

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton - Newport Folk Festival 1969

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 16 May 2019 13:58 -

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01. (Intro) 0:39 02. Mother In Law 4:04 03. Rock Me Baby 5:08 04. (Band Intros) 1:40 05. Ball And Chain 6:07 06. Stage Banter 1:05 07. Hound Dog 3:12 08. Swing It On Home 7:19
Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton - vocals, harmonica, drums Samuel Lawhorn - guitar
Pinetop Perkins - piano Curtis Tillman - bass Eddie Horton - drums

Bridging the gap between seminal originators like Bessie Smith and later-era blues divas like Koko Taylor, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton enjoyed a long illustrious career spanning four decades. Blessed with a powerfully pure and melodious voice and an equally strong personality, Thornton would have a profound influence that stretched far beyond the blues community. A self-taught drummer, harmonica player, and songwriter, Thornton was that rare triple threat who could play, sing, and write, and whose talents became a magnet for many of the greatest blues musicians of the era. The likes of Muddy Waters and his band, Lightnin' Hopkins and Buddy Guy all served to enhance the music of Big Mama Thornton, both in the studio and on stage. Her recordings and the blues phraseology of her singing style, which could be strong and sexy one minute and unequivocally delicate the next, would inspire nearly everyone that encountered her music, including the greatest of her black contemporaries, like the aforementioned Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins to subsequent generations of white superstars like Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin.

Born in rural Alabama in 1926, Thornton's introduction to music began like many of her peers, in the Southern Baptist church, where her father was a minister and her mother a singer. Following her mother's death in 1941, the 14 year old began a seven-year tenure with Sammy Green's Georgia-based show, The Hot Harlem Revue. Often promoted as the "New Bessie Smith," Thornton sang her way throughout the southeastern United States, absorbing the influences of seminal blues singers like Smith, Ma Rainey, Memphis Minnie, and Junior Parker, while gaining valuable singing and stage experience.

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In 1948, Thornton relocated to Houston, Texas. Three years later she began her recording career, signing with the Houston-based Peacock Records in 1951, a label specializing in gritty rhythm and blues and gospel recordings that would have a significant influence on soul and rock & roll music in the decades to follow. The following year (1952), Thornton joined label mate and bandleader Johnny Otis' traveling revue and played at New York City's famed Apollo Theatre, where she began as the opening act for R&B artists Esther Phillips and Mel Walker. Her undeniable charisma and vocal prowess soon had her advancing to headliner status and it was during this stint that she first earned the nickname "Big Mama."

At a Los Angeles recording session that August, Thornton first encountered the young songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who encouraged her to record a new 12-bar blues vocal they had written, called "Hound Dog." The single, despite being laden with sexual references, double entendres, and exuberant whoops and barks (backed with Thornton's equally provocative original, "They Call Me Big Mama," on the B-side), became a smash hit the following year, selling nearly two million copies and topping the R&B charts. One of the most obvious and notorious examples of the financial inequity that often existed between black and white performers, Thornton would earn a lifetime total of a mere \$500 for her recording, while Elvis Presley's version recorded three years later and revised for a mainstream audience, brought him international fame and considerably greater financial reward.

During the 1960s, Thornton relocated to San Francisco and remained a popular fixture on the club circuit and by the middle of the decade began a second resurgence. In 1966, Thornton recorded "Big Mama Thornton With The Muddy Waters Blues Band," which featured Sammy Lawhorn and Muddy Waters himself as her guitarists. Two years later, she would record the equally exciting Ball 'n' Chain album, this time with Lightnin' Hopkins serving as her guitar player. Both of these albums would have a profound influence, especially in San Francisco, where they would be embraced as strongly as those by Muddy Waters himself and the early Butterfield Blues Band, becoming part of the sonic blueprint for the San Francisco sound.

All of which makes this previously unheard Big Mama Thornton performance, recorded at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival so utterly compelling. Not only does this capture Thornton at a peak moment, but her band is comprised of an incredible roster of blues musicians, all notable for their contributions to the most important recordings ever to come out of Chicago's Chess Studios. Featuring guitarist Sammy Lawhorn (who never sounded better than he does right here!) and pianist Pinetop Perkins, not to mention the formidable rhythm section of Chess session men Curtis Tillman and Eddie Horton, this is a blazing performance that makes it abundantly clear just how incredible Thornton could be on stage.

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The set kicks off with "Mother In Law," a nod to Junior Parker, one of Thornton's major influences. This bluesy shuffle features both vocal and harmonica performances by Thornton and superb fiery guitar work from Lawhorn, setting the stage for the fireworks to come. Thornton's harmonica stylings also launch the deep sway of "Rock Me Baby" to follow, which showcases the powerfully pure tone of her vocals. This also features excellent piano work from Perkins throughout and a guitar solo from Lawton that burns with so much intensity that Thornton spontaneously encourages him to extend the solo even further than usual. Following some humorous stage banter and Thornton's introduction of her musicians, they delve deep into the delicious slow blues of "Ball And Chain," which would become a signature cover for Janis Joplin that same year. Again, Lawton burns right off the bat, inspiring a highly-engaged vocal performance from Thornton. Perkins dances all over the piano and Lawton's guitar solo, which incorporates plenty of reverb, whammy bar tremolo, and a touch of wah-wah pedal, manages to psychedelically outshine nearly everything coming out of San Francisco at the time. This is a smoldering slow blues of the highest order that skillfully increases the intensity until the Newport audience is literally going nuts.

Following some more humorous stage banter that gives listeners a glimpse of Thornton's strong personality, in which she declares, "This is the record I made Elvis Presley rich on," Thornton and band kick into "Hound Dog." Considerably more gritty and arguably more compelling than Presley's take on the song, Thornton's version is an altogether more smoldering affair. Although distinctly blues-based, the roots of rock music are clearly embedded in her arrangement. With limited stage time due to the nature of the festival performance, the final song of the set is a bit of an anti-climactic listen, but nonetheless proves that Thornton and band could swing with the best of them. This extended romp through "Swing It On Home" starts out as a great example of the tight musical relationship of Thornton and these incredible musicians, with its sharp stops and starts during the verses and it's swinging abandon on the choruses. Midway, Thornton takes over on drums, and while her solo is sloppy and eventually dissolves completely, she is no doubt having a lot of fun on stage and the crowd responds in kind. With the audience howling to keep it going, the group does just that, vamping on the song for an additional four minutes while Thornton struts around the stage whipping the Newport audience into a frenzy. ---Alan Bershaw, wolfgangs.com

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