

Koko Taylor interview.

At her house, 8510 S. Ada. Chicago.

September 15, 1982. 2pm.

You had a long recording career before you got with Alligator, didn't you?

Yeah, I stayed with Chess, it must have been about at least eight or nine years, and then after I left them I stayed free for a couple of years or so, just on my own, getting jobs on my own, going places and still doing the same thing. This went on for at least two or three years before I met up with Alligator. I had heard about Alligator, and Alligator had heard about me, and they knew more about me than I did them, because Bruce had caught my shows in different places, like Ann Arbor blues festival, and other places, in Europe, you know, so he was really enthused and happy over getting me in the organisation.

How's it been for you?

It's been real good, I tell you, I wouldn't take nothing from Alligator, because the years that I've been with them they've been fantastic, they did more for my career in these last seven years than the whole eight nine years I was with Chess. Because there's one thing about it, when you record a record for Alligator, they do their best to promote it, see to it getting played, see to it to the artists' working, you know, and I just love them for that.

They seem to be about the best blues label at the moment. I think so, I rate 'em number one.

Bruce has a very professional approach to recording.

He has, and he has progressed so much since he started off, you know, just one man starting a company seems pretty rough, but I can say that he really hung in there and worked hard, day and night, and still doing it, and I just think that he's the only one and the best one that's doing anything for blues anywhere in the United States. That's right.

I'm interested in how you decide what goes on a record - how much Bruce tells you, and how much you tell him.

Well; I tell you what. We put out ideas together, and we come up with ideas, and decide on a tune, and that mean both of us. [If he got a idea, he will relate it to me; if I got a idea I will relate it to him, and we will listen to it, and kinda decide on is this the right tune to do? or is this the right sound? or whatever. he don't just give me songs and say, this is what I want you to do, or this is how I want you to do it. He's always leave it up to me as to be perfectly satisfied with a song - do you feel that you can handle this tune well? you know, and things like that. Which I think is a good idea, because I never had that much authority in my first recording. So this makes it much easier, and I can put me into what I'm doing, not just do a tune because somebody give it to me on a piece of paper and say, this song fits you, go ahead and do it.]

Is that how it used to be?

Well, this is how it used to be, but now it's much different.

You've got some very impressive musicians on your records. I think so, I think so. In fact, I think they're some of the best. Sammy Longhorn for instance, was for a long time lead guitarist for Muddy Waters, I guess for mm, about fifteen years. And of course he's playing lead on some of my tunes. And also a cousin, Criss Johnson, and then my own guitarist, Maestro, Emmett Sanders.

How did you find Maestro?

Well Maestro, at one time his brother ^{in law} was working for me, his name was Eddie King. So Eddie King came to me one day, me and my husband, Pop, and he says, I'm not going to be able to travel, and I'll tell you the reason why, he said my wife told me, if I go on another trip, when I got back she was going to divorce me. Because she didn't like me being gone all the time. That left us really cold. So he says, well, I tell you what. My brother in law plays guitar, why don't you let him play for you, why don't you listen to him? So we did, he brought Maestro up here, and we listened to him. And when I first heard Maestro, I'll admit I didn't like what I heard, at all! It was very disgusting. It could be because, you know, when you get into one thing, and get your mind set on one thing, it's hard to get used to somebody else. So anyway, my husband kept telling me, Maestro will make a real good guitar player for you. Give him a chance. And I did, I gave him that chance, still totally disgusted with him, I hated when the time come for me to go up on stage, because I hated the way he played!

What was he doing that was different?

He wasn't doing anything, it's just that I had my mind confused with what I had been listening to. Because I've found, over the years, all musician is so much different, they all plays different. And when you change musician, you automatically expect a new sound. So until I could get used to this new sound, it was confusing. Now, today, if I had to get rid of Maestro for some reason, if he left and I got another guitar player, it would probably be confusing again, because I've really gotten used to Maestro, and I like him a lot. And right now we get along like two black-eyed peas in a pod!

