African-Americans became the key elements in styles preferred by Appalachian musicians. While the guitar enjoyed popularity in the north as a parlor instrument associated with classical music, this style of music "seems to have been rejected everywhere in the rural south" (Malone 24).

The emergence of the guitar in southern Appalachia coincided with the industrialization of the region. The most important development that dramatically changed people's way of life in Appalachia was the railroad. Where music is concerned, the construction of the railroads brought in workers with a varying range of ethnic backgrounds including a predominant population of African-Americans who brought with them their own musical traditions. Saltville, Virginia native and well known Appalachian musician Hobart Smith reported the first time he saw a guitar was when a black railroad gang laid track in his hometown during World War I (Malone 24). As black and white musicians inevitably mixed together to swap tunes, the whites were strongly drawn to the black musicians' rhythmically syncopated fingerpicking styles and their use of the flatted third and seventh notes of the major scale, commonly called "blue notes." The more adept white musicians were able to synthesize these stylistic characteristics into their playing, as well as employ similar vocal characteristics, such as sliding into and away from notes, in their singing. In so doing, they created a distinctive regional style that commercially would come to be called "hillbilly" music in the 1920s. While other ethnic groups were also musically influential, it is clear that African-

Americans heavily contributed to instrumental styles in the South and Appalachia that resulted in innovations by guitarists like Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, Merle Travis, and other key influences on Doc Watson.

Much has been written about Ralph Peer's August 1927 recording sessions held in Bristol, Tennessee where both the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers recorded for the first time. Both artists would produce high selling recordings and achieve a level of national success that allowed them to sustain long careers in the music business. Besides their commercial success, the Carter Family would best be remembered by scholars for two important contributions. First, largely through the efforts of A.P. Carter, they introduced a countless number of songs that would become a standard part of a collective repertoire for country, bluegrass, and other country offshoot genres. A great majority of these were old traditional songs and ballads collected by A.P. Carter from musicians, many African-American, he sought out in rural homes, factories, mines, and practically anywhere he imagined he might find a new song or verse. Because Peer paid fifty dollars and half of the publishing royalties for every song the Carters recorded, A.P. was ever searching for new material and was known to travel far and wide in Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina collecting songs to possibly record and publish (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 110). Although unacceptable by today's copyrighting standards, this practice of claiming authorship of songs he certainly did not write was a common occurrence in the music industry that persisted for many years. A.P. Carter is listed as the sole author of nearly three-hundred compositions (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 120). Some, such as "Little Darling Pal of Mine," he did write, but the great majority are traditional songs he collected and the true authors will likely remain anonymous. Despite this fact, due to his

tireless efforts to find new songs, A.P. Carter, and by extension the Carter Family, is credited with preserving and disseminating a large body of folk music that potentially could have been lost permanently.

Secondly, the Carter Family is remembered for the influential guitar style of Maybelle Carter. Her singular style, popularly called the "Carter scratch," was distinguished by the prominence of the melody played on the bass strings with the thumb while the downstroke of the fingers on the treble strings provided rhythmic accompaniment. The first instrument she learned to play was the autoharp and she soon started learning from her mother how to play the banjo. She showed an innate talent for music and at age twelve she won first place in a banjo contest in her hometown of Copper Creek, Virginia. When she was thirteen, her family acquired a guitar and with so few guitar players she might learn from in the community, Maybelle began working on her own style which she based on her banjo technique. Later she remembered, "I started trying different ways to pick it, and came up with my own style, because there weren't many players around. I just played the way I wanted to and that's it" (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 70-1).

Besides the clear melody in the bass, Carter's playing had a rhythmic drive which propelled the music forward and gave it a bouncing swagger. With their sparse instrumentation of only guitar and autoharp, Maybelle constantly looked for ways to get the most from her instrument, employing not only her "scratch," but also picking up blues licks from A.P.'s African-American friend Leslie Riddle, and using a slide in the Hawaiian style which she picked up from Palakiko Ferreira's playing on Vernon Dalhart's 1924 version of "The Wreck of the Old 97" (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 108,

184). One of her recordings that would have a lasting impact was "Wildwood Flower," which still stands as one of the first songs many aspiring guitarists strive to play and is considered a required part of any serious country or bluegrass instrumentalist's repertoire. With Doc Watson, the first song he learned to play on guitar was the Carter Family's "When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland," and Maybelle Carter's clear, rhythmic punch undeniably influenced his eventual playing style.

