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## Magic Slim & Popa Chubby

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and  
Corrupting  
the Blues?



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**"I hope he don't make me sound like no punk band."**

# Magic Slim

## The Last Real Chicago Blues Band

by Tom Hyslop

**T**he Master Blaster of the Blues. The Black Tornado. The Black Cloud. When star time comes and drummer Al Kirk calls these names, it means one thing: Magic Slim, the pride of Lincoln, Neb., formerly from the South Side of Chicago, is about to lay down a set of blues as real as it gets.

Magic Slim & the Teardrops personify, in the words of producer and writer Dick Shurman, "the spirit of a sweaty hole-in-the-wall Chicago blues club."

Onstage, Slim's blues instincts are infallible. He selects songs from his encyclopedic repertoire, peppers his banter with trademark one-liners ("I'm madder than a one-eyed Russian and crazy as a constipated Gypsy"), and jokes with the band to keep a party atmosphere going. Each Teardrops performance is underpinned by a massive groove — irresistibly punishing shuffles, slow numbers drawn from deep in the heart of the blues. Slim's singing is commanding yet nuanced; his huge, earthy, wet voice is one of the best in the genre.

His guitar work is keening and inventive: His devastating vibrato comes strictly from his hand — none of his Jazz-masters has its whammy bar intact — and he has a virtuoso's ability to bend time to his will, taking risks that invariably pay off. (If you've ever heard Slim get caught at the change, I'd like to know.) His gutsy phrasing and intuitive knowledge of what seems to be every lowdown blues phrase in existence — not to mention the bent and smeared English he puts on virtually every note — make his playing inimitable.

On a sunny May morning, Slim is spending a rare off-day at a North Chicago motel before heading out at midnight for an engagement in Tuscaloosa, Ala. The week before, he made a triumphant return to Brazil, where the Teardrops are major stars. ("Bout six women to every man, and so pretty you can't help but say *da-a-mn!* And they wearin' them there hip-hugger pants.") Earlier that week, Slim headlined the Feast of the Mau-Mau in New Orleans for Dr. Ike's Mystic Knights,



reuniting with his most famous Teardrops past — brother Nick Holt, Earl Howell, and John Primer. Now, he's taking the time to offer some thoughts on his life in the blues.

Morris Holt (no one in the business calls Slim by his given name) was born Aug. 7, 1937, in Torrance, Miss. He grew up working during the week and hearing bluegrass and country on the radio after dark. On weekends, Slim sang in church, where he became interested in playing music. He was forced to give up his first instrument, piano, when he lost the little finger of his right hand to a cotton gin. Slim says, "Music had been so good to me, I had to find a way to keep playin'. So I picked up on the guitar," at first playing an instrument he made from a broom.

He unhesitatingly cites his artistic touchstones: "B.B. King, 'Sweet Sixteen' — him and John Lee Hooker, 'Boogie Chillen.' I heard them on *Randy's Record Shop*, come on WLAC every Saturday night out of Nashville. I never will

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**Slim** forget it. Hey, man, I started [*motions playing guitar and hums Hooker's boogie pattern*], then you know I just weaned away little by little till I quit tryin' to play the country and western and bluegrass. I put all my effort in the blues. So here I am!"

Magic Sam was a childhood friend. "He gave me my name. I was never part of Magic Sam's band [in Chicago], but I used to sit in with him all the time on bass. Nobody else would even let me play with them. They told me to come back when I got better, said, 'You ain't good enough.' So I went back to Mississippi and went into what you call the woodshed. I worked at it; I worked hard. And when I come back five years later" — Slim pauses to savor the remembered satisfaction — "couldn't nobody tell me that no more. I guess I got good, and I guess I got even."

Slim put in his time at day jobs — as a dishwasher, at a laundry, working construction — as he climbed the musical status ladder, moving from the Flamingo and 1810 clubs to host the coveted weekly jam at Florence's. "I would sit in with Hound Dog Taylor there. He was starting to get noticed because of his records [on Alligator], and he quit when someone broke a chair over his head. He said, 'I don't need this shit.' He liked me, he told Florence to hire me, and she did. I played there Sundays, and other places just about every night."

His recording career, which began with a 1966 single on Ja-Wes, was sporadic at first, but since the mid-'70s, Slim has been among the most prolific Chicago bluesmen, with albums on Alligator, Evidence, Storyville, Rooster Blues, Wolf, and Blind Pig. A publicist tagged the Teardrops as "the last Chicago blues band," and essentially, it's Slim's title to lose: While other Chicago artists can lay legitimate stylistic claim to the title, most are stay-at-home types. Slim maintains a relentless road presence, bringing the opportunity to see real blues not only to audiences in Europe, Japan, and South America, but across the United States.

