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Watermelon Slim's lived the real blues

By Graham Rockingham
The Hamilton Spectator
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Who: Watermelon Slim and The Workers, with Michael Pickett

When: Sunday, 8 p.m.

Where: Pepper Jack Cafe, 38 King William St.

Cost: \$10 advance, \$12 at the door

Watermelon Slim isn't just another pretty face. As a matter of fact, there is absolutely nothing pretty about it.



Watermelon Slim, front, is backed by Michael Newberry, left, Ike Lamb and Cliff Belcher.

Slim's one of these guys you could honestly say carries the road map of his life atop his shoulders. Yeah, he's got more scars than face.

There's the scars from that fight outside of a Mississippi juke joint that shattered his jaw. He says he drove all the way home to Oklahoma the next day with a piece of jawbone sticking in his tongue.

There's also the bad teeth he got from years driving trucks. If the truck stop food don't rot your molars down to the gums, he explains, the engine vibration will.

"Truck drivers are known to be less than average toothwise," Slim, a.k.a. Bill Homans, says. "It's one of the jobs I can hold because they don't care what you look like as long as you get the objects from point A to point B."

Right now, Slim is holding down a job as slide guitarist, singer and frontman for a veteran band of Oklahoma blues hounds called The Workers (Mike Newberry, drums; Ike Lamb, guitar, Cliff Belcher, bass).

Slim's lived the real blues. You can feel it howl through his harmonica, hear it rip from his slide guitar. At the age of 57, he still keeps his fingers dipped in a bag of Bugle tobacco. He enjoys his whisky -- cognac, if he can get it. Slim suffered a heart attack a little more than three years ago, but that only made him want to live his life even harder.

All this is stereotypical blues stuff. But there's nothing typical about Slim. He's got a couple of university degrees, scored near genius level on his military IQ test, and worked as a journalist and an environmental activist. He reveres Shakespeare as much as he does Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, but John Lee Hooker tops them all.

Slim hates George W. Bush as much as he admires Jimmy Carter. And he throws around terms such as "phenomenological psychology" as he talks about the evolutionary existentialist philosophy of English writer Colin Wilson.

"Read Wilson's classic text, *The Outsider*, and you'll figure out what's going on about me," he says. "I'm an extremely square peg in a very round-holed society."

Born in Boston and raised in North Carolina, he started playing guitar in 1970 at a U.S. Army hospital in Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam, where he bought a cheap model for \$5 and used his Zippo lighter as a slide piece. Slim was recovering at the time from a disease the army never managed to diagnose.

He had volunteered for Vietnam in 1969. It was a dumb thing to do, he now admits, but military service was a tradition in his family. The war politicized him, as it did much of his generation.

Slim got out the army, found a job as a labourer and started getting involved in underground politics. He kept playing guitar and even recorded an antiwar album. His bio says he was the only Vietnam vet to record an album during the war, and it's probably right. He wasn't a big hit, but Country Joe McDonald performed some of his songs.

Slim wasn't talented enough at that point to make a full go of it in the music business. At the age of 32, he returned to school, studying history and journalism at the University of Oregon and serving as captain of the varsity bowling team (he can still bowl 190). He tried working at newspapers and thought about teaching history, but none of that fit.

"I was told specifically that I didn't have a place in the education industry," he says. "You have to be able to smile. Teaching and journalism and these kind of jobs are chiefly public relations' jobs. You have to be able to smile at people convincingly. And I don't have a smile anymore. I have a smile, but it's not a smile that I can take on TV."

Meanwhile, he kept playing guitar, getting better all the time, learning harp from his fishing buddy, Earring George Mayweather, and guitar from his roommate, Henry Vestine of Canned Heat. Somewhere along the line, he ended up with a wife and family. He separated from his wife four years ago while working his final job as a trucker, hauling industrial waste in Stillwater, Okla. It was about then that Slim decided to make the blues his full-time occupation. The heart attack only served to make him more focused.

He cut an album, *Up Close And Personal*, that was nominated for a prestigious W.C. Handy Award, and he's been touring ever since. He's got a new one, *Watermelon Slim and The Workers*, available in Canada on the Northernblues Music label.

The last time Slim played in Hamilton, last year at the old Staircase, there were people in the audience who actually said he changed their lives. It could have been the stories. He likes telling them. But the performance had something to do with it too. His laptop slide sounds a lot prettier than he looks.

"I play with a greater sense of let's-get-it-down-now, a greater sense of urgency," he says. "I'm in very good health at this point. I feel just fine, but I do know that I'm liable not to live a full actuarial lifetime, with my pre-existing conditions."

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