



Thornton, Willie Mae "Big Mama" (1926-1984)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A powerhouse performer noted for her no-nonsense stage presence and a penchant for cross-dressing, blues singer and songwriter "Big Mama" Thornton not only established a signature rhythm-and-blues style of her own, but also inspired mainstream rockers such as Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin. Her career spanned four decades, positioning her as a link between the blues divas of the 1930s and the blues revivalists of the 1960s.

As with many African-American singers, Thornton's career began in church. Born on December 11, 1926, she was one of a Montgomery, Alabama preacher's seven children. As a child, she sang in the choir alongside her mother.

Conspicuously large for her age, Thornton left school early. After her mother died when she was barely a teenager, she cleaned a tavern to help support the family. She taught herself to play drums and harmonica by watching others. When the scheduled singer failed to appear one night, Thornton persuaded the proprietor to let her fill the gig.

At 14 she won a local talent show, impressing blues promoter Sammy Green. He signed her to tour the South with his Atlanta-based Hot Harlem Review. Although billed as a successor to Bessie Smith, Thornton was already developing her trademark persona as an imposing blues belter in the style of Memphis Minnie and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey.

Settling in Houston in 1948, Thornton worked its vibrant club scene, rubbing shoulders with the era's top blues and R&B performers. In 1951 Peacock Records owner Don Robey signed her for a five-year performing and recording contract.

Robey recruited her for the Johnny Otis Rhythm and Blues Caravan, bringing her national exposure including her first show-stopping appearance at New York's Apollo Theater in 1952. A robust woman weighing over 300 pounds at the height of her career, her billing became "Big Mama Thornton" around this time although it is likely that she used the nickname well before then.

Otis furthered Thornton's career by asking songwriters Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller to write for her. Their "Hound Dog," embellished with Thornton's growling delivery, topped Billboard's R&B charts in 1953.

Thornton's experience with "Hound Dog" is one of the most frequently cited examples of the recording industry's appropriation of African-American artists' creativity. Elvis Presley's mainstream version of Thornton's only number one hit in 1956 so eclipsed her original as to obscure her achievement. Moreover, Thornton received only \$500 for her recording and received no royalties from later re-issues. The line "Bow wow to you, too," with which she ended subsequent performances of the song, was her retort to Presley's success with her material.

Similarly, in 1960 Thornton wrote and recorded "Ball and Chain," a soulful lament about obsessive love.

However, the record company retained the copyright and again Thornton was denied income from the song when Janis Joplin's cover became a hit with white fans.

Joplin acknowledged Thornton's authorship, however, and brought her to the attention of blues revival audiences. Thornton's career enjoyed a modest resurgence in the 1960s, bolstered by new recordings for established labels like Vanguard and Arhoolie and several television performances. She toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival troupe and made multiple appearances at the Monterey and Newport Jazz Festivals.

By the late 1970s Thornton was settled in California but a drastic decline in health had shrunk her once formidable size down to 95 pounds. She subsisted primarily on gin-spiked milk and appeared frail on stage but continued performing with soul-searing gusto into her final years, appearing as late as 1983 with Muddy Waters and B. B. King.

Thornton's preference for men's clothes was evident early on. Promoters coaxed her into skirts and gowns for the stage and early in her career she performed as the heavy-set woman of her moniker. As time went by, however, she asserted a more defiantly masculine appearance, often performing in a man's suit jacket and straw hat. Photos from her peak years show her jamming as one of the boys. However, the lyrics she sang and wrote, such as "Willie Mae's Blues," convey a woman's perspective.

Despite her rough-hewn persona, Thornton's singing ranged from the buoyant groove of "Sassy Mama" to the knife-edged intimacy of "Sweet Little Angel." She was equally adept with the rock tempo of "Partnership Blues" and the protracted cadence of "Hard Times," and her melancholy treatments of "Bad Luck Got My Man" and "I'm All Fed Up" prompt comparisons with Bessie Smith.

Scant information exists regarding Thornton's relationships, though she is widely assumed to have enjoyed lesbian affairs. During the early years in the South she seems to have had a son whom the state removed from her custody, possibly because of the hard-drinking and erratic lifestyle of a traveling blues singer. She suffered another loss in 1954 when friend and co-performer Johnny Ace accidentally--and fatally--shot himself in her presence prior to their Christmas Eve show.

One constant in her life was younger sister Mattie Thornton Fields who became Thornton's companion and care-giver when her health deteriorated. They shared a boarding-house residence in Los Angeles at the time of Thornton's death on July 25, 1984. Fields had endured her own share of calamities and wrote the lyrics to "Everybody Happy But Me," which Thornton recorded in 1975.

Biographical sources report that Thornton died alone and destitute. Jeannie Cheatham's memoir and Jack Jones' obituary, however, cite second-hand accounts that loved ones were with her when she collapsed from a heart attack, discrepancies that might reflect mourners' wishes to soften the tragedy.

Former bandleader-turned-reverend Johnny Otis presided at her funeral.

She was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1984.

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