

Workin' Man's Blues

I caught up with Watermelon Slim (aka Bill Homans) recently after a Canadian tour. Slim, first let me say we have a lot in common. We're the same age. I was a student activist in the early 70's, have a Master's degree in History, my father struggled raising watermelons and I love the blues! Somewhere we must have crossed paths in the past, but I know we will in the future.

BS: You play a dobro slide guitar with your left hand. Is it true that you taught yourself while recuperating in an Army hospital from an injury in 'Nam using a Zippo lighter as a slide?

WS: That's all true. That's where I started to teach myself, anyway. It's taken 37 years so far to teach myself, and I'm still giving myself lessons, and getting them from others.

BS: You hold the distinction of being the only Vietnam veteran to record an anti-war protest album, *Merry Airbrakes* (1973). Has it been reissued? Considering the current anti-war sentiment regarding Iraq, has there been a renewed interest in it?

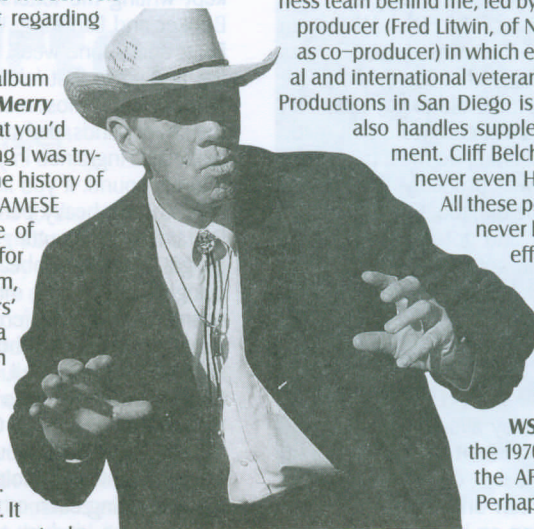
WS: I am the only Vietnam veteran to record an LP album of ANY type while the war was still going on (*Merry Airbrakes* was recorded 1972-1973). I don't know that you'd call this album exactly a protest album. But one thing I was trying to do was embody (as no one else ever has in the history of American music, of that period or later) the VIETNAMESE point of view. No, I haven't seen any resurgence of interest in it, though we do now have a few copies for sale on CD at the website. That record is a cult item, though. Original copies are very expensive collectors' items on EBay, and in Europe the album is sold by a small record-collectors' label, ShadokMusic. I retain the only original-reissue copy still in shrink wrap and guaranteed to be unplayed. Somebody make me a bid! It is a work of art in a work of art: the cover (as are the covers of all the original-reissue copies still extant) is a linoleum block silk screen, cut by Dr. Richard H. Phillips, PhD., and rolled by he and myself. It is exceptionally rare because it is a record with my actual name on it!

BS: Care to conjecture why this generation hasn't the passion for getting involved in politics and social issues like ours did? I teach high school seniors and am having difficulty getting them even to register to vote.

WS: "Our" generation did not lack for available mediated information. However, Generation X—and Y, as they're calling teenagers now—have grown up completely under the aegis of the Information Society. In 1975, the ARPANET, based out of MIT, was the first time technologists had been able to pyramidize remote terminal interface processors. You and I were 26.

By this point, the primacy of information—and the syndrome of information overload—is so endemic that people have less use for what is going on off the screen. I would argue that the process of popular behavioral modification—which we have performed on ourselves, with gentle nudges from those commercial interests whose business it is to foster an ultra-consumerism status quo—such that the American people who spend money are overwhelmingly mentally rooted in the exact present—was carefully calculated by the pioneers of the computer decades ago, in places like Harvard, MIT and the Rand Corp. think tank. I would argue that, without really thinking about it very much per se, the American people have a quantum more strongly opted for a pragmatist philosophy of thinking and action. Pragmatism: Do whatever works, in any given situation. I think you and I were raised when various philosophies based on or including various expressions of idealism were more in favor.

