



INTRODUCTION





*Doc Watson trying out a new guitar.* ILLUSTRATION © KRISTINA TOSIC





*"If the wind and rain could play guitar,  
they would sound a lot like Doc Watson."*

- GREG BROWN

On a simple wooden stage in a newly-built elementary school auditorium in New York City's Greenwich Village, Doc Watson, a handsome blue-eyed blind man with a sun-browned and craggy brow, wavy hair and worker's hands, sat on a stool in front of a crowd filled with a who's who of Washington Square folkies and musicians. He sang into the microphone at center stage, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," with a handful of other musicians gathered behind him, humming soft harmony.

Only a few blocks from this 37-year-old bard and his borrowed guitar on the evening of March 25, 1961, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center had not yet been built in Battery Park. Doc Watson's version of "Amazing Grace" would travel around the world to land again in New York City forty years later in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, to be used as a salve and solace for an entire nation. A simple search of online videos yields countless tributes to fallen 9/11 police and firefighters, nearly all of them set to the moving melody of "Amazing Grace." And memorial ceremonies each year are not complete without a bagpipe corps tolling the long, somber and majestic notes of the beloved hymn.

Not unlike the bagpipes, Doc's singing that night was simple, straight, and true. He added no frills, displaying true piety and emotion as he shut his eyes tightly and sang the hymn's stanzas. John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers, who listened to Doc's performance of "Amazing Grace" at the March 25, 1961 concert said, "I was in the audience and I remember how moved I was by that moment when a blind man was leading us on those verses, 'was blind, but now I see.' [From there] the mythology about 'Amazing Grace' grew."

Cohen continued, "I think we all knew 'Amazing Grace' before this. But it never had an impact. It never sank in the same way.... With Doc leading it, it was this sweet, accessible tune." Some folkies had heard it before, but this performance brought the hymn into the folk canon to stay. Soon, the hymn was performed all across the folk music circuit, and within a few years, it had crossed the globe. People of every color and creed around the world now sing the verses and melody of the hymn as Doc first heard them as a child.

The words to "Amazing Grace" were written by repentant slave trader John Newton in the 1770's, and the hymn was first published with the melody *New Britain* in William Walker's *The Southern Harmony* in 1847, to great acclaim, and was included in Walker's *The Christian Harmony* in 1866 - the hymnal Doc grew up with. Blind from infancy, the inspirational words of the hymn spoke to Doc even as a child. While talking about "Amazing Grace," Doc said, "When I leave this world, and these are my honest feelings, I'll be able to see like you can, only maybe a bit more perfect." The Greenwich Village audience caught a glimpse of his inner world that night in the elementary school's auditorium.

As he sat on the PS 41 stage in Greenwich Village, his family still lived in poverty; Doc, his wife and two children lived off welfare and garden vegetables. Five years later, Doc had started to earn a good living for his family. He had completed a national solo tour, signed with Vanguard Records, and was now planning to record with country superstars Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs in Nashville for their upcoming instrumental release *Strictly Instrumental*. But he almost did not make it to the recording session.

Just after arriving in Nashville to start recording, Doc's appendix ruptured. He had been under terrible stress during his first few years on the road, traveling from town to town by airplane and bus, knowing little more than the name of the person who would greet him at the other end. He smoked cigarettes to ease the edge, but that did not help his health. He suffered from ulcers before, and now he was in a Music City hospital bed.

When Bob Dylan had his 1966 motorcycle crash, newspapers everywhere reported it. However, unlike Dylan, Doc Watson was not yet a household name, and his illness went largely unknown. The family was left alone to circle his bed, praying that Doc would recover.

Doc later recalled his morphine-induced dreams in that Nashville hospital, "I was walking along by a big cornfield ... just like I did when I was a boy ... and I was barefooted.... There was grass along there ... and I could smell that green corn.... [It was] just as plain as reality."

As Doc walked out of the cornfield in his dream, "some big bruiser monster or another jumped out of that cornfield ... and was gonna kill me." He

fought for his life against the creature that had attacked him, until he finally began to "[get] the better of him." It's not hard to draw an analogy between the monster and the illness that had brought Doc to the edge of death.

After waking from his morphine dream, Doc later described striking a deal with God from his hospital bed while he was still "half in this world, and sort of not." He felt the "almost-presence of God and eternity, the whole thing" on one side of his body, and on the other, "Rosa Lee and the kids, and the world as it is." With death on one side of his bed and his family on the other, Doc said, "I'd like to get up from here, Lord, if it's your will, and work for my family, but your will be done. If it's not right, if I shouldn't, whatever I've done wrong, you know about it, and I've lain it aside." After delivering his humble prayer, Doc said, "It was like they lifted a ten-ton load off of my chest."

