

MAMA'S VOICE:

The Lasting Influence of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton

By Dr. Maureen Mahon

Adapted for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Blog from research conducted for “Listening for Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s Voice: The Sound of Race and Gender Transgressions in Rock and Roll,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 15 (2011): 1–17.

Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, one of America’s finest blues singers, is probably best known as the woman who originated “Hound Dog,” Elvis Presley’s most successful single, and “Ball ‘n’ Chain,” one of Janis Joplin’s signature songs. Thornton was a masterful performer whose live performances on the blues, rhythm and blues, and rock circuits riveted audiences. Presley and Joplin recognized her genius and borrowed elements of her vocal sound and style of delivery—as well as key parts of her repertoire—as they developed their own creative voices.

Willie Mae Thornton was born on December 11, 1926, in Ariton, Alabama, and grew up in Montgomery. At the age of 14, she left home to pursue her dream of becoming a professional singer. The recent death of her mother and a job cleaning spittoons at a local tavern gave her little reason to refuse the opportunity to join Sammy Green’s Hot Harlem Revue after she successfully auditioned for the troupe. As a member of this traveling variety show, she toured the southern black circuit, honing her skills as a comedian and blues singer in the vein of Bessie Smith. After seven years on the road, Thornton put down roots in Houston. She secured a regular gig singing at the Eldorado Club where her talent brought her to the attention of local black record mogul Don Robey. He signed her to his Peacock Records label and Thornton began recording for him in 1951. She continued to tour, winning over audiences with her vocal power, joking repartee, an ability to play harmonica and drums, and personal charisma. At Harlem’s Apollo Theater, venue manager Frank Schiffman christened her “Big Mama” after she stole the show from headliner Little Esther. The nickname referenced her physical size—she was a tall, heavysset woman—and the magnitude of her voice.

In 1953, Thornton scored her first and only chart hit with a song Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, then fledgling songwriters, had written for her. “Hound Dog” spent 14 weeks on Billboard’s R&B charts, seven of them in the number one slot. Thornton’s “Hound Dog” differed from most of the rhythm and blues records of the era in its spare arrangement. There are none of the honking saxophone solos or pounding piano flourishes that marked the R&B sound. Instead, supported by guitar, bass and drums, her resonant vocals dominate the foreground, conveying her haughty relief at being through with a trifling man. Thornton maintains a confident attitude, bringing the blues tradition of outspoken women into the R&B context and helping to set the style for rock and roll by putting sexuality and play with gender expectations in the foreground.

Thornton's "Hound Dog" was so popular that it spawned 10 covers before Elvis Presley recorded it in 1956. Presley's version of the song borrows heavily from the rendition he saw lounge act Freddie Bell and the Bellboys perform in Las Vegas, but he also incorporated elements of Thornton's style: The snarl in her voice and the ways she snaps off the words in the song's opening, for example. His faster tempo eradicates some of the confident defiance of Thornton's original, but he imports her swagger and her forceful vocals, following her practice of "hollering it out" in a deep, husky voice. Ironically, Presley's sexy masculinity comes into being in part as he draws on Thornton's confrontational black femininity.

Thornton's sound and attitude were also important resources for Janis Joplin, who encountered the blues great in the mid-1960s when both women were living and working in the San Francisco Bay area. Thornton had been active on the region's blues scene since moving there from Houston in 1956. She became known to the young white blues revivalists and helped to shape the sound of the next phase of rock and roll, most notably through her connection to Joplin who recorded Thornton's composition "Ball 'n' Chain." Joplin's vocal style, which rock critic Robert Christgau described as "two-thirds Willie Mae Thornton and one-third Kitty Wells," partly grew out of singing against the volume produced by her band. Her full-throttle vocal approach is key to her self-expression and it helped set the template for metal, punk and grunge vocals in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties. Joplin's biographer Alice Echols notes that she could sing in a "pretty voice," but that she was adamant that she didn't want to do so. Studying an artist like Thornton, a blues shouter who sang with considerable volume and didn't try to "sound pretty," gave Joplin a viable alternative. Modeling her vocals after Thornton's rough and commanding delivery enabled Joplin to find her singing voice.

Commenting on her music, Thornton said: "My singing comes from my experience...My own experience. I never had no one teach me nothin'. I never went to school for music or nothin'. I taught myself to sing and to blow harmonica and even to play drums by watchin' other people! I can't read music, but I know what I'm singing! I don't sing like nobody but myself." By singing like herself, Thornton created a distinctive sound that thrilled audiences and inspired her fellow musicians, earning her considerable respect—if not a lot of money. She was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1984. A quintessential troubadour whose compelling vocals left a lasting imprint on rock and roll, Thornton was frequently on the road, battling the blues until her death in Los Angeles on July 25, 1984.

*Willie Mae Thornton, undated.
From the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Records--Curatorial Division*

