

# “Wang Dang Doodle”—Koko Taylor (1966)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Frank Luby (guest post)\*



*Koko Taylor*

Willie Dixon, the poet laureate of blues music and a key architect of electrified Chicago blues, reportedly wrote or co-wrote over 500 songs, including some so influential that bands such as the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Steppenwolf, the Doors, Cream, and the Butterfield Blues Band covered them on their debut albums.<sup>1</sup>

That legacy confronted Chuck Berry, Bruce Hornsby, and the Grateful Dead’s Bob Weir with a tough decision as they helped celebrate Dixon’s posthumous induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994: which of those 500 songs should they perform live at the induction banquet?

They went with “Wang Dang Doodle,” the irresistibly upbeat and infectious party song Dixon originally wrote in the 1950s. With Dixon’s daughter Shirley on vocals, the band stretched the song into a seven-minute gem that could have lasted, to quote the song’s chorus, “all night long.”<sup>2</sup>

If not for a fortuitous decision by Dixon in the mid-1960’s, however, the performance of “Wang Dang Doodle” would have been an odd choice, not an obvious one, on such a special occasion. After the song’s two previous recorded versions--one by Dixon and one by Howlin’ Wolf--failed to find an audience, the song would have drifted into the dusty vinyl bins of obscurity if Dixon hadn’t persuaded a powerful and evocative blues singer named Koko Taylor to record it.

Born Cora Walton in 1928 in Bartlett, Tennessee, just east of Memphis, Koko Taylor seemed destined to spread happiness through song. She began singing in church at an early age and also formed a makeshift band with her siblings. “My brother couldn’t afford a guitar, so he made one from hay bale wire and nails, and my older brother made a harmonica from a corn cob. It was the only entertainment we had,” she once said.

When a young DJ named B.B. King played Memphis Minnie's "Me and My Chauffeur Blues" on radio station WDIA, it sparked Taylor's love for "this great sound called the blues."<sup>3</sup> After she and her husband moved to Chicago, she worked as a domestic during the day and sat in at South Side blues clubs at night. One at night at Silvio's, Dixon heard her with Howlin' Wolf and thought she had "the right voice" to sing the blues.<sup>4</sup>

He must have needed plenty of persuasion to sway Taylor to record "Wang Dang Doodle," because she didn't exactly leap at the chance.

"I hated it and I didn't want to do it," she said.

But, as her producer, Dixon not only got his way, but also lived up to his jack-of-all-trades reputation in the Chess Records building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago. He assembled a session band that included Buddy Guy on guitar, Gene "Daddy G" Barge on saxophone, Jack Meyers on bass, Fred Below on drums, and Lafayette Leake on piano. Johnny Twist teamed with Guy on guitar and claims to have co-arranged the song with Dixon.<sup>5</sup>

No one can argue with the pedigree of that soulful session band, but it was Taylor's vocal delivery that transformed "Wang Dang Doodle" into the hit that would become her signature song for over four decades. Released in early 1966 on Chess's subsidiary label Checker, the song became a major radio hit, first in Chicago and then elsewhere. Described as "hot as July jam" by DJ Pervis Spann at Chess-owned radio station WVON, the song peaked at #4 on the "Billboard" R&B chart in May 1966 and at #58 on "Billboard's" Hot 100 at a time when the golden age of blues music--at least within the walls of Chess Records--had started to decline.<sup>6</sup>

"There's nothing very deep about why people liked it or remember it," said Bruce Iglauer, the founder of Alligator Records, in an interview during the preparation of this article. "It's a great groove to dance to. It's simple. It's fun. It's catchy."

Taylor's rendition also tapped the song's potential. Its roots may not be very deep, but they are extensive. Like the many tributaries that flow together to form the Mississippi River, "Wang Dang Doodle" sits at a unique confluence of many forms of Black music. The title was synonymous with going out and having a good time when Dixon was growing up in the Mississippi Delta, and "wang dang" may derive from the tamer, unaccented "wing ding," a term from the 1920's for a raucous or rowdy party.

