

WATERMELON SLIM

Bill Homans was born in Boston 60 years ago. Some 30 years later, half a country away, Watermelon Slim was birthed in a field in Pushmataha County, entering life during the kind of stifling Oklahoma summer that can peel paint from a barn. Watermelon Slim and Bill Homans may be the same guy, but certainly something profound happened to Homans on that day, when he experienced a heat-enhanced epiphany he compares with the biblical Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. "I was in my field of watermelons in the middle of July in 1980, which was a very hot year," he recalls. "It was 105 degrees in the shade, I know, and I was standing in the sun. I had a D harmonica in one hand – I always kept one in my pocket – and a piece of watermelon I was eating in the other hand. It just hit me. I realized I had a blues name. And I've been Watermelon Slim ever since that day."

Under that moniker, the Oklahoma resident has become an internationally known blues artist, garnering, in the past few years, a very impressive 13 Blues Music Awards nominations from the Blues Foundation, a group made up of blues aficionados from across the globe. And while Slim has only been working under this name since that life-changing afternoon on his truck-patch farm 29 years ago, his music making goes a long way back.

"My first axe was actually bongos, back in 1958, when beatniks were around," he says. "I had my own first pair of bongos and was really hip to beatniks. I do consider myself a professional percussion player, especially congas and incidental percussion. I've always done some percussion with the groups I've been in."

A year after getting his bongos, Slim picked up the harmonica. It took a while, but he eventually played his first professional job as a blues harpist almost a decade later, at Vermont's Middlebury College. He earned a cool five bucks for the gig.

"That was the first time I tried to go to college," he notes. "It didn't work. I went to Vietnam instead."

And it was there, in a military hospital in Cam Ranh Bay recovering from an illness, that Homans added another instrument to his repertoire.

"I started playing on a five-dollar guitar from a Vietnamese commissary, balsa wood, with rusty old



strings, and I used a Zippo cigarette lighter I had – with a picture of Snoopy on it – as my slide,” he remembers. “I think the very first thing I used as a pick was a quarter, but I found myself a coffee-can top, and I cut a piece out of that, out of the plastic, and that was my very first plastic pick.

“I had always been left-handed, see, so I couldn’t learn (guitar) like normal people could. My brother was right-handed, and he’d been taking guitar lessons from about the age of 11, but I was left-handed,” he continues.

“So it struck me that I would try this (slide guitar style), having been a listener and a fan and a bluesman-wannabe from an early age, listening to people like Mississippi Fred McDowell, John Lee Hooker and several others. I wasn’t allowed to bring the guitar back, but I got one when I got back over to the states, and I just started working on that thing.”

Returning to the Boston area, Slim began playing locally, but after a few years he saw a need to relocate – in part, he admits, to leave a certain part of his life behind him.

“I was really just spinning my wheels, and, well, I had a lot of shady connections (in Boston),” he says. “I left partially to get rid of my criminal connections, and I came to Oklahoma because I’d been looking all over the country for land. I’d thought about the possibility of getting a truck, but ’79 was the year of one of the great attempts to start a truck strike, and fuel was very high. So I got some land in Pushmataha County (in Oklahoma).

“I became an independent farmer, and I was kind of naïve about it. I figured I might be able to actually make a living on what little land I had truck patching, but I figured it out after several years. If I had to look back on it, I’d say it probably would’ve taken a helpmate, and I didn’t have one of those.”

Throughout his farming days, Slim continued to play music, although performing took a back seat to making a living. For several years, Slim drove trucks and worked in southeastern Oklahoma sawmills in addition to raising everything from cantaloupes to Jerusalem artichokes. Watermelons, he says, were one of the crops he didn’t lose money on during his years with the truck patch. Then, he moved again.

“I didn’t get to playing steadily with anybody until about 1984, up in Oregon,” he says. “That’s where I first started playing with professional groups that amounted to something.”

Emboldened by that experience, Slim headed for Europe, where he tried to establish himself as a musician. When that didn’t work out as planned, he returned to Boston and truck driving. In 1993 he came back to Oklahoma, and he’s been here ever since, playing gigs both solo and with his band, the Workers, made up of Ronnie McMullen Jr. on guitar, Cliff Belcher on bass and Chris Stovall Brown on drums. With fans (known as Melon Heads) all over, and six discs released since 2002 (with another, produced by Delbert McClinton’s longtime songwriting partner and producer, Gary Nicholson, on the way), Slim finds himself so busy these days that he hasn’t been able to devote the time necessary to growing watermelons or any other crop. He’s also trying to carve enough time out of his schedule to finish several paintings, one a commissioned piece.

And even when he’s not on stage – where a typical show finds him playing harmonica, guitar and percussion in addition to singing – Slim attracts attention. In a March 12, 2009, Norman Transcript article, writer Doug Hill penned a review of the Bonnie Raitt show at the Riverwind Casino that talked almost as much about Slim, who attended the show and was recognized from the stage, as it did Raitt. Early in the story, Hill quoted the Oklahoma bluesman:

“‘Oh, I played with Bonnie Raitt back in 1972 and ’73,’ Slim drawled. ‘She and I both had similar musical ancestors and we went different directions.’ This was a revelation but makes perfect sense as the artists are the same age (59) and started their careers on the east coast. ‘I haven’t been on any Bonnie Raitt records but we’ve been negotiating for several years to get her on one of mine. It hasn’t happened yet, but it might,’ Slim said. ‘That will be mighty lovely if it does.’”

“She and I are pretty well known as the greatest female and male disciples of Fred McDowell on the guitar,” says Slim. “She learned direct from him, and I got about as close as anybody besides that. I heard every record that Fred ever did. One of the things that inspired me to play when I was back there in Vietnam was trying to make that sound, the sound I heard from Mississippi Fred.”

A couple of months after the Riverwind concert, Raitt and Slim met up again, this time for the May 8 dedication of the Mississippi Blues Trail Marker honoring their shared hero, McDowell.

“We were both there in Como, Mississippi, for the unveiling ceremony,” he explains. “Afterwards, me and my publicist, Mike McClune, and my biographer, Michael Kinsman, went to Fred’s grave, where I did something I’ve meant to do for 37 years. I stood on his grave and sang ‘Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,’ which I learned from him all those many, many years ago. There’s a picture of Fred there (at the grave site), some kind of high-durability laminated thing, and so I was able to look at him the whole time I was singing this song to him, standing on his grave. And we were the only ones there, except for an old boy who was tending his mother’s grave.”

It was a powerful moment for the artist known as Watermelon Slim, a way of finally recognizing the man whose music started a guy named Bill Homans on the road to blues stardom. McDowell’s

slide-guitar style, as Slim readily acknowledges, was “the actual guitar sound I tried to be fluent in first.”

And does he believe he’s finally learned it?

“Oh man, if I had to be really scratched about it, I would say I probably have,” he answers. “But I’ve passed by merely getting someone else’s style down. I’ve incorporated Fred’s style with everybody else’s I’ve ever heard. At this point, I’m Watermelon Slim.”