

As a family, the Waltons don't attract much attention. Lying somewhere between the Huxtables and your typical South Side working class family, they play, work, joke and bicker like the rest of us. Catch them on a holiday, when school is out, and you will find the family sprawled out on a pair of old, cracked vinyl sofas. They crowd around the TV, watching the Soaps. There's Cora, her daughter Joyce, and two grand-children: 16-year-old Wendy and 10-year-old Lee.

Who? Those names are so rusty Cora doesn't even remember how to spell them all when a visitor asks. This family isn't big on formalities: they all use nicknames. The kids are better known as Peaches and Candyman; their mom goes by Cookie. And Grandma? She's Koko Walton Taylor.

Koko picked up her nickname from her favorite childhood treat, hot chocolate. The name just stuck. Walton was bumped when Koko married Robert "Pops" Taylor back in 1953. These days, her name has expanded to the grand title "Koko Taylor, Queen of the Blues," as she sits—and sings—at the top of her trade.

There was no way to predict, when she was growing up in Memphis, that little Koko would someday grow up to be one of the best known female blues belters in the world. For such an atypical woman, Koko Taylor had a rather typical childhood. Typical, at least, for a poor black girl.

Born on a sharecropper's farm outside of town, Koko didn't have much of a chance in school; there was no place in the white children's classrooms for her, and formal education stopped after the sixth grade.

As is the case with so many poor teens, she married young: tying the knot with Pops Taylor at the age of 18, and following him north to Chicago, where friends said they could both find work.

Following so many wishful-thinking, but uneducated black women, Koko found work, alright: cleaning fancy, suburban houses and downtown offices. Pops worked for a packing company.

But the Taylors lived for the nights.

Evenings would find them at some of the city's liveliest blues clubs: Silvero's on Lake Street, the Celebrity Club on South Kedzie, and Pepper's Lounge on 43rd street. There, Koko found, in person, the singers she'd grown up with, when she'd spend hours listening to the B.B. King Blues Hour on her radio in Memphis.

In-between commercials for Pepticon vitamin tonic, Koko would sing along with the likes of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and the occasional female singer, like Lucille Spann. Koko can still sing the Pepticon jingle (authored by B.B. King, not one of his finest lyrics): "Pepticon sure is good, Pepticon sure is good, you can get it anywhere in your neighborhood."

When they recognized the singers in Chicago's clubs, Koko and Pops hung around till they invited her to sit in for a number or two. Soon, she was a familiar voice to club regulars and, when Willie Dixon caught her act, he got Koko her first recording contract, with Chess Records.

She's been growlin' the blues ever since.

Koko Taylor has always looked at singing like a job. A new career path that takes her into nightclubs instead of other people's homes. A career that may pay better than housekeeping, but still has enough rocky times to keep her humble. During those rocky times—as recent as the 1970s—Koko wasn't too proud to slip in a bit of domestic work behind her manager's back to help make ends meet.

"I've never seen a rich blues entertainer yet," Koko says. And, despite her claim to be one of the best-selling blues singers, she still tours the country by van to save on travel costs, touring ten months out of the year.

"I know about hard work, and I don't mind doing it," Taylor says, and following her to any local gig proves this girl works hard for her money.

The van pulls up to the club entrance about a half hour before show time. Koko and her Blues Machine pile out. Since she's not far from home, the family's come along, too, including Candyman, the ten year old grandson who knows that if he hangs around backstage long enough, Grandma will call him up to play drums for a few numbers.

They file into a dressing room, where Koko sheds her comfortable jogging suit for a beaded gown. She ignores the food placed for her. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and rolls will taste good later, but would hardly feel good on a nervous stomach.

Yes, watching Koko Taylor, you can't help but get the feeling she's at least a bit nervous. She must have sat through thousands of warm-up acts, but as she watches tonight's band, smoothing her skirt and staring straight ahead, she blinks hard and gives a half-smile. It's not aimed at the reporter who's been by her side all night: it's an unconscious tic, a sign of butterflies at work in the pit of her stomach.

