

Americana Idol

After years of spinning his wheels, **Watermelon Slim** drives straight into blues stardom. But is it the end of the **Workers** as we know them?

by Will Romano

If you've ever witnessed the tortured, slack-jawed facial expressions Watermelon Slim projects while testifying the blues, squeezing air through his harp, or curling a bottle over the strings of his slide guitar, you'd swear the man is either deranged or in mortal pain.

Yet even at his most grizzled, there's something sublime about Slim's rubbery, Grinch-like embouchure, time-worn countenance, and dull but strangely penetrating glare. Slim's a walking contradiction — part saint, part sinner. And his stage name, both cartoonish and curious, only adds to one of modern blues' biggest mysteries: Who the hell is Watermelon Slim?





"You hang out with him for five minutes and you'll know he's not like anybody you've ever met," says guitarist Ronnie "Mack" McMullen Jr. of the Workers, Slim's band of five years. "He has his eccentricities."

"He's a cross between Pa Kettle and Will Rogers," says Chris Stovall Brown, who co-produced Slim's *Big Shoes To Fill* (2003) and *Up Close & Personal* (2004).

Watermelon Slim has been variously described as a gentleman scholar, a MENSA dropout, a national treasure, a street hustler, a southpaw slide guitarist with a passion for Shakespeare (legend has it Slim has been spotted with Bill's plays in his gig bag), a French-speaking Forrest Gump full to the gills with grandfatherly insight, and a peculiar individual with enough personality twitches to drive even those closest to him up a proverbial wall. Even though he's currently more visible than ever (he's won two Blues Music Awards and, as of this writing, has been nominated in four categories for 2009), Slim seems to have come from nowhere. He's a bit like the Man With No Name from

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the now-classic Clint Eastwood spaghetti Westerns. How this mysterious stranger arrived is unclear, and where he goes after the sun sets isn't readily known, either. Like Eastwood, Slim is a phenomenon.

Adding another layer of complexity to Slim's story is the fact that big changes are currently taking place within his beloved band. Less than a year after winning a Blues Music Award for Band of the Year, the Workers have lost a member: Michael Newberry, Slim's drummer and tour manager, recently announced his resignation from the group. Newberry, who is now backing Chicago harp player Bill Lupkin, expects that his scheduled May appearance at the 2009 BMA ceremony will be his last with the Workers.

"It was a tough decision [to leave], but I called our manager [Chris Hardwick] and told him, and he said, 'OK. We hate to lose you. But we have plenty of time to fill your spot,'" says Newberry.

"We're all friends, all four of us," says Workers bassist Cliff Belcher. "As far as I'm concerned, we have an open-door policy for Mike. He'll always be a Worker."

McMullen and Belcher plan to remain on Slim's team at least through the rest of 2009, with producer Brown helping out onstage — "primarily as his drummer," says the Boston-based musician, "but Slim also wants me to bring harps and guitar."

After that, the future of the Workers seems uncertain. "I'm looking to bring my band touring days to an end," says Slim. "What I figure I'll do is play enough solo gigs to stay on the radar, to let people know that I'm still creating [new music]."

SLIM SHADY?

Here's what we know about Watermelon Slim. Born William Homans III in Boston, Slim was raised by his mother in Asheville, North Carolina, after his parents divorced. By age 10, he had taken up the harp. Later, while laid up in a Vietnam hospital, he taught himself left-handed slide guitar on a right-handed instrument. He banged around Oklahoma, Massachusetts, and Oregon, earned two bachelor's degrees and one master's (in history), married and separated from troubled blueswoman Honour Havoc (a legend in some punk-rock circles), performed grunt

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labor, and dabbled in illegal activities while living in substandard conditions (even going homeless at times), perhaps in rebellion against his upper-middle-class upbringing.

"I was a [pot] dealer, and I had associations that could only be called criminal," says Slim. "I wasn't a 'made man' or anything like that, but I knew where a lot of the pot I sold was coming from. I didn't want to steal. I never did steal. I associated with people who did, and did so with my eyes open at that point. But I didn't like it."

Slim eventually got out of the drug business. "I hadn't been busted, and I didn't owe anybody any papers. That's why I was allowed to walk away," he says.

He cut his first solo recording, *Merry Airbrakes*, in the early 1970s as one of the few Vietnam veterans to record an LP while the war was still raging. His career was going nowhere, however, and like many Vietnam vets, he lived a gypsy-like existence, dropping out in his 1957 GMC school bus.

"I drove that bus for several years, slept in it, took LSD in it, had parties in it," says Slim. "I think I lived that way partly [as] a reaction to being a Vietnam vet. Knowing that [I] had participated, even in [my] tiny little way, to what happened over there — it was shocking to me. I spent a number of years spinning my wheels, taking whatever job was available."

Indeed, Slim could almost be the creation of a Madison Avenue account manager who stitched together swaths of classic blues motifs to make a kind of modern myth. He's worked as a sawmill operator, a melon farmer (inspiring his stage name), a politician's bodyguard, a newspaper reporter, and a music teacher. He's also, in his own words, a "wannabe political investigator."

