

Today's Grapes of Wrath, (08/27/08)

The journey of *Watermelon Slim*, aka *Bill Homans*, is the stuff of movies. He learned his unique, upside-down, left-handed slide style in a Vietnam hospital bed on a \$5 balsawood model using a triangle pick cut from a rusty coffee can top and his Army-issued Zippo lighter as the slide. As a modern Tom Joad, he's worked as a truck driver, forklift operator, sawmiller (where he lost part of his finger), firewood salesman, collection agent, and has even officiated funerals. He ended up farming watermelons in Oklahoma - hence his stage name and current home base. Somewhere in those decades Slim also completed two undergrad degrees, in history and journalism.

Though he never made the finals of the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge, he was signed on the strength of his jarring, solo act.

From there, Watermelon Slim and his band, *The Workers*, have become the talk of the Blues World. In 2007, Watermelon Slim garnered /six/ Blues Music Award (BMA) nominations for Artist, Entertainer, Album, Band, Song, and Traditional Album of the Year. In 2008, Slim and the band were nominated for /another/ six Blues Music Awards for the same categories.

Still looking to win his first BMA, Watermelon Slim finally walked away with the two biggest prizes of the 2008 BMA's, Band of the Year and Contemporary Blues Album of the Year for his 2007 release, /The Wheel Man/. Backed by his crack band, drummer *Michael Newbury*, bassist *Cliff Belcher*, and guitarist *Ronnie McMullen*, Slim delivers what might be termed "Blues of the new millennium." They consistently deliver a rockin' Blues featuring Slim's slippery slide and veteran harmonica connected to themes essential in today's /Grapes of Wrath/ America. Past tunes like "Foldin' Money Blues," "Black Water," and "Hard Times" speak to the modern situation in the same way *Willie Dixon*'s tunes captured Chicago or *Charlie Patton*'s songs illuminated the Delta. At the same time, Slim's gravelly vocals are as timeless as the places this music was born.

The CD is a collection of styles, genres, and verses. There's the fine slide duet between Slim and *Lee Roy Parnell* on "Bubba's Blues." There's some clever down-home philosophy on the first song, "Blues For Howard," with *David Maxwell* added on piano. There's Slim blowin' a funky, Chicago Blues on *Detroit Junior*'s "Call My Job," followed by "You're The One I Need," wherein Slim acknowledges his harp debt to Chicago's *Charlie Musselwhite* and *Paul Butterfield*. On "Archetypal Blues #2," Slim's personal history rap captures floating verses from *Johnson*'s "Preachin' Blues," like "/the Blues is an achin' heart disease/" and honors his inspirations like *Wolf*, *John Lee*, and *Mississippi Fred*.

Three tunes are recorded field holler style. On "This Traveling Life," Slim's whoopin' and wailin' and his acoustic harp answering strongly alludes to the ending of the /O' Brother/ movie. The same treatment is given to *Laura Nyro*'s "And When I Die" and "I've Got A Toothache," where Slim's slide smothers the pain of the extraction. Remember the Blues is about reliving the pains.

The deepest, most timely Blues is "The Bloody Burmese Blues," about watching a foreign war from his hotel and wonderin' whether our press and government will take the time to report the massacre. This is where guitarist McMullen shines as he competently turns the emotion of the moment into weeping notes. The CD closes immersed in the Blues with five minutes of Mississippi Fred's "Everybody's Down On Me." Slim and his Dobro lament its forceful tale as if he was standin' solo in Como, Mississippi.

Because he's recording with the same band he tours with, Watermelon Slim and his Workers intuitively know how to find the continually paint fresh musical pictures. Get ready for another slew of BMA nominations to follow in 2009.