Another important influence on Watson who emerged from the Bristol sessions was Jimmie Rodgers. Most recognized for yodeling in his song refrains, Rodgers was commercially much more successful than the Carter Family and he was by far the most famous artist of the "hillbilly" recording era, appealing both to black and white audiences. Black musicians also enjoyed his music and his popular yodel. Johnny Shines, who was a friend and playing partner of the now legendary Robert Johnson, recalls he and Johnson "used to play a hell of a lot of his tunes, man" (Wald 118) and Howlin' Wolf also points to Rodgers as an influence (Davis 192). Stylistically less complicated than Maybelle Carter, Rodgers used the guitar for accompaniment only. Nonetheless he had a singular style characterized by accented, alternating bass lines punctuated by downward strums on the treble strings with strong bass runs. Like Carter, his playing had a pulsing rhythmic drive that had a clearly defined sense of beat. Instead of using his thumb and fingers, Rodgers played with a pick and that contributed to the percussive quality in his sound.

Raised in Mississippi and a long time railroad worker, Rodgers would certainly have had interaction with black musicians and the blues were infused throughout his music (Malone 87). In 1930, he even recorded his "Blue Yodel No. 9" with Louis Armstrong,

arguably the most popular and influential African-American musician at that time, if not the twentieth century. Although it was mostly a marketing decision, it indicates the degree to which both artists transcended the racial barriers of the record buying public at a time when segregation was the legal custom of the South through the shameful Jim Crow laws. His synthesis of the blues and yodeling into a unique form, the blue yodel, represented his greatest contribution to American folk music and helped to introduce the blues to a new generation of musicians. This included Doc Watson, who later adapted a large number of Rodgers's compositions into his own repertoire and has been known in live performances to play complete sets largely comprised of his songs.

Around 1930, when Watson was seven years old, his family received their first phonograph player and a number of records (reports range from less than fifty to seventy-five) from his uncle Jerome Greer (Lloyd 5-6). For households across the country the phonograph instantly provided a relatively cheap form of quality entertainment and exposure to a variety of styles of music that might have been previously unavailable. The effects of the phonograph on his imagination are immeasurable as Watson remembers, "we thought we had the king's treasure when he brought that thing in and played a record or two. And I tell you, I believe I loved it more than all the rest of the family put together, though, if Dad played the graphophone, I was sitting right by it" (Lloyd 6). He further remembers the first records they had were by the Carter Family, Tom Ashley and the Carolina Tar Heels, "Spike Driver's Blues" by Mississippi John Hurt, "Johnson's Old Gray Mare" by Texas fiddler Earl Johnson, and "Blue Ridge Mountain Blues" by Riley Puckett. Records by the Skillet Lickers, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Monroe Brothers were

soon to follow and the palette of Watson's influences continued to grow with the family's record collection.

Even more popular and accessible than phonograph players, the proliferation of radios in the home during the twenties and thirties also provided an inexpensive form of entertainment and an even wider variety of musical styles that could change with a turn of the dial. By the 1930s the radio had eclipsed the phonograph in popularity and live radio appearances became the primary medium for hillbilly entertainers to promote themselves. Often moving from station to station and state to state, musicians would play on any station, regardless of its size, to increase their popularity across as wide a region as possible. While the smaller wattage stations were vital for local promotion in a region, the higher watt clear channel stations provided the greatest opportunity for the largest audience across several states. The Saturday night barn dances broadcast by many of the higher powered stations greatly contributed to the rising popularity of hillbilly music in the Midwest and northern regions of the country. In 1932, when Doc Watson was nine years old, Nashville's WSM, home station to the Grand Ole Opry, boosted to a fifty-thousand-watt clear channel station and could be heard all across the Southeast. As the popularity of the Grand Ole Opry grew, it would come to be widely recognized as an institution closely identified with southern culture and many country stars that would become household names were regular performers on the show (Malone 95-6).

One important influence that Watson certainly heard on the Grand Ole Opry was the Delmore Brothers, who were members of the show from 1933-38. The Delmores were part of a phenomenon of several brother duet groups that were gaining popularity in the South in the thirties. With the Delmores, among the best and better known of these were

the Monroe Brothers, the Bolick Brothers who called themselves the Blue Sky Boys, and the Louvin Brothers. Alton and Rabon Delmore were known for their blues influenced compositions, tight and clear harmonizing, and Alton's smooth guitar picking style. Many of their songs, such as "Deep River Blues" and their tribute to Jimmie Rodgers "Blue Railroad Train," had a powerful effect on Watson. In addition to the influence of Alton Delmore's guitar style, the Delmore Brothers catalog became an important source of song material for Watson when he was preparing himself to perform for folk music audiences.

