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SLIM

SEPTEMBER 2010

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Slim's Pickins

WATERMELON SLIM BRINGS HIS GENUINE COUNTRY BLUES
TO THE GREAT SOUTHERN BLUES FESTIVAL.

BY SAMUEL J FELL

It wasn't that long ago that Bill Homans, or Watermelon Slim as he's known whilst onstage, was an unknown quantity. Even today, almost a decade down the track with five or six records under his belt, he's still not a household name, although to be fair, he's certainly made inroads with a slew of fine blues, and now country, recordings since his official debut in 2003. Since he first graced our shores at the Great Southern Blues & Rockabilly Festival in 2007, Slim's rag-tag past has been quite well documented in this country, from his time in Vietnam, to his many, many jobs, degrees and distinctions, all the way up to *Ringers*, his most recent release.

Readers of *Rhythms* may well remember the piece I wrote on him back in '07, going through his first unofficial release, *Merry Airbrakes* in 1973, his work as a funeral officiator, sawmill worker, petty criminal, truck and forklift driver and, of course, watermelon farmer, and his almost fatal heart attack in 2002 that set him back on the musical road, leading him to where he is today. If ever there was a man qualified to sing the blues, Watermelon Slim is that man

– he's got two degrees, he was a member of Mensa, he's been there and he's done it. And everywhere he *has* been and everything he *has* done, has been used to create this music he now calls his own, this deep and dirty blues, and more recently (*Escape From The Chicken Coop*, '09, and *Ringers*, '10), that old time country. This is a man who's done it all.

It's late morning when I'm connected through to Slim who's sitting on his porch in Oklahoma, just back from the airport, and clearly in the mood to talk. We spend almost an hour together on the phone, Slim sometimes concise, sometimes rambling, always entertaining. He sounds tired, particularly as our conversation draws to a close, but throughout our interview, to emphasise what we're talking about, he'll let loose an a cappella field holler, the rich timbre of his voice booming through the speaker and filling the *Rhythms* office with its depth and power. He may be 68 years old, he may be in ill health, but Watermelon Slim has got it, and in truth, it's quite a wonder that he never found this true calling of his sooner.

Of course, as I mentioned, there was an unofficial dabble in music,

not long after he returned from Vietnam, as an ardent anti-war supporter incidentally. *Merry Airbrakes* was the name of the record, and by all accounts it did reasonably well – indeed, nowadays it's a collectors item. It strikes me as interesting then that Slim *didn't* stick with music at that point in his life – just listening to him sing over the phone (as well as listening to any one of his records) shows how good he is now – what must he have been like back in the early '70s? “Well, I wasn't, and am not to this day, a great musician,” he tells me.

“I'd have to say I'm as good a songwriter as anybody out there, but as far as being a performing musician, I'm competent,” he goes on slowly. “What I *am* is accessible, I talk to people, I don't go off to the dressing room afterwards, I'm interested in many things that my audiences are interested in. As well, I'm not physically good looking, these days even more than before... **I'm resigned these days to being a half-toothless, ugly old fellow, which is all right because I'm certainly not the first ugly old bluesman.**”

This is Slim's way of saying that the reason he didn't continue on with music in the early '70s is because he wasn't particularly marketable. It seems the industry hasn't changed much over the past 37 years, it's still, as Slim notes, all about looks as opposed to talent. You're either a virtuoso, or incredibly good-looking. Watermelon Slim is neither.

However, the man has, over the course of the past decade, made inroads, even if they are underground ones. “Yeah, I'm what you'd call a cult item,” he muses, and he's right – in the blues world, he's a man who's offering something new to the genre; a man who's operating in the 21st century, but one who works like it's 1952 or thereabouts; a man who makes no bones about the life he's lived, about the cards he's been dealt, he just gets out there and does it, turning it into magical music in the process; in high demand amongst a low number. “I'm aware I'm just small potatoes, my star isn't particularly bright out there, but there are a lot of people that can see it, and I thank God for that,” he concurs.

Another reason why Slim never stayed with music after coming back from Vietnam, was because of the OPEC Oil Embargo, an event that effectively stymied the manufacture of polyvinyl chloride, the product used to make records at the time. “The price of PVC jumped by hundreds of percent and the recording industry was suddenly not interested anymore,” he tells simply. And so Slim finished off the early '70s, home to an ungrateful country from an unnecessary war, with but a taste of the music world and very little to show for it. And so began, for Watermelon Slim, his long and arduous detour, a road heavily travelled, on his way to where he is now.

