

Remembering Doc Watson...

By IFAN PAYNE
Music Critic

Remembering Doc Watson, but yet not remembering the first time.

Was it on the radio? Or on record? Or was it at a festival in Virginia?

Whichever it was, it was love at first hearing. A musician who made his guitar speak eloquently, and through whose singing voice was communicated the good-natured attitudes of a simpler time.

Sneaking tape recordings off the radio programs and returning to those fragments again and again over the years to hear that distinctive voice and the scintillating flat-picking of Doc and son Merle.

Doc Watson is called the greatest living exponent of this country's musical roots.

Hyperbole? Maybe.

But for one who has become associated with the roots of folk and basic bluegrass, his musical beginnings were mixed. He was born in 1923 in Stoney Fork, North Carolina, to a family of musicians who taught him the old songs and the old styles. His first instrument was not the guitar, with which his name is now synonymous, but the harmonica — which he still plays, conjuring up the ghosts of forgotten blues and folk per-



DOC WATSON
...love at first hearing

formers.

He soon turned his hand to the banjo and the guitar, but it was not until he was twenty-nine that Doc became a professional musician, playing in a band that, according to him, played "a combination of rock and roll, coun-

try and western, old pop standards and a few old square dance tunes."

Remembering the club, in Washington, DC.

Dark, crowded — sweaty before the proceedings even began — but the dark would not bother the blind guitarist as his son led him to the microphone and there, no more than an arm's length away, father and son picked and blew and sang their way into an enchanted land of dusty roads, Tennessee hills, and long lost loves waving goodbye as trains whistled forever forlornly over an endless lost landscape of times gone by.

It was in the sixties and the folk boom that Doc began to attract attention amongst those who were rediscovering the music of the Tennessee and Kentucky mountains, and Doc and his music have remained at the forefront of the folk-bluegrass style ever since.

Hearing him again just a couple of months ago at Winfield, it was evident that Doc has been more concerned to preserve the style than to assimilate any new ones.

He hoes his own furrow.

Remembering that I picked up two albums at a record stall in a festival many years ago, one of the Seldom Scene and one of Doc Watson. The stall owner says, "Hey! You got a real taste in music there. Two of the best."

Flattery will get him everywhere, I thought to myself.

I wasn't so sure about the Seldom Scene, but he was right about Doc Watson. He's two of the best. At least.

There are not many people of whom it can be said without raising a smirk that they are a legend in their own time, but Doc Watson is one of those people, and it is an event not to be missed when he and Merle and bass player Michael Coleman perform in Forum Hall of the KSU Union at 7 p.m. on Thursday.

The concert will start with a set by local guitarist Peter della Femina, and I have written before in these columns of his talents. Quite a combination.

Now, if Doc will perform his inexplicably and uniquely moving version of Gershwin's *Summertime*, the winter of my discontent may not be turned to glorious summer but it will at least be transformed into a thornless rosy glow.

And next time I can start by remembering Doc Watson...here in Manhattan, Kansas.

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