The Monroe Brothers were another duet with far reaching influence in the South that Watson heard on records and radio programs such as The Crazy Crystals Barn Dance broadcast on the high powered WBT out of Charlotte, North Carolina. They were also known as great harmonizers and for a high level of musicianship that mostly emanated from Bill's mandolin playing. He obviously would become a pioneer and innovator of bluegrass music in the 1940s and Watson likely listened to the genre's birth and maturation weekly on the Grand Ole Opry. He also was taken with the fast, hard driving rhythm guitar playing of Charlie Monroe. When the Monroes played a quick tune like "My Long Journey Home," the overflowing enthusiasm of Bill's explosive mandolin and Charlie's hammering pick and downhill tempo was palpable even to the most casual of country music fans. As with the Delmores, the Monroe's songbook stayed with Watson, and his memory of their songs some thirty years later no doubt helped to warm him to the icy Bill Monroe when they were preparing for their first duet concerts in 1963.

When he was thirteen, Watson's cousin introduced him to the guitar and let him borrow it. Soon his father offered to help him buy a guitar if Doc could learn a song

before he returned home from work that day. Watson finished learning the Carter Family's "When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland," for which he had figured out the chords, and soon he had a brand new Stella guitar (Lloyd 5-6). He began playing with a thumbpick and his fingers like Maybelle Carter but switched to a flatpick when he learned Jimmie Rodgers used one (Willis 368). Over the next few years, Watson assimilated the music of key influences like Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, and Alton Delmore into the beginnings of his personal style. In a recently discovered recording, believed to be his first, made at the 1941 Boone Fiddlers Convention by Appalachian Teacher's College English Department Chair William Amos "Doc" Abrams, Watson plays and sings Roy Acuff's "Precious Jewel." A remarkable recording, the influences of Carter and Rodgers are clearly evident in his guitar playing while the cleanly executed G-runs during vocal pauses are reminiscent to that of Bill Monroe's on his version of the "Muleskinner Blues." Watson likely heard him perform the song during Monroe's first year on the Grand Ole Opry in 1939.

As Watson aged into his later teenage years and early twenties, he discovered the impressive fingerpicking style of Merle Travis, whose influence was arguably the most widespread of any country guitarist in the 1930s and 1940s. Raised in the coal fields of Muhlenberg County in western Kentucky, Travis started on the five string banjo until his older brother gave him a handmade guitar. In his community he learned from Ike Everly, father of the Everly Brothers, and Mose Rager, both of whom showed Travis how to pick with the two finger technique popular in that area of Kentucky (Malone 202). In Travis's fingers, the style reached a high level of sophistication and virtuosity and his name became synonymous with the style.

The Travis style typically consists of the thumb maintaining a bass line, strictly on the downbeat, by alternating notes between the lowest three strings (E-A-D) while the index finger plays a more rhythmically varied melody line, alternating between the highest three strings (G-B-E). To give the bass line extra accent, Travis would use his palm to mute the bass strings, creating a more percussive thump. At a fast tempo, the style gives the illusion that more than one instrument is playing and is notable for the sheer number of notes produced by only two fingers. This technique derived from many of the elaborate fingerpicking styles developed by African-Americans, which practically all employ the thumb for playing bass lines and any combination of the index, middle, and ring fingers for the melody lines. Among many possible examples of recorded African-American musicians who used two fingers are Rev. Gary Davis, Fred McDowell, and Blind Boy Fuller. Travis's teachers, Rager and Everly, reportedly learned the two finger technique from fellow miner Kennedy Jones, who picked it up from Arnold Schultz, an African-American whose fiddle playing also had a profound effect on a young Bill Monroe (Lightfoot, 190).

While sacred, hillbilly, and stringband music clearly played an important role in Watson's early musical experiences and his later search for songs to perform, the blues was another type of music that Watson highly valued and incorporated into his own personal style. According to Watson, the first blues music he heard was the "Spike Driver Blues" record by "Mississippi" John Hurt. Interestingly he includes Jimmie Rodgers and Riley Puckett as early blues influences as well (Willis 369). His conception of the blues genre is certainly broad, including artists and songs many would consider as something other than blues, while his interpretations of blues tunes lack important

elements required of the music (Lightfoot 187-88). It seems he had little interaction with African-American musicians except through the handful of recordings of artists like Hurt or the Memphis Jug Band, and as he grew older he was more attracted to popular music by the likes of white country artists such as Travis, Chet Atkins, and Eddy Arnold to name a few. As a concept of hard times and sadness, the blues was something Watson surely understood and his intentions were never to imitate black blues artists' sound. As we have seen, when opportunity knocked for Watson, he was marketed and presented as an example of traditional Appalachian folk music, not a bluesman. To this end, he had to refine his style to reflect what was expected.

