



By Don Wilcock



Some people would say that Watermelon Slim lost the International Blues Challenge in 2003. It would be more accurate to say he didn't win. And I'm not even sure you can say that.

Since competing in the contest four years ago, Slim has released four albums. *Mojo*, one of England's top music magazines, named his most recent release, *Watermelon Slim and The Workers*, the number one Blues album of 2006, and *Blues Revue* raved "great band, great material, and great album." With six Blues Music Award nominations this year, he has two more than Charlie Musselwhite, the next most frequently nominated artist. Only B.B. King had previously ever scored six nominations in one year.

How do you define "winner" when it comes to the IBC?

"You don't have to win the IBC," Slim says. "All you have to do is be in the game, and there's no telling what good things can happen to you, because they happened to me."

Chris Hardwick, one of the judges at the 2003 IBC, was so taken with Slim's performance that he started a record label, Southern Records Group, with Slim's *Big Shoes to Fill* CD. In the press release sent to journalists with that album, Hardwick asked, "Have you ever met someone and instantly knew that there was something very special about them and you just had to learn more? This rough-on-the-outside, but highly talented and intelligent fellow amazed me with his straight-from-the-heart sincerity and powerful musical talent." Hardwick went on to say, "The concept behind SRG is to offer an outlet for talented performing songwriters who have been overlooked by the big labels or simply don't fit the big label corporate formula."

It's a Catch-22 familiar to many Blues artists. "You can't get credit unless you borrow money from somebody officially," explains Slim, "and you can't borrow money from somebody unless you have credit. The exception is if you find somebody inside the credit game who's willing to sign for you and start you. Chris was willing to sign for me, in a sense."

After releasing *Up Close and Personal*, his second album for Southern Records Group, Slim moved to NorthernBlues, a larger label that could handle his growing success. In April, they will release *The Wheel Man*, a follow-up to his 2006 barnburner *Watermelon Slim and The Workers*.

"Part of (why I've been successful as a

Bluesman) is because I'm old and real, and also because I'll not be quite as effacing about my songwriting ability," says Slim. "I'm as good a songwriter as you'll find anywhere in this world."

With degrees in journalism and history, Slim could teach English, history, geography, political science, economics, and psychology, but he's spent more time hauling waste, being a sawmill hand and loading bricks and mortar than he has working behind a desk. "No kid these days has unloaded railroad cars of 90-pound cement bags in a 10-hour day all by himself several days a week. Think 900 reps of 90 pounds in 10 hours," he says.

"Sweat's more important to me than intellect," says Slim, whose current Blues Music Awards nomination for Song of The Year is a number called "Hard Times." "I'm not puttin' 'em down or anything, but the degrees are practically a coincidence."

Here's a man who was a heavy equipment operator for the Army's First Signal Brigade in Long Binh, Vietnam, in 1969. He had a subscription to *Rolling Stone*, which was a revolutionary tabloid newspaper at the time, and it never got past the mailroom. Later, he worked in logging.

"You gotta be real," he says in a voice that's a collision of regional accents collected from times in Boston, the South and Oklahoma. "On this next record, there's gonna be a sawmill holler, the job I've done more than any other job besides truck driving in my life. I've been a feller. That's the guy who cuts the trees down. I've been a hauler. That's the guy who drives 'em on a big truck. I've been a saw miller. I've worked every position except sawer at the saw mill, stacker, green chair, off-barer, fork lift operator, whatever. I've done it. And that's why I'm legitimate, because I really have done it."

*Hard times – Lord,
hard times have come at last
If you want to see me on my good side
Baby, you better look fast*

Slim hasn't much use for kids who think they can sing the Blues. The only one he'll name is Jonny Lang, "because he kinda turned his back on the Blues. These young guns never worked themselves a steady job where they had to bust their ass. Somebody once said, 'Well, they'd have

cont. enpg 32

photo: Scott Allen - vividp.x.com



cont. from pg 31

never got Muddy Waters if he'd been a white-collar worker.' Nobody would have given a shit, but as it was, he was a cotton picker and a truck driver. He knew what it was like to sweat."

I'm too poor to pay attention

I'm too hungry to eat

Too sick to see the doctor

And I'm too tired to sleep

Slim's been married twice, and it was in those two marriages that he got his schooling. There's obviously some relationship there, but he's not ready to connect the dots. "I've been up and down, over and out with women. I'm sure I'll never get married again. And I don't indulge myself with groupies, though I could have them. If I was really into it, I could probably get laid most nights after the gig. What do I need to see from a woman? Is there a woman out there that can show me something that I ain't never seen or done before? I doubt that. And they come with all that other baggage."

I'm too frustrated to see my psychiatrist

I'm too toothless to chew

Too far down to ever get even

I'm too hard up to screw

"By this point, the age helps," Slim says. "Not to pull any punches on myself, I'm a scar-faced, half-toothless old Bluesman. I'm an ugly son of a bitch. It helps (my image as a Bluesman). It might have helped at 30, but I had other stuff that I was doing. I was seriously in the Blues. I was trying to

make it at 40. Certainly was! Back in Boston after I'd gotten my degree and after I had decided I was temperamentally suited to reporting, I was busy driving truck, but I was playing with Stovall Brown and playing with my group in the Boston area called the Old Dogs with Washtub Robbie. I was basically the other Bluesman in town besides Earring George Mayweather, who was the grand old man of Boston via Chicago and originally via Alabama.

I just can't see to put my pants on

I can't hear myself sing

I can't always taste my whiskey

And I just can't feel much of anything

"Now, I write about things that I've done, but I'm not just so goddamn full of myself. I write about things that I've done because people would be interested in, like, the sawmill, or getting my face busted six ways to Sunday down in Mississippi, or some other stuff that I've wrote about. I drove home from Mississippi with a piece of jawbone sticking in my tongue. They didn't even treat me. The police threw me out of town. I've done much better in Clarksdale every time I've gone down there since."

Win, lose or draw? Watermelon Slim's a winner, and just playing the International Blues Challenge changed his luck and his life.

"Be sure you understand from me that Watermelon Slim is a very blessed man," he says. "I don't regret a gaul-durn thing. I know I'm getting' someplace now. I know my plane's off the ground. If I was to die right this minute, I'd be going out on top."

photo © Scott Allen - vividpix.com