On stage together you work very well.

Did you see me lately, or something?

At On Broadway last weekend, and the time before that was at Stages, when you were making that film. When you're all on stage, Albert, Maestro, you...

Yeah, we works as a team now, and like one little family, you know. Everybody gets along just fine, and we cooperate with each other, and work together, and work tunes out together, even on the bandstand. This is how it has to be, you know, you cannot work successfully, and do a good job, with somebody that you don't like to work with, or you don't like the way they play, or they don't like playing behind you. The communication gotta be there. So that's how it is with us, you know, we just gets along fine.

Both times I've seen you, you were on Alligator packages. Yeah, they've got to a point that they have quite a few of that, quite often,

Alligator packages. Which is very nice, because the other guys are good artists, and I enjoy working with them - Son Seals and Lonnie Brooks, and also Albert Collins.

It works very well. Do you mind being before or after people? It doesn't matter. I don't really suggest what position I should go on stage. It doesn't matter whether I'm first, second, or last. I think that whatever matters is with the audience, it's how they rate you, you know. And it doesn't matter. Some people think like, well, if I'm the last, I'm the star of the show because I'm last on the show. But you can be the star of the show and be first on the show, it's how the people feel back in their minds. I think they are the ones that make the star, and it doesn't matter what position you go on there.

Bruce showed me some running sheets. They seem to look after you on the road.

Yeah, I got one in there now, a week long! Oh, he is now, if something go wrong, believe me when I tell you, Bruce is just as upset as I am. And we also gets along just fine, and we work together, and cooperate together, and I try to cooperate with him as much as he do with me, and this makes work much easier for everybody.

It does seem rather like a family.

Oh yeah. Well I think this is how it should be.

And it's probably not been done before quite like this.

It has never been done with me, I'll put it like that, because I never had the opportunity to sit down and discuss, if I had a problem, I never had nobody really to discuss it with. I would just come home and talk about this or that, the things that I liked, the things that I did not like. But this way, like it is now, if it's a problem, Bruce always leave his self open, and he always tell me, if you got a problem, don't hesitate to bring it to me, talk to me about it, and let me know what's going on, you know. And I really feels really free, you know, I feel better knowing there's somebody really care about what's happenning with my career.

Yeah, as I say, I'm impressed with Alligator.

So am I!

I've got a list of songs here from your LPs, credited to you.

How do you go about writing a song?

When I decide to write a tune, things just come to me, like lyrics. And also sometimes it can be from everyday life, and it don't mean something that I have experienced, it don't mean something that you have experienced. But when you write a song, when I write a song, I try to write something that's gonna relate to people, you know. It's going to tell a story, it's going to have a meaning, and wherein if it don't mean something to you, it'll mean something to somebody else, you know. And this is what I mainly be concentrating on, and this how I feel when I write a tune.

And how does the music come together?

Same way with the music. I try to come up with an idea, and the right type of music to fit the lyrics that I'm writing about. Say for instance if I'm writing a fast tune, well I want the music's gotta be fast, and yet gotta be something about the

music that's interesting, to make the people stop twice, and listen to it, and make 'em want to go, Oh I like that. You know, you hear a lot of people say, well, I don't care for the words that much, but I love the music. You know, I have bought records that I have just really liked the music, and I don't even know what the words say. So in getting the tune together, it gotta be, one of the two gotta be something you can work out that's going to interest the people enough that they gonna go out and get it.

On Be What You Want To Be, it credits both you and Willie Dixon. Does that mean you worked together on that one?

Ah, yes. That means he came up with some of the ideas and lyrics, and so did I.

[He seems to have been quite an important figure in your career.

Oh yeah. The whole time I was with Chess records, I was under the jurisdiction of Willie Dixon, because he was working for Chess records also, A&R man, and he was the one that would select my tunes that I would record, and he would also do the writing of the tunes, and he would do the arranging and everything, so I didn't have no say-so about how something should go, you know. My job was to sing, and that was it. And that's all I did!]

