



Slim of All Trades

Watermelon Slim is more than just a bluesman.

"I'VE GOT NOTHIN' but time on my hands," says Watermelon Slim. "And miles to go."

That's the story of Slim's (a/k/a Bill Homans) life. Boston-born and North Carolina-raised as the son of a progressive attorney and ex-freedom rider, Slim first heard the blues from the family maid. He attended a liberal arts college in Vermont, then hit Vietnam, then Vietnam hit back. Bed-ridden, he laid an old five-dollar guitar on his lap and, using a pick carved from a rusty coffee can and his Army-issue Zippo as a slide, taught himself to play the blues.

In 1973, Slim released *Merry Airbrakes*, an album of weighty Delta blues in which anti-war protest was couched in existential and spiritual themes. Country Joe McDonald covered a few of the songs, but in the wake of the OPEC oil embargo, the cost of manufacturing vinyl records skyrocketed and unproven artists such as Slim took it on the chin. "The idea was to make records that definitely would sell," recalls Slim. "You can mark the watershed of the recording industry [there]."

For the next 30 years, Slim kept busy about 30 different ways. He's been a truck driver (hauling nuke waste!), bill collector, funeral officiator, forklift operator, petty crook and watermelon farmer (hence the name). He went back to school, earned a master's degree in journalism and history, roomed

with Canned Heat guitarist Henry Vestine, and joined Mensa. And in 2002, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. But he never abandoned music and subsequently released three critically-acclaimed albums—*Big Shoes to Fill*, *Up Close and Personal* and *Watermelon Slim and the Workers*—while notching W.C. Handy Award nominations left and right. His latest, *The Wheel Man* (Northern Blues), is poised to do the same.

The title references Slim's days a criminal but also conjures images of him behind the wheel of his big truck, or riding in his new touring van, with nothing but time on his hands. "If the music all goes south," he draws, "[the van's] dual-purpose design is a transcontinental moving van." Moving what, nuke waste? "Oh, no, no!"

If Slim had his druthers, he'd pick up where his master's thesis left off and continue his independent investigation of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. "My research has not been debunked," says Slim, "as [others'] has, because they got off onto the Middle Eastern connection, which is a bunch of bullshit. It's neo-Nazis; domestic American terrorists that are waiting to strike again. If I could get ahold of a minimum of \$750,000, I'd put together a team to investigate that. I'd stop my blues career to do it."

RANDY HARWARD

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