Although they fail to meet certain fundamental characteristics of the blues, especially in terms of form and rhythm, Watson unquestionably perceives a number of the songs he performs as his version of the blues. The main blues influence in his guitar style comes from Travis's distillation of the two finger blues technique into a vehicle for his own pop music aspirations and after mastering the technique, Watson also used it as vehicle for adapting a number of old tunes. His popular version of the Delmores' "Deep River Blues" serves as one of numerous examples of how he adapted a song for solo performance with the Travis style. Despite the fact the first blues artist he heard was John Hurt, he did not incorporate Hurt's three finger technique. Perhaps the style was too difficult for one his age, or he was simply more interested in the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, but by the time he had the technical abilities for syncopated fingerpicking, Merle Travis was his model. He also obviously understood the importance of the blue notes of the scale and felt he could apply them to any type of song to make it more blues like (Lightfoot 188).

In Watson's singing style, Jimmie Rodgers and his take on the blues idiom typified by his performance on "Blue Yodel No. 1" represents his strongest blues influence. The form of the verses follows that of a typical blues in that the first two lines are repeated and make some kind of statement, followed by an answer in the third line. Stylistically, Rodgers slides into and away from notes while adding extra vibrato to held syllables, both of which are common vocal practices in the blues. Where he veers stylistically is his use of humorous lyrics and a slightly cheerful vocal tone which can also be said of Watson. This is not to say Rodgers is his only inspiration. His vocal style on his version of John Hurt's "Spike Driver Blues" sounds similar to Hurt, both in style and voice quality, hinting at Watson's ability to assimilate a particular artist's sound into his style without sounding like an imitation. Despite the fact he did not play the blues in its purest form, which can also be said of Hurt, certain elements of the music do permeate Watson's style.

One area Watson can claim a complete understanding of form, style, and aesthetic is the fiddle tune and the successful adaptation of their melodies to the guitar. Moreover, he is widely recognized as a true pioneer of the style and is indicated by many guitarists of all levels of experience as their key influence. Not the first to try it, Watson "heard people like Grady Martin and Hank Garland when they were pickin' in country music playing fiddle tunes. And I wondered if I could learn to play fiddle tunes with the flatpick" (Willis 367). Martin and Garland were part of the roster of Nashville studio musicians utilized by Chet Atkins in the 1950s and the tune that inspired Watson was Garland's 1949 instrumental "Sugarfoot Rag." For the square dances he played with the Country Gentleman, Watson began working out "Black Mountain Rag" and "Beaumont

Rag" on the electric guitar and was known to play them for thirty or forty minutes at a time for dancers (Lightfoot 186). When Rinzler came along, Watson understood what he was doing on the guitar would work just as easily on an acoustic instrument and preparing for his first concerts he knew his arrangements would likely appeal to the folk audiences. Indeed, Rinzler noticed the enthusiastic and surprised reactions of the crowds when Watson played lead breaks and fiddle tunes, and as he traveled across the country on the folk circuit he was most acclaimed for his flatpicking skills.

To adapt the fiddle tunes, Watson had to combine two vastly different picking techniques commonly referred to as up and down picking and cross-picking. Up and down picking simply consists of alternating the pick down on downbeats and up on upbeats, usually through a series of continuous eighth or sixteenth note scale patterns. Cross-picking involves alternating the pick across three or more strings, usually in three note arpeggiated patterns, in one of several combinations of up and down picking patterns, the most common two being down-down-up and down-up-up. One of his more famous adaptations, "Black Mountain Rag," provides an ideal example of Watson seamlessly switching between both techniques from one moment to the next, not dropping a note, and effectively adding glissandos in imitation of the fiddle, all at a quick tempo.

While Watson's recognition as an innovator is well deserved, it is important to mention three of his predecessors who influenced his flatpick technique. Don Reno receives more attention for his virtuosic banjo style but he was also a masterful guitarist and is generally credited with playing the first bluegrass guitar lead with a flatpick in 1956 with his sarcastic composition "Country Boy Rock and Roll" (Willis 156). With his

musical partner Red Smiley, Reno created a brand of bluegrass distinctly different from Bill Monroe and a style of banjo picking built on chordal solos and single string runs that bore little resemblance to that of Earl Scruggs. His guitar style is boisterously aggressive, full volume, and precise, combining the drive of Charlie Monroe and smooth picking of Alton Delmore.

