

Oklahoma in the 90s and the 21st century, including and Big G (D.C. Minner protege Garrett Jacobson) and Pinky and the Snakeshakers.

Ronald "Ronnie Mac" McMullen Jr., 32, Guitar. the young, good-looking member of the group. Also toured with Bo Diddley, and most recently helped his former band, Sweet Brenda and Sour Mash, to a spot in the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge. He replaces Ike Lamb, 42, guitar, longtime Oklahoma session player, leader of his own unit, Ike Lamb and the Law for 9 years, and most recently with Michael Newberry in the Deviants.

All these seasoned touring pros sing and they are all monsters on their axes. I am the least of the musicians in my group. I can count on any of them to drive safely, though as a professional trucker I figure I drive about half the miles, or a little more. I am the owner-operator of the transportation, underscoring my involvement as an entrepreneur in the business, not just a musician in a band.

BS: You play dobro, guitar, and harp. Do you have a personal favorite?

WS: As I was just telling a friend, I actually played drums—bongos—before I ever picked up a harp, which I did at the age of 10. I have played various percussion professionally off and on over the years, particularly congas and tambourine. I am the incidental percussionist in *The Workers*. I also have played African thumb piano for 33 years. Listen to "Bridgebuilder" on *Up Close and Personal*, my second release.

However, harp is my number one axe, I would say, though I'm beginning to become a little bit comfortable with my guitar playing. By the way, I only play slide guitar, whether I'm playing a dobro, a lap steel, or a regular acoustic or electric guitar. I also play what's called "the Pinewood", an electric 4-string diddly-bo that is like a double-A-Fuel dragster of a slide instrument. It has the loudest, howlingest single-coil pickup I have ever owned, blows Strats and Tellys away. But I don't think I have an actual favorite. I am a whole package. I am a singer before all my instrumental axes.

BS: How did you hook up with producer Chris Wick? He plays bass on one of your discs, right? Obviously, you work really well together.

WS: We met in Norman, Oklahoma, where I have recorded all of my 21st century CDs (5 now, including the soon-to-be-released *Wheel Man* and my first, self-released CD from 2001, titled *Fried Okra Jones*), soon after I had finished the Big Shoes to Fill sessions, at Bell Labs, with Trent Bell, former guitarist for the Chainsaw Kittens and longtime technician for the Flaming Lips. Chris, a Norman real estate appraiser and entrepreneur, longtime gigging musician, and a judge for many years at the IBC, was the music-biz insider who first decided to invest time and money in me. Chris is #2 on the bass depth chart, and did record with me on *Up Close and Personal*, on Fred McDowell's "Frisco Line".

BS: Your new CD, *Wheel Man*, is your second for the Canadian label, NorthernBlues. (By the way, I can't take it out of my CD player) This label seems to be luring many hot new artists, do you agree?

WS: Fred Litwin, owner of NorthernBlues, is certainly a discriminating buyer and supporter of musical talent! And along with Chris Hardwick, Michael McClune and Rick Booth and the other agents at Intrepid Artists, of Charlotte, NC, he has been a wheel in the musical-business combine that has me, a half-toothless former wastehauler and grunt laborer, playing internationally. I look for our relationship to be long and productive!

BS: Your lyrics and passion are so raw and so intensely personal. Do you play to the audience or your inner self when performing?

WS: Both. I am a much more professional musician now than I was when I started this long, sustained push to make a living at my art, with the original *Fried Okra Jones* (two Oklahoma State University philosophy professors into the blues, Doren Recker and Mike Rhodes, plus myself), and the alternative rock (New-Age Red-Dirt", we used to label ourselves, lol) group, Another Roadside Attraction (led by Stillwater, Oklahoma rocker Nathan Clewell, who also was the engineer on my song on *Watermelon Slim and The Workers*, "Folding Money Blues", at his Big Hombre Studios), back in 1998. But remember, I've been doing this front-man gig for 30-some years now, so although I am constantly reading audiences and tweaking my act, I also have had decades of inner reflection, and, as they say, virtue is its own reward and so is the music.

