

Watermelon Slim and the Workers – *Bull Goose Rooster* (2013)

by S. Victor Aaron

A Vietnam War vet, a truck driver, painter, watermelon farmer, writer, small time criminal, a thrice-degreed scholar, a regular Blues Music Awards nominee, winner of multiple blues Album of the Year awards, and, oh, a former member of MENSA.

That's Watermelon Slim, a bluesman who's actually lived a life as colorful as the engaging narratives he croons on the sings he writes and covers.

Only seven years ago Slim, née William Homans, exploded onto the blues scene with his Workers band, and their self titled release *Watermelon Slim and the Workers*. He's been on a roll since then, but this overnight success story was a lifetime in the making (Homans' first album *Merry Airbrakes* dates to 1973). After a few records he made away from his band, Slim reconvenes with the Workers after a four year layoff from recording with them, and *Bull Goose Rooster* will soon see the light of day as their fourth album together.

The Workers is comprised of Michael Newberry on drums, percussion, Cliff Belcher on electric bass and Ronnie 'Mack' MacMullen: electric guitars, backup Slim on vocals, blues harp and various slide guitars. It's a well-honed unit, and with Chris "Wick" Hardwick back at the helm at producer, it's 2006 all over again.

In this wide-ranging record, they play everything from acoustic Delta to electric Chicago blues and a lot of country & western and folk in-between and play it like real pros. Amos Blakemore's "Tomorrow Night" is the right way to start a set, a stomping roadhouse blues, with Slim's fiery Little Walter style harp. But Slim's own "Bull Goose Rooster," featuring his spunky electric slide, is Slim at the top of his game, warbling with a drawl of a master storyteller. And Slim has stories to tell — that song is based on a true encounter with a rather commanding fowl ruling the roost of a U.S. Post Office parking lot. Slim draws upon his experience as a truck driver to spin engaging tales on "Blue Freightliner" and "Trucking Class."

His covers include a hard-rockin' take on Woody Guthrie's "Vigilante Man" and a straightforward but effective execution of Slim Harpo's "I'm A King Bee" and "Scratch My Back." His vocals on his own "Prison Walls" are as commanding as his slide guitar. But listen to his totally unaccompanied undertaking of the classic Canadian folk hymn by Stan Rogers, "Northwest Passage." A song that's meant to be sung a cappella, Slim also fully embraces it and invests his soul into it for the whole five minutes.

Along with Otis Taylor, Watermelon Slim is also one of the few bluesman working today who regularly takes on political issues but whereby Taylor directs his ire and concerns toward broad societal issues, Slim directs his aim at the ruling class. His songs "A Wrench In The Machine" and "The Foreign Policy Blues" carry on the fight he's been bringing to the establishment since *Merry Airbrakes* and as a self-styled whistle-blower, even dedicates the album to America's whistle-blowers (no doubt he's including Edward Bradley in that number, now).

A thinking man's bluesman, an everyman's bluesman, or both? Watermelon Slim is all that and it's his varied background, a highly learned mind and a soldier of conscience that makes any record he makes with the Workers not just simply methodically crafted blues record, it's got a little more depth and a little more wit to boot. *Bull Goose Rooster* is no exception.

Watermelon Slim is the definition of a 21st century renaissance man.

When in Quebec, he speaks French to his audience with his gravelly Oklahoma twang. He got into college on a fencing scholarship. He is a Vietnam War vet who sings Vietnam War protest songs. Watermelon Slim is a multi-award-winning songwriter, guitarist and bandleader who has driven a truck, officiated at funerals, sold firewood and, on occasion in his younger days, broken the law to earn a living.

Bull Goose Rooster is the ninth disc in 10 years from Watermelon Slim. His first disc, *Merry Airbrakes*, was released some 30 years prior to that, in 1973, as a solo effort. Each disc expands the diversity of Slim's interests and musical influences. You can stream his new one, below, until June 25.

Slim, whose real name is Bill Homans, is fabled to have once been a member of Mensa — a rumour he flatly denies. Whether schooled or self-taught, the breadth of knowledge and experiences that he brings to his songwriting belies the musical persona of the guitar-playing watermelon picker.