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### Hammer-Down and Highballin'



Watermelon Slim's personal approach to the blues keeps him going

by Joshua Hoyer

With a low, gravelly voice reminiscent of Tom Waits, Bill Homan, also known as Watermelon Slim, says the heart of his music comes from living the life of a bluesman. He said a bluesman is one who has known work and sweat and blood and loss.

"I have failed more things than most people have tried," he said. "I have done most everything wrong and learned from it, and that's part of what the blues is. It is trial and error. It is really screwing up. It is getting your head beat in, literally, and learning from it."

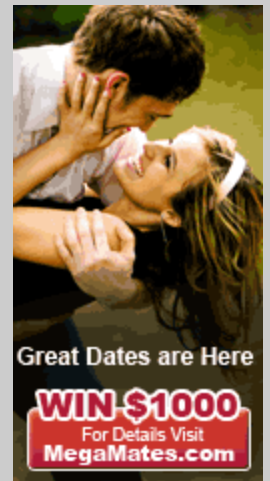
It can be argued that good music, or any art, comes from a life rich in experience, the music itself an extension of the soul who writes and plays it.

Having been a Vietnam veteran, long-haul truck driver, forklift operator, saw miller, petty criminal, firewood salesman, collection agent, dock worker and watermelon farmer, Slim has emerged as an international blues artist. His growling voice, soulful slide guitar and versatile harmonica have, for the second year in a row, earned a record-tying six Blues Music Award nominations. This puts him in the company of only B. B. King, Buddy Guy and Robert Cray.

His songwriting is steeped in delta and Chicago-style blues. Slim said he designed his college curriculum (he has two bachelors and a master's degree), to be able to write anything, in any style on any subject.

"Whether it is text that is public relations, historical commentary or investigation, I can write it," he said. "My goal was to become as good a writer as I could."

Slim said blues music is about more than losing women, drinking and carousing or sexual prowess. He has written songs about work as a truck driver, about love, loss and songs that are political. Over the years he has responded musically to issues such as Hurricane Katrina, 9/11 and



the slaughter of Buddhist monks in Burma among others.

"Basically I'll see something of social or political import, and I'll write a song right then and there based on what I have seen," he said. "It's a journalistic process."

He and his band, The Workers, have played extensively in Europe and Asia, and in November will play in Turkey. When overseas, he sometimes apologizes for current U.S. leaders, and thanks those countries which have given better thought to foreign policy.

"I am an ambassador of blues culture, of my country, and of thinking, compassionate human beings wherever I may find them," he said. "That is who I speak for."

At 57, Slim said the only reason he still tours is to make his daughter proud. On his soon-to-be-released album, *Paid Holidays*, Slim penned a song entitled "Dad in the Distance," which is his take on being long-separated from his daughter. He said if he didn't have someone to live for, it wouldn't matter how long he lasted.

"I'd probably sit in Memphis on the street and make my \$100 a day playing on the street," he said. "I'd probably drink up \$30 a night, even though I'm not a big drinking man."

Luckily for blues and music lovers, Slim annually travels 75,000 miles by land and 40,000 by air each year. Fans describe a Watermelon Slim show as authentic and personal. Slim is well-known for mingling with the audience while he plays.

"If you're not doing blues personally, you're not doing them at all," he said.

Slim said he has been blessed with increasingly better musicians. With Michael Newberry on drums, Cliff Belcher on bass, and Ronnie McMullen on guitar, Slim said, any performer could sound good. Part of his job, he said, is writing songs good enough to interest good musicians in playing them.

"God has blessed me through all this, through all these living experiences," he said. "I'm hammer-down and highballin' this whole life through."

*Watermelon Slim and The Workers play the Soaring Wings Vineyard Spring Wine and Blues Festival Saturday, May 10 with Canned Heat and local act Jumpin' Kate and The Naked Reserves. The festival costs \$30 and runs from 12-10 p.m. Soaring Wings is located at 17111 S. 138 St. in Springfield. Visit [soaringwingswine.com](http://soaringwingswine.com), [watermelonslim.com](http://watermelonslim.com), or call Soaring Wings at 402.253.2479.*

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