

Watermelon Man mines the blues

Roger Levesque

Freelance

Saturday, August 25, 2007

WATERMELON SLIM & THE WORKERS

Where: Labatt Blues Fest, Heritage Amphitheatre, Hawrelak Park

When: Today, 5:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$45, limited availability at the door; box office opens at noon

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EDMONTON - In a genre rife with nicknames and the gritty characters that inhabit them, bluesman Watermelon Slim (originally Bill Homans) seems entirely ready to live up to his moniker.

"Most of it's magic and some of it's tragic, but I've had a great, full, interesting life," offers Slim, on the line from his home in Oklahoma City.

It sounds like a line from a song, and Slim's story -- in and out of music -- has certainly inspired a tune or two. At 58, the Boston-born singer, guitarist and harp player is making the most of his second round in the music business, copping his experience and observations as a self-proclaimed "musical journalist" to relate life's stories through blues music.

It's working. Earlier this year, he picked up a record-tying seven nominations in the Blues Music Awards (for artist, entertainer, album, band, song and traditional album of the year), following the release last year of The Wheel Man, his second recording on the Canadian-based Northern Blues label.

If that album shuffles out a few over-calculated moments, you can't deny the high-energy kick of Slim and his band The Workers, the eclectic, contemporary feel of his material, or the paradoxical strengths of his resume.

Slim is a Vietnam war veteran turned antiwar protester, a Mensa member who was driving a truck until his current career comeback, a former watermelon farmer with two college degrees (bachelor of journalism, master's in history), and a songwriter who ranks William Shakespeare and Muddy Waters as his two literary heroes after his "god," John Lee Hooker. He actually sat in with Hooker in 1970 and recently opened for John Lee Hooker Jr. at a festival.

He's a survivor too, considering his near-fatal heart attack in 2002, and the crushing accident that broke four bones in his left-guitar-playing hand last year. (Now healed, it works "better than ever," Slim reports.)

Slim was raised in North Carolina and grew up hearing his family's black maid sing Hooker songs, alongside his exposure to bluegrass, country and church music. After singing Bach in a school concert at nine, he got a set of bongo drums and a harmonica. But it wasn't until he was laid up with a rare disease in an army hospital in Vietnam in 1970 that he started playing a primitive guitar with a metal pick cut from a coffee can.

Back in the U.S., he recorded his first album of roots, blues and pop songs in 1973, adding protest messages about Watergate and the Vietnam War. His college training gave him the ability to write, but in the intervening 30-odd years, Slim held down all sorts of jobs that left a rich vein of experience -- including the years of farming watermelons in Oklahoma, which ended when he married his first wife in 1983. He also put in stints as a newspaper reporter, teacher and funeral director.

During much of this period, he was able to nurse his music on the side. But it wasn't until 2001 that he made a commercial comeback with the first of a string of five recordings. His profile has grown considerably since Northern Blues released his self-titled album with The Workers in 2006. (The Workers include guitarist Ronnie McMullen, bassist Cliff Belcher and drummer Michael Newberry on tour). In live performance, they focus on original material, but you might hear the occasional cover of Muddy Waters in the mix.

Along with his aggressive musical delivery, Slim packs a certain measure of humility and the occasional political comment. In recent times, he's been using his role as an entertainer to help raise funds for the victims of hurricane Katrina.

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