

BRUSHED BY GOD Watermelon Slim

... not your ordinary bluesman, not your ordinary guy



By Aaron Kayce

Born Bill Homans in Boston and raised in North Carolina by his mom, Watermelon Slim is one of the most authentic, celebrated bluesmen of the day. In the last four years alone he's been nominated for 17 Blues Music Awards (formerly the W.C. Handy Awards), putting him in exclusive company with folks like B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Robert Cray. He's also one of the most fascinating men on the planet. Sit down with Watermelon Slim one afternoon and you'll learn about the blues, America, comparative theology—and maybe even yourself.

"I'm a late blooming musician," he says in his erudite drawl. "There have been reasons for that. One of them is I'm only moderately talented and I'm physically not very good looking... In music, if you're gonna make the big money, one smile is as important as any talent or any brains or contacts you may ever have. I don't have a smile; I've got no teeth."

For most of his life, Slim drove a truck and worked in a sawmill. Aside from his wizened vocals and stingy, snaky slide guitar licks, those are the bluesier of his resume items. The rest? Well, they're all over the place—funeral officiant, firewood salesman, bill collector, watermelon farmer (where he got the name), self-proclaimed ex-petty criminal, manual laborer, lover and political investigator. One reckons those all ring bluesy in their way, but here's where Watermelon Slim really deviates from the bluesman archetype: He holds degrees in history and journalism, and is a member of the genius IQ society Mensa. His father was a renowned attorney (he defended the Freedom Riders in Mississippi), his brother was a pillar of the Boston financial market before becoming a world famous classical composer. Slim is also a Vietnam vet (now an anti-war activist), and it was while convalescing in a veterans' hospital that he modified a left-handed balsawood guitar, using a shard of tin can as a pick and his Zippo lighter as a slide.

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Media: Michael McClune at 310.319.1199 or info@michaelmcclune.net

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The man's like Jekyll and Hyde, the way he bounces between blue- and white-collar boasts. He yarns about breaking his back while hauling industrial waste ("I fell thirteen feet off my tractor-trailer, but I got back up and drove that load home and never missed a day of work") and comments about his training in phenomenology and existentialism: "I'm a student of people like Colin Wilson, the evolutionary existential philosopher." And he delights in his own dichotomy, proudly straddling such an ostensibly huge cultural expanse, and enjoying the dropped-jaw gawks he gets from folks that can't fathom such well-roundedness.

It was by virtue of this diversity that Watermelon Slim became the musician he is today, which is what you might call the "real deal." In fact, Slim seems to have become a protector of the blues. In our instant-everything, disposable-everything world, our sense of history and context is eroding, and it's up to folks like Slim to keep the fire burning long enough for the next generation to stoke. "I'm a historian and I'm always making sure people understand this is a historical exhibit," he says. "I'm kind of a guardian (of the blues) because I'm qualified to do it."

Now at the peak of his profession, though still not making the "big money," Slim has been singing on stage for 53 years, starting in glee clubs and school choruses. He released his first album, 1973's *Merry Airbrakes*, after returning from Vietnam. The liner notes read, "This album of music was conceived and recorded during the months between the 1972 Presidential election and the full-flowering of the Watergate disclosures..." Though critically acclaimed, it was a casualty of the 1973 oil crisis—in that high oil prices meant vinyl records were more expensive to produce. "Labels were less inclined to take a chance on an artist," he says. Although it came out, Atlantic Records pressed far fewer copies of the album than they originally intended.

The album's most notable recognition came when Country Joe McDonald covered the songs (ostensibly live), but *Merry Airbrakes* was reissued in 2004—one year after Slim's phoenix album, an ode to his father called *Big Shoes to Fill*, put him back in the public eye. In August of 2004 he was able to quit driving trucks and focus solely on music and he's put out four albums since, including the latest, 2008's *No Paid Holidays* (Northern Blues). Now Slim says life on the road has become too painful. He'll release "the next great shit kicking county & western truck stop album" in July, but "I hurt, so my touring career is coming to an end. By next year, I will consider myself semi-retired."

Regardless of his limitations, teeth (or lack thereof) and scars—including those sustained when a car struck him in 2006, Slim remains a prolific writer and spry performer. He connects, perhaps because of his everyman-journeyman life, with his listeners intensely and personally, not just creating a sublime blues music experience, but edifying them with stories and wisdom. To them, he's more than just a bluesman.

"I have something that brings folks together," says Slim. "I think the word is empathy. I'm not just a businessman; I'm not just a musician; I'm not just a veteran; I'm not just a laborer; I'm not just anything. I relate to a lot of people and they see the empathy in me, and turn to me not only for entertainment but for psycho-spiritual sustenance. Four words: "God. Has. Brushed. Me. I know this."

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