

Truckers' advocate

Watermelon Slim

Blues musician brings over-the-road experience to his songs

By Rachel Telehany



Blues performer Watermelon Slim (center front) quit driving a truck in 2004 to pursue music full time with his band, The Workers.

Aspiring musicians in the trucking industry are common, but the guys who actually make it are lucky and few.

Blues man Bill "Watermelon Slim" Homans, who most people just call "Slim," is both a new and old voice on the blues scene. His new album, *Watermelon Slim and the Workers*, is his third album in four years, following the success of the 2003 release *Up Close and Personal*. At 56 years old, Slim is experiencing late success in his

musical career with critically acclaimed albums, a rockin' band, The Workers, and a past full of stories from Vietnam, truck driving, and the marriage of a slide guitar and a gravelly voice.

"I'm thankful to have my musical career, as late in life as it is," Slim says.

Born in North Carolina, Slim remembers the family maid singing old John Lee Hooker songs, especially "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer." But it was

only many years later when he realized that the music he had grown up with was actually blues, a passion that, along with truck driving, fueled his desire to make his music known to the world.

In 1969, Slim began truck-driving training for the military, but he didn't receive his commercial license until 1980. In an Army hospital in Vietnam, Slim taught himself how to play the left-handed slide guitar. He released his first album in 1973, an underground album to protest the Vietnam War, but then turned to truck driving for a living.

He hauled produce until 1984, and a short stint in watermelon farming gave Slim the name that granted him entry into the club of nicknamed bluegrass and blues pickers. He attended the University of Oregon for a degree in journalism and history, but in 1987 he was back on the road, working for a moving company in Boston after his music career failed in Europe. Then he got married to a woman he calls "the best spoons player in Massachusetts," and in 1992 while he was driving for Werner, his daughter was born.

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Slim earned a master's degree at Oklahoma State University in 2000 and continued to work on his music with top names in blues like Chicago harp player "Earring George" Mayweather, Bonnie Raitt and John Lee Hooker.

A heart attack in 2002 only slowed Slim down for a little while.

After recovering, he got back to driving a truck and making music. He released the album *Big Shoes to Fill* and traveled all over the country, performing and gaining fans.

In 2004 Slim gave up trucking to focus on his music, and in 2005 he won the W.C. Handy Award for Best New Artist Debut, and his album *Up Close and Personal* was named the No. 1 Southern Blues CD of the Year. Decades of hard work have paid off, and with the release of his new album, Slim is looking forward to future success.

So far, his favorite stop on tour has been England in 2004. After years of college between trucking, he can enjoy putting his knowledge to good use as a tourist.

"I'm a big Shakespeare buff, and I got to reach out and touch his bed [while I was in England]," Slim says. "My book of Shakespeare is broke down in

the bindings."

Despite Slim's highbrow taste in literature, the twang of his guitar and lyrics like, "If you got nine speeds forward, you better grab for number 10/ Cause I'm hammer down and high-ballin', you might never see my face again," in his song "Mack Truck," remind fans of his trucking roots.

"This is the music that they can identify with," Slim says.

Slim lives in Oklahoma now, but for New Year's Eve 2006, a company of chicken haulers asked him to drive a "tricked out Peterbilt" around the block as a promotion for a gig at Knucklehead's in Kansas City.

"It was so cool, man," he says.

"I loved it."

He then went in and joined the band for a late-night jam.

As his musical career heats up, Slim is quick to remind fans that the highway is one of the greatest influences of his music.

"Working has taught me more about life than anything else," he says. "But I've always thought of trucking as a public service. I retain a great deal of pride about it."

"I always keep my CDL current."

Check out Watermelon Slim's website and blog about his travels on the road at www.watermelonslim.com.