His late father, Harvard-educated civil rights attorney William Homans Jr., argued to abolish the death penalty in Massachusetts and helped to reverse the state's stand on the issue. Slim dedicated *Big Shoes To Fill* to his dad.

"He was one of the truly great men," Slim says. "He defended Freedom Riders in Mississippi and even the Boston Strangler."

Slim's family background in public service may have played a role in shaping his activist mentality (he was deeply involved in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War effort and continues to speak out about American foreign policy) and his optimism concerning rehabilitation (he once formed a band with prison

inmates at the Massachusetts Reformatory at Concord). "I was the only non-inmate member of the group," he says of that experience. "I replaced a recidivist burglar and pimp. There were people in the group serving time for second-degree murder and manslaughter and forgery. It was a uniquely successful — while it lasted — experiment in rehabilitation therapy."

Much like his dad's "come one, come all" defense dictum, a patchwork of humanity stamps Slim's life and times. Details and plotlines of his history are only now coming to light.

"Slim's manager and I have been working with him for years, and stuff is still coming out that we didn't know," publicist Michael McClune says of the performer.

Creating and maintaining a mystical aura is standard operating procedure for blues musicians. Still, those close to Slim maintain that he's a straight shooter who tells the truth about his past — at least the truth as he sees it.

"When I first met Slim, he told a story about how he met Junior Wells in 1971 in some old bar in Chicago," Workers guitarist McMullen says, "and Junior supposedly took the harmonica from Slim and started playing. I was like, 'Whatever, man.' Then I met a dude who was with Slim the night that happened. I've



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The newest Worker:
CHRIS STOVALL BROWN

never known Slim to lie. He might embellish, but he doesn't lie. And enough of what he says is substantiated that you believe him."

"People sense he's genuine, and that comes through in his music," says Brown, who in the Eighties played drums in Slim's Boston-based band the Old Dogs.

The transparency of Slim's emotions and his ability to draw in listeners are evident in his recordings. Take a song such as "Shed My Blood in Mississippi" from *Big Shoes To Fill*: Despite the tune's lighthearted sound, we feel the crushing blows of fists impacting our jaw as Slim recounts his experience of being mugged in Clarksdale, Mississippi, while searching for a juke joint. "Dad in the Distance," from 2008's *No Paid Holidays*, breaks hearts with its tale of parental guilt. The deep a cappella tones of "Truck Holler #1" and "Truck Holler #2" (from *Up Close & Personal*) capture the loneliness of a man sitting in his truck cab, counting the miles and hollering the blues. We're served a slice of humanity cut by a 52-inch buzz blade in "Sawmill Holler" (from 2007's *The Wheel Man*), which, as a 21st-century recasting of the John Henry legend, offers a cross section of a miller's life.

Even when interpreting someone else's work, Slim makes it his own. On *No Paid Holidays*, he turns Laura Nyro's "And When I Die," a full-on symphonic folk/soul tune about life, death, and rebirth, into an introspective piece that quakes with aching



PHOTOGRAPHY © JOSEPH A. ROSEN

MICHAEL NEWBERRY, CLIFF BELCHER,
RONNIE MCMULLEN JR., SLIM (clockwise from left)

hollers, pregnant silences, and enough portents to make Ralph Stanley proud.

"It's a flash of brilliance," Fred Litwin of NorthernBlues Music, Slim's label, says of the bluesman's reimagining of the tune. "He has a tremendous ability to pick cover songs."

OKIE DESPERADO

Slim's best work could be ahead of him. His next album, titled *Escape From the Chicken Coop* and recorded in Nashville, is dedicated to country artist Dave Dudley and holds some of Slim's most honest songs. It's due in June on NorthernBlues.

"The record is primarily, but by no means overwhelmingly, shitkicking country music," Slim says. "Having grown up in North Carolina, country music and bluegrass made a great impression on me."

Slim changed his modus operandi for the new album. No members of the Workers appear on any of the disc's 13 acoustic and electric tracks. Instead, Slim banged out more than 20 songs in four days with Nashville session players handpicked by producer Miles Wilkinson.

Tracks recorded for the project include originals "18-18 Wheeler," "Long Line Skinner," "Skinny Women, Fat Cigars," "Truck Driving Songs," "300 Miles" (a twangy ballad recounting

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the hard-drinking, hard-driving life Homans' mother never wanted for her son), "Shoulda Done More" (written with Music Row songwriting ace Gary Nicholson), and an emotional spoken-word reading called "Friends On the Porch." Slim also laid down covers of "The Way I Am" (recorded by Merle Haggard in 1980), Paul Craft's "Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life" (a hit for Moe Bandy in 1976), and the mandolin-mellowed "Wreck On the Highway" (famously recorded by Roy Acuff).

Another song, "Winners of Us All" — which might be held until NorthernBlues releases Slim's second Nashville record in 2010 — is a six-and-a-half-minute epic that champions working men and women. Bruce Springsteen, it seems, has nothing on Slim.

