

BluesWax
Sittin' In With Watermelon Slim

Published June 2006
By Jack "Sulli" Sullivan

When you see **Bill "Watermelon Slim" Homans** for the first time, you just know there's truth to the saying "Still waters run deep." The creases in his face speak of a life that has been lived and stories that must be told. His deep, resonating voice speaks for us all. He has the look of a consummate workingman from post-World War Two. He's a Vietnam Veteran who served his country with honor only to return and give a lifetime of service to Vietnam Veterans Against the War. As an 18-wheel trucker, he hauled toxic waste to provide for his family while earning his masters degree in history. Slim always loved music, however, and is an accomplished singer, songwriter, harmonica player, guitar player, and percussionist who's paid his dues. Just look into those eyes: You'll see his soul. They're the eyes of a Mensa member who has quietly filled life's union book of dues to get to his true vocation: playin' the Blues.

Jack Sullivan for *BluesWax*: So, Slim, where do you hail from, and where do you live now?

Watermelon Slim: I'm living in Oklahoma City now, and have for the better part of 26 years; I own property here and have lived all over the country, on both coasts and many places in between. I grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, and first heard the Blues [there]. I didn't know it was the Blues then, but I remember 10 years later thinking, "Hey, that was **John Lee Hooker** playing."

BW: That's a good person to first hear the Blues from. I know you play Dobro, harmonica, slide guitar, and sing. Which came first?

WS: I am a singer-songwriter and play the harp, which was actually not my first instrument. My first instrument was actually a pair of bongos and a cheap-assed conga drum. I have played percussion off and on for all this time. In my own act I am the professional tambourinist.

BW: So you were a founding member of the Beat generation?

WS: Oh, absolutely. I had bongos there in the prime beatnik period there in 1957 or '58. I was 8 or 9 years old. Then I started playing guitar when I was in Vietnam. So basically I guess you could say I was a singer, songwriter, harp player, guitarist - and remember, I also play the African thumb piano and also am a professional incidental percussionist.

BW: What brand of harmonica do you play these days?

Audio, Video, Live Dates, Tour Blog & more at www.watermelonslim.com

WS: Hohners. I don't use anything but Hohners. I gave Lee Oskars about a 7- or 8-year run, but they were unsatisfactory over the long run. I use Hohners, and when they go bad I give them to kids as souvenirs.

BW: Your first album, titled *Merry Airbrakes*, was released more than 30 years ago.

WS: Yeah, in 1973 I released an album called *Merry Airbrakes*, and then in 2001 I self-released an album, which was the first time I got international coverage. Right away Ivan Ivanovich picked it up in Croatia. I'm big time in Croatia; I wanna get back over there.

BW: What was the reason for the long hiatus?

WS: I tried it once and I tried it with some of my own money. I had other agendas and I was learning my craft.

BW: Can you tell us what inspired you to come back to music?

WS: Well I never really been away, I've tried on a couple of occasions to actually establish myself as a musician, most determinedly in 1987 when I first went to Europe to play. It didn't work. I mean...I fell on my face. I didn't have the team I have right now. So I came back not only not being able to stay there, but I had gotten the crap kicked out of me. I came back with a couple of broken ribs and a knot on my head the size of a silver dollar.

BW: Ouch!

WS: So I tried on several occasions playing around Boston for several years while I was busy driving a truck. I went back down to Oklahoma where I woodshedded for several more years way back in the backwoods, taking care of my family. Then we got back up to Stillwater, Oklahoma, where OSU [Oklahoma State University] is, and I went to Oklahoma State. And while I was going there I was playing around with people and meeting folks and I gradually ended up playing with better and better musicians. Today I'm playing with a crack veteran pro outfit and they give me everything I need. They are really talented.

BW: Having met you and the band at Bayfront last summer, they seem like a great bunch of guys. Can you tell us a little about them?

WS: The group is the **Workers**, and we've all been workers - mostly blue-collar workers. They all at various times have been blue-collar guys, construction and whatnot. **Mike** [Newberry, drums] has been an aircraft mechanic, **Cliff** [Belcher, bass] has done various repair things, I'm a trucker, and **Ike** [Lamb, guitar and bass] has been in construction and everything else. At the same time they've spent the last 20-odd years dedicating themselves primarily to being musicians. I would have to say they were good enough to do it the first time. I think they all bloomed a little bit earlier than me. Regardless of the

dues they may have paid, they have been professional musicians and stuck to it where I didn't.

BW: In doing research for this interview it seemed to me that music was almost an unfulfilled vocation for you. That said, your nomination for Best New Artist Debut by the Blues Foundation must have seemed like finally coming full circle. How exciting was that?

WS: Well, it was pretty exciting, but I missed out on the very best opportunity. I knew at the time when I saw the list of nominees who was going to win. I should have gotten every dollar I could beg, borrow, steal, or acquire in any other way, and put it down on the eventual winner. As it was I only made \$35 betting on **John Lee Hooker Jr.** It was a better bet than Oak State playing OU with Oak State missing their two tight ends!

