

Watermelon On Top, (09/13/07)

Since the turn of the millennium, *William "Watermelon Slim" Homans* has evolved from a local Blues hero in and around his Oklahoma City base to a big-time, critically acclaimed player on the international scene. Coming off his self-titled debut for the NorthernBlues label - a record that topped several Album of the Year charts and garnered six nominations at this year's Blues Music Awards - Slim's 2007 tour schedule has taken him all over the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Why are fans everywhere suddenly falling in love with this man and his music? Perhaps it's because he's an extremely talented man with an unpretentious, blue-collar attitude. The Vietnam vet-turned truck driver-turned watermelon farmer paid his dues for decades and is reaping the rewards now. He plays and sings with a rare humor and intensity and writes real-life tales of struggle and conquest that ring true. All those elements combine to make his newest, /The Wheel Man/, another standout release.

The sweet smell of newfound success pervades the album. The dark clouds that seemed to hover over many of the songs on Slim's previous albums have now all but dissipated. There's more of a cocky air of rebellion and even celebration in the chords and grooves on /The Wheel Man/. *The Workers* (drummer *Michael Newberry*, bassist *Cliff Belcher*, and guitarist *"Ronnie Mack" McCullen*) keep it simple in the most positive sense. This is a focused band that serves the needs of each song. And there's a lot of bounce in their step this time around, as evidenced on a whole slew of up-tempo numbers including "Drinking and Driving," "I Know One," "Truck Driving Mama," and the rocking "Rattlesnake." Any of these would do just fine on a Saturday night where party folk are looking to shake what they got.

Watermelon Slim, an inventive harp and slide guitar player, is at his best on edgier cuts that mine a deep vein of emotion. The slithery, Reggae-like "Black Water" is a poor man's complaint to the callous "pols in Washington"; without specifically referencing Hurricane Katrina, the song speaks to the concerns of uprooted Gulf Coast residents: "/Black water, please let me rest my head/You know you killed my family, now Tent City's where I'll make my bed/." "Newspaper Reporter" is a classic slow Blues that succeeds on the strength of Slim's full-bore vocal and the sympathetic accompaniment of pianist *David Maxwell*. Primal Blues forms are another of the man's strengths: his two-and-a-half minute a cappella "Sawmill Holler" and harp-and-vocal solo "Jimmy Bell" take us about as close to the levee camps as we're bound to get with an iPod strapped on.

Oh, and then there's the title cut, with special guest *Magic Slim* delivering a stinging guitar solo that feels right at home in this context. It kicks off the record and may be the catchiest tune of all.

None of this quite matches the glorious intensity of one of Watermelon Slim & the Workers' live shows (I can write this now that I've seen them), but /The Wheel Man/ is a confident statement by an artist who has come into his own.

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