



## Taylor's gospel: blues is fun

By Mark Bialczak  
Staff Writer

When Koko Taylor was growing up on a sharecropper's farm in Memphis, her daddy knew his daughter could sing.

But his idea of the proper setting was church. And the only music he allowed her to wrap her fine voice around was gospel.

"I grew up in a church singing group," Taylor says. "I'm glad he made me do that. Still today, I love the gospel."

But something happened down on the farm.

"I got bitten by Willie Dixon," Taylor explains with a laugh.

So all of a sudden, Taylor's two brothers were playing on homemade instruments to accompany their sister. One had a guitar made out of bailing wire and nails, and another had a fife crafted from a corn cob.

"We weren't able to buy electric guitars or bass," she says. "We had to use whatever we could make."

Nobody had to make anything up to appreciate her voice.

"What you hear, I was born with," she says with pride and appreciation.

For more than 30 years now, Taylor has been sharing that voice with the world. She started singing professionally in the blues clubs of Chicago, where she had moved with her new husband.

Today, she sings all over the world. And loves it just as much as she did back home in Memphis.

"It's what I love doing. I wouldn't exchange it," Taylor says. "I really love being out here with my fans and friends."

Taylor sings at midnight tonight at Hotel Syracuse as part of the New York State Budweiser Blues Festival. She can't recall ever visiting Syracuse. That's part of the thrill, she says, performing at new places in front of different people.

"I always feel good about it because I know I have fans there. When I go to a new place, I know it's because people said, 'Let's get Koko Taylor here.'" she says.

Taylor's latest disc on Alligator Records, "Force of Nature," is considered one of her best. It



Courtesy of Koko Taylor

Blues singer Koko Taylor performs tonight at Hotel Syracuse.

### The details

**What:** Koko Taylor in concert at the New York State Budweiser Blues Festival.

**When:** Midnight today.

**Where:** Hotel Syracuse.

**To hear Taylor on NewsLine:** Call 472-2111.

Once connected, punch in 8866. The tune is from her disc "Force of Nature." It's "63-Year-Old Woman."

earned a four-star review in Rolling Stone magazine when it first came out in 1994.

She's particularly proud that she wrote a couple of tunes on that one, "Put the Pot On" and "63-Year-Old Woman." And she's writing songs for her next disc, including a couple called "I Don't Want No Man Always Hitting on Me" and "I'm an Old Woman Built on a Young Woman's Frame."

Taylor says she's always looking for new ways to present the blues.

"I don't listen to nothing before

I write," she says. "That's something that's been already done. I think up in my mind for something that's not been done before."

When new female voices enter the blues scene, the best ones often get compared to Taylor.

For instance, Shemekia Copeland, who also performs at this weekend's fest, sometimes is called "the next Koko Taylor."

"I'm really honored that young people coming along appreciate my music," Taylor says. "It's a traditional thing, to listen to your idols. I used to listen to Memphis Minnie, Bessie Smith, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters when I was young."

She's still young enough to create quite a stir when she sings.

"My major goal is to reach out to people, reach out to my fans, and have them reach out to me," Taylor says. "If you don't hear applause or see dancing, something ain't clicking."

"My goal is to get them up," she says. "A lot of people think the blues is about my music is designed to make people feel good about themselves."

## Singer proud to carry on legacy of her father

By Mark Bialczak  
Staff Writer

There were a couple of years in her life when Shemekiah Copeland didn't want to sing.

That thought still kind of surprises the 19-year-old from Manhattan even now.

After all, with blues great Johnny Clyde Copeland as her father, music was everywhere as she grew up.

"I got into it on my own," says Copeland. "I began singing when I was little. I was just lucky. Anybody who has the chance to grow up with the blues in their life is lucky."

"But for a long time, every time Dad tried to get me to sing, I wouldn't. When I was 10 and 11, So he left me alone. He didn't bother me about it," she recalls.

If Copeland's mission was to get his daughter to follow in his footsteps, the lack of parental pressure was the right way to go.

He remained close to his daughter, even when he was out on the road.

"I never thought of my daddy being Johnny Clyde Copeland. He was just Daddy," she says. "And my Daddy called me all the time. Every day. And when he was home, he spent good time with me."

Then, right out of the blue, she got the bug to sing again.

"When I was 15 or 16, I changed my mind," she says. "I told him I wanted to do it. So he took me out on the road with him."

Indeed, Copeland gave his daughter every opportunity to learn the craft. He often introduced her during his shows and let her sing several songs.

"Then he got sick," she says.

His illness took Copeland through nine open-heart operations.

He died July 3, 1997. Shemekiah thought her father would be around longer.

"We had no intention of losing him," she says sadly, noting that it was one year from the day of his death. "At that point, he was doing so well."

"He was tired, but he had a right to be," she says. "But always, he was strong. He was a bull. I'm starting to realize that I'm going to miss him. He was so good to me."

When Copeland performs this



Courtesy of Shemekiah Copeland

Singer Shemekiah Copeland plays Saturday afternoon at Clinton Square.

### The details

**What:** Shemekiah Copeland in concert at the New York State Budweiser Blues Festival.

**When:** 3:45 p.m. Saturday.

**Where:** Clinton Square Performance Harley-Davidson main stage

**Tickets:** Admission is free to Clinton Square events.

**To hear Copeland on NewsLine:** Call 472-2111. Once connected, punch in 8864. The tune is "Ghetto Child."

weekend at the New York State Budweiser Blues Fest, at 3:45 p.m. Saturday at Clinton Square, she swears she'll fear the presence of Johnny Clyde on stage.

"He's there with me every time I sing a song," she says. "My songs or his songs, I know I'm going to get a push from him."

Her brand of blues is making a name for itself, too.

Her debut disc on Alligator Records, "Turn the Heat Up," is a fiery blend of funk, R&B and Memphis soul, with a touch of gospel intensity for good measure.

In fact, when Bruce Iglauer, the president of Alligator Records, heard Shemekiah sing the first time, he knew he wanted her for his label, arguably the most prestigious of all blues imprints.

"I think she will be the next," he says.

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