

Willie Mae "BIG MOMMA" Thornton



Willie Mae Thornton was born December 11, 1926, on the rural outskirts of Montgomery. She was one of six siblings. Her father was a minister and her mother sang in the church choir. Willie Mae grew up singing in church and learned drums and harmonica, perhaps from a brother who was an outstanding player, later known as "Harp" Thornton.

Montgomery native Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (1926-1984) Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton Willie Mae's mother died when she was 14, and she took a job cleaning a local saloon and soon was substituting for the regular singer. Accounts of how she attracted the notice of Atlanta music promoter Sammy Green vary. In one version, he heard her win first prize in a local amateur contest; in another she helped his artists move a piano up the club stairs. In any event, in 1941 Thornton joined Green's Georgia-based show, The Hot Harlem Revue, and remained with him for seven years. Billed as the "New Bessie Smith," she sang and danced throughout the south-eastern United States. She later acknowledged the influence of artists heard during this time, including Smith, Ma Rainey, Junior Parker, and Memphis Minnie.

In 1948, Thornton left the Revue and settled in Houston, where she would contribute to the development of the "Texas blues" style. In this period, she

worked with two producers: bandleader Johnny Otis and, most significant, a flamboyant black entrepreneur named Don Robey. Robey reportedly heard Thornton in Houston's El Dorado Ballroom and was impressed with her ability to play multiple instruments, rare for a female singer. He signed her to a five-year contract with his Peacock Records Label. (This independent studio, later called Duke-Peacock, was known for gritty rhythm and blues and gospel and was an important influence on soul music and rock and featured artists such as Marie Adams, Johnny Ace, and a young Little Richard.)

Thornton's open lesbianism caused some tension with Robey, but he produced her first recordings and set up a regular performance schedule for her in his Houston club, The Bronze Peacock, and on the southern performance trail known as the "Chitlin' Circuit." This string of clubs and venues covered the eastern and southern United States and were considered safe for African American musicians to play in. They ranged from the Cotton Club in New York's Harlem neighbourhood to local juke joints in Mississippi. Thornton spent much of the early 1950s on the road or recording for Robey or Johnny Otis when in Houston or Los Angeles.

In 1952 Thornton travelled to New York City with the Otis Show to play the famed Apollo Theatre, where she initially served as the opening act for R&B artists "Little" Esther Phillips and Mel Walker, but soon was promoted to headliner. She first earned the nickname "Big Mama" at this time. In August, at a recording session in southwest Los Angeles, she was approached by the young song writing team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller—soon to become rock & roll legends. They offered her a 12-bar blues vocal called "Hound Dog," which she liked and paired on a single with her own "They Call Me Big Mama" on the B-side. Her exuberant "Hound Dog," laden with open sexual references, whoops and barks, was released nationwide in 1953 and soon topped the R&B charts. Despite its sale of two million copies, Thornton received only \$500. In contrast, Elvis Presley's 1956 version, heavily refined for mainstream audiences, brought him both fame and considerable financial reward. This is perhaps the most notorious example of the inequity that often existed when a black original was covered by a white artist.

Rhythm & blues were soon eclipsed by the growth of rock & roll, and Thornton's career slowed in the mid-1950s, although she was only in her thirties. Her agreements with both Robey and Otis expired, and in the late 1950s, she moved to San Francisco to perform with her old friend Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, a former Duke-Peacock artist. She had no contract or regular band and endured a number of difficult years. Fortunately, traditional blues were revived by the mid-1960s through the enthusiastic interest of artists such as Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones, and the Bay Area became a centre of blues activity. Although she still did not have regular support, Thornton always was invited to the Monterey Jazz Festival and in 1965 toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival, an unusual honour for a female artist.

In the late 1960s, she made several seminal recordings for Chris Strachwitz, producer of Arhoolie Records, including *Big Mama Thornton: In Europe* (1966), backed by Buddy Guy, Walter Horton, and Freddy Below; *Big Mama Thornton with the Chicago Blues Band* (1967), with Muddy Waters, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, and Otis Spann; and *Ball & Chain* (1968), a compilation of original work by Thornton, Hopkins, and Larry Williams. Rock artists took note of these powerful recordings. The title song of *Ball & Chain* became a signature song for Thornton's great admirer Janis Joplin, and in September 1968 Thornton appeared at the Sky River Rock Festival with a line up that included the Grateful Dead, James Cotton, and Santana.

Willie Mae Thornton performs at the Museum of Willie Mae Thornton Performs in New York City. The 1970s brought more documentation of her work: *Saved* (Pentagram Records), *She's Back* (Backbeat), and *Jail and Sassy Mama!* (Vanguard). Also at this time, however, years of heavy drinking began to affect Thornton's health. She had to be led to the bandstand at the 1979 San Francisco Blues Festival, and despite illness gave a stunning performance. She survived a serious auto accident and rallied to perform at the 1983 Newport Jazz Festival with Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, resulting in a live recording *The Blues—A Real Summit Meeting* (Buddha

Records). Thornton's final compilation, *Quit Snoopin' Round My Door*, was released posthumously by Ace Records (U.K.). Willie Mae Thornton died of a heart attack in Los Angeles on July 25, 1984, at the age of 57. The funeral was led by her old friend, now Reverend Johnny Otis, and many artists paid tribute. She was buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery in Los Angeles. That same year, she was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame.

Discography: [Hound Dog](#); [My Man Called Me](#); [Yes I cried](#).

More of Willie Mae Thornton tunes [here...](#)