

By JEREMY LOOME

They say there's some old-time voodoo associated with the blues, the 'mojo hand' charm that protects its owner with good fortune.

Watermelon Slim has been known, in his righteous sideline as a phenomenologist, to carry a mojo hand or two.

Earlier in the week, the incendiary performer - who blew the roof off Edmonton's Labatt Blues Festival last night in an unbelievable show - said he was starting to believe in the winning boy's magic, the mojo.

"Three times now, I've wanted to stop the rain at a certain point from coming down, and three times," he counselled, "three times, it has worked."

And so he promised again yesterday, both backstage an hour before his set with his band, the Workers, and again on stage.

And yea it came to pass, the sky was blue - for most of his set -and the crowd was not, drawn in by his supreme mastery of the stage.

Slim ran through a handful of powerhouse tunes off his two recent CDs: Hard Times, Juke Joint Woman, Devil's Cadillac, plus a few Muddy Waters tunes accompanied by awesome Aussie blues guitar mama Fiona Boyes.

All the while, his wicked lap-steel slide nicely complemented guitarist Ronnie McMullen's single-string licks, packing the dance floor and leading to an ear-shattering standing 'o' at the end of the night.

He's that kind of performer. In venues across the globe since his rebirth three years ago as a label artist on Canada's Northern Blues Records, the former Bill Homans has been ripping up stages with the casual elan of a well-oiled backhoe. He does it with slide guitar on his lap and many tales from the hard-living road in his heart.

"I am you people," he told the crowd, who were busy eating up his frenetic stage show with abandon. "This thing crosses all cultures, the blues."

Cosying up to the crowd is one of his things, but it's not fake schmooze: the guy is genuinely so sociable that a five-minute chat quickly turns into a two-hour conversation on the merits of phenomenology, the politics of the Christian right and the nature of the blues.

When he's playing, his tight-as-a-crewcut band the Workers lay down smoking boogies and lockstep shuffles, designed to elevate moods and fill dance floors. He owned the crowd, slinging riffs, playing the genial host, blowing wicked harp. It was surely one of the best blues shows the city has seen.

And he held a touching tribute to Canadian and U.S. troops dying in the Middle East by gently blowing Reveille while the audience stood in silence. "For your fallen Canadian heroes and our U.S. heroes," said the Vietnam vet. "May our leaders learn to choose better missions for them."

It's hard to call anyone at the Blues Fest a headliner. The show is usually consistently brilliant, and it's rare that an artist goes even a little awry.

So it made a certain degree of sense to plunk Slim, who graces this year's festival T-shirt, into the middle of the proceedings, although he was an exceedingly tough act to follow.



Watermelon Slim performs at Edmonton's Labatt Blues Festival in Hawrelak Park last night. (David Bloom/Sun Media)

Nick Moss and the Flip Tops do their own fine take on Chicago blues, with lots of thick buttery guitar tone and Freddie King-inspired single string guitar. Moss kept the dance floor full - although, in truth, it had filled up from the moment the day's opener, the excellent soul band the Lloyd Jones Struggle, played a truly forlorn version of I Broke My Baby's Heart.

By contrast, the day's 'headliner', Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gents, brought the funk in hard, with Cleary playing the dual roles of soulful shouter extraordinaire and unexpected surprise: he looks like a librarian.

Made up of a handful of members from New Orleans's smoking inner circle of blues stars, the band lies somewhere between the traditional and modern R&B, dipping into old piano rags that go right back to the early part of the last century then combining them with a soul groove.

It was one of the strongest lineup days in the festival's history; the perennially underrated - and aptly named - Struggle got things underway with a set that combined as much funk and soul as blues.

And Fiona Boyes, the latest in a string of impressive blues discoveries from Down Under, showed why she's seen by no less than Pinetop Perkins as the heir apparent to the great Memphis Minnie McCoy, plucking some ungodly fine sounds out of a telecaster and making enough righteous noise with a three-piece to engage the crowd thoroughly.

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Who & Where: The 2007 Edmonton Labatt Blues Fest, Hawrelak Park Amphitheatre, starring the Lloyd Jones Struggle, Fiona Boyes, Watermelon Slim and the Workers, Nick Moss and the Flip Tops, Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen.

Note Perfect: Watermelon Slim and the Workers on Hard Times.

Sour Note: Tough to pick one; they could use more food venues.

Today:

Gates open at 1 p.m. Shows run from 2:30-10 p.m.

Must-see: John Long

Lineup:

- John Long
- Garret Mason
- EG Kight
- Mitch Woods and his Rocket 88s
- Los Lobos