During our interview, the rain is bucketing down. It pounds on the tin roof of the office, sometimes drowning Slim's voice out, never letting up, much like the man himself. It's at this point in our conversation that we're covering what happened to him between the release of *Merry Airbrakes* in 1973, and the release of his first official record, *Big Shoes To Fill*, in 2003. We're not going into detail, because it's not necessary. What we're talking about is his life, how he lived it and what kept him going, for it wasn't an easy life. He tells tales of working as a removalist, loading trucks, driving trucks, unloading trucks, shifting furniture up three or four flights of stairs, on his own. I don't doubt what he says. He has no need to embellish anything. He talks with a calm voice, he doesn't get excited, he just tells it like it is. To him, it's life. To me, and to fans of his, it's evidence of a life lived in the blues, an essential ingredient one must have in order to sing them.

“I was talking about this the other day with Jonny Lang's bass player,” says Slim, immediately warming to the topic. “There are ways to have the blues without going out and sweating and bleeding for a living, but I can't think about any other way that is quite as sure

as working your butt off to understand what the blues is. The blues is work music first and foremost, it was work music before it was ever called the blues.” It's at this point that Slim lets rip with a burst straight from a cotton field back in the early part of last century, before coming back and beginning to talk about his current crop, which is going to seed given he's been out on the road for a while.

Even today, he lives a simple life. Even amongst the touring around the world, Watermelon Slim is still a farmer at heart, a man who still, no doubt, scans the skies before he retires each night, a man still not afraid of a hard day's work. “Blues is music which is close to the land,” he suddenly says, reeling it back in. “The first people who sang it were farmers or working for farmers or tilling the soil, working with the earth, and I've done that. I'm a man who has sweated and occasionally bled for his living.”

Of this I have no doubt, but Slim, who likes to give an example to everything he says, begins to talk about Jonny Lang, about how he's been nothing but a musician since he was 12 years old and therefore has never really *had* the blues. “I don't mean to throw Jonny under the bus, I'm sure he's a nice fellow,” he says. “I mean, my grandchildren found the blues through listening to him, but he's not a bluesman, he hasn't done what it takes to be a bluesman, and maybe they're better off for it, maybe they're better off just playing the blues and not having them.” I venture at this point that as an audience member, or by listening to a record, you can tell whether or not it's authentic by how the person delivers it and from that, you can tell if they've lived it or not.

“Well yes, but we're talking demographics and business, and ninety percent of people who buy Jonny Lang albums aren't real blues fans anyway,” Slim counters. “They're just kids who see another very, very good looking kid doing something they think maybe they can do, there's some self-identification going on there. A lot of people would picture themselves being Jonny Lang, but they can't and if they try, they're barking up the wrong tree... they can't picture themselves being Watermelon Slim, they don't wanna do *that*, that would be foolish. Not only would it be unrealistic, but you'd have to wonder why they'd want to go out and do the labour I've done and lived the life I've lived.”

He's probably right. Why look up to a craggy old man who's busted his hump all his life, when you could look up to a good looking young fella who's been a guitar virtuoso all his life? I'll tell you why, and it harks back to what I said before – because when you listen to someone sing the blues who's actually *lived* them, you can tell. And for real fans of the music, of the genre, *that's* what matters. I ask Slim, at this point in his career, now that he actually has a career in music, if he regrets anything. If he could, would he go back and change anything he's done over the past 33 years, anything at all along that path that's led him to where he is now?

“Well, I think I would have guaranteed that I would have married at least one of the women that got away, and didn't marry at least one of them that didn't,” he chuckles. “Not that I have a huge amount of regrets, I mean, not everything in my life I'm proud of, but I've been consistent in my ideals, even if in some cases I've badly deviated from them. But not for reasons of greed, I can at least guarantee myself that. Maybe lust and occasionally laziness, but not greed.” Slim talks briefly about having survival guilt after coming home from Vietnam only slightly injured. He talks about how his trademark whilst truck driving and labouring was durability. He talks about his ability to work in searing temperatures. How could he have *not* gone on to be a bluesman?

“Put it this way,” he then says, coming back to my original question. “I've got a lot of regrets, but I've stood up for people, I've stood up for myself as good as I could, and now, at the end of my life, I know that my mother was aware that I got my first award nomination, she didn't want me to do what I was doing, any of the life that I've lived, so I'm thankful for that.” This is something Slim remarked upon last time we spoke and it seems the fact his mother was aware he'd left a life of hard labour behind him to pursue his dream before she died,

is a solid comfort, something that puts paid to anything he does regret. Still, he can't change anything now, it's his history, and it's history which is informing what he does now, musically, and for that, there are a lot of people who are thankful, not just his mother.

