



*Photo Courtesy of Peggy Steinke*

## Watermelon Slim: Blues on the Edge

By Jay Brakefield

Watermelon Slim lives the blues. He's also part of a rich American tradition of down-and-out wanderers and seekers after truth that includes Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac. Son of a distinguished Boston lawyer and civil rights activist, Slim went to Vietnam and came back to protest the war. He's worked in factories, lost part of a finger in a sawmill, failed at farming, driven a truck, investigated political corruption, had the shit beat out of him in Mississippi, had a heart attack. He calls his band the Workers. He speaks French and once was a champion fencer. He's got a master's degree and once joined MENSA, the organization for genius-level people, but found it boring. He's played music since he was a kid, has played with Bonnie Raitt, Robert Cray, Champion Jack Dupree and Country Joe McDonald, and now, at 54, has a chance to make a living at it for the first time. He's grateful for the opportunity but views it with a wary skepticism born of bitter experience.

Slim was born Bill Homans in Boston. When he was 3, his parents di-

vorced, and he moved with his mother to her hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. "My mother was a lapsed piano player, my dad had played the flute," Slim says. "I would have to say my mother reasonably encouraged me to play or sing, but I don't think it was in anybody's mind that I would be a singer or anything."

He was exposed to the blues at home. "I first heard the blues, looking back on it, at 5 years old, in 1954, in North Carolina, when a woman who, in those Jim Crow days would have been called a maid, would be singing John Lee Hooker music, 'One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer,' 'Boogie Chillen'." I can hear her voice 50 years later. I didn't know what it was; all I knew was that I liked it. That's the very first live music I can remember hearing."

A few years later, he began playing harmonica. "I was 10 years old or thereabouts. We had an upstairs room with electric trains and so forth. I found a harp and started playing. Eventually I got my own, a Hohner Marine Band for 75 cents, and some stuff came along like Stevie Wonder's

'Fingertips', and I would play along with that."

In 1968, Slim went to the national fencing championships and finished 7<sup>th</sup> in dueling swords. "I wasn't a great fencer, but I was a class B fencer in the Amateur Fencing League of America."

Slim dropped out of college to join the Army and serve in Vietnam as a heavy equipment operator in 1969 and 1970. He calls his experience "utterly unremarkable," but it obviously touched him deeply. It also gave him another musical outlet. Sidelined in Cam Rahn Bay by a mysterious illness, he bought a \$5 Vietnamese balsa-wood guitar and started learning to play it — backward, since he's left-handed. He used a Zippo lighter for a slide and a piece of plastic from a coffee-can lid for a pick. He didn't take lessons. "There was nobody to take lessons from. The blues isn't rocket science. I had to use a D tuning, which is what Fred McDowell would use. I have no idea how to play in a straight tuning." Now he plays mostly in open G, on Dobro or lap steel.

After he got home, Slim's grandmother was so glad to see him that she gave him a National Steel guitar. Back in Boston, he became active in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War — same chapter as John Kerry. Slim served as state coordinator of the organization from 1971-74 and did investigations. "We discovered and uncovered and broadcast through the press the existence of a full-scale escalation of the Vietnam War that Nixon never told Congress about until it occurred," he says.

### 'Merry Airbrakes'

In 1973, Slim recorded an eclectic anti-war album, *Merry Airbrakes*, working with his brother Peter Homans, a musician and classical composer, and musicians from Concord Prison. All the material was original, written by himself or with his brother, except for Woody Guthrie's

# Drummers Beat All

## Free Drum W

With Duan

Duane has performed as Stevie Wonder, T Grover Washington and more. Duane with an inside k and musicality



"Vigilante Man".

"It never made a label," Slim says. "We were negotiating with Atlantic. I should have taken their two cents on the dollar that they offered me, and I'd either be a household word or burned out. I had 1100 copies; I probably gave away a hundred or two, sold 400 of them. Many, many, many of them were damaged in the process of me carrying them around for years. I had failed. Atlantic didn't want me. I had to threaten a lawsuit just to get the ones that I'd paid for. I have one of the original copies and a couple of the much, much later German reissue on a small collectors' label." He's thinking about reissuing it.

After a dead-end decade, Slim says, "I realized I wasn't getting anywhere in Boston. I went all over the country looking for someplace where land was cheap and it was far from civilization. The anti-war and anti-nuclear movements had reached the end they did reach. I didn't have any personal relationships that I was going to sever by leaving. And south-eastern Oklahoma, what they call Little Dixie, satisfied all the criteria: It was far from everything; land was cheap."