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## Chubby

That originality has paid off in Europe, where Chubby plays 70,000-seat venues and sells far more albums than most American blues acts sell domestically. "I'm different," he says, "and I think they pick up on that over there. I just go out and play, and I'm not on some rock-star trip."

Now, for the second time in his career, he's getting a chance at U.S. recognition outside the Big Apple. With the release of *The Good, the Bad, and the Chubby*, his new album on Blind Pig Records, the hefty guitarist finds himself shuttling back and forth between Europe and the States at a breakneck pace. "I'm flying out tomorrow to do a thing at the Swiss Exhibition," he says during a June interview, "then I come home for four days. I'm back over for the weekend, then I'm home for 10 days and then back in Europe again." Yet he also found time to serve, at Blind Pig's request, as the producer of the latest record by blues traditionalists Magic Slim & the Teardrops (see sidebar below).

On the side, Chubby plays NYC dates with the Black Coffee Blues Band, which features his wife of eight years, Galea, on bass, and Shemekia Copeland sideman Arthur Neilson on second guitar and vocals. Chubby and Galea met during a performance — "she came in to buy cigarettes in this little Brooklyn bar where I was playing, and she sat down and started talking about all this music I loved" — and are the parents of six-year-old twin daughters Tipitina and Theodora. "I love Galea more than anything in the world, and that means that sometimes she and I duke it out like Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield," he says. "And she's a better biter than Mike Tyson."

Chubby was born Ted Horowitz in the same section of the Bronx immortalized in the Robert De Niro film *A Bronx Tale*. He describes it today as "a real Italian neighborhood — guys with slicked-back hair singing on street corners, people playing stickball in the street, fire hydrants open. It had that

## Making Magic Slim's *Blue Magic*

Asked about producing Magic Slim & the Teardrops' just-released *Blue Magic*, Popa Chubby is both assured and humble. "I've worked on about 25 records," he said, "and this is by far the best blues record I've made. And it's for one reason: Slim. He's the real deal, plain and simple. This guy's been playing music longer than I've been alive."

Recording took place in early April at Blind Pig's warehouse. "I raked up my whole studio and drove it out to Chicago in my Ford van," Chubby explained. "Instead of bringing Slim into some studio where he wasn't

going to be comfortable, we set him up there and used boxes of CDs as baffles. There was a pool table in the warehouse, and people were playing during all the sessions. We got a couple bottles of whiskey and just let him do his thing."

Chubby's easygoing production style suited the bandleader just fine. "He ain't so particular," Slim said. "All he want us to do is 'In together, and out together,' and he'll take care of the rest. I ain't hired to do no song two or three times. I tell 'em all when I go in there: Get that first take. See, I put all I



have in it, one time. After that, hell, things get boring."

It was label co-head Jerry Del Giudice who first approached Chubby with the project. "He sent me a bunch

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## Slim

Surprisingly, this Chicago champion has been a resident of Lincoln, Neb., for the better part of a decade. "It ain't no problem to live here [Chicago]," says Slim. "I just got tired of it. After my kids was grown, me and my wife said, 'Hell, let's go.' They had stuck me up twice, you know, and I didn't want to get hurt



PHOTOGRAPHY © DOUG KINNEN

or go to jail, so we just left. Now I like it out there."

Slim has been remarkably successful at getting his Teardrops, through their many personnel changes, to play the sound he hears in his head. "I try to keep it simple. I don't want a whole lot of that fancy stuff, you know. I like to have it straightforward. I think we're doin' pretty good."

### Selected Discography

- Highway Is My Home* (1978)  
Evidence 26012
- Grand Slam* (1982)  
Rooster Blues 2618
- Black Tornado* (1998)  
Blind Pig 5046
- Snakebite* (2000)  
Blind Pig 5060
- Blue Magic* (2002)  
Blind Pig 5076

## Chubby

kind of romance." The elder Horowitzes owned a candy store on the corner of 181st Street and Arthur Avenue, and in it sat a juke box filled with the hits of the day, which included plenty of Motown and Stax/Volt rhythm and blues. Chubby would thrill when someone dropped in their change and played "Chain of Fools" or "Dock of the Bay" or the newest Supremes single.

"My dad was a big jazz fan, and when rock 'n' roll happened he got into that, too," Chubby says. "He took me to see Chuck Berry when I was 7, and it rocked my world. It was like, 'This is what I want to be when I grow up!'"