There's no need for her to be nervous. The show is a rousing success, met by cheers and stamping feet, with the mostly white audience singing along as Koko swings into her best-known tunes. Even Candyman, when he finally takes a turn at the drums, is applauded wildly.

It's hard work, but it's not without its rewards. Koko beams on stage.

Back in the dressing room after the show, Koko picks up the pay envelope left for herself and the band—she'd come by earlier in the day, but opted to wait until after the show to collect in cash. She pulls on the jogging suit and takes the chicken dinner as carry-out. It fills a few tins, which are loaded into the van along with family and band members when they all head for home.

There has been only one major blip in the Blues Machine's busy tour schedule. On a very foggy night in February, 1988, the band's van took a wrong turn. Seriously wrong.

The road to the next concert date at the University of the South in Swanee, Tennessee, “had more curves than a cobra,” Koko recalls. The van blew out a tire and plunged over a cliff on Lookout Mountain. “It was about 200 feet to the bottom,” she says. “It was like a nightmare—like something in the movies. On the way down, our van hit two trees, and them big limbs held that van there, keeping it from going down to the bottom of that cliff. We stayed there, hung up in those trees until rescue came, about an hour later.”

Those trees saved six lives: Koko, Pops and the four members of the Blues Machine. The trees didn’t save any of them from injuries, however. Koko ended up with a broken shoulder, collarbone and three cracked ribs. Pops went into cardiac arrest, and his health never totally improved. The others’ injuries ranged from broken bones and pelvis to contusions and back injuries. The Taylors had medical insurance; band members did not.

When she was able to perform again, Koko starred in a benefit concert that raised more than \$50,000 to pay their bills. There was also enough to tide Koko over until she was well enough to resume her full touring schedule.

She was back on the road in June of that year, declaring, “I don’t intend for the accident to change nothin’. It was just what it says: an accident. That could’ve happened if I’d been right here in the house. I could’ve left, going to the grocery store, and got run down, or whatever. I could’ve been here in my bed, and got half burned to death ‘cause my house caught on fire. I hope it never happens again but, still, it was just an accident.”

Even before “superwoman” was a nickname yuppie moms aspired to, Koko did her best to balance long hours and frequent business trips with her role as doting mother. A housekeeper stayed with Cookie when her mom and dad were touring. Still, Koko made the most of the time she did have to spend with her daughter and, later, with her grandchildren.

Though her parents were often communicating with her only by phone, “Cookie always knew that didn’t mean we weren’t close, or didn’t mean we didn’t love her as much,” Koko insists, adding, “If I wasn’t on the road, I’d be in Wilmette, Winnetka or Glencoe doing domestic work. She knew I had to make a living.” The heavy travel schedule started when Cookie was ten, the year of Koko’s big hit, *Wang Dang Doodle*.

Cookie has mixed feelings about those days. “It was exciting, but it’s still always hard to not have a mother around. I don’t care how good a housekeeper was, it’s not like a mom.”

Like some odd genetic trait, the yen for the blues must skip a generation. Cookie wants no part of her mother’s club land. “I’m in the church, and you can’t mix a life with God with the blues,” she says firmly. At the same time, she can’t pretend Koko’s chosen career has exactly made her a fallen woman.

Koko has no real vices. Cookie knows she doesn’t smoke, drink or take drugs. The only vice she can hang on her mother is banana pudding. “She eats it every day—every day. It’s so bad she’ll go hide in the

bedroom and eat it.” Koko herself doesn’t volunteer any information about that secret indulgence, shrugging her shoulders and quoting her friends, “I’m just a square. They say I’m not hip, not cool. No, I’m *hot!*”

Still, mixing it up in the music business is some kind of nameless vice in which Cookie wants no part. “I wish Mom well, but for myself, I chose another life. Everybody in my church prays for her.”

Try telling that to Cookie’s son, Candyman.