So Watermelon Slim is a bluesman, albeit a cult one, but that hasn't stopped him from being successful within his cult status. His 2006 record, *Watermelon Slim & The Workers* garnered him *Mojo Magazine's* Number One Blues Album of 2006, Album of the Year at the 6th Annual Independent Music Awards, and six nominations at The Blues Awards, including Best Album and Entertainer of the Year (a feat equalled only by the likes of BB King and Robert Cray). He was inducted into the Oklahoma Blues Hall of Fame in 2007, and has been recognised by the Toronto Blues Society, the Blueswax Awards and *Blues Revue* magazine – there are definitely people out there who can see his star, and it's burning bright blues.

So why, with his 2009 record, *Escape From The Chicken Coop*, did he switch to country music? "Well, I grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, so I may have heard the blues without knowing what they were, but I was also listening to country music, and I certainly knew what that was by seven or eight years old," Slim tells. "I grew up going to church and singing hymns, and country music has a lot to do, at its base, with the music of the church. So I quite naturally went from the church music I was singing to appreciating country, rockabilly, western music.

"I had a very wide ranging musical experience when I was a kid," he goes on. "But I've been living in the South for the great majority of my life and country music, like the blues, is basically Southern music. So I'd say it's a matter of being a Southern person and that's why it's a natural thing for me to also do country and western, honky tonk music. The other reason is that I'm a truck driver, I mean, I still am – you can take the boy out of the truck, but you can't take the truck out of the boy. So the first one I did, *Escape From The Chicken Coop*, was dedicated specifically to my colleagues and comrades in the transportation industry."

Whilst he doesn't offer a specific explanation as to why he decided to switch from the blues to country for that album – he is wont to ramble, after all – it's quite plain, it's just a natural progression and you shouldn't be surprised. Having said that, I and no doubt some others, would have been surprised when earlier this year, Slim released a second country album in *Ringers*. Now, I should clarify here and say this isn't just a bluesman deciding to try his hand at something new just for the hell of it. This is good music, as far as country music is concerned, it's executed well by a man who obviously knows his way around the genre. And it's country music in the sense of Waylon Jennings, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, not the pop country that putrefies mainstream airwaves these days. These albums are good.

"Well, I'll tell you this," Slim tells me when I ask why he then backed up with another country record instead of sticking with the blues. "I warned the head of the Northern Blues recording company (*the label that releases Slim's records*) that he ought to just go ahead and let me make these records on my own, because he was liable to take a bath on them. And he was like, 'Well, you always planned to do these two records, right? They're great songs, right?' and so they went ahead and spent all this money anyway, and I can tell you that sales of my last two records are almost nonexistent. They're sitting on shelves like dead squirrels in the middle of the road.

"Nashville reviewers have pointedly refused to review them, they do not want to even give my records the time of day," he rambles on. "Because I'm so far outside what today is called 'country.'" It's here



that Slim begins to talk about R&B and how it's not rhythm and blues anymore, but something completely different, which is how he, or the mainstream media, views country. It seems, listening to Slim talk, that there's very little room for the likes of him within the industry, but he just keeps on going – durability is indeed one of his strong points.

Of course, you could just call him an idiot; plugging away at something, knowing it's not going to explode, knowing not many people are paying attention, not 'playing the game' in any way, shape or form...

"I'm just trying to do it the best way that I can," Slim says, not long before our conversation comes to an end. "I'm getting on in years and I'm a man who knows that life must eventually come to an end and that comes right back to the three themes in the blues that I've been singing about for decades – work, long-term relationships and mortality. We're all gonna die, it's all gonna come to an end," he takes another singing break.

"I'm not lying, it's all gonna come to an end, but I've lived a life full enough for three," he goes on. "I've been in and out of the classroom, I've fought a war, I've fought against a war, I've worked harder than anybody I know."

He tapers off here, gets lost in his own thoughts, and you can't blame him – he certainly has a lot of them. Our conversation wraps up around here, the rain still cascading down outside, Watermelon Slim a lot more tired than he was almost an hour ago.

"I'm a retired truck driver who's found something easier to do," is one of his final comments, issued with a smile, and it's true. What he does, making this music, he certainly makes it seem easy. But nothing in his life has been easy, not even now. He toils and works at his craft and not many people hear it, and in fact he probably gets less recognition playing music than he did driving trucks.

But therein lies the appeal of Slim, and the many like him. It's not about the glitz and the glamour. It's not about the money and the fame. It's about the music. In this case, it's music you can believe, because Watermelon Slim is a man who delivers it as he's delivered everything in his life – with meaning, with courage, with determination, and that, is what makes him great. He'll never be a rich man, but he'll be a rich man. And he doesn't want any more than that.

Ringers is available on Northern Blues through Only Blues Music. Watermelon Slim & The Workers play the Great Southern Blues Festival, October 1-3.



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