

The Renaissance

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Koko Taylor at the Renaissance – Sept. 27, 2008, 8:00 PM

"I come from a poor family," recalls Koko. "A very poor family. I was raised up on what they call a sharecropper's farm." Born Cora Walton (an early love of chocolate earned her the lifelong nickname Koko) in 1928 just outside of Memphis in Bartlett, Tennessee, Koko was an orphan by age 11. Along with her five brothers and sisters, Koko developed a love for music from a mixture of gospel she heard in church and blues she heard on radio stations beaming in from Memphis. Even though her father encouraged her to sing only gospel music, Koko and her siblings would sneak out back with their homemade instruments and play the blues. As a youngster, Koko listened to as many blues artists as she could. Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie were particular influences, as were Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson. She would listen to their songs over and over again.

When she was in her early 20s, Koko and her soon-to-be husband, the late Robert "Pops" Taylor, moved to Chicago looking for work. The couple settled on the city's South Side, the cradle of the rough-edged sound of Chicago blues, "With nothing but, 35 cents and a box of Ritz crackers," Taylor recalls. She found work cleaning houses for wealthy families in the ritzy northern suburbs, and on nights and weekends Koko and Pops would visit the South and West Side blues clubs, where they would hear singers like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Magic Sam, Little Walter, and Junior Wells. Thanks to prodding from Pops, it wasn't long before Taylor was sitting in with many of the legendary blues artists on a regular basis.

Taylor's big break came in 1963 when, after a particularly fiery performance, she was approached by songwriter/arranger Willie Dixon. Much to Koko's astonishment, he told her, "My God, I never heard a woman sing the blues like you sing the blues. There are lots of men singing the blues today, but not enough women. That's what the world needs today, a woman with a voice like yours to sing the blues." Dixon first recorded Koko for USA Records and then secured a Chess recording contract for her.

For more info on Koko Taylor, go to www.kokotaylor.com

"Blues is my life. It's a true feeling that comes from the heart, not just something that comes out of my mouth. Blues is what I love, and singing the blues is what I always do."

-Koko Taylor

Discography:

Main Releases

- Old School (2007)
- Deluxe Edition (2002)
- Royal Blue (2000)
- Force Of Nature (1993)
- What It Takes: The Chess Years (1991)
- Soy Como Toda Mujer (1990)
- Jump For Joy (1990)
- From the Heart of a Woman (1989)
- Willie Dixon - The Chess Box (1988)
- Live From Chicago: An Audience With The Queen (1987)
- The Earthshaker (1978)
- Queen Of The Blues (1975)
- I Got What It Takes (1975)
- South Side Lady (1973)
- Koko Taylor (1969)





Chess Records: The Birth of the Blues

2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago is one of the most famous addresses in American pop music history. From 1957 to 1967, the building housed Chess Records, the studio and recording company that beget legendary recordings by Koko Taylor, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, John Lee Hooker, Etta James, Buddy Guy, Ramsey Lewis, Ahmad Jamal, Aretha Franklin, and dozens of others. Many of these musicians were southern-born African-Americans who had come to Chicago in the wake of the "great migration" of the early and mid-20th century. Recordings such as "Johnny B. Goode," "Rescue Me," and "Red Rooster" were all recorded at Chess, and in the 1960s, the Rolling Stones immortalized the address in the Blues instrumental "2120 S. Michigan Avenue," much of which was recorded there.

Leonard and Phil Chess were Polish-Jewish immigrants who settled in Chicago and, in the 1940s, opened the famous Macomba Nightclub. It was here that Chicago blues history would begin. Mississippi Delta Blues artists would play the rough, rugged music of the Mississippi Delta Blues at the Macomba and the music soon caught on. When Leonard Chess realized music scouts were gaining interest in these musicians, he decided to begin recording and selling the music himself.

Initially, the Chess brothers rented a small, makeshift studio, but by the mid-1950s, the Blues began to increase in popularity and interest grew nationwide. The unique "Chess" sound that emanated from its walls was a result of its musicians, studio (where none of its four walls were parallel — with several held on "clips" to allow desired reverberation), and electronic tube equipment. The room's acoustical dynamics were key to defining the "Chess" sound.

After Leonard Chess' death in 1971, Chess Records was eventually sold to MCA and absorbed by Geffen Records. Music made at Chess is the basis for all rock 'n' roll we hear today.



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