



Watermelon Slim

by By Patrick Langston
July 2007 Issue

Watermelon Slim is explaining why, despite two master's degrees, he couldn't land a teaching job a decade ago.

"I don't have any front teeth," the 58-year-old bluesman growls by cellphone on his way to Tupelo, Mississippi. Rough living took them years ago.

A school superintendent told him to forget teaching. Asked how an employer has the right to deny an applicant because of teeth or lack thereof - the self-described "overbearing, sweaty, occasionally smelly" Slim abruptly slips into formal legal cadence.

"Case law consistently upholds a prospective employer's right to deny someone employment based on appearance, unless that appearance is directly the result of another discriminatory category."

Slim breaks off for a moment to yell, "There's a smoky up there! Get in the other lane, get in the other lane!" The driver is heard shouting something back and Slim is, for the moment, mollified.

The multifaceted and mercurial Watermelon Slim is in the midst of a frantic summer tour schedule with his rocking band The Workers to promote his excellent new album, *The Wheel Man*.

Slim has also just finished a new DVD, which will mean six releases in six years. His 2005 album *Watermelon Slim & The Workers* ranked No. 1 in MOJO's 2006 Top 10 Blues CDs, and was nominated for six Blues Foundation awards, a feat previously restricted to the likes of B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Robert Cray.

(None of the nominations, alas, translated into a win.)

Pulling off that many recording projects, never mind all the touring, means a lot of time together for Slim and his three-piece band.

Unfortunately, says Slim, he's a "mediocre" team player. "I'm a bull in a china shop."

To substantiate this claim of troublesome individuality, he hands the phone to his drummer, Michael Newbury, whose rhythmic edge on *The Wheel Man* might be traced to his earlier gig playing for the roots-rock outfit the Ban-Lons.

Says Newbury, "Slim has come from a different way of doing things and he's done an incredible job of adapting. He's hard on himself."

Born Bill Homans in Boston, Slim grew up in North Carolina listening to the blues singing of the family's maid. His father was an attorney and ex-freedom rider.

Although Slim later completed graduate studies in journalism and history, his first brush with post-secondary education was short-lived: in the early 1970s, he dropped out of college to ship off to Vietnam.

While there, he taught himself slide guitar on a five-dollar balsa wood cheapie using a pick cut from a coffee can top and his Zippo lighter for a slide (he's since added a 13/16 inch spark plug socket to his arsenal of slides and also plays a mean harp).

Slim returned from Vietnam an ardent anti-war activist with stories to tell. In 1973, he released his debut album, *Merry Airbrakes*, the only known record by a veteran during the Vietnam War.

Country Joe McDonald later covered some of the album's protest tracks, but Slim's music career quickly tanked.

"The record industry did not want to invest in any more unproven commodities," he says, in part because the Arab oil embargo had resulted in a shortage of polyvinyl chloride, a key ingredient in record production.

"In the 1970s, I tried making a living in Europe with music, but I got my head knocked in," he says. "So I went back to blue collar labourer, and frankly, petty crime, farming and various things."

It was to be 30 years before Slim's next record.

Most of those three decades were spent working as a long-distance trucker hauling industrial waste, a career from which he finally retired in 2004. Many of his songs were born while he was behind the wheel.

A stint on a watermelon farm led to his nickname.

"In my 30s and 40s, I was a stout man," the now-thinner, shambling Slim says, using the term "stout" to mean powerful. "I used to unload railroad cars by myself. I'd unload a 90,000-pound railway car in a 10-hour day."

One of his favorite jobs was at Junior Jackson's sawmill in Oklahoma. "I was off-bearer, the guy that stands in front of the main 52-inch buzz saw and catches the cross-ties and slabs and lumber. I did get the top of my finger taken off by the buzz saw."

During those years, he also attended university, married and had a daughter of whom he's immensely proud, and joined Mensa, which makes him a pretty smart guy.

"I got out of crime about 1978. Crime was for me education, and as the title song of the new record says, I spent years waiting for the deal to go down."

Slim also dedicated himself to music.

"At this point, I'm finally fairly competent in the slide guitar but I wasn't really someone who had the whole package together back then."

During those years, he says, "I dove into life so deep, I don't care if I ever come up." A terrific and still-expanding collection of tunes is the result.

"I got three main things I sing about," he says. "Work, and I don't mean computer work, I mean hard work. Relationships, and I don't mean teenage angst. And death, my own mortality. I know I'm going to die. Robert Johnson knew he was going to die. It's like Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, you know: 'The horror, the horror.'"

Slim actually suffered a near-fatal heart attack in 2002, and the recent spate of recordings comes from knowing that "I'm getting older and I may not be around that much longer and I've still got the physical energy to do it. I never run out of material. I live therefore I experience therefore I write."

Slim also worries, a lot, about an international conspiracy of neo-Nazis that extends into Canada via the Aryan Nations organization and includes some heavily armed groups in the United States. Neo-Nazis were behind the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168, he says. "Tim McVeigh was a willing pawn . . . and we cannot trust our law enforcement and investigative bodies."

Slim made the bombing and conspiracy his master's thesis subject.

"I would quit my blues career in a hurry if I could get enough money to bust the ones that did the bombing."