He tried drums but switched to guitar as a teen after hanging out with "older cats who turned me onto Freddie King, Albert King, B.B., and guys like that." It was the age of the British blues boom; Foghat's cover of "I Just Want To Make Love to You" was getting pop radio play, and Led Zeppelin was building a mini-industry out of reworked Willie Dixon material. "I started seeing Willie's name on all these

records," Chubby says. "So I asked around and my friends said, 'He's the guy who wrote "Little Red Rooster" and "You Shook Me," and not only that, but "Whole Lotta Love." I knew the Led Zeppelin version of "I Can't Quit You Baby," and somebody played me the Otis Rush version, and I realized Jimmy Page had taken Otis' solo note for note."

### Selected Discography

- Booty and the Beast* (1994)  
Okeh/Epic
- One Million Broken Guitars* (1998)  
Lightyear 54254
- Brooklyn Basement Blues* (1999)  
Shanachie 9021
- How'd a White Boy Get the Blues?* (2001)  
Blind Pig 5071
- The Good, the Bad, and the Chubby* (2002)  
Blind Pig 5075

## Slim

Drummer Al Kirk joined Slim “six years ago, goin’ on seven. Al’s a bad boy now! Oh, yeah. When I first hired him, he was peckin’ on them drums [*taps the table lightly*]. ‘Pop that snare,’ I told him. ‘You can throw them other parts away as long as you pop that snare!’” Slim’s brother Nick was a constant on bass until he decided to take some personal time a year and a half ago; Slim scouted his replacement, Danny O’Connor, at Lee’s Unleaded on the South Side. “He never played no blues before, just R&B. But he listens, and that’s the most important thing. One hell of a man.”

The Teardrops always include a second guitar player. Some have been little-known (“Pete Allen,” Slim says fondly, pointing at the cover of his *Grand Slam* LP), while others were Chicago veterans like Lefty Dizz and Jake Dawson. The superb John Primer apprenticed for a dozen years, earning Slim’s highest praise (simply, “He play blues”). His first and favorite was Alabama Junior Pettis: “I ain’t never found another one like Daddy Rabbit. I’ll tell you one that’s close, John McDonald. I like him and Michael [Dotson, the Teardrops’ current second guitarist].”

Slim runs a tight ship. “Everybody does their work. On the bandstand, you do like I asks you and we will get along. After you off the bandstand, do what you want to do. But it

## Chubby

It was a profound experience for the 18-year-old. “I began to see the common thread that runs through *all* music,” he says. “As time goes on those threads have gotten more visible to me, and the things that set different kinds of music apart have gotten more invisible to me.”



PHOTOGRAPHY © PATRICIA DEGOSTARZY courtesy of CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Stints in various lower East Side outfits led him to a spot as a touring musician with punk pioneer Richard Hell. It wasn’t that Chubby was particularly into punk rock; it was that he knew how to play guitar *and* bass, making him doubly desirable to Hell. He was also playing in subway stations, in tiny NYC clubs — anywhere he could get a gig. “I played with whoever

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of his records, and my first thought was, *nobody’s getting this guy*,” Chubby said. “They are not getting that they can’t take Slim, put him in a box, and polish him up.”

Chubby rolled tape for four days, keeping performances largely live, then took the cuts back to New York for “mixing live tracks with samples.” Slim, who hadn’t heard the album in its final form at the time of our interview, wasn’t thrilled with the idea that *Blue Magic* might land him on the rock-club circuit. “I don’t know exactly how they’re going to do it,” he said. “But I hope he don’t make me sound like no punk band. If he do, huh, I’m gonna be mighty mad at him!”

He needn’t have worried. Far from the kind of loop-based makeover artists like R.L. Burnside have been given in recent years, the sampling on *Blue Magic* is unobtrusive, even on a cover of Mighty Joe Young’s “Chicken Heads” to which Chubby grafted his own rhythm track. “We tried doing it with the band, but it wasn’t working,” Chubby said. “I wound up cutting a drum loop, then opened up the bass with a bunch of guitar stuff and dropped Slim over it.”

The sessions also yielded a version of “Crossroads” that Chubby said contained lyrics he’d never heard. “About half the verses were new to me. I said, ‘Slim, where’d you get this

stuff?’ Magic Sam had shown it to him, who was shown it by someone else. It was a real piece of history.” The song was left off *Blue Magic*’s final running sequence.

Chubby believes Slim is proof that commercial considerations haven’t overtaken the blues genre. “He’s one of the only people left who plays blues with absolutely no self-conscious attitude, without any thought of trying to cross over, without any of the crap that turns what *should* be good blues records into bad ones,” he said. “He just wants to play his guitar, drink some whiskey, have a good time, eat some chicken, and go to bed. He’s a simple man.”