BW: It seems you've led a life full of passions, earning a masters degree in history, being a member of Mensa, a Vietnam Veteran, a lifelong activist, a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and a trucker of toxic waste. Does paying all those dues impact your music?

WS: Well, yeah, of course it does! Everything you talked about there is reality. I live in a reality in which I have my own perspective, but I live very seriously in reality. That's why the songs I write are the way they are and have the personality they do. I have always tried to be something like a journalist in the Blues, taking what is going on right now and turning it into commentary within my musical genre, [with] a little of my added perspective.

BW: You do have some wonderful songs, and they are great stories.

WS: I'm gonna have some more this next album. I can tell you that.

BW: I'm sure you will. Tell us about your newest release on NorthernBlues, titled *Watermelon Slim And The Workers*.

WS: It appears 99 percent - nah, it's a hundred percent sure; the only objection would be mine, but it's a hundred percent sure - we're gonna be produced by **Jim Dickinson** in the next one. [Readers, you read it in *BluesWax* first!]

BW: That's terrific!

WS: Especially if this one doesn't fail, and I have been told by my ecstatic musical team that the album has debuted at #13 on the *Billboard* Blues charts. So there's no telling what might happen. This one might actually sell. It has been selling 150 a week before the *Billboard* rating so it might even sell 500 a week.

BW: Well, congratulations on the well-deserved success. Your touring schedule is busy, and from what I read people are responding well to your shows.

Audio, Video, Live Dates, Tour Blog & more at www.watermelonslim.com

WS: We've had nothing but great audiences from beginning to end. We just did three weeks from Kentucky to Ohio, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, New Brunswick, and South Ontario. We trucked over 5,300 miles on this swing, and we played for 14 or 15 excellent audiences.

BW: Johnny Cash wrote a song just like that tour at one time.

WS: Traveling is a part of what the gig is. We would like to be traveling a little less between gigs, but we're getting better gigs and we're making progress on it.

BW: How is the road treating you guys?

WS: Well, you know, I have to get a bigger vehicle, since Freightliner Corporation hasn't bought into the idea of me getting one of their ton-and-a-half UPS-type trucks with their logo splashed all over it traveling 70,000 miles as a rolling PR truck as I do my gigs.

BW: Funny.

WS: Well, that was what I was hoping for, now it looks like I just gonna have to buy a Freightliner anyway.

BW: Nice try, anyway.

WS: Well, it's their loss, not mine. Well, mine, too, since I'm gonna have to spend more money.

BW: Who were some of your early influences in music?

WS: Well, Hooker of course. The **Wolf**, and the cut **Stevie Wonder** did called "Fingertips." You know, I played along with that on the harmonica a lot.

BW: Well that's a first for me. From a harmonica player, usually it's Little Walter first.

WS: I never heard of Little Walter until college times. I didn't know who that was. I heard **Sonny Boy** many years earlier than that. I think I had his gutbucket down with the albums earlier than any other Blues person. However I was listening to **Ray Charles** in my house, and my mother had a couple of **Bo Diddley** albums, and I was also listening to 1950s-style R&B [like] **Little Johnny Taylor**.

BW: I know you just played with David Maxwell recently. How was that?

WS: Well, the band did a whole set with him down in Maynard, Massachusetts, and we loved playing with Dave because he's absolutely as good as anybody you'll ever play with. The man is a consummate professional, and the guys really liked playing with him.

BW: Last question Slim. Is there anyone you've had the pleasure of playing with recently that you'd always wanted to play with?

WS: Well, "wanted to play with" always eventually blends into "hey, you think I'm gonna die before I get to play with?" It did with Hooker; I played with him in 1970 and then didn't get a chance to play with him and he was gone and passed. Never played with the Wolf or **Mud**, and I have not yet played with **Pinetop**, but I have sat in with **Margolin** and **Willie Big Eyes**. Now, recently, I can answer that real easy. Myself and the band was playing a little more than a month ago in Lincoln, Nebraska, at the Zoo Bar. Well, **Magic Slim** was there and he came up and sat in with us after our first set, and that was absolutely thrilling being able to be...I mean, I never get to be anybody's sideman. My whole career is characterized by never being anybody's sideman.

BW: And a fan with the best seat, too.

WS: Oh, yeah, I'm up there laying against this wall playing harmonica, and he's out front just tearing this crowd up! That was the most exciting thing that has happened recently.

BW: Damn. I missed it!

WS: Other people that have excited me recently: **Jason Ricci** on the harp. As far as I'm concerned, he's gotten to be one of the best harp players in the United States. **Kim Wilson** still is [the best] here in the States.

BW: Thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk to our readers. Anything you want to add for the fans out there?

WS: Just that I feel blessed. That's the only word for it. The fans out there have seen me go to my knee, and I always say, "To God the Victory," but all the fun to us. Let them all know we'll keep playing the Blues and we'll keep it fierce and keep it real. We will always play real instruments for real people.

Jack "Sulli" Sullivan is a contributing editor at BluesWax. You may contact Sulli at blueswax@visnat.com.