

# “Hound Dog”—Big Mama Thornton (1953)

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Essay by Michael Sporke (guest essay)\*



*Big Mama Thornton*

On 13 August 1952, Willie Mae Thornton, now better known as Big Mama Thornton, recorded, with Johnny Otis and his orchestra a song that would become her signature forever: “Hound Dog.” And it was just a few days after that that she had become “Big Mama Thornton.” That occurred when she performed with Otis at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. As she recalled years later in an interview with Ralph Gleason of the “San Francisco Chronicle”:

I played opposite Little Esther at the Johnny Otis show in 1952, and I didn’t have no record and I was singing the Dominos’ song “Have Mercy, Mercy, Baby,” and I stole the show! We played the Apollo in New York and that’s where they made their mistake. They put me on first. I wasn’t out there to put no one off stage. I was out there to get known and I did! I stopped the show. They had to put the curtain down. Little Esther never got on that first show. That’s when they put my name in lights and Mr. Shiffman, the manager, came backstage hollerin’ to Johnny Otis and poking me in the arms with his fingers (it was sore for a week). “You said you had a star and you got a star! You got to put her on to close the show!”

From that day on, she was called Big Mama Thornton.

The recording of “Hound Dog” became one of the many legends, rumors, about Big Mama Thornton’s career when, by 1956, the rock ‘n’ roll age was already universal. Elvis Presley recorded “Hound Dog” to international acclaim. The Presley record spurred a number of lawsuits over publishing rights, and Big Mama Thornton would, for the rest of her life, tell how Elvis got rich and famous with “her” song. But to set it straight, Mike Stoller and Jerry Lieber wrote “Hound Dog” especially for Big Mama.

Jerry Lieber remembers:

Absolutely, the afternoon we saw her, Johnny Otis told us to come down to his garage in the back of his house, where he used to rehearse. He wanted us to listen to his people and see if we could write some tunes for them. We saw Big Mama and she knocked me cold. She looked like the biggest, baddest, saltiest chick you would ever see. And she was mean, a “lady bear” as they used to call ‘em. She must have been 350 pounds and she had all these scars all over her face. I had to write a song for her

that basically said “Go f--k yourself” but how do you do it without actually saying it? And how to do it telling a story? I couldn’t just have a song full of expletives, hence the “Hound Dog.”

Mike Stoller adds, “Right, ‘You ain’t nothing but a motherf---er.’ She was a wonderful blues singer with a great moaning style, but it was as much her appearance as her blues style that influenced the writing of ‘Hound Dog’ and the idea that we wanted her to growl it, which she rejected at first, her thing was ‘Don’t tell me how to sing no song.’”

“Leiber and Stoller brought me the song, ‘Hound Dog,’” Johnny Otis recalls of the time he produced Big Mama Thornton's recording. “Parts of it weren't really acceptable. I didn't like that reference to chicken and watermelon, [and] said, 'Let's get that crap out of there.'... This came out and it a big smash, and everything was all right. I had half the publishing rights and one third of the song-writing.

“Then Elvis Presley made it a mega hit, and they got greedy. They sued me in court. They won, they beat me out of it. I could have sent my kids to college, like they sent theirs,” Otis said. “But, oh well, if I dwell on that I get quite unhappy, so we try to move on.”

The success of the song pushed Big Mama Thornton for a short while to the front of everyone’s attention. She was added to the “Blues Consolidated Package Show” of Don Robey’s Peacock label, which featured Johnny Ace, Junior Parker and Bobby Blue Bland, it was soon obvious that “Hound Dog” would be the biggest seller in the history of Peacock Records and Big Mama Thornton played it coast to coast. Called the “Peacock’s Belting Lady Killer of the Blues” or the “Reigning King and Queen of Blues,” Big Mama Thornton had a triumphal tour success.

Having a job washing and cleaning spittoons in a local tavern as a kid in her home town of Montgomery, Alabama, Thornton took a chance one night when the tavern’s regular vocalist got drunk. She convinced the tavern owner that she could do the job. She never looked back after that. When Willie Mae was about 14 years old, the Sammy Green’s Hot Harlem Revue, with the comedian Snake Anthony, played at the Pekin Theatre in Montgomery. The Theatre organized a singing audition and Willie Mae took part. She won first prize and began traveling with Sammy Green’s “Hot Harlem Revue.” The impulse to do this came probably from Marie Smith McClain, known as Walking Marie and later as Diamond Teeth Mary. The blues singer (and probably the stepsister of Bessie Smith) was performing then with the Hot Harlem Revue and years later she remembered, “I met Willie Mae Thornton when she was working on a garbage truck. I heard her singing when the garbage truck went by. I took her off the garbage truck.”

After a few years with the “Revue,” Thornton went to Houston, Texas, to sing on her own. It was there that Don Robey, owner of Peacock Records, heard Big Mama Thornton and signed her to an exclusive five year contract and had her play in his newly opened Bronze Peacock Club. And the rest is history....

After “Hound Dog,” Thornton’s musical career went up and down until she died. She toured Europe twice as part of the American Folk Blues festival, both times with enormous success. She wrote a song named “Ball & Chain” that made Janis Joplin famous and the success gave Big Mama Thornton a new audience as part of the blues revival in the sixties. She got cancer and had a car accident that forced her to stay in a wheelchair for a while. But she recorded blues, gospel, rock ’n’ roll and performed until the end even when her health got worse over

the years because of her strong drinking habits. When she died on July 25, 1984, after she had just gathered with her some old buddies, she didn't leave any money behind. Her friends gave her a big funeral and Johnny Otis conducted it. As one of her closest friends said, "She lived as she wanted to do. She wasn't a millionaire and I don't think she was trying to be one. She always said that the blues were more important than having money." The little girl from Alabama had made her dream come true and became the famous Big Mama Thornton. She had lived her life to the fullest and managed to make a living with her music for over 40 years. Big Mama Thornton made it her own way without many compromises, keeping her self-respect and humor. Above all, she was as real as it gets, and if you cannot feel the blues when you hear her sing then you've got a hole in your soul. Or, as Big Mama Thornton would have said: "You ain't nothing but a hound dog."

*Dr. Michael Spörke, is a German author based in Duesseldorf. He wrote the books "Living with the Myth of Janis Joplin: The History of Big Brother & the Holding Co." (2009) and "Big Mama Thornton: The Life and Music" (2014).*

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