

Slim's hard life of blues may find reward in honor

By Gene Triplett - *The Oklahoman*- January 21, 2005

He's been a war-protesting Vietnam vet, a trucker, farmer, "political investigator," school bus driver, janitor, honors graduate and card-carrying member of Mensa International, an exclusive society limited to people with a genius-range IQ. He holds degrees in journalism and history, including a master's in the latter from Oklahoma State University.

But through it all, including his brushes with stardom, financial ruin and even death, **Bill "Watermelon Slim" Homans** has always considered himself a bluesman first, with songs steeped in the hard-earned wisdom of a workingman's life lived to the limit.

At 55, he's still alive and maybe just a little bit amused about being nominated for a W.C. Handy Award in the Best New Artist Debut category after singing the blues for nearly 40 years.

"Well, it just gives a whole new meaning to 'best new artist,' doesn't it," Homans chuckles in a voice slightly raspy with wear. "I did play my first paying gig in 1968, before I even ever went to Vietnam.

"I'm very excited about it, I guess," he says of the nod from The Blues Foundation, which is the blues world's equivalent to an Academy Award nomination. "Everybody seems to be more excited about it than me. But I know what it represents, and I'm busy doing a letter-writing campaign, 'cause apparently it depends on people's votes."

The "new artist" tag arises from the fact that Homans' 2004 album "Up Close & Personal" is his first national release, the result of a distribution deal made last year by his manager, **Chris Hardwick**, who also owns Southern Records Group. The Norman-based label also released Slim's 12-song "Big Shoes to Fill" in 2003, but only on a regional level. Both collections showcase a fiery artistry on harp, dobro, steel guitar and vocals that's taken decades of smoky club work to perfect.

It just took a little while to get the nationwide exposure Homans needed so he could quit his day job and start playing for keeps.

"At this point, I've got the perspective to remember that a lot of people don't get recognized in this field until they're very mature men and women," Homans says. "Me and **Miss Blues** are the oldest fully-practicing blues musicians I think in Oklahoma right now."

Born in Boston and raised in Asheville, N.C., Slim remembers first hearing the blues at age 5, from the black woman who cared for him when his mother and grandmother were away from the house.

"This was still in the last days of Jim Crow segregation," he says. "She would sing things like 'One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer' and 'Boogie Chillen' — 'My mama don't allow me to stay out all night long.' You know, stuff like this. And I realized years later that what I'd been listening to was the blues as early as I can remember."

And that made his earliest influence none other than **John Lee Hooker**, the composer of those two songs. Homans grew up flailing at bongos and congas and wailing away on a 75-cent harmonica. But, being left-handed, he had difficulty learning to play the guitar until someone taught him in Vietnam. Then, not long after completing his tour of duty as a heavy-equipment-operating support troop, he found himself face-to-face with his hero.

"The first real blues great I ever got on stage with was John Lee Hooker," Homans says. "In a place called the Unicorn Coffeehouse in Boston. I was a young vet, six months back from the war, really still a blues wannabe. ... And there his name was on the marquee, and I walked in, and I got to play a couple of numbers, and John Lee treated me with great respect. He treated everyone with great respect. And he's always been my No. 1 musical hero, even ahead of **Muddy Waters**."

It was during this period that Homans' political-activist persona took shape, first as the Massachusetts state coordinator for Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Around 1972, he became the only Vietnam veteran to record a full-length protest album during the Vietnam War, titled "Merry Airbrakes."

In 1973, Homans recalls, he was negotiating with Atlantic Records with **Adrian Barber** when "the oil embargo happened. ... Suddenly, the price of polyvinyl chloride (from which records were made) jumped by 400 percent, and record companies stopped negotiating with a whole mass of loss leaders, or untested musicians.

"I actually had to threaten to bring a lawsuit to get the 1,100 copies of 'Merry Airbrakes' which I had paid for myself, because I was negotiating with Atlantic about a reissue. And if I'd never brought a lawyer in, if I'd said, 'OK, I'll take your two points on the dollar,' you probably would've thought of me as a household word by now. Or else I'd have burned out and become Janis Joplin or something," Homans chuckled.

What he did become was the highly educated blue-collar stiff described earlier, with occasional forays into investigative work for various left-wing political groups involved in everything from promotion of an alternative-fuel vehicle to probing allegations of election irregularities and real estate fraud on American Indian land. (On the advice of his manager, Homans declined to elaborate much on his political activities.)

Meanwhile, music has remained a constant, earning him friendships and musical ties with the likes of singer **Barbara Dane** and the late Canned Heat guitar ace **Henry "Sunflower" Vestine**, who joined Homans' band for a time when the two were roommates in Eugene, Ore.

Slim was also invited to perform at the "Songs of Protest: The Vietnam Songbook" event at the New York Public Theatre on March 1, 1993, sharing the bill with Dane, **Bonnie Raitt**, **Pete Seeger**, **Thurston Moore**, **Jim O'Rourke** of Sonic Youth and **Tuli Kupferberg** of the Fugs.

Now, with the release of "Up Close & Personal" creating national buzz and perhaps a W.C. Handy trophy awaiting him at the May 5 award ceremonies in Memphis, Tenn., Watermelon Slim appears to be traveling in good company on a permanent basis, his truck-driving days behind him. But he doesn't regret those years of toil and trouble, even though they led up to a recent, near-fatal heart attack.

"That's what the blues is," Homans says. "Blues is work music. ... There's other strains in it, but the blues came out of the fields. And when I do a truck holler, it's just the same thing that that cotton-picker was doing on his sharecrop farm as far back as you wanna go."

As for life outside of work, "You have no idea. I'm just trying to find somebody to write the book for me, because it's been a hell of a life. It's been a busting-out-at-seams life. That's why I sing the songs I do. I have dived so deep into life, and I've hungered for knowledge of everything, good and bad, highbrow and lowbrow. I've just gone after it. I realize how lucky I am to have been able to go after as much as I've gone after."