I myself did not cast a ballot for any presidential candidate in the last election. Oh, I voted for a congressional candidate, a governor and local offices, but I would not vote for a man whose campaign clearly showed him to be part of the problem against a sitting president I KNEW to be part of the problem! We were offered no choice. I have personally been acquainted with Sen. Kerry for 36 years and it is my sad but well-considered opinion that he lost his cojones along his path to nomination. Tell your students from me to get their butts out and register. But a vote by silence is still a valid phenomenon. We really do need an actual "none of the above" available on American election ballots!



Watermelon Slim



BS: OK, let's see—born in Boston, grew up in North Carolina, worked and currently based in Oklahoma. You hauled industrial waste for a living until a heart attack caused you to re-evaluate your career and decided to commit to the blues. You and *The Workers* were nominated for six Blues Music Awards this year. Obviously, the blues has been good to you. Do you regret not beginning this journey sooner?

WS: But I did begin it "sooner". I tried, such as I understood the process, to make a living, or even have commercial success, from playing music several sustained times in what has been a mostly scuffling career. I've just got a business team behind me, led by Mr. Chris Hardwick, my manager, publisher and producer (Fred Litwin, of NorthernBlues, is executive producer. I am listed as co-producer) in which each aspect is being handled by seasoned national and international veterans of their jobs. Michael McClune, of Crows Feet Productions in San Diego is my publicist. Michael Newberry, my drummer, also handles supplementary regional bookings and road management. Cliff Belcher, the bass player, handles the merchandise. I never even HAD a merchandise outlet before *The Workers*.

All these people need acknowledgement, because I would never have gone anywhere without this kind of a team effort. I would still be driving a truck and playing locally and on weekends and vacation time.

BS: You hold several college degrees, are a member of Mensa, and are interested in Elizabethan drama. Why truck driving rather than an academic career like teaching?

WS: I was a member of Mensa for 2 or 3 months in the 1970s. I did qualify, by my IQ (142) as measured by the AFQ in the military in 1969. I found it boring. Perhaps I would find it less so now.

I'm a physical, sweaty, loud fellow. I don't work well in offices, I'm afraid I offend more people than not in that kind of an environment. I have done stints as a daily newspaper reporter (which you have heard about in the new release) and as a teaching assistant at the college level. And I do have subject teaching endorsements from Oklahoma at the high school level in history, English, geography, political science, economics and psychology.

But I also have no top teeth, and one thing about teaching, as about reporting, is that you must be able to smile convincingly at those you work around. When is the last time you saw anyone on tv without a full set of teeth, whether real or false? I'll bet, never. I have medical issues which make it prohibitively expensive to have a full oral rehabilitation, or even effective dentures. I have become resolved to the probability that I shall never directly materially benefit from an education I would not trade for any Harvard graduate's. I am a trained master of the English language and it has helped me be known as a songwriter.

In trucking, nobody cared that I was sweaty and occasionally smelly, as long as I got the goods from point A to point B intact. Trucking, and labor in general, is what I was good at. I don't know much about restraint; I tend to work at 100% capacity all the time. And trucking, no matter what you're hauling, is public service; certainly was when I was hauling waste and when I was in the moving business for years. If all the stockbrokers and insurance salesmen go on strike, the country muddles on. If the trucks stop, the country comes to a screeching halt, just like if I threw the trailer brakes on in my rig while rolling down the highway!

BS: Please tell the readers about your band, *The Workers*.

WS: Michael Newberry, 50, Drums. Founding member of the Fortune Tellers and the Banlons in the 1980s. Played for Billy Bacon and the Forbidden Pigs. Most recently, before forming *The Workers* with me and Ike Lamb, Mike was longtime drummer for Oklahoma standout Scott Keaton, in his group the Deviants. Toured with Bo Diddley and has been a spot replacement for Willie "Big Eyes" Smith.

Cliff Belcher, 48, Bass. Originally from Fort Worth, he recorded with Doyle Bramhall Sr. in the 1980s; was bassist for various standout groups in