Do you think that might have been because you're a woman?

I think it was because they probably thought I didn't know what I was doing, and at that time, I guess I didn't. But now that I have more experience in singing and how things go, and more experience at writing tunes, you know, I execute this talent with Alligator, because they give me a chance to do it. It's one thing, you never know what a person can do until you give them a chance to do it.

I'd like to talk a bit about Europe. Is it strange, for a performer?

I tell you what. I don't feel different so far as singing to people, you know, to an audience. But it do feel strange to perform to an audience that, the way I see it, they do not understand what you are saying, you know, they don't understand the language. So I figure if they don't understand the language, how can they understand the words of the song? But I also found that if I do a tune, or anybody do a tune, you can always know this is a good tune, something that they like. I mean, you can't fool 'em, any more than you can fool people here, that's speaking English. So this has always been a mystery to me, because the audience loves the blues, and they let you know they love it. So I can't figure out how, how do they go about loving it the way they do. They really do love the blues, and so far as the way they respond, the way they come out to hear it, it's no different than the people right here in America.

Well, you were saying earlier about not knowing the words of a song, but liking the music and buying the record anyway. It's maybe like that for them.

Oh, OK. It's a good idea.

But a lot of them speak English really well.

You know, everybody I talk to once I get back home, they say, but you be surprised, most of the people over there speak English. If they do, they keep it hid! Everybody

I talked to, they'd be speaking French, or German, or whatever, and it was just seldom that I'd run up on anybody that speak English, and I'd be so glad when I run up on somebody that speak English. It's like I haven't heard it for I don't know how long!

When you're there, do you always take your own band?

Yeah, I definitely take my own band. I was supposed to have gone over in October to do one special show in Germany, but they didn't want to bring over the band, they just wanted me alone, so I refused to go, because of that.

You started singing as a girl, in church.

Yeah, I did. I been singing all of my life, and what I mean by all my life, ever since I was like that kid in there. I was just like he is today. I was singing and dancing. I love that, and I grew up going to church every Sunday, singing gospel with the rest of the family, neighbourhood kids, and things like that. We lived in the country, I was raised on a cotton farm, and every day we would go to the field, to the cottonfield, me and my brothers and sisters, we had us a team going, we was singing, blues. My one brother, on the back of the house, he had nails - you know what nails is? Tenpenny nails? - he had nails back of the wall, and he had hay bailing wire, and he put on nails, six of them, and that was his guitar. And my other brother, he made him a harmonica, out of a corn cob - you know, he just cut the holes in there like that - and that's what he blowed for a harmonica. That was because they couldn't afford to buy what they wanted to play. And when it got to me, I didn't need anything but my mouth to sing, we didn't know what microphones at that time was. So this is what we did, we had a real band going, you shoulda heard us round there, my brothers playing guitar and blowing harmonica, and I was singing, and all this stuff, you know. I can remember the first blues song I was trying to sing was: 'Hey, you, what black rat, someday I'll find your trail,' by Memphis Minnie, you know. And I used to listen to her, because the first blues record I ever really paid any attention to, my brother went out and bought it, and it was Me and my Chauffeur Blues by Memphis Minnie. Back in those days we didn't have electricity like they have today that you hook up, we had, they call it Graphonolia, that you wind with your hand, and that was probably before you was born, I don't know if you know what I'm talking about. That's the kind we had. They wasn't even making 45 records then, all of the records were 78s. And that's what this particular record was on, 78. Yeah.

That's interesting. I was wondering who your influences were.