"I wrote ["Winners of Us All"] sitting in the freakin' truck waiting for an industrial operation to conclude," says Slim. "I envision

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it having orchestration — woodwinds or strings. I keep thinking, 'How would Harry Chapin do it?' It'll be orchestrated, but I still want it to capture that 'dirty old Dumpster' feel."

On the whole, the music recorded for *Escape From the Chicken Coop* presents Slim as a fusion artist, melding country twang and bluegrass instrumentation and sensibilities with a healthy dose of roaring blues slide guitar.

"I've had a couple people worried that Slim has 'gone country,'" says Rick Booth of Intrepid Artists, who books Slim's tour dates. "I don't look at it that way. For me, I like Slim's records for the music, regardless of what [genre label] is put on it."

WILLIE AND SLIM

Slim is a rare animal who stands apart from the blues scene despite his recent accolades, and he doesn't fit comfortably into the country genre, either. Publicist McClune likens him to American music icon Willie Nelson — and some of Slim's associates agree with that assessment.

"Who would you compare Willie Nelson to?" Booth asks. "Slim and Willie are who they are, and they can't change — and you wouldn't want them to."

In other words, Slim can only be Slim. That might be why he was self-conscious upon showing up to record in Nashville. Slim has a reputation for being pigheaded, difficult, even self-defeating — and Nashville seemed, at least initially, to feed his paranoia.

"[He] was extraordinary nervous when he got to Nashville," says producer Wilkinson. "I picked Slim up at the airport and drove him to the hotel. On the ride over, he said, 'I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know why anyone would want to make a country record on me. I think I'm just going to go home.'"

"I looked him in the eye and said, 'We've put together a team of talented people, and these guys are going to make the best record they can possibly make for you. We're all here to help you realize this vision of yours to make a country record. I want you to know that is what is going on. Nothing else.'"

Wilkinson nursed Slim's lack of confidence during the marathon four-day session. "By day four, Slim is real nervous again and talking about going home," Wilkinson says. "But when our guitarist made a comment about Slim being a great slide player and that 'Slim has to play the solos on this record,' Slim broke out into tears. He couldn't believe it. Everything I said about these people really caring about his music came to be. The rest of the session was like falling off a log."

Slim is known for battling back from the brink of disaster. It was just a few years ago that he suffered a near-fatal heart attack within days of the release of *Up Close & Personal*. His career seemed to be going nowhere when manager Hardwick partnered with him.

"He had no promotional skills," says Hardwick. "He just wanted to be an artist. He still does. He'll screw it all up if you give him something else to do besides being an artist. He'll tell you that."

Through his own hard work and the efforts of his associates, Slim has become what some people never expected him

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to be: a survivor. "I don't have any illusions that I'm some sort of major-league entertainer," Slim says, "but I'm making a living."

TIRING ... AND RETIRING?

The music business can be an exhausting exercise in frustration and futility. For Slim, it's only been exhausting. In the past six years, he's made six records and a live DVD (tentatively due this fall), and in the past three years alone he's performed an estimated 500 shows. Slim recently announced plans to take "a radical sabbatical" and cut back his touring schedule to concentrate on writing a biography and to focus on his other love, painting.

"My health has not been good the last couple of years," he explains. "[In 2006] I got hit by a car and shattered my wrist. Then I went out and did 182 gigs the next year. When I played the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise in January 2007, that was the first gig I did after I was hurt, but I hadn't even had my cast off for a full month, so I never really had a chance to recover. Also, I've been diagnosed with degenerative arthritis in my shoulders, hips, and knees. In the last three years, up until

we went to Turkey [in November 2008], we'd been averaging about 75,000 miles over 12-month periods."

By 2010, Slim says, his live performances might be few and far between. "I'm going to at least semi-retire. I'm going to make an announcement in Memphis at the [BMA] ceremony. If I win an award, that will give me a place to speak to the blues business. I'm going to tell everybody and thank them for supporting me and bringing me from where I was to where I am."

Slim has crammed enough experience into his life for at least two people. He might not be proud of all the chapters of his past, but they've given him a wealth of material.

"His life is like a movie waiting to be made," Brown says.

"Even with the stuff you'd have to leave out, it would be an amazing story. The great thing is that Slim's story *does* have the Hollywood ending. He finally did achieve the recognition he deserved."

"I've lived life on my own terms, and I thank God for that," Slim says. "Of course, it has included my head and other parts of me bouncing off hard objects every now and then. But that's part of learning. That's the blues." ☐

Discography

Merry Airbrakes (1973) Shadoks Music

Big Shoes To Fill (2003, with Fried Okra Jones) Southern Records

Up Close & Personal (2004) Southern Records

Watermelon Slim & the Workers (2006) NorthernBlues Music

The Wheel Man (2007) NorthernBlues Music

No Paid Holidays (2008) NorthernBlues Music

Escape From the Chicken Coop (2009) NorthernBlues Music

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