"I immediately started farming. I was a mediocre-to-poor farmer." The neighbors helped him. He lost money on everything but watermelons, cantaloupe and okra, and picking okra was miserable work. Even if you wear gloves, it makes you itch so bad you've got to go jump in the creek. The experience did give him his blues name, though. As he recounts in "They Call Me Watermelon Slim" on his *Big Shoes to Fill* CD, he was standing in his watermelon field, "not a woman in 20 miles; I was a lonely SOB," when it came to him that he was Watermelon Slim, and he's been Watermelon Slim ever since.

After a few years of farming and a brief shot at marriage, he went off to Oregon, where he played music and

got a degree in journalism and history. He tried living in Europe, ended up back home driving a truck, took time off from that to work for a few months as a reporter for the second-smallest daily newspaper in Massachusetts. "The only writing I did that was worth anything was covering Jesse Jackson up in New Hampshire in 1988," he says.

He kept working shitty jobs and playing music. Played for a while in a band called Another Roadside Attraction, which helped him develop as a musician.

In August 1999, he went to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to apply for work as a researcher with the Delta Blues Museum. Right around the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, he says, "the bomb hit me. I went down and put in an application at the Delta Museum, then I went around the corner and played for a while and drank for a while. I'd already driven from Stillwater, Oklahoma, to Mississippi. I got directions to the next juke joint, and the next thing I knew, I was walking to the hospital with cops in tow. I had multiple, compound jaw fractures. I was charged with resisting arrest after I was picked up from lying on the ground dead, unconscious."

"The hospital refused to treat me because they said I was aggressive. The cop took me home to the motel and said, 'Get some sleep. You've got a long drive tomorrow.' This all happened on a Friday night. I drove home to Oklahoma over the space of Saturday. I went fishing on Sunday, used my completely destroyed jaw to eat the fish that I had caught and didn't get treated until the next Wednesday. An aunt in California was nice enough to guarantee that the surgery would be paid for. The oral surgeon said, 'You must have an iron constitution not to have infected.' But the doctor did a great job, put me back together, and my recovery was complete. My face is

**Workshop**

**with Durrett**  
with greats such  
as the Temptations,  
Jr., Red Garland,  
will provide us  
with into the chops  
takes to be one

**Blues Jam**  
April 9th at 7 p.m. with  
Buane, Sumpter Bruton,  
and many more  
surprise acts

lopsided."

The next year, Slim went back to school and got a master's degree in political science from Oklahoma State University, writing a thesis called "North American Fascism: Transmission of the Virus." He investigated white supremacist groups since World War II, including those involved in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

"Four days after I got my master's from Oklahoma State, I was back working for \$7.50 an hour on a factory line, and six months after that, I was driving," he says. With his beat-up appearance and missing upper teeth, he says, "I can't smile convincingly at the people to whom it's important to provide public relations. I don't look middle-class, and I look like a truck driver. I'm always going to look like a truck driver."

"The more the society urbanizes and modernizes, the less you'll get real dichotomies like me, people who have spent most of their lives doing labor. I was supposed to be an intellectual, a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher. One of the great losses of my life is that I never had any vocational counseling at all. I had never done anything but grunt labor by the time it was time for me to go to school and learn to do something different."

A couple of years ago, Slim finally got a break when he met Chris Hardwick, a Norman, Oklahoma, musician who had started his own studio and label, Southern Records. Slim's first CD on the label, *Big Shoes to Fill*, was released in 2003. The CD is dedicated to his dad, who died in 1997. They spent time together and became close in the last few years of his dad's life.

"My father was one of the greatest attorneys of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," Slim says. "He was the only civilian attorney to go to Vietnam to try a capital case, a black man accused of shooting a white officer. The man was acquitted. They couldn't keep my dad

out because of his beyond spectacular war record in two navies. He dropped out of college and joined the British Navy in 1939, so he was in the war several years before most Americans. After we got in, he joined the American Navy and spent the rest of the war in the Pacific Theater. He defended Dr. Kenneth Edelin in an abortion case. He defended Albert DeSalvo, the Boston Strangler. He defended Henry Miller when his books were banned. He was a freedom rider in Alabama and Mississippi in the 1950s."