Well, listen, after I got a taste of listeng to her, that's when I really got into it, because we didn't have nightclubs, and thigs like what's going on today. Of course, all the blues that I heard and listened to, was on the radio. And I would listen to people like Howlin Wolf, and Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Sonny Boy Williams, Magic Sam, and those was peoples that just really stuck with me, all along, you know, I just fell in love with them, and kept saying, like, oh man, I wish I could sing like this one, or like that one. And I tried to do it, you know, all the time, just for my own enjoyment, and this is what we'd do. So anyway, after I'd growed

up and everything, and got out there on my own, well, I came to Chicago. And when I got to Chicago, the firsts thing that I did, I heard about all these people that I'd been listening to on the radio, that they lived right here in Chicago - all except Memphis Minnie, I never met her. But Howlin Wolf, Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, Elmore James, all those people lived righthere. So I got a chance to meet 'em, they was playing in different clubs, and my husband and I, we would travel around the different clubs, and they would let me sit in, and do tunes, like that, and you know, I kept that up for like a few years, and I kept just getting better and better, and more experienced, you know. So finally, I was sitting in, and I guess you would say this is how I got discovered by Willie Dixon, because he heard me when I was singing with other bands, you know, and that was before the recording started. And I got tied up with him, you know, with a conversation about him wanting to record me, he'd never in his life heard a woman sing the blues like I sing the blues, and he swear to God, you got the kind of voice that we need today, we don't have no women singing the blues. I don't know, I didn't know how many women sang the blues, at that time. He said we don't have no women singing, and this is what we need, more women singing the blues. So that's what I did. I started recording with him, under his instruction, for Chess, and that went on until I got to where I am today. And of course since then I've toured Europe several times, I've received two Grammy nominations - that's them up there, I'll show 'em to you before you go, if you'd like to see 'em. I received all kinda, a lot of nice little trophies and things like that, beautiful write-ups, I've did TV shows. I would say I've came a long way, you know. I've come too far to look back now.

It's too late to stop now. It's interesting that the people you were listening to were mostly men.

Yeah, and a lot of them are dead and gone, now. Magic Sam, Elmore James, Howlin Wolf, is all dead. Of course they lived a long time after I met 'em, I'm just saying they're dead now, but of course their music lives on with me, lives forever with me, and I guess a lot of other people. But you know, these people I been naming, they been making records for the last forty years. My God, Muddy Waters been singing, gotta be a good 35, 40 years, and Howlin Wolf, and that's a long time. So I had to have been pretty young, because I was young when I was listening to these people.

Have you heard Valerie Wellington?

You talking about Chicago? The girl who be up at the Kingston Mines? I heard her, and everybody tells me that I am one of her admirers, that she idols me. You know? And I didn't know this. And they kept saying, you don't know this, but Valerie goes on the bandstand, and she thinks she Koko Taylor. She sings at least five to six of your tunes every time she go on the bandstand. I say yeah? It couldn't be true. They say, you don't believe it, come to the Kingston Mines. So one night we was out, just partying, I was off that week, and so sho nuff, we stopped at the Kingston Mines, and I got a chance to see and hear Valerie. And it was amazing, you know, she was singing my tunes. And I felt good about it, because I would like to see more womens, and younger people, follow in my footsteps, and a lotta other blues singers' footsteps. I wish there was a lotta other Koko Taylors, you know, that's

really into the blues.

To get back to Maestro. He only guested on one track on your last album. Will he do more on the next one?

Well, I know he'll be on the next album, and probably like you said, the main attraction. But he probably won't be the only attraction on the album, because in the first place a album is based upon a lot of things, for instance, forever listening. So we worry about the best sound, and different sounds, and sometimes we do a variety of musicians, and also we use more musicians on a album than just travelling around, you know, day by day. But he will be on the next album.

Your new album was just last year, wasn't it, so the next one's probably not for a while.

Yeah, it is.

I'd Rather Go Blind is destined to be a big hit, I think.

I'm wondering what is it waiting on. It's almost a year old.

Yeah. But it's a beautiful song.

I think so, thank you.

Perhaps because it's blues, and blues doesn't get too much airplay, people will just discover it slowly. It has real quality, people won't get tired of it.

You think it still have a chance to go all the way to the top?

Yeah.

I hope so.