

## Drive It Home: A blues hero goes country on a trucker's ode to the road

### WATERMELON SLIM

#### *Escape From the Chicken Coop*

NorthernBlues Music

"Country music is white man's blues," goes the saying — an aphorism that comes to life on Watermelon Slim's new album. They're calling this his "Nashville album," but Slim won't be jamming with Keith Urban or dueting with Taylor Swift at the CMAs. (Thank God.) *Escape From the Chicken Coop* finds the singer and slide guitarist revisiting the country of the Seventies, before the homogenization of the Garth Ages. The sound owes as much to Lynyrd Skynyrd as to Merle Haggard, Hank Williams Jr., Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings.

The 13-track set opens with "Caterpillar Whine," Slim's Southern-rock trucker's anthem. Inspired by the Yoda of truck songs, Dave Dudley (as well as Junior Brown), Slim drives that theme through the final four songs: "It's Never Too Hard To Be



Humble," "300 Miles," "Truck Drivin' Songs," and "18, 18 Wheeler." In between, he dips way back to Roy Acuff for the acoustic "Wreck On the Highway" and covers Haggard's "The Way I Am" (Slim changes Hag's line about his fishing float — "I can almost see that bobber dancin'" — to "I can almost see that barroom dancin'"). Slim might not fish much, but he tells us what he does like on "Skinny Women and Fat Cigars" and covers Moe Bandy's "Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life." There's spoken word in "Friends On the Porch," and

there's a tribute to "America's Wives." Slim even does a mainstream country duet with Jenny Littleton on the happy love song "You See Me Like I See You" — a departure for the typically dour Slim.

Nashville allies include keyboardist Kevin McKendree and guitarist Rob McNelley from Delbert McClinton's band, as well as frequent McClinton co-writer Gary Nicholson, who has written R&B songs into country hits (Patty Loveless' "The Trouble With the Truth") and turned country songs into R&B classics (Arthur Alexander's "If It's Really Got To Be This Way"). The band features two of Nashville's most versatile session men: steel-guitar genius Paul Franklin and, fresh from backing Robert Plant & Alison Krauss and Elvis Costello, fiddler Stuart Duncan. Those musicians dial up the twang, but just as Slim's blues albums are country enough for Americana fans, *Chicken Coop* is bluesy enough not to alienate his existing audience.

— Larry Nager