The next time Doc confronted death face-to-face was two decades later, in 1985, upon the tragic death of his son Merle. Guitarist Jack Lawrence witnessed Doc's last moment with his son's earthly remains, "We had held up pretty well through this whole thing. And it came to the end of the service and nobody had taken Doc up to the casket to say goodbye. So T. Michael Coleman took Doc up, and Doc had his arms and head down on the casket, said goodbye, and he was crying."

Lawrence and the other young musicians present watched as Doc laid his head on his son's casket and wept for his best friend and musical soulmate. None of them had imagined that this king of guitar could appear so small and frail. When they saw Doc with his head and hands on Merle's casket weeping, they could not help but also break down crying. Jack Lawrence recalled, "At this point Coleman and Merle's friend Cliff Miller and I just lost it. So here the three of us were standing around; we were all just sobbing."

After Merle's death, Doc's friends and fellow musicians watched him return to the spiritual mindset of his youth. Supported by the pristine *a cappella* harmonies of the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Doc recorded a hymn called "Did Christ O'er Sinners Weep" for his all-gospel album *On Praying Ground*, and the emotions tied both to the words and performance are palpable.

Did Christ o'er sinners weep,  
Then shall our cheeks be dry,  
Let floods of penitential grief,  
Spring forth from every eye.



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The Son of God in tears,  
The blessed angels see,  
Those tears were shed for everyone,  
They were shed for even me.

Doc's baritone notes, recorded soon after Merle's death, quiver with sadness. *On Praying Ground* marked the beginning of the second half of the aging bard's career, and this sense of loss never left his music again.



Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson will turn 89 years old on March 3, 2012, two days after this revised second edition is released. He still performs concerts, and he somehow continues to put together blistering flatpicking solos for his eager fans, but his time in the public eye is growing to a close.

*Blind But Now I See* is a tribute to him, but also an invitation for students of history, guitar, culture and fans of all ages and persuasions. Look at Doc's life and what he has accomplished, and apply that same passion to your own goals and dreams. Just think of what he was able to achieve after the age of 37, when Ralph Rinzler first met him in North Carolina.

Doc doesn't want to be put on a pedestal, and this book, though reverent, aims to fulfill his wish. Doc is one of us, ultimately just someone who worked hard for his family, loved God, and became the best he could be. This is the story of the man, the musician, and the people and cultural surroundings that made his rise to greatness possible.

KENT GUSTAVSON, JANUARY 2012

**Note to the reader:** *This biography employs the use of Arthel Watson's nickname "Doc" throughout, even when describing his childhood. This was done for consistency when jumping back and forth between past and present in the narrative. - KG*



CHAPTER ONE

*Lone Pilgrim*







*Annie Watson holding her son, Arthel (Doc), in her arms.*

ILLUSTRATION © KRISTINA TOSIC







*"I can remember sitting on your lap - [I] must have been about two years old, hearing them sing at the church.... To me as a tiny little boy, I remember thinking it must sound like that in heaven."*

- Doc, to his mother, ANNIE

As birds began to sing before dawn on Sunday mornings, the residents of Wildcat Creek valley began to sing and pray. Up the winding road towards Deep Gap, before summer's heat filled the valley with soup-like warmth, the cool morning air was filled with the sound of chanted prayers and hymns. The nine Watson children and their parents would dress in their Sunday finest, then walk the three miles over the creek and down into the valley, joyfully anticipating songs and fellowship with their neighbors. All through the valley, other fathers helped their boys slip into hard-soled shoes and home-sewn pant-waists, and other mothers squeezed their girls into Sunday dresses.

The Watsons would make their way each Sunday morning, through snow or rain, sun or shadow, to the valley where Mount Paran Baptist Church stood. Before Doc was able to make the entire journey on foot, his parents would carry him. When they entered the church, they smelled the sweet scent of homemade soap on the ladies in their calico Sunday dresses and pomade in the hair of gentlemen in their best trousers, with hands scrubbed as clean as workers' hands can get after a week of hard labor. Together, they would fill the church with music and prayer.

Doc remembered the sound, "It was so strange, and yet it was so pretty.... The singing was very pure then. No vibrato in the voices at all, you know, just good straight harmonies, and some of those mountain people had voices like you wouldn't believe!"

