

What's the Word?



"The Crossroads" by Matt O'Brien

By Reverend Billy C. Wirtz

Along with the melodies, cool nicknames and irresistible beat, blues music features an alternate universe of sayings, characters and obscure references. Many have origins in African Voodoo, some from jazz-hipster speak and a few refer to historical events. You've probably wondered about some of these, but were afraid of being B.S.'d (Blues Shamed). No worries; I've divided them by terms, characters and expressions for your blues linguistic education.

PART ONE: Reoccurring Terms

Black Cat Bone: The bone from a deceased black cat – boiled, cleaned and then ground for use in mojos and mojo bags. Reputed to bring good luck and ward off bad in the user. Fortunately, not popular these days. Usually sold in "alleged" form.



Crawling Kingsnake: The male anatomy.

Get Your Ashes Hauled: Engaging in the act of procreation.

Goofer Dust: Often referred to by Champion Jack Dupree and in "I Don't Know" by Willie Mabon. Can be any mixture of graveyard dirt, herbs, dried cat poop, salt, sulphur and other powdered substances combined to cause harm and misfortune to the intended victim. Often sprinkled around a bed or put in drinks.

Hadacol: A patent medicine popular in the 1930s and 1940s, containing Vitamin B and 12% alcohol. Advertised as great for battling the pains of "rheumatism, heart problems, ulcers, nervousness and gas." Dudley LeBlanc, a senator from Louisiana, marketed his product via the "Hadacol Caravan" touring show, which featured country singers, blues singers and movie stars. It took the country by storm between 1948 and 1951. Wynonie Harris sang about it, Professor Longhair did "The Hadacol Bounce" and even Buddy Guy has done a version of the "Hadacol Boogie." Hadacol and its 24-proof solution was especially popular in the "dry" counties of the South.

House of the Rising Sun: The version that we know refers to an actual New Orleans brothel owned by Madame Marianne LeSoleil Levant (French for "the rising sun"). It opened in 1862, catering to the Union soldiers, and closed in 1874 due to neighbors' complaints. The song itself was first recorded in 1928, and the famous version by The Animals came along in 1964.

John the Conqueror Root:

One of the most misunderstood lines in blues comes from "Mannish Boy" by Muddy Waters. It sounds like he's singing "gonna bring back my second cousin, that little Johnny Conqueroo." He's actually bragging about bringing back "Little John the Conqueror Root." John the Conqueror is the trickster and healer in West African folklore, whereas John the Conqueror Root is the woody tuber of the Ipomoea jalapa plant. It is carried whole, or ground



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and used as part of a mojo bag. Muddy Waters was playing an inside joke with this line. His reference would be like saying "Going to bring back my Aunt, Miz Ginger Rogers" or "my Uncle, Little Salt Peter."

Mojo/Mojo bags: A small bag worn around the neck or carried in the pocket with a variety of contents. Mojos were believed to bring good luck and were used for positive energy. They often contained a variety of roots, graveyard dirt, toenail clippings, pubic hairs or whatever they believed would bring good luck and ward off evil spirits. Although they would downplay the belief in such matters to the audiences, most of the old school blues singers respected and believed in these charms and talismans – one of the reasons that many considered blues to be "devil music." The mojo bag was also known as a mojo hand.



Mojo Hand: Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins both sang songs about their future plans to acquire mojo hands. The hand reference referred to the inclusion of powdered bones in the contents. Mr. Hopkins wasn't going to Louisiana to engage in a Yakuza ritual.

Pudding: The female anatomy.

Ya Ya: Heroin.

Yas Yas: Buttocks region.

Viper: A marijuana user.

Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee: Substitute words employed to make the song acceptable. The phrase was originally a bawdy army barracks number that went, "Drinkin' wine motherf*cker, drinkin' wine, g*ddam." A few minor word changes, and "Stick" McGhee had the hit which saved Atlantic Records in the later 1940s.



PART TWO: A Few Characters

CC Rider: 1. Circuit Rider: A traveling preacher. 2. Hobos who rode the Colorado Central railroads in the 1930s. 3. CC Rider is a play on the phrase "Easy Rider."

Easy Rider: 1. A freeloader.
2. A sexually liberated woman/a prostitute.

Stagger Lee a.k.a Stack-a-Lee, Stagolee or Stack O' Lee: Lee "Stag" Shelton belonged to an African American gang of St. Louis pimps known as "The Macks." On Christmas night 1895, he got into a bar-room argument with a young stevedore named Billy Lyons. Lyons' wife had bought him a Stetson hat for Christmas. Not content to admire it or buy his own, Shelton proceeded to grab the hat and play keep-away. When Lyons demanded its return, Shelton pulled out a Derringer and shot him. Lyons would eventually die, and Shelton, convicted of murder, served 12 years. Two years after his release, he was

again locked up and died in prison on March 11, 1912.

If a hat had not been involved, this would have been a long-forgotten drunken argument. Instead, it became a legend first sung by Professor Charlie Lee, "The Piano Thumper," around Kansas City in 1897, re-recorded by several artists, and is still played weekly at Monday night blues jams around the world.

PART THREE: Expressions

Blues served not only as entertainment, but as an existential worldview often hidden behind certain expressions. Double entendre was used to disguise even more profound truths.

Dust My Broom: Time to clean house. Time to change course.

It's Tight Like That: That's the way it is. The early predecessor to "it is what it is." Life's circumstances compared to well-conditioned personal anatomy muscles.

Down to the Crossroads: Given the time, circumstances and Robert Johnson's genius, there are at least three different meanings:

1. An actual event. Robert Johnson went to the corner of Old Highways 61 and 49 (N. State Street and Desoto Avenue) in Clarksdale, MS.
2. He's talking about making life decisions; daily crossroads we all face.
3. In African folklore, the Crossroads represents the intersection between "the two worlds" where the supernatural can be contacted and the paranormal occurs. The kind of place where you might go to "sell your soul."

For those of you interested in the evolution of hipster speak and blues terms during the Harlem Renaissance, check out *Really the Blues* by Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe. It's an amazing story complete with a hip-tionary.

Meanwhile, go back and listen again to those old classic blues records. I hope you'll enjoy them even more than ever, especially now that you know what a Conqueroo is. 🎵

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Image from *The Story of Stagger Lee* by Timothy Lane, produced by Riverfront Times.