
Nicknames and the Blues LEGENDS OF THE PAST

By CC Rider

I'm CC Rider, back another year to wax on blues nicknames. A topic I know well 'cause I built my life around the blues, and my career around a nickname.

You probably know a bit about this topic too. 'Cause if you know the music, you know it's famous for its nicknames. So, how'd you like a little learnin' on how some of your favorites landed theirs? Here's a list of ten of the best blues nicknames from the past.

Ma Rainey: Up first we've got Ma Rainey. And she's up first 'cause she was one of the first to record the blues. Sometime in the 1880s, she was born Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett. Quite a name. Maybe a little too much to fit on a bill. So she took the last name Rainey, and the first name Ma. Why Ma, you ask? Easy. Because Ma Rainey was the Mother of the Blues.



Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown Photo courtesy Alligator Records

Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown: Genre-bending multi-instrumentalist Clarence Brown could play drums, fiddle, mandolin, viola, harmonica, you name it. Born in 1924, he

got his start when T-Bone Walker fell ill at a concert, and young Brown hopped up on stage, grabbed T-Bone's guitar, and wrote his signature blues "Gatemouth Boogie" on the spot. Brown ultimately became best known for his incredible "blues fiddle" playing, but it was his singing that landed him the nickname. A high school teacher remarked that he had a "voice like a gate." And so "Gatemouth" was born.

Big Bill Broonzy: Superstar guitar-slinger and session master Big Bill Broonzy also had simple reasoning behind his nickname. They called him Big Bill, well, because he was big. Born William Lee Conley Bradley, he took the name Bill Broonzy early on. And by the time he became a star, he was as famous for his monster talent as for his, alleged, monster size. He actually wasn't all that tall, especially compared to the likes of Howlin' Wolf. His driver's license listed him as only 6 feet 1 1/2 inches tall. But he talked a big game, and he sure loomed large over the music scene.



James "T-Model" Ford Photo by Lou Bopp

T-Model Ford: James Lewis Carter Ford didn't even pick up a guitar 'til he was 58 years old, after his fifth wife left him. He'd worked blue-collar jobs all his life: plowing fields, working at a sawmill, graduating to a lumber company foreman. But it was an early gig as a truck driver that saddled him with his nickname – T-Model Ford – after a truck not unlike the one he manned.

Barbecue Bob: Early Atlanta blues guitar-man Barbecue Bob was born Robert Hicks. But when he was discovered while working as a BBQ chef at Tidwell's Barbecue in a North Atlanta suburb, the gimmick was too good to pass up. A Columbia Records talent scout took some photos of him playing guitar in his white apron and chef's hat, and dubbed him Barbecue Bob. The rest is history. His first record, *Barbecue Blues*, was recorded in 1927 and sold 15,000 copies, which made him a bestseller at the time.

Tampa Red: Though he's not the most famous on the list, he sure is one of the most important. Born sometime between 1900 and 1908, Hudson Woodbridge Whittaker took the rural blues and made it commercial with his brilliant songwriting and single-string guitar solos. He was one of the first to take the instrument electric. And in the 26 years of his career, he cut nearly 230 sides, releasing more 78s than any other blues artist. As for his nickname? Hudson was born in Tampa, FL. Hence the Tampa. And as for the Red? A combination of his red hair and his light complexion.



David "Honeyboy" Edwards Photo by Phil Chesnut

David "Honeyboy" Edwards: David "Honeyboy" Edwards is a legend among those in the know. The Delta guitar master, born in 1915, was first recorded by Alan Lomax and toured with Big Joe Williams. He made great friends with Robert Johnson and was actually there the night Johnson lost his life. Though he worked as a musician all his life, he wasn't recorded commercially till 1951, when he cut a record under the name Mr. Honey. That's a name given to him by his parents, sharecropping musicians themselves.

He was just so sweet, he became known as Honeyboy. The name stuck.

Memphis Minnie: The greatest lady blues guitarist of all time, and one of the greatest guitarists of all time, ball-gown notwithstanding, was born Lizzie Douglas in 1897. But man, she hated that name. So from an early age, her family called her Kid. Kid Douglas cut her teeth early, on the street, with the circus, travelling and playing wherever she could. And it paid off. By the time she was discovered in 1929, singing and shredding outside a barbershop by a Columbia Records talent scout, she was better than any man on the scene. She went to record for the first time in New York City shortly after that. It was an A&R man for the record company who gave her the name she'd make famous – Memphis Minnie.

Sleepy John

Estes: John Estes, born at the turn of the century, is known for his distinct vocal style and his work with mandolin-master "Yank" Rachell.

But he got his nickname, Sleepy John, from a few



"Sleepy John" Estes (far right) pictured with Hammie Nixon and James "Yank" Rachell
Photo by Dick Waterman

peculiar mannerisms. Some say he looked sleepy because he was blind in one eye, after he got hit with a rock as a young child. Others say it was a neurological disorder, narcolepsy, which caused him to fall asleep while he was playing, even if he was standing up. Still others claim he had control over his sleepiness, that it wasn't a disease but a choice. Whenever things got too tough or too boring for him, Sleepy John would check out. Just decide to go to sleep.

Champion Jack Dupree: Boogie-woogie piano man and blues singer William Thomas Dupree was known for his clever word play and his rolling style on the keys. But he got his start using his hands in a different manner – as a prizefighter. That boxing background is how he got the nickname Champion Jack. He took that handle from the ring to the stage.

That's all for now. You got any favorite blues nicknames? How 'bout one of your own? What do you call yourself when you're on stage or singin' in the shower? Let us know.



CC Rider devotes her life to the men and women of the blues, the notes on the wax, the giants on whose shoulders we all now stand. She writes and voices CC Rider's Venerations alongside Elwood on the BluesMobile Radio Hour. Check her out at ccriderblues.com and on a radio station near you.