► **Slim**

be showtime, I don't want to be outside lookin' for you. No. Sometime our road manager pay 'em before the show start, because hey, we trust 'em. They always there, they never fucked up, never. Nobody gets drunk on the show but me [laughs]! And I don't be drunk, but sometime I get a little tipsy on the last set. I get into it with the crowd. But I try to stay calm, and I try to be alert at all times.

"You got to play the blues from the heart," says Slim, and that is key to understanding his art. If he's feeling it, he is unstoppable. Shurman produced three of Slim's Blind Pig discs: "He's the classic artist I wouldn't try to rework. Just put him in a position to do what he does best so it feels good to him. He works quickly and is focused in the studio. More

**" I guess I  
got good,  
and  
I guess I  
got even. "**

than anyone else I've produced, he does a session like a live show. He likes to do a few songs in a row, like a set, then take a break and listen to playbacks. If the song isn't happening, it's best to stop it right away because he's not into a bunch of retakes. It's just a matter of whether the stars are lined up right that day; if not, it's better to just come back and do the song again tomorrow. He can do a magnificent album in a day, or just not quite nail things all day. When it's the right day, it's a wonderful thing."

Hardly a household name, Slim is not without his adherents — Eddie Vedder hand-picked the Teardrops to open a Pearl Jam show; a recording in circulation finds Gov't Mule/Allman Brothers guitarist Warren Haynes trading licks with Slim at B.L.U.E.S. Etc. Shurman reminds us that Slim is Blues King of Brazil as well as an admiral in the Nebraska Navy — though he has no blueprint for world domination. Slim believes in gaining respect the old-fashioned way: earning it, one crowd at a time. His longtime friend Lisa Becker says, "I don't think he has a mind for the business side of things. He just wants to play his guitar and that's it. What you see is what you get with Magic Slim. He is very content just playing small shows here and there. He doesn't have a desire for greatness — he feels like he has it all every day."

Whatever the future holds, Slim is characteristically good-humored. "One thing I can say before I leave this

►► **Chubby**

would pay me, and whoever *wouldn't* pay me," he says. "I just wanted to play."

Chubby found real recognition in 1992, when Fox gave him the coveted "blues jam" spot at Manny's. It was a grueling job, but Chubby was prepared to pay his dues. "It was a big break for me, but Buddy definitely got his pound of flesh," he says. "Luckily I had a lot of pounds of flesh to go around!"

Around the same time, he got an even bigger break — and substantial national exposure — after entering the Long Beach Blues Festival's 1992 talent competition. "Buddy insisted I do it," Chubby explains. "They held the local finals, and I won that, and they sent me out to California and had the nationals, and I got up and played a slow blues. I remember hitting a high note and the audience getting on their feet. I called Buddy up from my hotel room and he said, 'You lost, didn't you?' I said, 'I won.' He said, 'The whole thing?'"

The runner-up? A young acoustic blues strummer named Kevin Moore. Two years later, after getting a record deal, his label rechristened him Keb' Mo'.

Chubby signed in 1994 with Okeh Records, the classic blues label newly revived by A&R man Michael Caplan as a division of Epic. It was Moore's label, and it was also home to a slew of rootsy up-and-comers ranging from Anders Osborne to G. Love & Special Sauce. It was from Chubby's one major-label album, *Booty and the Beast*, that "Sweet Goddess of Love and Beer" became a hit. But he describes his experience with Okeh as bittersweet.

"I wasn't even interested in a major label, because I saw that as the devil. But they offered me Tom Dowd, who I was a huge fan of and who'd worked with everyone from Ornette Coleman to Muddy Waters, as producer. And we had a hit, and I don't regret it. But when it came time to do the next record, they wanted to fire Dowd, because alternative music had sprung up and they needed a young alternative producer."

So as Chubby's European following began to build, he chose to sign with a French label, Dixiefrog, rather than stay with his U.S. benefactors. Three subsequent albums sold more than 50,000 copies each, and by 2001, Blind Pig was ready to take him on. They issued his *How'd a White Boy Get the Blues?* in the States, and expect the new *The Good, the Bad, and the Chubby* to be even more successful. "I find my music getting more and more political," Chubby says of the new disc, "because I think it's my obligation as an artist to try to point some sort of direction."

He's referring, of course, to "Somebody Let the Devil Out," the aforementioned post-9/11 song. But there was also "It's a Sad Day in New York City When There Ain't No Room for the Blues," from *White Boy*, which, in addition to having one of the longest titles in blues history, contains an acerbic jab at Rudolph Giuliani concerning the former mayor's strict enforcement of noise regulations — a crack-down that changed the face of the city's music scene. Has his opinion of Giuliani changed in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001?