Doc's father General was the *singing leader* at the church, and the weekly trip around the side of the mountain, over the creek, and into the valley was a part of life for the Watson family. The little church required only that sinners come forward to be saved: dipped in the deep waters of the Baptist faith. They did not believe in *sprinkling*, the local term for when Protestant pastors sprinkle water on a child's head in baptism. They believed in full immersion. – body and spirit below the water, spitting and gurgling for air.

The small boy in his mother's arms was baptized by this music, this harmony, embraced by a wash of a *cappella* voices, bouncing around the uncoated planks of the small sanctuary – strong, sure, and free.

In his role as the singing leader at the small church, General would start the small choir singing and count out time with his arm. There was no sheet music, and no instrumental accompaniment of any kind during the Sunday service, but at revivals and *singings*, copies of the shape note hymnal, *The Christian Harmony* would be passed around. Doc remembered, "[There were] big singings at the church back then, and I guess [my dad's little 16-person choir] must have been pretty good, because they won a lot of them." Doc's father's favorite hymn was "The Lone Pilgrim," which Doc later recorded on his first album with Vanguard Records, self-titled *Doc Watson*.

The original Mount Paran Baptist Church has long since been torn down and replaced by a brick building across the street, but the simple sanctuary lives on in Doc's daughter Nancy's memory. "There was an old painted wood church ... where my brother Merle and I were first introduced to music. Kerosene lanterns were suspended from the ceiling, lighted at night. Moths repeatedly circled the yellow glow as the familiar scent of burning wicks filled the air, mixing with the ever-present one of the pine wood walls. In a similar setting our parents were introduced to music; the same as their parents, and their parents before them.... People knew [the church] as a place to rest and forget for a while the hardness of life. They could sing their soul's sorrows and frustrations away."

Doc's childhood was wonderfully simple. He knew church, family and little else. His brothers and sisters were his closest friends, and his family lived on an Osborne Mountain ridge top farm, where they grew vegetables and subsided off of the land as their ancestors had done for generations.



Arthel Lane Watson was born on March 3, 1923, at nine o'clock on a Tuesday evening. He did not acquire the nickname Doc until he was much older, once he was performing around his local area. His parents christened him with a totem of courage and intelligence. Arthel, Doc's given first name,

comes from the Gaelic words *àirdeil* for "ingenious" and *gal* for "valor." Doc's middle name is Lane, or "roadway," which would turn out to be fitting for a man destined to spend the second half of his life on the road.

Doc's father, General, was a gentle bear of a man, a farmer and manual laborer who loved his family and God above all else. His mother, Annie, was a homemaker, running around after nine children and tending household chores and the garden.

Annie was descended from a line of preachers and singers, but she was not able to read. Although General was barely able to read, she relied on him to do the nightly Bible readings with their children by lamplight. Annie was versed in oral tradition, knowing many ballads passed down by generations of Scotch-Irish Appalachian women, and most of the hymns out of *The Christian Harmony* that they would sing on Sundays and during nightly devotional gatherings. She would hum or sing while churning butter, hanging the laundry, sewing, or tucking the children into bed at night.

Annie was happy in the small cabin that General had built for them on a small parcel of the 3,000 acres that had first belonged to their ancestor, David Watson, five generations earlier. The home was built of trees pulled from the steep hillsides all around; the chinks between the logs were filled with mud, and the roof was made of tin. The cabin was about a mile from Wildcat Creek, down a winding path across the side of the mountain. There was a cellar cut into the hillside full of preserves in the winter; there was a garden in back, and a hill on the side. Doc's father cut the lumber off the hillsides to burn in winter and to sell to the local lumber company for cash.

The town nearest to Doc's family home was Deep Gap, a few miles up the road. Though Deep Gap is well known as the hometown of Doc Watson, it is little more than a ghost town now. The new Highway 421 recently blasted its way through the mountain towards Boone, and old Highway 421, which runs directly through Deep Gap, sits abandoned and empty. One of the only signs in town is painted on the side of a barn and reads "Jesus Saves" with an arrow pointing skyward.

Doc's ancestor David Watson trained as an apprentice before marrying and traveling to the colonies. He was the son of shoemaker John Watson in Edinburgh, Scotland, trained as a saddler's apprentice for six years in the 1770s, working hard to save for his long voyage to the new world with his young bride. After David Watson's training in Scotland, he came to the American colonies just before the Revolutionary War, and signed up to fight the British in exchange for the promise of land.