The other guitarists, Bill Napier and George Shuffler, both worked with the Stanley Brothers in the late 1950s. At that time, the Stanley Brothers were also looking for a way of playing bluegrass while separating their sound from that of Monroe. Their idea was to feature a second guitar to play leads which became a hallmark of their sound. The first, Bill Napier, can be heard utilizing both a flatpicking style in their 1959 recording of "Mountain Dew" and a cross-picking style on "Sweet Thing." His playing is also clear and rhythmic and his cross-picking pattern is largely down-up-up (Willis 365). Shuffler took over from Napier in 1961 and developed his own take on cross-picking, using a down-down-up pattern because "that's the only way you can do it and keep a consistent roll" (Willis 366). By this time Watson was working on combining both styles, while inventing combinations of his own including cross-picking by only alternating the pick down and up, but he undoubtedly was familiar with the work of Reno and the Stanley Brothers through their frequent radio appearances and early records.

If the only music Doc Watson recorded or performed were his fiddle tune adaptations, his legacy would still be secure. With the Travis style, as adept as Watson's playing is, it functions mainly as a tool to accompany his singing, or an instrumental display that amounts to little more than a faithful imitation. In the fiddle tune tradition, one important stylistic consideration of a good instrumentalist is the amount and types of variation of

the melody they play each subsequent time through the form (A A B B). It is within these melody based improvisations that fiddlers can show off their array of skills and level of musicianship. This fact is not lost on Watson, whose improvisational work is always virtuosic but musically tasteful, which is often a challenging balance to achieve for many players. When a player reaches a level of command with scales and arpeggios in a variety of keys, it is easy to overplay and have a sterile sound more appropriate for practice room exercises.

Even down to the distinctive passages that signal the end of a tune, Watson almost single handedly created a new style of guitar playing, firmly rooted in a rich tradition but thoroughly modern sounding, with a nearly endless supply of potential repertoire. Through his father-in-law Gaither Carlton, he had a reliable source for Appalachian fiddle tunes played by a native of the region with a strong family musical tradition. All of the fiddle tunes Watson played, from "Black Mountain Rag" to "Salt Creek" to "Beaumont Rag", became a standard part of the guitar picker's song list and were immediately identifiable even to those who were unable to play them. Although he did not invent the techniques that made playing the tunes possible, he brought them together expressly for that purpose. In the process of trying to earn a living by touring across the country, Watson disseminated the style to countless guitarists, some of whom, notably Clarence White, Norman Blake, and Tony Rice, would evolve the style even further, carrying it into bluegrass, folk, folk-rock, and later "newgrass," the more musically liberal cousin of bluegrass.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Folklorists often go to great lengths to discover and define the differences between musicians who learn traditionally through face to face interactions within their families and local culture and those who learn primarily through books, magazines, and recorded materials. An inestimable number of Appalachian musicians, including Doc Watson, fit into both categories, usually learning the basic playing techniques from a family member or friend then refining their musicianship and expanding their repertoire by listening to and learning from recordings of superior musicians. By the time Watson was in his teens, the proliferation of radio and increased ownership of phonographs inevitably meant more musicians in different regions of the country began to influence each other. His story of beginning in his family's musical tradition through banjo lessons with his father to seeing new musical possibilities after hearing the records of someone like Merle Travis or a radio performance by the Monroe Brothers is not unusual. The influential bluegrass banjo player Don Stover began playing a claw hammer banjo style, only to begin working out a three-finger style after hearing Earl Scruggs with Bill Monroe on the Grand Ole Opry in the mid 1940s (Willis 279). No matter their tradition, the most intuitive musicians are inevitably influenced by every kind of music that has, for them, some kind of impressive quality or positive emotional effect.

For Doc Watson, after clearing the initial hurdles facing all beginning guitarists, Maybelle Carter, Jimmie Rodgers, and a host of other musicians he heard on the radio

and records defined a new and exciting musical world within his grasp, providing him the foundations for a guitar style that would greatly serve him later. As the old time and hillbilly music of his youth faded more and more into unpopularity and obscurity, Watson followed the musical trends of the time, enjoying music by popular country artists who would also come to influence his style. By the 1950s, he was playing electric guitar in a country band and had to be familiar with a variety of popular music from the country and rock and roll charts. So taken with the music of Merle Travis and Eddy Arnold, who was not known as a guitarist, Watson named his son Eddy Merle after the two country stars. For eight years, Watson paid his dues and honed his guitar skills with The Country Gentleman, motivated by the simple economics of trying to earn a living and support his family without the financial assistance of the state government.