## Slim

world: I've done seen some of everything. I done been some of everywhere. Long as I've got my health — I ain't got no heart troubles, no blood pressure, ain't but one thing that I got. The doctor told me I had the cat-hep-it. And I asked him what do that mean? 'Can't help from lovin' them girls!' And that's the only thing that I got," he says, laughing broadly. "Ain't nothin' wrong with that!"

If audiences recognize Magic Slim for what he is — a blues act as authentic, hard-hitting, subtle, and profound as they come — he will have it made. His shows offer the kind of turn-back-the-clock musical experience that nothing short of Muddy Waters and an earlier generation of bluesmen coming back to tour again can equal. And Slim has faith in his audiences. "You know," he says, slipping into his Howlin' Wolf voice, "I want to tell everybody: 'Hey! It's the public that keep the blues alive. Y'all hang in there!'"



## Chubby

"No," he says, "and here's why. Giuliani just did what *anybody* would have done after 9/11. He had already been such a bastard and sold the city out so badly. He closed all the music clubs in New York. He ruined the arts. Manny's got shut out, and it's now a Pop-eye's Fried Chicken. It's all about real estate, just like every other war in the world."

If that sounds a bit lofty for a blues-rocker who, in his heart of hearts, is essentially a showman and an entertainer, Popa Chubby doesn't care. All he really wants to do is rescue civilization.

"Music will save humanity," he says. "That's really what I think. Historically, politics and religion are the reasons people kill each other, and music and art are the reasons people don't. The truth is, music is everything to me. It's why I get up in the morning and why I go to bed at night. And that's never going to change."

# Popa Goes to Manny's

[Editor's note: Popa Chubby composed the following story as part of a series of autobiographical writings he calls *Road Rot*. He hopes to one day publish the collection.]

The phone rings and the voice on the other end sounds at once annoyed. "Popa Chubby, please," he commands.

"Yeah?" I say.

"This is Buddy Fox from Manny's Car Wash. Listen: If you ever wanna gig here, you gotta stop playing Avalon on Wednesday nights. It's right around the corner from us and that's just our policy."

Well, I think to myself, six months of calling this guy for a gig and this is what it took to get his attention. Buddy's reputation has preceded him, so I know what's coming next.

"Listen, Buddy, you know how much I wanna gig at your club, but Avalon gives me a steady Wednesday gig and you know we're packing 'em in ..."

"Listen," he interrupts, "the only one who gets a steady gig here is [name withheld]. He does the jam on Sunday night."

"Well, look, Buddy, why don't you just fire him? He sucks anyway."

Silence. Then, "I'll get back to you."

That Sunday starts my 150-week run as the house band and host of

Manny's World-Famous Blues Jam. In my time there I would witness many things. The most famous was the "TURN DOWN" sign that hung ominously from the top of the stage. The dreaded banner was placed there by none other than Boxcar Joe Laing, resident sound engineer and ex-Newark police sergeant, whose mantra was "my house, my rules," so I had my work cut out for me. Nevertheless, I set forth to provide all interested parties with fine entertainment.

My band would take the stage for the first set while the vultures would begin to circle. "What about me? I was first on the list."

Grown men — dentists, construction workers, accountants — armed with a few Stevie Ray riffs and a shiny new guitar from Sam Ash paid for with a corporate Visa would hover waiting to mount the stage so they could blow their load and drive back to Jersey, sated in delusions of grandeur for another week. Or a chanteuse would butcher a version of "Summertime" so badly you'd shiver in

your shoes, only to be followed by an overwrought version of "Dr. Feelgood" sung so out-of-tune it would cause Saint Aretha herself to pull out chunks of hair. Or a transvestite stripper would do a heartfelt rendition of Tina Turner while gyrating against my leg.

Although it was a difficult job, it was not without its rewards. I remember getting the legendary Odetta up to sing "St. Louis Blues" with Stephen Stills. Sounded pretty good, but my most vivid memory is of an overheard conversation between two women in the crowd. "Who is she?" I heard one ask. "I think she was in the Supremes," the other replied, both seeming satisfied now that Odetta's pedigree had been established.

I graduated from hosting the World-Famous Blues Jam, and you know what? The "TURN DOWN" sign now lives in my basement. But I know somewhere out there is a chiropractor or a stockbroker with just the right few Stevie Ray licks and a brand new Stratocaster, just waiting for his shot on the list.