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# SUN ENTERTAINMENT Weekend

Fri, August 24, 2007



- Home
- News
- Entertainment
  - 2007 Fringe
  - Showbiz
  - Movie News
  - Movie Reviews
  - Television
  - Music
  - Video Games
  - Other Entertainment
  - Out There
- Sports
- Photo Galleries
- Opinion/Comment
- Columnists
- Lifestyle
- Business
- Contests & More

By **JEREMY LOOME, SUN MEDIA**



By tonight, the dance pit in front of the stage at Hawrelak Park will be a writhing, sweaty mass of bodies, acknowledging the healing power of the blues.

That's a big ol' cliché, but like many clichés, it stems from truth: this music was designed to take away your blues, not add to them. Sure, some of it is mournful - downright woeful even. But mostly, it's simple, good-time music.

At the centre of this year's pilgrimage to Edmonton's Labatt Blues Festival, an annual church service for the blues anointed that runs tonight through Sunday, will be one Bill Homans, a.k.a. Watermelon Slim. He's a guy with no top teeth who drove a truck for 30 years before becoming a blues star.

Like the blues, there's more to him, of course. He has two university degrees and is an expert in Elizabethan history; he's been a small-time crook and a big-time protester; he's been a teacher in an industry that didn't want him; and he's learned a few lessons from the one that did.

He rails against the anti-intellectual nature of productivity-driven North America, while at the same time accepts that sometimes the simple things are what bring him peace, whether playing Smokestack Lightning on a lap-steel or heading back to rural Oklahoma to decompress from the road.

The blues are Bill Homans' solution to life's challenges: he treats them with respect, right down to the tradition that the mojo hand - the shamanic charm for good

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- Coupon Book
- Envirovision
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- Active Edmonton
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- Fore Golf
- Building Dreams
- Colleges & Uni's
- Gateway North
- 2007 Motorshow
- Pets On Parade
- Travel Tips
- Police Beat
- Look & Feel
- Autonet Section

fortune - should be carried at all times.

"Well, I don't work real well at all in offices. I'm not a quiet fellow. I'm kind of loud, and physical and sweaty, some people would even say smelly. It has been often noted and I'm barely tolerated in offices," Homans says.

"I tried being a reporter and I was barely tolerated. I tried reinventing myself as a school teacher and, along with my degrees, I've got high school teaching endorsement in six different subjects. I've done graduate work in psychology.

"But I don't have any top teeth and was told that I didn't fit in to the educational industry. One school superintendent was candid enough to tell me my lack of teeth was 'an effective bar to your professional employment.' They want you to look and act middle class, you see, but I don't look middle class. I look like an old meth addict."

No teeth maybe, but plenty of bite. All the songs from his first four CDs deal with the trials and tribulations of being a poor truck driver, along with tales of the human condition: weak women, foolhardy men, the ties that bind us and a few that sometimes get us arrested.

They're so good that last year, Slim's first album on Canadian label Northern Blues was nominated for a record six Blues Music Awards.

The blues are both simple and complex, like Homans. Easy to play, tough to master. Easy to get into, tough to put down. This weekend's lineup features everything from the fretboard wizardry of guitarist Elvin Bishop, to the mournful Delta style of the brilliant John Long, to a roots reinvention courtesy of Los Lobos.

Most of their music will be rooted in three chords, known as the one, the four and the five no matter what key. But those three chords will still manage to express the common joys and sufferings of thousands.

"I play everyman kind of music, because I don't play just blues, I also play the real country-and-western," says Homans. "It's chicken and egg. Am I drawn to the music or am I drawn to the people, because I am one of the people?"

Either way, we know where he'll be this weekend. Drawn to the music or drawn by the people, Hawrelak Park is a good spot for old souls.

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