BS: When I was growing up, my father lost his ass raising watermelons and we struggled financially as a result. He won't eat melons to this day. Were your melon endeavors more successful?

WS: I didn't lose money on watermelons. But I lost money on almost everything else, with one leafy crop excepted, heh heh. I'll eat one more bite of watermelon than anyone who wants to put their \$100 bill on the table.

BS: Have you ever toured Europe? Any future tour plans there?

WS: We were in Lille, France a month ago for one gig—an 8,500 mile week-end commute. I did the gig entirely in French, my second language. Very cool! We will be going to England, and, in August, to Notodden, Norway, later this year. We are working on other European opportunities, including in Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia). We spend a lot of time in Canada, of course; last week we played in Saskatoon and Regina, Saskatchewan, and in Winnipeg, Manitoba, for 3 Canadian full houses of great fans! We will play in at least 5 provinces this year.

BS: My students would say, "You are keeping it real." You have a fresh, unique take on the blues...not the same old wannabe blues guitar slinger. Do you think this is why fans are attracted to your music—that you aren't trying to sound like somebody else?

WS: (shrugs shoulders) I am who I am. I have lived what I sing about, right down to being mugged, robbed and left for dead in an alley in the blues epicenter of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

BS: Your new CD just released in April has special guests Magic Slim and David Maxwell. What was it like working with them?

WS: I first met and played with David Maxwell back in 1987 or 88, when I was co-leading the Old Dogs, my 1980s group in Boston, with the legendary "Washtub" Robbie Phillips. It was then also that I played with "Sax Gordon" Beadle, hornman extraordinaire for Matt "Guitar" Murphy, Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson (I think he also worked with the late Luther "Snake" Johnson) and others over a long career, and Bruce Bears, piano player for Tony Lynn Washington. They are such consummate professionals that, whether I'm in the studio, doing my frontman gig, or standing off to the side and playing my part as a wind sideman, I never have to worry that I'm not going to understand something and screw up.

I also have to mention the "other" piano player who appears both on Big Shoes to Fill and on *Wheel Man*, Dennis Borycki. I knew the quality of his work from having sung my first French release, a single titled, "tu Ne Sais Pas Comme Je t'Aime," by Oklahoma songwriter Jan Cole, to his accompaniment.

And Magic Slim. Oh yeah. We first met Slim at Knuckleheads' in Kansas City, one of our favorite venues of all. The big biker-friendly club has both indoor and outdoor stages and its very own railroad car to boot. We were both booked at Knucks' annual one-day blues festival in 2005, and Slim and I hit it off immediately and got talking about mojo hands. He was the headliner and he killed the crowd, slayed 'em.

Well, one day in the dead of winter we were playing the Zoo Bar in Lincoln, Nebraska, when I see this giant man sitting at the far end of the club. It was Slim. He came up and played with us for the first time then. Later, in the spring, he came in and did it again! He tore those crowds up. Chris and I got talking about guest appearances for *Wheel Man*, and of course I wanted to have the very best people I had at some time worked with but never recorded with. (I had ALWAYS wanted to record with Dave Maxwell, of course!)

I won't say another thing. Hear the title cut, where we both sing and trade guitar licks. Well, one more thing: Magic Slim and I will one day make a record that will be titled *Two Slims Are Better Than One*.

BS: Slim, you have another winner in the release of *Wheel Man*. I can't wait to meet you at the Tampa Bay Blues Fest and wish you the best at the Blues Foundation Music Awards on May 10th in Memphis.

WS: God has blessed me. If I die (blink) as soon as I send this online interview to you, I am like John Elway: I'm going out on top!

Monte Adkison

Monte teaches high school in Ocala, FL. E-mail her at bluzstalker@cfl.rr.com and then go to her new website at www.bluesstalker.com. It's full of pictures of those who've been stalked!!

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