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## MUSIC

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Preview

### **Hey, Watermelon man**

Meet Watermelon Slim: scholar, farmer, revolutionary and too-good-to-be-true bluesman

#### **WATERMELON SLIM AND THE WORKERS**

Sat, Aug 25. Labatt Blues Festival (Heritage Amphitheatre, Hawrelak Park). Info: 708-7230, [www.bluesinternationaltd.com](http://www.bluesinternationaltd.com)

Watermelon Slim can't be a real bluesman. He's too perfect. From his tobacco-ravaged voice and southern good ol' boy patois to his eclectic, blue-collar employment history (he's been a collection agent, a sawmill operator, a watermelon farmer, and a funeral officiator), he's had exactly the sort of hard-living, road-weary life audiences demand of their "authentic" bluesmen. There's even has a ludicrously hard-luck story about how he started playing music. To quote directly from his label's website: "While laid up in a Vietnam hospital bed, [Slim] taught himself upside-down left-handed slide guitar on a five-dollar balsawood model, using a triangle pick cut from a rusty coffee can top and his Army issued Zippo lighter as the slide."

Oh, c'mon.

But there's another side to Slim: he's also a certified genius, a member of Mensa, the international high-IQ society. He has three degrees, including a masters in history, and he won't hesitate to explain why, after releasing an acclaimed album in 1973, he went silent for 28 years, not releasing a followup until 2001.

"Well, it was the OPEC oil embargo," he says. "I was negotiating with Atlantic Records to release the record I had made, and suddenly when the price of polyvinyl chloride [a substance synthesized from petroleum and used to manufacture vinyl LPs] jumped 500 per cent, Atlantic wasn't interested in negotiating anymore."

If it weren't for that pesky Arab-Israeli war, Slim might have spent fewer years behind the wheel of a big-rig and more in front of a studio microphone. (A student of history such as himself must surely find amusement in this.) But he kept busy during these silent years.

"I was working. Worked in everything from forklift operating and truck driving to selling firewood, petty crimes, farming watermelons. Did a lot of things. Been a political activist and investigator a long time. Worked on several very sensitive, you'd probably have to say, anti-government scientific projects, and during all that time, I was busy learning to be the musician that some people think I am today. But I don't want to brag on myself. I'm still the least of the musicians in my group."

Wait—what was that about anti-government scientific projects?

Slim declines to elaborate, but that first 1973 record, *Merry Airbrakes*, was a vivid indictment of the Vietnam war, in which Slim served, enlisting voluntarily after dropping out of college, where he got "an A and three Ds" in his only semester in 1968—he says he was too into LSD and DJing to bother with studying.

"My family had an illustrious military history. There was never any question that I wouldn't go," he says. "But it was completely FUBAR, just like the military mission that the United States is involved in now."

Slim's latest release, *The Wheel Man*, continues in the activist vein, with songs like "Black Water," a righteous finger-stab at the U.S. government's colossal mishandling of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But the themes of most of his tunes, he says, fall into three categories: work, long-term relationships, and "coming to grips with [his] own mortality."

Speaking of which, Slim won't say how old he is, just that he's a "late bloomer"—but he doesn't seem bitter about it. He just sounds pleased not to be driving rigs anymore.

"Heck, if we sell 15,000 copies of my latest record, we'll think that's a roaring success. If you want to make money in music, you put on a cowboy hat, you make sure your teeth are really nice, and you do country. Now I really like country... I hope to make the next great shit-kicking truckstop country album, matter of fact. Within the next year, go down to Nashville and do that."

Slim's list of musical antecedents are pretty much the usual suspects for a blues singer: Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, James Cotton. But nowadays, Slim thinks, and most would agree, that with his eclectic songwriting—everything from supremely funky blues to rustic hillbilly songs to percussive world music—he's created his own niche. And that's not to mention his "backwards" slide guitar (he plays left-handed on a right-handed guitar, holding the instrument upside down).

"At this point, I am someone who actually influences people rather than being influenced... You can't say Watermelon Slim sounds like A or B or C, because I sound like myself. People in the United States and Canada are saying 'Oh, Watermelon Slim showed me how to do that.' But you know, I don't want to brag on myself."

MATTHEW HALLIDAY

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