As a result of the resurgence of interest in folk music by northern urbanites in the late 1950s, a number of factors came together leading to Ralph Rinzler's discovery of Watson. Watson worked hard to remake himself into a folk musician, but he was never far removed from the music he played through his teens and twenties, and when played on an acoustic guitar, the fiddle tunes he worked out and perfected on the electric guitar gave him a level of respect and admiration a notch above other folk performers. Despite his initial disbelief he could be successful on a large scale, Watson's work paid off and the musician he was to become was enabled by the influences of the folk revival on idealists like Rinzler who sought to identify the representative musical traditions, or roots, of a singular American culture. Fortunately for Watson, his musical experiences were grounded in one of the traditions valued by the revivalists and his performances of

the music were convincing enough to forgive, and even enjoy, his more innovative side while ignoring his rockabilly past.

In many ways Doc Watson was a product of the folk revival. His discovery was the result of a revivalist following a tradition made up of practitioners aiming to preserve American roots music through collecting old recordings, making new recordings of a bygone generation of musicians, and preserving personal and family histories. The figures of the folk revival successfully ascribed roots music with cultural value while deciding which artists were relevant. In his attempt to "rediscover" Tom Ashley, Rinzler discovered Doc Watson, recognizing both his superior musicianship and commercial potential. Before Rinzler's efforts Watson was nothing more than the local blind boy who could pick a pretty good guitar. This is not to suggest Rinzler had dark motives. To the contrary, and to his credit, his love of the music was genuine, and the large amount of work he did for both Watson and Bill Monroe was done with the sincere intention of helping them because he felt their stature as musicians demanded it. If nothing else this demonstrates the value he placed on the musical figures he felt were important.

Rinzler was ready to help Watson, but only if Watson was willing to take up the acoustic guitar and focus on relearning the songs from his formative years. With Rinzler's encouragement, he went on a hunt for songs by unearthing old recordings, songbooks, and visiting relatives. To create an appealing image for the folk audiences, Watson had to reinvent himself musically from an electric guitarist playing in a country swing band to what was expected of a traditional southern Appalachian musician. In this way the folk revival had as much influence on the musician Watson would become as the musicians that inspired him. It is true he had a firm understanding of the traditional

Appalachian music and early country music valued by the revivalists; he simply had not spent much time playing it for many years until Rinzler came along. If he would have decided that playing in a more current style on the electric guitar offered him more economic promise, we either may have never heard of Doc Watson, or would know him for entirely different reasons.

Obviously Watson did not comply with the image for long. His guitar skills and eclecticism insured he would defy any notion of a traditional performer except to the most liberal definitions. In most traditional Appalachian music, the guitar serves in an accompanying role, providing a clearly marked bass line and strummed chords. The style Watson developed elevated the guitar to a potentially prominent, if not dominant role that sharply veered from the stylistic requirements of traditional stringband and fiddle music. His sophisticated rhythm style combined strumming, cross-picking, and flatpicking runs that marked the most elaborate vocal accompaniment of any other folk guitarist at the time. In addition to his inspiring fiddle tune style, his ability to play both the rhythm and lead parts simultaneously while singing caught the ears and imaginations of a new crop of innovative musicians across the country. Although Watson is quick to point out he is far from a bluegrass musician, he is often identified as such because the vast majority of modern day bluegrass guitarists' sound is so deeply infused with his style and the music has changed dramatically as a result. Much like Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs, Watson redefined the possibilities of the instrument and codified a musical language that became the hallmark of an instrumental style.

Attaching a genre label to what Doc Watson does musically is a difficult if not futile endeavor. Rinzler called him a "hybrid" heavily influenced by a variety of regional folk

styles through the radio and phonograph, born too late to become representative of the traditional vocal or instrumental style of his region, but musically sensitive enough to capture the essence of the old time musicians he listened to as a youngster (Watson and Rinzler 9). In his argument that Doc Watson does not perform “primary blues,” but a less than faithful representation gleaned from the likes of white recording artists like Jimmie Rodgers and Merle Travis, Lightfoot refers to him as “an emblem of Appalachian white blues” (189). Considering true representations of core blues were never his intention, Watson would probably feel a sense of pride in the designation.

