

My Memoirs - Chapter 2.2 - The Music Scene

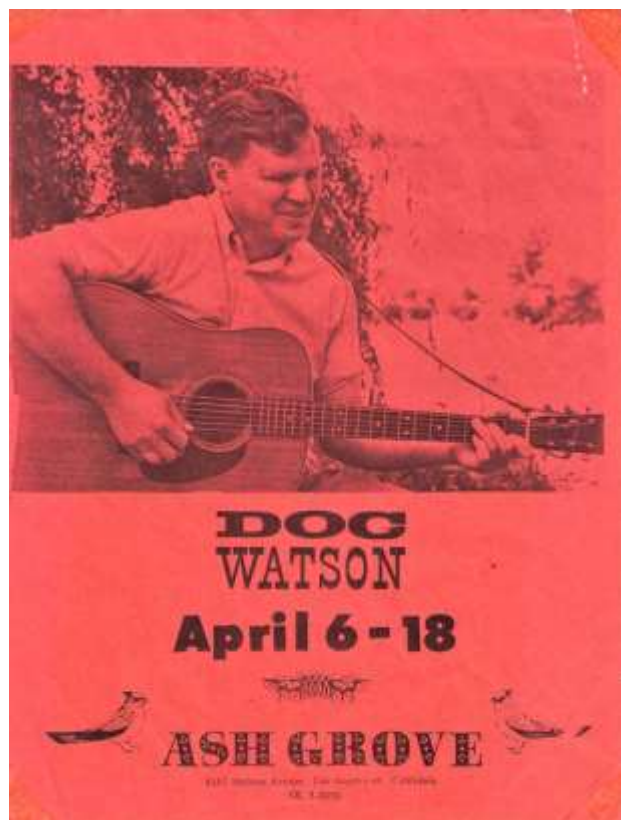
Dan Fefferman
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Six blocks east of Fairfax on Melrose stood the Ash Grove, rightly dubbed the folk music Mecca of Southern California. I had started going there in junior high but now that I was in high school I could go even after school and hang out in their "picking room" or the guitar shop, McCabe's, which eventually moved to Santa Monica and still thrives today. In the picking room young musicians would often trade riffs or have picking contests to see who could play Doc Watson's version of "Black Mountain Rag" faster and cleaner. Taj Mahal often spent time there, as did soon-to-be famous sidemen like Ry Cooder, David Lindley (slide guitar for Jackson Browne) and others. Legendary players also occasionally hung out too: Mississippi John Hurt for one, Rev. Gary Davis for another.

The Pseudo Mountain Boys were on good terms with the club's owner Ed Pearl, who hired us to put up posters in the neighborhood in exchange for free admission any night except Saturday. As a result, the list of people I got to on stage in that relatively small venue is practically endless: from

Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys on one end of the spectrum to Howlin' Wolf and his band on the other. Solo acts included names like Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Barbara Dane, Odetta, Jose Feliciano, Skip James, Phil Ochs, Elizabeth Cotton, John Lee Hooker, Willie Dixon, and Tom Paxton. It would take far too much space to list them all. Herb, our mandolinist, was in love with Buffy Saint Marie. He practically went to heaven the night she asked him to change her guitar strings for her in the dressing room.



On night after the show started and we had to abandon to picking room so as not to be heard in the main hall, Herb, David and I were playing out on the sidewalk, when Doc Watson walked up. Doc was blind, so Bernie Pearl, Ed's brother, led him up to us. He was one of our idols, the best guitarist in the business. We rolled our eyes at each other nervously, but kept playing. The song was "Somebody Loves You Darling." Pete usually sang baritone but he was in Azusa, so it was just me and Dave on vocals. When the chorus came around, to our surprise and delight, Doc joined in on Pete's vocal part. Herb then took the mandolin solo, and Doc quipped, "I hear you, son." (He pronounced it "hyear.") It was the high point of our career, at least so far.

Every summer there were music festivals. The UCLA Folk Festival was the biggest, but the most important for us was the Topanga Canyon Banjo and Fiddle Contest, where hundreds of aspiring players came to show off their skills. Pete won first place in the advanced category twice and Dave beat out John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, our fellow denizens of the Ash Grove back then, to

take home the blue ribbon in banjo one year. Not to brag, but I still have my own blue ribbon in the beginner category on banjo. I don't put too much stock in that, though, as I had serious skill on guitar by then; but since I had only been playing for a month, I figured that I qualified as a beginner.

By 1964 the Pseudo Mountain Boys were beginning to get occasional gigs at well-known coffee houses, including the Ash Grove and the Troubadour. Too young to play in bars, we had to settle for Shakey's Pizza Parlor for our regular gigs. Once we opened for the future country star, Ricky Skaggs and his family

when Ricky was even younger than we were, a prodigy of about ten years old, I think. I suffered a several blow to my ego that night when his sister played "Eighth of January" better than I did in our opening set. Back stage, the other band members rubbed it in: "You got chopped by a girl. YONK!!!" Do this day, I don't know if she chose that particular song because she knew I had screwed up my solo earlier, or not. (It's the fiddle tune that Johnny Horton sang as the melody on "The Battle of New Orleans")



Meanwhile, David was learning fiddle and making considerable progress. He knew every note of every solo the great Chubby Wise ever recorded with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys. One day, a storm blocked Monroe's band from getting over the pass to L.A., so Bill flew ahead for their gig at the Ash Grove. Ed Pearl scrambled to put a band together for him. No professional fiddlers were available, so Dave was chosen in fill in. He looked like a deer in the headlights to us, but he was tall, dark and handsome, peering out from under a slightly too-large, black cowboy hat on the Ash Grove stage. Sure enough, he played the solos note for note like Chubby Wise. Monroe introduced him as "an upcoming young fiddler, a Jewish boy, David Elson" -- or did he say "Nelson?" A little later I got my own chance to play with legendary "Father of Bluegrass" at a picking party at Ed Pearl's house in the Hollywood Hills.

When you can say: "I played with Bill Monroe," and "Doc Watson sang with my band," you know you've made it.