

Willie Mae "Big Mama"
Thornton, 1965



'BIG MAMA' THORNTON

HER SONGS, SOUND, STYLE, AND
ATTITUDE MADE FORMATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS
TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROCK & ROLL.

BY MAUREEN MAHON

Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton stands on the television studio soundstage, arms swinging in time, and belts out “Hound Dog.” Her resonant voice is assured as she sings the opening double-entendre lines: “*You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog, been snoopin’ round my door / You can wag your tail, but I ain’t gonna feed you no more.*” Thornton and her song reached back to the tradition of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, Black women blues singers of the 1920s who sang about love and trouble with forthright verve. This 1965 performance appeared on German television when Thornton was part of the American Folk Blues Festival, an annual tour that brought the luminaries of American blues – artists like Thornton, Willie Dixon, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Howlin’ Wolf – to Europe between 1962 and 1970. Thornton and her fellow blues troubadours who traversed Europe made the African American blues tradition available to a new audience of young, predominantly white, listeners. This new fanbase included British musicians like Long John Baldry, Alexis Korner, John Mayall, and members of the Animals, the Rolling Stones, and the Yardbirds, who drew on the blues to create the styles that came to be called blues rock, psychedelic rock, hard rock, or, simply, rock.

This scenario would have been almost impossible to imagine when Thornton began her singing career two-and-a-half decades earlier in Alabama, but by the mid-1960s, she had already served as a source for rock & roll, when Elvis Presley launched his career by covering her 1952 hit single “Hound Dog” (by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller) in 1956. A decade later, she would play that role again when Janis Joplin launched her career by covering Thornton’s song “Ball and Chain.” Thornton’s vocal style inspired Presley and Joplin. “My singing comes from experience,” Thornton said. “My own experience. My own feeling. I got my feelin’s for everything.” Like many blues musicians of her vintage, Thornton heard rock & roll as “nuthin’ but the blues speeded up,” and she did not think of herself as a rock & roll singer. Still, her songs, sound, style, and attitude made formative contributions to the development of rock & roll.

Thornton’s first and only Number One hit, “Hound Dog,” spent fourteen weeks on *Billboard*’s R&B chart in 1953, seven of them in the top spot. Featuring a guitar, bass, and drums and none of the horns that dominated most 1950s R&B recordings, the track’s stripped-down instrumental sound allowed Thornton’s brash vocals and ad libs to dominate the track. “Hound Dog” was a best-selling record for Thornton’s Houston-based label, Peacock Records, and launched Leiber and Stoller on their own path to rock & roll success.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
On the road with the fourth
American Folk Festival,
1965; feeling the beat,
1969; with the Muddy
Waters Blues Band
(with Waters on the far
right), San Francisco, 1965.



“ THORNTON IS A CRUCIAL SOURCE OF THE BLUES-BASED VOCALS THAT GENERATIONS OF ROCK & ROLLERS HAVE ABSORBED. ”

When Presley covered Thornton's "Hound Dog," he replaced the original's narrative – of a woman exerting her agency in a relationship – with a scenario about a literal dog's failure to catch a rabbit. His sped-up version of Thornton's song turned it into a delivery system for rock & roll excitement, going to Number One on *Billboard's* R&B, country, and pop charts in 1956. It was the best-selling record of his career. Presley had mined the sound, feel, energy, and attitude of the blues that Thornton and other African American artists so masterfully performed and, in so doing, created something a growing number of young listeners could connect with. But relative to the influence of "Hound Dog," Thornton did not make a lot of money from her recording. "I got one check for \$500 and I never seen another," she once told a reporter, but she never relinquished her claim to the song. She always performed it in concert and she always told her audience that she had been the first one to sing it.

Thornton was accustomed to standing up for herself. Born in Ariton, Alabama, in 1926 and raised in Montgomery, she went out on her own at the age of 14, when she joined Sammy Green's Hot Harlem Revue after winning first prize for her singing at a talent contest. During the 1940s, she honed her skills as a singer, dancer, comedian, harmonica player, and drummer, traversing the southern Chitlin Circuit with the traveling show. She parted ways with Green's troupe after almost a decade over a dispute about her pay and put down roots in Houston, where she signed to Don Robey's Peacock Records in 1950. Robey paired her with rhythm & blues bandleader Johnny Otis, who took her out on the road with his orchestra. Thornton won over audiences with her vocal power, joking repartee, harmonica skills, and personal charisma. After bringing down the house at Harlem's Apollo Theater, she got the nickname "Big Mama," a reference to her physical stature and vocal power. It was Otis who put Thornton together with Leiber and Stoller, then still fledgling songwriters. Inspired by Thornton's tough demeanor and vocal prowess, they wrote "Hound Dog" for her.

By the time Presley recorded the song, things were souring for Thornton in Houston. She was mourning the death of her touring partner, R&B singer Johnny Ace, and her ties with Peacock had dissolved. She tried her luck in the Bay Area, singing in the Black clubs of Oakland and Richmond in the late 1950s and, in the 1960s, riding the wave of renewed interest in the blues. In 1964, Ralph Gleason, the dean of San Francisco music writers, asserted that she was "the best woman blues singer

alive today." A standout figure, she was known on the scene for taking the stage wearing a shirt, jacket, and slacks in the style of the male blues artists she toured with. In keeping with the renegade spirit of rock & roll, her sartorial choices revealed a defiant attitude toward the rules of feminine comportment.

Thornton's unconventionality and her great blues singing appealed to Janis Joplin, who was making her way in the Bay Area's music scene in 1966. After hearing Thornton sing the then-unreleased "Ball and Chain" at a club, she asked Big Mama backstage for permission for her band Big Brother and the Holding Company to cover the song. With Thornton's nod, the band's rendition became a centerpiece of Big Brother's sets; in a career-establishing performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, Janis sang Thornton's lyrics about the pain of love with raw, soul-baring, and expressive vocals. Her wails and wrenching screams shifted Thornton's blues into overdrive.

By tapping into Thornton's song and style, Joplin set her voice and the vocal sound of rock & roll free. Like Presley, Joplin took Thornton's vocals in new directions, creating a fresh vocal template for the form. From Presley and Joplin to Robert Plant, Ann Wilson, Pat Benatar, Axl Rose, Kurt Cobain, Jack White, and Brittany Howard, Thornton is a crucial source of the blues-based vocals that generations of rock & rollers have absorbed and elaborated.

Thornton died at 57 in 1984 – the same year the Blues Foundation inducted her into its Blues Hall of Fame in recognition of her contributions to the art of the blues. Some of her finest moments are captured on *Big Mama Thornton in Europe*, *Big Mama Thornton With the Muddy Waters Blues Band*, and *Ball N' Chain*, which feature her collaborating with Waters, Fred McDowell, Otis Spann, and Buddy Guy. Thornton's spirit lives on in these Arhoolie recordings, in the sound of rock's vocals, and in the Willie Mae Rock Camp, a free music laboratory dedicated to empowering girls and gender-expansive youth through music education. The Brooklyn-based nonprofit, founded in 2004 by feminist musicians, states on its website: "As a strong, Black, female voice in a field dominated by men, Willie Mae Thornton transgressed gender and racial barriers. Underrecognized in her time, her groundbreaking work paved the way for generations of female and gender nonbinary musicians to come." Rock Camp's founders named their enterprise after a woman who represents ideals of creativity, self-expression, and nonconformity – ideals that, like Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton herself, are at the heart of rock & roll.