No doubt, debate about Watson’s academic classification will continue, and however one chooses to describe his music, the fact remains that Watson does not consider himself an innovator or exceptional talent worthy of special recognition. His decision to pursue the slim chance at making music for a living was never anything more than a proud man trying to make his own way and independently support his family. On the *Legacy* CD release, Watson fondly remembers the pride he felt when he filed his first income tax forms and was able to cancel his state financial assistance. As an insightful musician, he saw a universal quality in the different types of music, both past and present, which emotionally affected him or caused him to think about music differently. Watson would likely agree with the jazz trumpeter and be-bop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie when he said “For a guy’s musical development, the same rule applies in jazz as in any other field; you collect facts and study . . . You take a riff that Roy Eldridge played, and you play that riff . . . And you figure the alternatives . . . And when you get that far, finally you’ll come up with something different. But it’s the same music; it’s just progressing all the time” (Ward and Burns 410).

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Chronological Discography

The following is a comprehensive listing of the albums recorded by Doc Watson, including guest appearances on other artist's albums, which are denoted by the artist's name listed before the title of the album. Much of Watson's catalog originally released on vinyl or cassette has been reissued on Compact Disc. For the sake of brevity, the only reissues listed here are the Folkways albums with the original Tom Ashley and Watson Family recordings made by Ralph Rinzler. Watson has released albums with no less than fourteen record labels, usually several within the span of a recording contract. To avoid redundancy, the city of publication for each label is listed only in the first citation in which it appears.

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Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley's, Vol. 2. Folkways, 1961.

The Doc Watson Family. Folkways, 1963.

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Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City. Folkways, 1963.

Old Time Music at Newport. New York: Vanguard, 1964.

Doc Watson. Vanguard, 1964.

Treasures Untold. Vanguard, 1964.

Friends of Old Time Music. Folkways, 1964.

Doc Watson and Son. Vanguard, 1965.

Traditional Music at Newport 1964, Part I. Vanguard, 1965

Southbound. Vanguard, 1966.

Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. *Strictly Instrumental*. New York: Columbia, 1967.

Home Again. Vanguard, 1967.

Good Deal! Doc Watson in Nashville. Vanguard, 1968.

Progressive Bluegrass and Other Instrumentals, Vol. I. Folkways, 1968.

Doc Watson on Stage. Vanguard, 1970.

Ballads From Deep Gap. Vanguard, 1971.

Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. *Will the Circle be Unbroken*. Los Angeles: United Artists, 1972.

Elementary Doctor Watson. Poppy/United Artists, 1973.

The Essential Doc Watson. Vanguard, 1973.

Then and Now. Poppy/United Artists, 1973.

Two Days in November. Poppy/United Artists, 1974.

Memories. Sugar Hill/United Artists, 1975.

Doc and the Boys. United Artists, 1976.

The Watson Family Tradition. London: Topic, 1977.

Old Timey Concert. Vanguard, 1977.

Lonesome Road. United Artists, 1977.

Look Away!. United Artists, 1978.

Live and Pickin'. United Artists, 1979.

Reflections. New York: RCA, 1980.

Red Rocking Chair. Chicago: Flying Fish, 1983.

Doc and Merle Watson's Guitar Album. Flying Fish, 1983.

Doc Watson Favorites. Liberty/United Artists, 1983.

- Down South.* Durham, NC: Sugar Hill, 1984.
- Pickin' the Blues.* Flying Fish, 1985.
- Riding the Midnight Train.* Sugar Hill, 1986.
- Arthel Doc Watson: Portrait.* Sugar Hill, 1987.
- Favorites of Clint Howard, Doc Watson, and the Blue Ridge Mountain Boys.*
Brighton, MI: Rutabaga, 1988.
- The Doc Watson Family.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian/Folkways, 1990.
- Doc Watson Sings Songs for Little Pickers.* Sugar Hill, 1990.
- On Praying Ground.* Sugar Hill, 1990.
- Norman Blake and Tony Rice. 2. Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records, 1990.
- My Dear Old Southern Home.* Sugar Hill, 1991.
- Remembering Merle.* Sugar Hill, 1992.
- Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley: The Original Folkways Recordings 1960-1962.*
Smithsonian/Folkways, 1994.
- Docabilly.* Sugar Hill, 1995.
- The Vanguard Years.* Vanguard, 1995.
- Watson Country.* Flying Fish, 1996.
- Doc and Dawg.* San Rafael, CA: Acoustic Disc, 1997.
- Home Sweet Home.* Sugar Hill, 1998.
- Mac, Doc, and Del.* Sugar Hill, 1998.
- The Best of Doc Watson: 1964-1968.* Vanguard, 1999.
- Third Generation Blues.* Sugar Hill, 1999.