“When we’re rehearsing in the basement, he’s always there,” Koko says. There’s no hiding a grandma’s pride when she adds, “On the drums, he’s as good as Frank Alexander, who I’m paying!” For now, Candyman slips in for an occasional track on Koko’s albums. He plays in church, and sits in on local gigs with grandma whenever he can. If you still doubt he will someday be a part of her Blues Machine, just mention, even casually, that you’re interested in his talents. Koko will lead you into the family room, clear out the soap opera fans, and pop in a series of video tapes with cameo appearances by her grandson.

There’s the 1984 Dan Ackroyd PBS special, “Sweet Home, Chicago,” where Candyman strums a guitar twice his size. There’s Big Twist’s music video, “Too Much Bar-B-Q,” Candyman’s acting debut as young Twist. And there he is, banging the drums on one of Koko’s concert tapes. Yep, the kid has talent.

There was a time, not so long ago, when one couldn’t have written this much about Koko without giving almost equal time to Pops Taylor. He brought her to Chicago, helped her work her way into the blues scene, then served as her manager, driving the van and keeping the band in line.

“He knew how to stand up for his woman,” is the way his daughter describes Pops’ role on the road. She describes Pops as “a well-oiled piece of leather,” adding that she understands why he didn’t stay behind to keep house while Koko toured. “Mom wanted him with her.”

It’s not that Koko couldn’t take care of herself on the road, however. Manager Bruce Iglauer recalls the time she pulled a pistol on a club owner reluctant to pay after a show. Clearly, Pops’ presence means more than safety to Koko.

He’s there, even when the band is rehearsing in the family basement. Pops will perch on a sofa, sometimes snapping his ever-present suspenders, and pulling no punches.

He speaks up after a run-through of *Let the Good Times Roll*, which the band has performed hundreds of times. “Did you feel like you were tied together on that?” The lead guitarist is forced to answer, “Not really.” “That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” Pops replies. No need to say more.

Other times, he tosses in more direct advice. “Make it *funky!*”

The sporadic praise he offers is usually overruled by Koko. "That was alright," Pops offers after a version of Beer Bottle Boogie that seemed to click. But Koko is quick to disagree. "No, it wasn't. I can understand them not knowing it, but don't say it was alright." They continue like that through one song after another. Bickering a bit, sometimes talking over each other, but always in synch.

Pops died last year, after a long illness that seemed to stem from the van accident. Now, Koko holds the band together herself. She's the one who makes sure they get to a gig on time. She rides herd over rehearsals, without Pops to provide the extra set of ears and time-tested insights.

Koko holds the family together, too. The Taylors had lived in their south side bungalow for 27 years, but after one year there without Pops, she decided it was time to move on. She had a house built in suburban Country Club Hills.

"If we didn't move there, I would have gone back to Memphis," Koko says, on one of her last afternoons in the gold lacquer and velvet living room in which she'd grown so comfortable. "The suburbs aren't like this. Here, I like to look out the window, watch the cars go by. Nobody goes by there; it's kind of lonesome." A minute later, she justifies the move, "It's what I've been working for all of these years." No need to add that she didn't do that work alone.

Tough as ever, Koko Taylor seems headed for another of the many peaks that have characterized her long career. The strong sales for her latest album, *Jump for Joy*, are especially gratifying because its title track is one of the few she's written herself.

Taylor makes her silver screen debut this fall. Her voice has been heard singing on two major motion pictures: the 1986 thriller, *Eight Million Ways to Die* and a year later, the teen flick, *Adventures in Babysitting*. In the upcoming *Wild at Heart*, starring Nicholas Cage and Willem Dafoe, we'll see Koko performing on stage.*

"This time, they can see that it's me," she says, beaming with pride. Ironically, it won't sound as much like Koko as it did on her other films. She'll be singing two songs written by director David Lynch. "Weird tunes," Koko says, breaking into song to demonstrate. "I fell for you ba-by, like a bohnhhhmb." Her voice croons at its very lowest register. To Koko, it sounds like one of the "cream puff" singers a true blues mama disdains. But the working girl takes over, and feels only pride.

"I'd have sung *Rock-a-bye, Baby*," she says, the consummate performer.

* *Wild at Heart* drew "mixed to negative reviews," according to Wikipedia, but did win the *Palme d'Or* at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival.