

T-Bone Blues

T-Bone Walker's Story In His Own Words

From Stenographic Notes by Jane Greenhough

EVERYBODY in the South has a nickname or initial. I was called "T-Bow" but the people got it mixed up with "T-Bone." My name is Aaron Walker but "T-Bone" is catchy, people remember it. My auntie gave it to me when I was a kid. Mother's mother was a Cherokee Indian full blooded. There were sixteen girls and two boys in my mother's family, all dead but two.

I just naturally started to play music. My whole family played—my daddy played, my mother played. My daddy played bass, my cousin played banjo, guitar and mandolin. We played at root beer stands, like the .Drive-ins they have now, making \$2.50 a night, and we had a cigar box for the kitty that we passed around, sometimes making fifty or sixty dollars a night. Of course we didn't get none of it, we kids. I and my first cousin were the only kids in the band. Before I came to California, Charlie Christian and I did the same thing in root beer stands. I'd play banjo a while, then dance a while.

I was born in a little town called Linden near Texarkana, then moved to Dallas. Ida Cox picked me up in Dallas where I was working at Eddie's Drive-In. I was working there singing like Cab Calloway, making a bit of noise, and a hotel about two blocks away complained and they sent the wagon to take us to jail. We'd start work at seven and by nine every night for two weeks the wagon would come—the whole band would be in jail every night. I said, "I quit, I'm tired of going to jail."

Ida Cox—since I was a kid she was one of my favorite blues singers. I went on the road with her on a tour of the South. Twelve girls in the chorus, two principals, two comedians. I used to play thirty-five or forty choruses of "Tiger Rag" with a table in my teeth and the banjo on the back of my neck. Never had a toothache in my life, and I used to carry tables in my teeth and tap dance at the same time. I started that in Fort Worth at the Jim Hotel. When I was with Ida Cox and we were broke we used to eat syrup and bread, without even any butter with it. We did "Coming Around the Mountain," and the old numbers, mostly comical, and the blues and tried to be funny. One of the comedians had a bazooka and played a tin Prince Albert can with his fingers. Then I had to go home and go to school. I didn't drink or smoke then, but I did play penny dice. I was just learning to shoot then.

I also worked in a medicine show, selling Big B Tonic, with Josephus Cook and Dr. Breeding I used to get five dollars and he sent my mother ten. I used to make the medicine, too, made it in a tub with black draught. It was called BB—double B and they were willing to pay a dollar for it because it was two dollars at the drug store. He got rich on that—it cost thirty-five cents to mix. We had movies, a stage show, a trailer and a Model T Ford. We played at small towns where people didn't have no sense and we really sold it.

LeRoy Carr gave me the inspiration for singing the blues. He was a terrific blues singer and he played with a fellow named Scrappin Iron or Scrapper Blackwell, some thing like that. I play in almost the same style they do. I'll take Floyd Smith for blues playing today, and I'm crazy about Alvino Ray for his style. He uses a Hawaiian guitar, but you can't

make it sing the blues. I can't play the Hawaiian guitar, can't make a note on one of those things. !3ut I like his tone and his style.

I used to hear all the singers, but LeRoy Carr was my favorite and still is. If there was music, I was right there. LeRoy used to sing "When the Sun Goes Down" and "Monte Carlo Blues" and "Night Time Is the Right Time." I still sing those numbers. I used to lead Blind Lemon Jefferson around playing and passing the cup, take him from one beer joint to another, I liked to hear him play. He could sing like nobody's business. He was a friend of my father's. People used to crowd around so you couldn't see him. Blind Lemon was from Galveston. He was dark yellow and weighed around 175 or 180, kind of reminds you of Art Tatum the way he looked.

Bessie Smith is my favorite girl blues singer. Ma Rainey could sing the blues, but she couldn't sing the blues like Bessie. They had different styles. Bessie was the QUEEN for everybody better than Ethel Waters. She was REALLY great, she could sing ANYTHING. Billie Holiday doesn't sing the blues. People will like the blues as long as they are in the world. Blind Lemon LeRoy Carr, sang the real blues—and Lonnie Johnson—old man now, still working. Wonderful blues singer, Don't ever leave him out. Sharpest cat in the world, wore a silk shirt blowing in the wind in the winter nice head of hair, and a twenty-dollar gold piece made into a stickpin.

I never took a music lesson in my life, but I can read and write music and play seven different instruments. I used to think I was a terrific piano player, played boogie woogie all the time. Once I played with a band for two years without knowing what a note was. From different kids in the band if I got a wrong chord they told me how it should be.

