

Just listen to that man play

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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When I was growing up, there was a lot of music in my house—mostly choral music, jazz standards, showtunes, [CCM](#), and praise and worship music (the last two being considerably more distinct in those days than they are now). My parents are both musicians, and before and for a while after they had kids, they played in a local band. Another couple from that group remained close friends of my parents, and their son and I--living a half mile from each other, each surrounded by sisters--were inseparable from birth to college.

On many Saturday nights, I slept in my friend's basement. His dad liked to wake us for church by putting on records by Doc Watson--who [died Tuesday](#)--and cranking the volume. This was the louder, bluegrassier Doc, with prominent banjo (played by him or by others) and a great deal of flashy solo work. To us it was aimless, ludicrous music. We jumped out of our sleeping bags to shut it off, and my friend's dad grinned and told us to get ready for church.

It never occurred to me that he might love this music for its own sake and not just as a parenting tool. It didn't have any electronics or drums, and the only songs about Jesus were creaky old hymns! But I'd always looked up to my friend's dad as a guitar player, one who played acoustic almost exclusively--his electric has been on long-term loan to me for 20-odd years now--and also had a banjo he got out from time to time.

Of course he loved Doc Watson. Every guitar player who has ever gotten into acoustic and/or country music loves Doc Watson.

My road to Doc was typical for someone my age lacking a traditional-music background. As a teenager in the mid-90s, I liked REM more than I liked the grunge scene; soon I encountered the Jayhawks and Uncle Tupelo and (early) Wilco, alt-country bands that pretty much blew my mind. They sent me back toward the great country-rock music from before my time--The Band, *Harvest*-era Neil Young, Gram

Parsons. By my mid-20s, I was naming Hank Williams and A.P. Carter as among my favorite songwriters.

And though I'm no huge fan of bluegrass's showy, solo-driven take on the country string band, my exposure to it made me want to be able to play the guitar like that, if only to choose not to most of the time. In that world, Doc Watson is almost single-handedly responsible for elevating the guitar from an accompaniment instrument to a formidable solo one. If you like country music and play mostly with a [flatpick](#), as I do, Doc's the guy to study for the rest of your life.

That said, I especially love Doc's [fingerstyle](#) work. It's more subdued than his flatpicking, and deceptively simple--he'd play straightforward accompaniments for his weary baritone, but with a great deal of nuance and with unfailingly crisp, driving rhythm:

Hearing Doc play made me start letting my electric guitar collect dust for months on end. Hearing him play an old American hymn like that made me want to never again hear it played straight on the piano or (God forbid) the organ. Fancy flatpickers are a dime a dozen now, but they wouldn't be doing what they're doing were it not for Doc.

As for my childhood friend, he comes down to Chicago for honky-tonk shows sometimes, a fact I imagine his father enjoys. Country music has a way of grabbing you for good. And thanks to Doc Watson, I expect I'll be trying to get better at playing it for the rest of my life.