David Watson fought valiantly as a cavalryman and on one retreat narrowly escaped capture by the Redcoat army. According to John Preston Arthur's *History of Watauga County*, Watson's horse jumped a ditch that his pursuer's horse could not cross. Watson returned safely to his family as a hero, and in the 1790's was given his promised piece of land, soon bringing his wife and children to the wild Watauga region of North Carolina along with their seven slaves. He also brought along his father John Watson, who eventually lived to be 100 years old with his life spanning two continents and two centuries. David and his wife Mary Beda had twelve children.

Life in the wilderness was hard for David's family involving backbreaking tasks such as clearing land and guarding against wild animals and neighboring Cherokee tribes. However, these risks soon paid off, and as the Watauga River valley became a hotbed of settlement in the coming generations, the family land became more and more valuable. David owned miles of the countryside near present-day Boone, North Carolina, which today is settled and owned in little parcels by thousands of his progeny.



During the Civil War, North Carolina was part of the Confederacy, while nearby Tennessee was the last state to join the rebels, and was a front of heavy fighting. Doc's great-grandfather Thomas Watson, Jr. was a soldier for the Confederacy. After returning from the war, Thomas Watson, Jr. had a boy named Smith.

Smith grew up in Deep Gap, and he married a girl named Charlotte, then had a son with her, whom they christened General. Despite being named according to a military rank, he was born into a world far removed from the times of the Revolutionary War within which David Watson had fought or the Civil War within which Thomas Watson, Jr. fought.

When General was born, education was secondary to survival. After the Civil War, isolation had come to Appalachia, and family clans stuck to their own hollows, keeping to ancestral traditions, and living a subsistence-based lifestyle. General never received a formal education, and though only a nine-year-old boy when the 1900 census was taken, his profession was already listed as "farm labor." In that same census, General's name was misspelled as *Jenarl*. Later in life, General learned to read a few passages in the Bible and to sing hymns out of the family shape-note hymnal – but that was the extent of his literacy.

On his own birth certificate, 32 years after his father was born, Doc Watson was also falsely christened, marked forever by humble beginnings: the child

of two nearly illiterate parents. Little Arthel was legally registered by the State of North Carolina as *Örthel* Watson.



In 1896, Annie Greene was born in a one-room cabin in Meat Camp, North Carolina. Meat Camp had been a Confederate camp in the Civil War where meat and supplies were kept in a cave, hidden under close guard from enemy raids.

Annie's father built a new home of split and flattened logs, cutting chinks out of pine to fill the gaps between the logs. Annie's mother stuffed newspapers into these gaps, coating them with a paste of flour and water, in order to insulate the cabin against the cutting winter winds. They lived a simple life, lighting the house by pine torches at night.

Annie grew up in the last vestige of 17th century European culture; her parents still carried on the traditions her Scotch-Irish ancestors. Among other traditions kept through two centuries of American domesticity, her father still made shoes for his family, affixing their soles with wooden pegs. Her six brothers and four sisters watched as their shoes emerged from the weathered and expert hands of their father.

As Annie grew older, she longed for a handsome suitor. One night Annie had an especially vivid dream: she was shelling corn upstairs with her brother, getting ready to go to the mill. They were hard at work, sitting for hours, silently peeling the leaves away from the precious yellow and white kernels of corn, when suddenly a dog barked. Annie leapt to the window, dumping the corn out of her apron, looking off down the road to see who was approaching. She saw two men coming up the road, still far away.

In a 1976 interview, Annie spoke of how her dream soon came true. One day while silently shucking corn upstairs with her brother, she heard a dog bark. She ran as quickly as she could to the window, dumping her corn in excitement. Indeed, she saw the two men from her dream walking up the road, still off in the distance.

Annie ran downstairs to her mother, and shouted, "There's two men coming!"

Her mother said to her, coolly, "Get the broom and brush up the hearth right quick ... and get you on a clean dress!"

Annie did her best to brush her hair quickly, and she donned a simple and clean dress.

Soon enough, the two strange men she had seen approaching came inside. One man was Annie's cousin, Wade Greene, and the other was young

General Watson, 19 years old, thin and handsome, hands and face brown from hard work, and his eyes bright with danger. The two men had walked 16 miles to arrive at the Greenes' house.

General had been in trouble with the law in Deep Gap, and was required to go to court near the Greenes' house, so Wade had suggested he stay the night with the Greenes on his long journey.

On part of the long walk through the mountains, Wade said to General, a mischievous grin on his face, "There are pretty girls up there at the Greene's."

General, with a sly grin, replied to Wade, "If there are, I'm gonna help them wash the dishes!"

General's strategy worked. His eye was set soon after his arrival upon young Annie. After dinner, when she was in the kitchen cleaning up, General came into the kitchen with his hands stuffed into his trouser pockets. Annie could barely move. She could hardly look up. This was a strange man and she was shy. She just stood silent, barely lifting her eyes to look at General.

