

THE SMILEY TILLMON BAND

Without question one of the busiest blues outfits in the Chicagoland area, the Smiley Tillmon Band is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser. There's an obvious reason why the veteran guitarist's booking schedule is so jam-packed. As his nickname indicates, Smiley knows how to have a good time and makes sure his audience does too. After 55 years of playing the local blues scene, Tillmon remains happy to serve up the blues and soul standards that people never seem to stop craving, and his band keeps the grooves tight and right, making Smiley smile all night long.

Smiley joined forces with bassist Tom Rezetko back in 2007, and they've been together musically ever since. "We looked at each other and said, 'Hey, man, let's see if we can take this thing to another level!'" says Smiley. Kate has been with Smiley's combo for nearly five years. Married to another blues guitar standout, Nick Moss, her slashing Freddie King/Magic Sam-influenced leads contrasting strikingly with Smiley's fluid fretwork (she fell in love with the blues at age 21 when she met Buddy Guy, later sharing stages with Buddy, Jimmy Johnson, Eddie Shaw, and Lurrie Bell, to name just a few). "She just put another level on it," notes Tillmon. "She's such a great player." Drummer George Baumann completes one of the Windy City's toughest blues combos.

Smiley was born Moses Tillmon in rural Jefferson County, Georgia. "In the cotton fields, because I wasn't born in the city," he says. "I stayed there in Georgia 'til I was about ten years old, picking cotton and stuff in the meantime. Then my mom moved to Florida, Fort Lauderdale. So when I got to Fort Lauderdale, I went to school there and started picking beans down there in the beanfields. One field to the other field.

"I loved to sing. My mom was a pretty good piano player. I always wanted to play. So I finally went to the pawn shop and bought a guitar for ten dollars and bought a little chord book to try to figure out what to do. Eventually things started to happen for me." There wasn't much blues where Tillmon was growing up. "I heard a lot of church music," he says. "I used to listen to country music, really. There was a lot of country music—the *Grand Ole Opry*, stuff like that."

Hoss Allen's radio broadcasts over Nashville's WLAC were eagerly anticipated. "He would play stuff by Louis Jordan, the guys out of the '40s and '50s," Smiley says. "Every once in a while, you would hear it. His theme song was 'Swanee River Boogie.' I never forgot that."

When he was old enough to get into the local clubs, Tillmon watched some of the greatest R&B performers on the planet perform at a classy place located midway between Fort Lauderdale and Miami called the Palms of Hallandale. The Midnighters, the "5" Royales, Bobby Bland, Little Willie John, Guitar Slim, and B.B. King all graced the Palms stage, and young Moses soaked them all up. "You were inspired by all these guys," says Smiley. "They had a lot of pretty ladies, so I wanted to be a part of that too!

"I love B.B. I never like to copy his style, but I like the way he plays, and he was a good player," Tillmon says. "I really love jazz too. I like George Benson. I like Wes Montgomery, but I actually like George better than Wes. And a guy named Grant Green. He's a heck of a player."

Smiley's first experience in a recording studio was with Miami singer Billy Miranda, likely the session that produced Miranda's explosive 1960 rocker "Run Rose" for Chicago's Checker Records. "There used to be a club in Fort Lauderdale. It was a great club called the Downbeat," he says. "I worked with Billy Miranda there, and then I worked with him in Miami at a place called the James Club. We did some stuff for a (producer) that lived in Miami Beach called Bobby Dukoff."

Living in Florida exposed Tillmon to calypso. "When I went to school in Fort Lauderdale, a lot of kids' parents were from Nassau. So there were a lot of Nassau kids around there, and they always liked to play calypso, do the limbo, and all that kind of thing," he says. "Harry Belafonte was really popular, so everybody wanted to be like Harry Belafonte." Smiley left Miranda to join Sammy Ambrose & the Afro-Beats, who specialized in calypso. Ambrose was a Miami singer who doubled on drums; the Afro-Beats consisted of Charles Wright on the other guitar (future Miami singing star Betty Wright's older brother),

bassist Sammy Williams, and Joe Sanders on percussion. “I went to the see their show,” he says. “They did the limbo and all the Caribbean stuff, and I liked that too.”

The Afro-Beats toured as far north as Montreal and Quebec City. They cut a 45 in New York that came out on the West Side label in the states and CMI north of the border. Coupling “Nitty Gritty” and “The Canadian Twist,” it was a lot more R&B than calypso. “We got some mileage out of it,” Smiley says. “We got some gigs out of it. I didn’t get no money, but we got some gigs!” When the Afro-Beats broke up in 1962, Ambrose stayed in New York (he would cut the original ‘64 version of “This Diamond Ring”). Smiley set his sights on a different metropolis.

“I didn’t want to go back to Miami, and I had met some people in Canada that knew people in Chicago,” says Tillmon, whose Windy City contacts included guitarist Phil Upchurch and veteran drummer Jump Jackson, who hooked him up with bassist Singing Sam, leader of a band called the Sparks. Moses Tillmon received his lifelong nickname as a Spark. “We were on the bandstand, and everybody used to call me Moses. And I like to have fun and laugh. (Singing Sam) said, ‘I ain’t gonna call you Moses. I’m gonna call you Smiley!’ That was in 1962. So I’ve been wearing it ever since.

“When I got to Chicago, everything was a lot of blues and a lot of soul music, that kind of thing. But blues was kickin’,” Tillmon says. “I ran into guys like Jimmy Johnson, Jody Williams, Lefty Dizz, Lonnie Brooks—he was Guitar Jr. then. So you know, I learned from those guys. They helped me out. A guy named Lacy Gibson. All these people, man.”

Tillmon worked during the mid-‘60s with South Side keyboardist Billy “The Kid” Emerson, who had cut the classic “Red Hot” a decade earlier for Sun Records in Memphis. “He didn’t have no record then,” says Smiley. “He was just out there jobbing like everybody else. He had the name from ‘Red Hot.’ That’s where he had his little name from. We were all just out here, trying to make that little \$15 a night.”

Smiley’s guitar was overdubbed onto “A Dancin’ Whippersnapper,” one of Emerson’s mid-‘60s singles on Billy’s own Tarpon label. “He just liked what I was doing,” Tillmon says. The song was penned by Emerson and newcomer Denise Craig, soon to find stardom as Denise LaSalle. “She used to work with Billy,” says Tillmon. “Billy really got her going. We started out with her in ‘64, ‘65, something like that.” The South Side was Tillmon’s primary stomping grounds. “I didn’t play the West Side a lot. I really liked to play the South Side,” he says.

Smiley’s first bout with full-time musician status ended in 1977. “My family came first,” he says. “I had five kids, so I couldn’t be going nowhere.” So he found himself a day job. “I worked at a school district, maintenance and special ed, for 30 years to 2007, when I retired,” he says. “I took gigs, but that wasn’t my main thing at the time. I was working at the school.”

Tillmon’s retirement resulted in a renewed commitment to playing blues, this time as leader of his own band. “I’m full speed ahead trying to play music now,” he says. “It was time to get back on the trail. Things have been going well since then, since I hooked up with Tom. He’s the best.”

Smiley is smiling more than ever these days. “That’s my whole attitude,” he says. “To play and have fun.” But those one-liners that he trots out throughout the night to serve as between-songs patter? “Sometimes the joke’s on me, because they’re sort of shaky,” he laughs. “I’m trying to get through the night. That’s all I’m trying to do!”

—Bill Dahl (2018)