

Kings and Queens, Dogs and T-Bones: NICKNAMES AND THE BLUES

By CC Rider

Stage names are common in the music industry, but nowhere are they so prevalent – and so colorful – as in the blues. Of course you've got the Big and the Little, the Slim and the Blind – but there are far more than that. Ever wondered how your favorite blues musician got his or her name? I'll tell ya. Here's a list of some of the most famous blues men and women, their pseudonyms, and how they got 'em.



Riley B. King a.k.a B.B. King Photo courtesy B.B. King Museum

B.B. King:

King of the Blues, Riley B. King got his start at a Memphis radio station while working as a singer and disc jockey. It was on air that he took the name now synonymous with the blues: "All the deejays had nicknames, so the station started calling me the Beale Street Blues Boy," he said. "That was three Bs and it was a mouthful. Soon I was getting letters to just the Blues Boy... From Blues Boy it was shortened to just Bee Bee, and then B.B." And that's how we came to know B.B. King.



Cora Walton Taylor a.k.a Koko Taylor Photo by © Marilyn Stringer

Koko Taylor:

Queen of the Blues Cora Walton Taylor's story is much simpler than that. She got her name Koko 'cause she loved chocolate!

T-Bone Walker:

The origin of Aaron "T-Bone" Walker's stage name is pretty straightforward. Take his middle name – Thibeaux – and consider that it's French, so it's pronounced "Tee-Bo." Not so much of a stretch to T-Bone from there. And that's pretty tasty.

Skip James:

Nehemiah Curtis James is a pretty heavy handle for everyday use. So Mr. James took the name Skip. It's said the Bentonia-based picker could be like sunshine or lightning at any given moment. "I never was in anything too long or deep," he once said, "that's why I reckon they called me Skip."



Nehemiah Curtis James a.k.a Skip James

Lightnin' Hopkins:

The official story goes that Sam Hopkins got his nickname as many bluesmen did – from a record company. While recording his first session in 1946 with piano-man Wilson Smith, an Aladdin Records exec thought their names could use a little more fire. So he dubbed Smith "Thunder" and Hopkins "Lightnin'."

But Lightnin' himself told a different tale – two different ones in fact. The first goes that his mentor Blind Lemon Jefferson gave him the name: "Blind Lemon said that when I sang and played, I electrified people. He was the one that started callin' me Lightnin'." And the second? Hopkins told drummer Doyle Bramhall that he took his name after he was struck by, yep, lightning, while sitting on his front porch.

Big Mama Thornton:

Singer, songwriter and gender-bending pioneer Willie Mae Thornton is better known as "Big Mama" Thornton. Why? She said it – or sang it, rather – best. "Well, they call me Big Mama/ 'Cause I weigh 300 pounds." That'll do it.



Willie Mae Thornton a.k.a Big Mama Thornton Photo by PHOTOFEST

Sonny Boy Williamson II:

Aleck Miller was called "Rice" by his friends and family. But to the rest of the world, he's known as Sonny Boy Williamson II. Why Number 2? Well, Miller's first steady gig was on a popular Arkansas radio station. The show's promoter wanted to capitalize on the stardom of the reigning Chicago harmonica master, Sonny Boy Williamson, so he did what anyone would do – named Miller after him. History's tacked on the II to distinguish, but there's nothing second rate about the second Sonny Boy.

Hound Dog Taylor:

Theodore Roosevelt Taylor had a pretty good name to start – but someone else had it first. So the six-fingered guitar-slinger took a new name, one that fit him better. What do

Dorothy Moore

"Well known for Misty Blue"



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you get when you got a long face, and you love women? A Hound Dog... A Hound Dog Taylor that is.

Taj Mahal:

Living legend Taj Mahal was born Henry Saint Clair Fredericks, which was a great given name. But he was inspired to take his stage name following a series of dreams about Gandhi and social progress. (Full disclosure: I've been a fan of his for years – and never made the connection to the Indian wonder of the world.)



Henry Saint Clair Fredericks a.k.a
Taj Mahal Photo by © Marilyn Stringer

Muddy Waters:

McKinley Morganfield was sent to live with his grandma on the Stovall Plantation just north of Clarksdale, MS, at age three. Soon enough, he developed a penchant for playin' around in nearby creeks and puddles. So his grandma started calling him "that little muddy baby." The name stuck. As he grew, he took on the "Water," and as his talent and renown grew along with him, just Water wasn't enough. So he added the "s" and became Muddy Waters.

Pinetop Smith:

Clarence Smith was the first to call his piano style boogie-woogie. He was also the first famous bluesman to call himself Pinetop. But it's not 'cause he played a piano with a pine top, as I always thought. As a young man, Clarence was quite the tree climber. Always catchin' him hangin' out at the top of pines, his neighbors dubbed him Pinetop.

Howlin' Wolf:

Chester Burnett was a big man. Big Foot Chester and The Bull Cow were one-time nicknames. But it wasn't his size that got him the moniker he's famous for. As he tells it himself, it all started with some bad behavior and words of warning from his grandfather: "He gimme that name. He used to sit down and tell me tall stories about what the wolf would do. Cause I was a bad boy you know. And I was always in devilment...I got afraid...[but] they start to call me 'Wolf.' And I get mad about this. So they just kept on callin' me 'Wolf.' I was three years old...And it upset me, you know what I mean, I didn't know it was going to be a great name for me."

These are all great names for sure. Makes me want a new nickname. Do you know any fantastic origin stories of blues names? Let me know what I'm missing. 🎵

CC Rider spends her time venerating the mothers and fathers of the blues – the giants on whose shoulders we now stand. Listen to her wax on the Bluesmobile Radio Hour.
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