### **Seeing the Potential**

Slim says Chris Hardwick, who doubles as his manager and record producer, is the first person to believe in him and introduce him to people who could further his career.

"Slim's kind of like an onion," Hardwick says. "You peel back another layer and learn more. He's great; he has the energy of a 16-year-old." With national distribution, a nomination for a Handy Award for best new artist and a piece coming out in *Blues Revue* soon, Hardwick says, "He's going somewhere. I've been hearing this comment, 'I feel like I just went to the blues Church.'" They'll release Slim's next CD in August. This one will feature his touring band, drummer and bandleader Michael Newberry, bassist Cliff Belcher (who hails from Fort Worth) and guitarist Ike Lamb. Former Muddy Waters guitar player Bob Margolin will guest on the CD, too.

Slim will get a chance to use his French on April 8<sup>th</sup> when he does a blues in schools workshop in Hamilton, Ontario, while in Canada for several gigs.

The band may perform at the Handy ceremonies in Memphis on May 5<sup>th</sup>. At any rate, they'll play on Beale Street the next night. And they'll be a J&J's in Fort Worth on April 29<sup>th</sup>.

Slim is quick to praise the band. "They've stretched me," he says.

## **Craig's Guarantees the L**

# **40% OFF!**

**Every cymbal in the store!  
Zildjian, Paiste and Sabian.**

**Beginner Set  
Starting at \$319.**

**Includes hardware and free drum throne.**



"They're so good that if I don't stretch, then I'm not good enough to play with them. I probably always will continue to be the poorest of the four of us as a musician; I've got the style, and I write the songs, and my time's pretty good."

"Everytime I've played with people that are serious and take me seriously, I've made real strides. People haven't always taken me very seriously. I'm not very flashy. I wouldn't have called myself anything more than technically competent on the guitar. I would have to say I'm a very late-blooming musician; it's only in the last four or five years that I've even begun to be satisfied with myself as guitar player. This is not just about me; it's about this band I have, which is the very best band that I've ever had."

He deems himself a good harp player, though, and was named best harp player in the state last year by the "Payne County Line," an alternative paper in Stillwater.

### Career Crossroads

Finally, Slim had to choose between truck driving and playing music. He'd take off all the time available from his driving job. "They said, 'You can drive or you can play,' and I said it's time to leave." He played the first gig with Ike and Michael in July. Belcher joined the group later.

Newberry has high praise for Slim. "I knew the manager, Chris, and I had spoken to him about some other projects, and he knew about my abilities as a drummer and bandleader, so he called me when he needed someone who fit that description. I took a chance, and I'm glad I did. I had heard Slim briefly in the past, but when I showed up for the first rehearsal and we started talking, I found out his knowledge of blues and love of it, I found out I was going to play with someone who loved blues as much as I do. And I decided we're going to do some traditional stuff along with the originals."



Photo Courtesy of Peggy Steinke

"The response has been magnificent," he says. "I think a lot of people are afraid to go out and play traditional blues, afraid people won't like it, they've got to throw in some other stuff, and that's exactly what we haven't been doing. I'm just amazed every night. People love Slim. He's an enigmatic performer; he's nothing but authentic. If somebody's performing from the heart like Slim does, and the rest of the band, people like it."

"He kind of puts the ball in my court. I've been designated as the leader; I do all the set lists and things like that. He's as pleasant a person to work with as I've ever worked with. He's got a wonderful voice. He's got a heck of a life story, and a lot of that comes out in the music and in performance. I think that's what makes it so good; it's coming from some-

thing real."

### Blues Material

"Why does Watermelon Slim have the blues?" Slim asks. "Thirty years of watching my government lie and cheat and kill. There are three themes in my blues: work – not typing, the kind of work where you give your sweat and blood for a bare living. Relationships – 'my baby done left me'; it's more complicated than that. And mortality. When Robert Johnson said, 'Blues is a low-down shaking chill,' I know what he means. I've had a heart attack and a stroke-like attack. The more I think about it, the more my guitar playing becomes like broken freaking glass. But I also have humor and hope."

"One thing I want to stress is that I'm a very lucky man to have anyone listen to me at this late part of my life."

## Lowest Prices On Everything We Sell.

5pc. kit w/Module Free Bass Pedal!

**Pro Maple Sets**  
Starting at \$669.00



TD-8KV Package  
Lowest Price Ever

**Roland**



**Craig's**  
music, inc.