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Blues man Watermelon Slim keeps looking up, driving on

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He calls it the “Little Dixie” region of his adopted state — Oklahoma — and the cell reception is spotty, at best.

Being on the other end of a disconnected phone line, it’s hard to tell how long Bill “Watermelon Slim” Homans keeps talking before he realizes the call has been terminated.

It could be five seconds, or it could be five minutes — Homans likes to talk, about life and his observations about living. And he loves to talk about his chosen profession — the blues.

Homans is no stranger to Brackins Blues Bar in downtown Maryville; in fact, he’s become something of a fixture at the venue, and Wednesday night he’ll return with his band, the Workers. It’s been almost two years since he last talked to The Daily Times, however, and in those 20-something months, much has changed for Homans.

He’s gotten older and a little more run-down, but given the morbid tone of his last conversation with Weekend, it’s no stretch to say he’s probably a little more upbeat than he’s been in a while.

“I’ve gotten in somewhat worse health since you’ve seen me, but I’m a blessed man for all that,” Homans told us Wednesday. “I’ve actually had an outright miracle or two occur around me, and my Christian faith has never been stronger. Between certain things that have happened and my Christian faith, I’ve figured out that there are no contradictions in life.

“Now if I could just figure out how to make it rain where I want it to rain, then I’ll know my mojo is all-purpose.”

Of course, much has happened over the past year that would brighten any artist’s spirit. Last December, Homans garnered a record-tying six 2007 Blues Music Award nominations for Artist, Entertainer, Album, Band, Song and Traditional Album of the Year. Only those in the top echelon of the genre, men like B.B. King and Buddy Guy and Robert Cray, have ever landed six nominations. To top it all off, his 2006 self-titled album was ranked No. 1 in Mojo Magazine’s 2006 Top Blues CDs, won the 2006 Independent Music Award for Blues Album of the Year, hit No. 1 on the Living Blues Radio Chart, debuted at No. 13 on the

Billboard Blues Radio Chart (ahead of both Robert Cray and the North Mississippi All Stars) and won the Blues Critic Award for 2006 Album of the Year.

Although he was shut out of winning any awards, Homans didn't slow down in 2007. In April, he released "Wheel Man," his fourth album in five years, and earlier this summer, he was inducted into the Oklahoma Blues Hall of Fame.

Not bad for a guy who chose his stage name from a former occupation — a watermelon farmer in the Sooner State. Oh, he's done a few other things along the way, from working in a sawmill to driving a truck to officiating funerals to petty theft, even. And he's been playing guitar for more than 30 years, since being discharged from the military after the Vietnam War. Although he'd picked up a \$5 Vietnamese balsa wood guitar while in-country and learned to play it using a Zippo lighter as a slide and a piece of plastic cut out of a coffee-can lid for a pick, he got his first real guitar after getting back to the States. His late grandmother bought him a National Steel guitar, and he cut his first album, "Merry Airbrakes," in 1973.

It would be another couple of decades and some change, however, before Homans made the blues — burned into his musical heart as a child by the songs of his family's housekeeper — a full-time career. That's why he was nominated under the Best New Artist Debut category for the 2005 W.C. Handy Awards (he lost out to John Lee Hooker Jr.).

Not that winning was a big deal for Homans. After all, the years in between his first album and the time he decided to become a full-time blues man made for plentiful songwriting fodder. He's a man of dichotomy — raised in two cultures; a member of MENSA International (an exclusive society for those with genius-range IQs) and a holder of honors degrees in history and journalism and a master's degree from Oklahoma State, but a truck driver by trade. He may well be one of the most literate blues men alive, but he shucks it off like it isn't a big deal.

"I'd rather play the blues than drive a truck, but really, I enjoy it most when I'm on the stage," he told us in a 2006 interview. "My body is probably better off for playing than if I had to drive a truck into my 70s, but that's the alternative for me — either go back to driving a truck and hard labor, or play the blues.

"I find myself wondering, will they remember me as long as they've remembered Muddy Waters? We all still play his songs, but he's only been dead since 1982 or '83. That's nothing, really. How will they remember Watermelon Slim? I don't know the answers, and it gives me the blues to think that I don't know the answers. I'm an old man, and I probably think through things too much."

A heart attack in 2002 colored a great deal of his artistic process for several years; heavy thoughts on his own mortality and the nature of life in general weighed on him, but it seems like, somewhere along the line, Homans has turned a corner and is enjoying his success —

both domestically and abroad.

“I certainly have been doing a lot of international gigs, even if I’m not quite as spry as I used to be,” he said. “I went to the doctor, and he put me on an anti-inflammatory. He told me there was nothing going on that would require any operations any time soon, so I’m going to keep going.

“Everything seems to be going great right now. We’ve been all over the world and just got back from Norway; we’ve done France and lots of Canada; and we got nominated for all of those awards for the last record, and the new one is selling like crazy.”

The familiar beeping of a faded-out cell phone signal comes over the line as Homans is abruptly cut off, lost to the whims of technology. His conversation has been brief, but that’s OK — his set on Wednesday night at Brackins won’t be, and for those who wish to engage him in conversation, he’ll likely have plenty to say. He’ll no doubt bemoan his mortality a bit, and perhaps ponder the nature of impending death for us all, but this time around, he may just crack a smile and tell a joke and realize that, no matter what else happens, he’s still got the blues and an audience that wants to hear him play them.

And if nothing else, that makes him a blessed man, as he’ll be the first to tell you.