In 1933 I left Dallas with a white band that I led and danced with, the only colored man in the show, all dressed up in white tails. I even danced with a white girl for a partner. Everybody asked me questions about California, because the band was from California. They asked me about movie stars but I couldn't tell them anything because I'd never been in California at that time.

I met Bessie Smith at Fort Worth at the Fat Stock Show in 1933-34 with Ma Rainey. Ma Rainey was a heavy set dark lady, mean l as hell but she sang nice blues and she never cussed ME out. She had a show with the Haines Carnival at the Stock Show and I played for her.

I left the South in 1934 and in 1935 I began playing an electric guitar.

Well, I decided to make music my career since 1941. Before that, if I was playing, if I made money, OK. If I didn't, OK, I'd get me another kind of job. At that time I was playing at Little Harlem in the south part of Los Angeles, and a girl used to come to hear me every night. Finally she got tired of coming so far to hear me so she arranged for me to get a job with real good pay in Hollywood, arid then I started to get my name. I played at Billy Berg's Capri Club and the Trocadero and lots of other Hollywood spots after that. I started making records again too. The first time I ever made a record I was only sixteen years old. It was for Columbia and I made "Wichita Falls Blues" and "Trinity River Blues" with banjo and guitar accompaniment, under the name of Oak-Cliff T-Bone. Oak-Cliff was where I lived then. Columbia had people out scouting for talent and they picked me up. Later I made "T-Bone Blues." Commodore bought the master and now Blue Note has it. I never made a penny out of that, but Les Hite and Louis Jordan made a million on it. I make records so fast now I don't even have time to learn the words. I read it right through and make a rehearsal one day and a record the next day. Then I take the records

home and study them to learn the lyrics. People can't believe I don't know how to sing my own records. Lately I've made "Bobby Socks Baby" and "Mean Old World." I've got a year's option with Black & White and Phil Moore is my director. The other day I got a check for two thousand dollars for royalties.

I like piano, bass, guitar for blues accompaniment, the winds in between. The old time blues beat...one...two...has been the blues beat for years... since back in the days of—Zutty Singleton! I bet Zutty will laugh when he reads that.... I mean the old New Orleans days. The Ory band know how to play it. Somebody like Zutty or Kid Ory are just right. Singing hasn't changed but the accompaniment has changed. I use a mike so I can sing soft, you can sing better. I train myself to sing soft, you can get a better tone.

My favorite band today is Basie. I like his piano—we've been friends for twenty years, and I like Tatum's piano too. The Three Blazes is my favorite trio. Trumpet? POPS! It's GOT to be Pops all my life. Pops is my Daddy. EVERYBODY loves Louie.

You got to know what you're doing to play bebop. The young generation are different. They are mad over it. Maybe they'll grow out of it. Charlie Parker and Dizzie I could sit all night and listen, but most of them don't know what they're doing. People are crazy about it in New York and Chicago. They don't like it in California and Texas.

The city I like best is Chicago, but the state of Texas is best. People give you a room, feed you, won't let you pay for nothing. Other places everybody has their hands out. But I'd rather live in California than anywhere. You can see my tonsils smiling every time I cross that line. Only after you work in Los Angeles and San Francisco you're through and there are so many places to play in the South. Whenever they hear my guitar offstage they start screaming for me to come out, I always go over with all the kids. When I was on tour this spring I played for a lot of kids and one little girl three years old said, "Have him come over to my table, Daddy, I love him" and she brought me a five-dollar bill on the stage.

I like golf and horses. I have my own horses. A great big black one and a roan. I'll ride anything you give me to ride. My black horse jumps three feet in a Western saddle. My agent is afraid I might get hurt and cut off his living. I've played golf with Joe Louis. He's a good golfer. I'm also interested in a fighter, Rusty Paine. He fought in San Diego the other day, fights heavyweight. I haven't had a chance to be with him like I'd like to be, give him a chance and not let them beat him to death. He's got nerve and power and can take it.

I belong to the Baptist church—Hardshell—I love church songs. I'd walk ten miles to hear Sister Rosetta Tharpe sing church songs, but not two blocks to hear her sing the blues. I'd walk TWENTY miles to hear her sing my favorite number, "When I Reach the End of My Journey." Two kids made a record of that and every beer tavern and gambling place in the South has it on the juke box. In the South they can't make enough records of it. Gamblers and hustlers bought them, everybody around with me bought it. I got five copies. It's my very favorite piece. These days it isn't church like it's supposed to be. They charge a dollar ten to come to church to hear Sister Tharpe. I don't like the way Josh White is going over big with church songs. I don't think that's right. I don't sing in church because I'm no hypocrite. I don't think a fellow ought to go out cussing and drinking and gambling all week long and then come and sing in church on Sunday.

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