Foundation: The Doc Watson Guitar Instrumental Collection 1964-1968.

Sugar Hill, 2000.

Doc Watson at Gerde's Folk City. Sugar Hill, 2001.

Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. *Will the Circle Be Unbroken III.* Hollywood, CA: Capitol, 2002.

Songs From Home. Capitol, 2002

Round the Table Again. Sugar Hill, 2002.

Legacy. Fairview, NC: High Windy Audio, 2002.

Trouble in Mind: The Doc Watson Country Blues Collection. Sugar Hill, 2003.

The Three Pickers. Rounder Records, 2003.

Sittin' Here Pickin' the Blues. Rounder Records, 2004.

Bryan Sutton. *Not too Far From the Tree.* Sugar Hill, 2006.

Black Mountain Rag. Rounder Records, 2006.

Doc Watson: The Best of the Sugar Hill Years. Sugar Hill, 2008.

Chronological Videography

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- Tribute to a Legend: Merle Watson Memorial Festival.* Wilkesboro, NC: Wilkes Community College, 1988.
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- A Ramblin' with Doc and Merle Watson.* Vestapol Productions. Ohio University Telecommunications Center. Prod. and Dir. Greg Hill. Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records, 1995.
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- Doc Watson: Rare Performances 1982-1993.* Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, Inc. Vestapol. Rounder Records, 1995.
- Legends of Old Time Music.* Vestapol. Rounder Records, 1995.
- Legends of Flatpicking.* Vestapol. Rounder Records, 1995.
- Songs for Ralph.* A production of New York University Tisch School of the Arts UFG/TV. Dir. Paul Petrussans. New York: Filmmaker's Library, 1996.
- Doc's Guitar Jam.* Vestapol. Rounder Records, 1996.

Traditional Music Classics with Doc Watson, Roscoe Holcomb, Buell Kazee, and Kilby

Snow. Newton, NJ: Shanachie Entertainment, 1997.

Legends of Country Guitar. Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, Inc. Rounder

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Doc Watson and David Grisman Live in Concert. Vestapol. Rounder Records, 1999.

The Three Pickers. Rounder Records, 2003.

Pete Seeger's Rainbow Quest: The Stanley Brothers and Doc Watson. Shanachie, 2005.

Biographical Sketch

Born July 27, 1974 to Beverly P. Hill and Hallett B. Hill, Jr. in South Charleston, West Virginia, Jon Hill was raised nearby in the small community of Winfield where he attended Winfield High School, graduating in 1992. While in high school, Mr. Hill started fostering his love of music, playing in a rock band and later taking classical guitar lessons after hearing the music of J.S. Bach played by Andres Segovia. In August 1992 he began his academic career at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia majoring in music with a concentration in classical guitar performance. While there Mr. Hill received many academic honors including first prize in the 1994 WVMTNA-Wurlitzer Collegiate Artist Guitar Competition, and the 1995 Belle and Lynum Jackson Scholarship Competition for instrumental soloists, held annually at Marshall. In 1997 he earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree, graduating magna cum laude.

In 1998, Hill decided to pursue his master's degree in music, focusing on classical guitar performance at Illinois State University. While in Illinois his passion for music was not confined to academia and he soon joined another rock band, spending his weekends playing in cities throughout the state, including Chicago, Peoria, and Rockford. Feeling homesick and missing the mountains, Hill's interest in playing bluegrass and old-time music greatly intensified and he started devoting more time to playing both three-finger and clawhammer style banjo. After borrowing a mandolin from a friend he became interested in learning Bill Monroe's mandolin style and to the detriment of his second master's recital it soon became his primary musical focus.

In 2000, Hill earned his Master of Music degree but his interest in bluegrass and old-time grew stronger and in 2001 he entered the Appalachian Studies program at Appalachian State University to learn more about his home region's rich musical heritage. He now resides in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with his wife Emily, working at the Chapel Hill Public Library and maintaining an active performing schedule as a mandolin player with a number of bluegrass bands in the region. In addition to bluegrass, Hill is interested in playing many styles of music including rock and jazz and hopes to continue performing as much as possible. His future academic plans include possibly pursuing a Master's degree in Library Science or a Ph. D. in music.