Written by Jeff Ignatius
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When Nellie “Tiger” Travis sang “Wang Dang Doodle” – Koko Taylor’s signature hit – she could never hit the high notes in the chorus: “We gonna pitch a wang dang doodle all night long.”

“I always did it down low,” Travis said in a recent phone interview. Then came Taylor’s funeral in 2009.

“I hit the high note for the first time ever,” Travis said. “That day, it just came out like that. ... I do it all the time now. ... I can’t explain it. I don’t know if it was a spirit thing, or if I was just so full until it just came out ... . I just know I hit it now.”

It’s fitting that Travis – with Jackie Scott, Dolores Scott, and Chick Rogers – will be performing as part of a Taylor tribute on Saturday night at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival. Beyond singing at the funeral for the Queen of the Blues, Travis has a tribute ballad called “Koko” on her 2011 album *I’m Going Out Tonight*, and her natural growl and rich, soulful voice make her a good interpreter.

And Taylor was a second mother to the singer. More than a decade ago, Travis said, she was singing a New Year’s Eve show at Taylor’s banquet hall. “My mother was videotaping me, and my mother fell dead at my feet,” Travis said. “Koko kind of took me on as her child after that happened. ... We were pretty close. She told me a lot about the business, a lot about different musicians ... .”

Unlike most blues artists – who talk about being infected by the musical style at an early age – Travis grew up on gospel and country in the early 1960s in Mississippi. She tried to break into top 40 in Los Angeles before moving to Chicago in 1992. “It never occurred to me to do blues,”

she said, noting that she came to Chicago because her mother was ill and didn't plan to stay. But then she realized that "it was much easier to break into the blues world [in Chicago] than it was R&B [in California]."

From there, she had to learn blues songs, which she did by listening to Taylor and Big Mama Thornton. But she stressed that even though she wasn't raised on blues music, the blues was in her blood.

"I was always a singer," she said. "The main thing about that was just learning the lyrics. ... I grew up living the blues, because I grew up very poor. I grew up picking and chopping cotton for a living. So that was part of the blues; I just wasn't singing it. [Laughs.] So it was natural to me, because blues was derived from gospel. ... It wasn't anything I had to learn." And she stressed that blues singers need to have the blues in their souls: "You can copy it, but it's not the same thing as coming from your heart."

She started writing her own material for 2000's *I Got It Like That*, and she said that she has much to say. "I've been married five years; I've had a lot to write about my husband," she said with a laugh. Something he told her became the basis for the title track to her 2009 album *I'm in Love with a Man I Can't Stand*. (He has his good qualities: Travis said he is excellent at packing her bags for tours.)

She continues to switch between soul and blues, and she's now recording a Southern-soul album to follow up the bluesy *I'm Going Out Tonight*. One reviewer likened her soul vocals to Gladys Knight, so Travis has earned favorable comparisons to *two* legends.

As for her nickname, Travis originally wanted to be called "Angel."

She recalled: "I just thought 'Angel' fit. But everybody else seemed to think that it didn't. And I have to agree with them now, because – for some reason with the growl and with my strength – 'Tiger' fits for real. ... If you know how dominating a tiger is and how aggressive a tiger is, that's who I am [on stage]. ... 'Tiger' just rang a bell."

She still thinks of herself as an angel, though, and referenced the famous lyric “The angel in your arms this morning is gonna be the devil in someone else’s arms tonight”: “Angel is who I really am in my heart. ... I’m just not the devil part. I’m just a tiger up on that end.”