Instead of helping the women wash dishes, as he had planned with Wade, General just stood there and watched as Annie worked. After they finished, General worked up the courage to ask Annie, "When I get back home, I might write you a letter. Will you answer it?"

This was romance of the highest degree for young Annie. Modestly, she replied that she *might* answer his letter. In a week, she got a letter as promised. Every two weeks after that, General would walk 16 miles to the Greene's home to come courting his future bride.

General and Annie were married in the gentle, thawing days of May, 1911, in Meat Camp Township, at her father's home. The ceremony was simple. The newlyweds soon after moved to Tennessee and General found a well-paying job there. However, it did not take long until they were homesick for the hills they had left behind. General was at times so lonely he would pull his banjo out in the middle of the night and play a tune or two.

Annie remembered how homesick her husband would get. "Oh, he wouldn't sleep.... He'd get up and he'd get that banjo and he'd get me up and I'd have to ... try to dance with him for hours and hours.... He'd sit and pick that old banjo and want me to dance and dance. You know, I tried to do anything to pacify him."

General played a few tunes for his young wife at home, but they never attended any dances or public events together where there might be music or other such merriment. The early 1900's in Appalachia were filled with many community events, from molasses-making to quilt-making, log-rolling, ground-clearing, bean-stringing, house-raising, and many other happenings.

At such gatherings, jugs of moonshine often were passed from hand to hand. General was a devout Baptist and did not believe they should participate in such debauchery.

Homesickness soon overtook them both, and the young married couple moved back to Deep Gap to live with his family. General immediately set to work building the home where they would soon raise their nine children.



Despite his humble birth, Doc's lineage traces back to European royalty through his great-grandmother on his father's side, Betsey Triplett, who was the great-grandchild of a man named "Yankee" John Church. Although he was not given as much land by the young American government as David Watson had been, Church also moved to Wilkes County in North Carolina after the Revolutionary War in 1773.

Yankee John had a long history in the United States – his great-great-grandfather William Goodrich was one of the first settlers of the Colonies, in 1648. The adventure of crossing the seas had been quite dangerous in Goodrich's day, and at times, as many as half of each ship's passengers, who would often board below decks with the rats, did not survive the grueling voyage. Even upon arrival in the colonies, a rough existence awaited each of these immigrants. Because of the rough conditions, travel to the American continent did not become commonplace until decades later. Nevertheless, 19-year-old William survived the treacherous journey with his 16-year-old newlywed wife.

Before his emigration to America, William Goodrich's lineage stretched back to the year 1390 in Lincolnshire, England, and a who's who of knights, lords, barons, and, thirty-three generations before Doc was born, kings of England. Forty-four generations before Doc first breathed the North Carolina air, his distant relative Charlemagne had been appointed by the Pope to rule the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne and Doc then traced their common ancestry to kings of Italy, France, Austrasia, the Ostrogoths, the Franks, Al Manie, and even, eighty generations before Doc was born, Germanicus Julius Caesar of Rome.

Charlemagne had an all-encompassing passion for learning that moved countless historians to write biographies of him. He was responsible for reforms in all worlds of academia, from art to script. He probably did not know how to write, but legend says that he kept a tablet under his bed so that he could practice writing in secret. Doc Watson, too, grew up with parents who knew little about reading and writing, but who nevertheless valued the education of their children. Doc grew up with Bible lessons each day and was



later sent to study at one of the best schools for the blind in the country at the time. After he dropped out of school, Doc continued to study hundreds of *talking books*, precursors of audio books, recorded in special formats and made available to blind readers by the Library of Congress on any subject imaginable. Doc Watson, like Charlemagne, kept his metaphoric tablet under his bed, always valuing education and innovation in his own life.



The Depression came to Appalachia before the rest of the country, and in the mid-1920's, Doc's parents took solace in the simple plank walls of Mount Paran Baptist Church on Sunday mornings and summer nights. Annie held her little blind son in her arms, and the rest of the children gathered around her as General led the church choir and congregation in song. Doc drifted away on the human harp of voices filling up the small, sweaty sanctuary.

Far from the wealth of European royalty, the crown prince of flatpicking guitar was christened in the wash of harmony in that summer church; women and men around him singing and shouting out the songs of glory in their piercing tenor and soprano voices, the turn of their tongues inherited from mouths long forgotten. He certainly would not have traded the throne of his mother's arms in that summer church for the plush velvet chairs of Roman kings.