The song is a callout or invitation to people with names like "Automatic Slim" and "Razor Totin' Jim," who are arguably the literary cousins of characters that appeared in the oral tradition of toasts, the heroic rhyming stories recited in the Deep South. Profane and improvised, toasts became part of Black folklore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as people--most often men--one-upped each other's stories at parties, on street corners, and in prison. Some observers feel that rap music traces its roots back to toasts.<sup>7</sup>

Dixon used G-rated language to describe the final guest list for that wild party, as well as what those revelers were planning, but he left plenty of room for easy interpretations that can cover the spectrum all the way down to X-rated.

Unlike many blues songs which look backward and then draw the listener into the tension and drama of the present, “Wang Dang Doodle” is all about a future where anything can happen. It’s a list of over-the-top dares and promises about breaking out windows, kicking down doors, and fussin’ and fightin’ till daylight which leaves the listeners to wonder if anyone really shows up or if any of those events happens.

Dixon originally recorded “Wang Dang Doodle” himself in 1954, according to the liner notes on a Chess Records boxed set.<sup>8</sup> Those notes do not mention the accompanying musicians, but it said that the single was never released. According to Dixon’s autobiography, Chess never backed Wolf’s version in 1960, perhaps because Wolf himself dismissed the song. He called it “too old timey ... like some old levee camp number.”

When Wolf sings, he sounds as if he is rushing through tedious task of taking attendance. But when Taylor calls out to people like “Pistol Pete,” “Fast Talkin’ Fanny,” and “Washboard Sam,” her intensity thrusts listeners onto the party bus to the union hall and makes them eager to fulfill all those promises. Her version is all upside and no downside.

Ironically, the song that Taylor helped rescue from obscurity returned the favor to her over a decade later. Iglauer signed her to Alligator in the late 1970s, and he revealed in our recent interview that her previous commercial success with “Wang Dang Doodle” played a role in that decision.

Their collaborations elevated Taylor to her unofficial status as Queen of the Blues and earned her 11 Grammy nominations, including one win in 1984. She performed what the “New York Times” called a “spicy” version of “Wang Dang Doodle” at President George H.W. Bush’s inaugural ball in 1989. But 1989 and the years before and after were also about touring. She brought her magnetism and passion to audiences night after night in small clubs, at concert venues, and at festivals.

On one night in Cleveland in late 1989, Taylor demonstrated that she could wield “Wang Dang Doodle” like a magic wand. She normally made that song her final encore, but on that night, she performed it prior to the encores and whipped the audience into a frenzy. One review of that show began with the line “Tickets to a show this hot should carry a warning label.” Her repertoire that night--from a stirring rendition of “I’d Rather Go Blind” to the rollicking “Hey Bartender”--showed that an artist’s signature song may define her, but it does not confine her. Taylor embodied that spirit right up until she passed away in 2009 at the age of 80.

*Frank Luby is a writer and editor based in Chicago. His book "Blues Flashbacks: The Legends In Their Own Words" compiles his published stories on blues music in the 1980's. It includes two interviews with Koko Taylor as well as interviews with Willie Dixon and Bruce Iglauer. The book was nominated for a 2021 award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research by the Association for Recorded Sound Collections.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.songhall.org/profile/willie\\_dixon](https://www.songhall.org/profile/willie_dixon)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rockhall.com/inductees/willie-dixon>

<sup>3</sup> Luby, Frank, *Blues Flashbacks: The Legends In Their Own Words*. Chicago, Blues Backroads Baseball LLC, 2020, p. 108

<sup>4</sup> Dixon, Willie with Don Snowden, *The Willie Dixon Story: I Am The Blues*, Da Capo Press edition, 1989, p. 176

<sup>5</sup> <https://southsideweekly.com/johnny-twist/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.billboard.com/artist/koko-taylor/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2004/04/6679.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.45worlds.com/cdalbum/cd/chd9353>

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