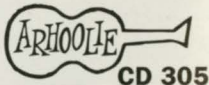


Big Mama Thornton

BALL 'N' CHAIN



1. SWEET LITTLE ANGEL
(W. M. Thornton)
2. UNLUCKY GIRL
(Jack Dupree & W. M. Thornton)
3. SWING IT ON HOME
(W. M. Thornton)
4. LITTLE RED ROOSTER (Willie Dixon)
5. HOUND DOG (Leiber & Stoller)
6. YOUR LOVE IS WHERE IT
OUGHT TO BE (W. M. Thornton)
7. SCHOOL BOY
(W. M. Thornton & F. McDowell)
8. MY HEAVY LOAD
(W. M. Thornton & F. McDowell)
9. I'M FEELING ALRIGHT
(W. M. Thornton)
10. SOMETIMES I HAVE A HEARTACHE
(W. M. Thornton)
11. BLACK RAT
(W. M. Thornton & M. Lawlar)
12. LIFE GOES ON (Morris & Williams)
13. BUMBLE BEE
(W. M. Thornton & M. Lawlar)
14. GIMME A PENNY
(J. Moore & T. Rhone)
15. WADE IN THE WATER
(W. M. Thornton)
16. BALL 'N' CHAIN
(W. M. Thornton)

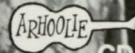
Total Time: 61:52

All selections: Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton - vocals.
#1-8: Recorded in London, England, October 20, 1965 with:
#1, 3, & 4: Buddy Guy-guitar; Fred Below-drums; Eddie Boyd-piano or organ; Jimmy Lee Robinson-bass.
#2 & 5: Same as last but add Walter Horton-harmonica.
#6: Big Mama Thornton-vocal, harmonica & drums.
#7 & 8: Fred McDowell-guitar.
#9-14: Recorded in San Francisco, Ca., April 25, 1966 with Muddy Waters' Blues Band: James Cotton-harmonica; Otis Spann-piano; Muddy Waters-guitar; Samuel Lawhorn-guitar; Luther Johnson-bass; Francis Clay-drums.
#15 & 16: Recorded in Hollywood, Ca. January 25, 1968 with Edward "Bee" Houston-guitar; Everett Minor-tenor sax; Curtis Tillman-bass; Nathaniel Dove-piano; Gus Wright-drums.
#1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 & 15: Published by Tradition Music Co. (BMD); #5: Pub. by Lion & Elvis Presley Music Co.; #16: Pub. by Baytone Music Co.
Produced by Chris Strachwitz
Cover by Elizabeth Weil
Cover photo by Chris Strachwitz
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BIG MAMA THORNTON Ball N' Chain



Over 60 Minutes of
CLASSIC
BLUES



CD-305

Big Mama Thornton

Willie Mae Thornton was born and raised in Alabama. Her father was a minister and her mother also sang in the church. When Willie Mae was 14 she left home to tour with the Hot Harlem Review out of Atlanta, Georgia, and remained with this show until 1948 when she went to Houston, Texas. No one taught her how to sing or how to play the harmonica and drums. Willie Mae just watched others and tried things. During her stay in Houston, Big Mama heard and met many of her contemporaries like Junior Parker, Lightning Hopkins, Lowell Fulson, Gatemouth Brown, and her brother Harp Thornton who played harmonica also lived in Houston.

Around 1950 Big Mama Thornton made her first recording in Houston which was released under the name of the Harlem Stars. Shortly thereafter the local Peacock label signed her and she went to Los Angeles to make appearances with Johnny Otis who was the leader of a popular show band. In 1952

Big Mama was recording for Peacock in Los Angeles, when two song writers, Lieber and Stoller, who were hanging around LA studios hoping to get their songs recorded, handed her a song scribbled on a paper bag. Big Mama looked it over and started singing the lyrics. Johnny Otis put some catchy arrangement behind her and they recorded it. Peacock put the tape on the shelf for a while but when "Hound Dog" finally came out it put Big Mama's name all over the country. She was in Dayton, Ohio with the late Johnny Ace when the record came out in '53. It was a hit and Big Mama was in demand by the promoters who put together big R&B shows and she went on tour from coast to coast. Later Elvis Presley recorded the song and made a monster hit for himself utilizing pretty much the same arrangement.

In 1956 after a tour with Gatemouth Brown, Big Mama returned to the West Coast and settled in Los Angeles. By this time down home blues were on the



photo by Jim Marshall

decline and record dates hard to get. I recall meeting Big Mama on the boardwalk in Santa Cruz around 1959 where she appeared at a bar with Baby Calloway on piano and Pete Lewis on guitar. Big Mama was in the corner behind the drums and a glass of water was on a window sill but not for drinking. It contained her harmonica which she liked to keep wet! She had recently recorded for Baytone Records but the issued 45 was nothing special. It was actually for Baytone that Big Mama had just recorded her next big hit but they did not have the sense to release it, although they had her assign the copyright to Baytone. It was a song she sang a lot in the 1960s when her career was boosted by the renewed interest in blues on the part of white audiences here and overseas. It was a song Big Mama had made up herself and she really felt it. Janis Joplin also loved it and asked Big Mama's permission before recording "Ball and Chain." Unfortunately it was not Big Mama's legal right to grant such permission.

Big Mama continued to record through the 1960s and 70s and played at many blues and jazz festivals in the

United States and in Europe. I tried on several occasions to make some recordings but since Big Mama never had a steady group with her, I was constantly searching for the right band to back her on a recording. Gatemouth Brown came through San Francisco and I recall meeting with him at the Booker T. Hotel on San Francisco's Fillmore Street where he and his band were appearing in the early 60s. Arhoolie Records was still a poverty class operation and I recall Gatemouth being willing to work with Big Mama but he was leaving town soon and had his own career to worry about which was not exactly flourishing at that time. The first recording session on this disc finally came about while we were all in London with the American Folk Blues Festival which was rapidly becoming an important annual podium for the best blues artists and toured most of western Europe. I finally realized what an amazingly versatile singer Big Mama was when I heard her jamming with only Fred McDowell's eery slide guitar backing her improvised lyrics in a hotel room. Big Mama was a wonderfully sensitive and caring singer and she had a heart of gold. Just about every

photo: Berkeley Folk Festival



musician on the tour wanted to back her but Buddy Guy had an "All Star" band from Chicago and was the official back up band at the nightly concerts. For the recording the All Stars all came to the studio and Fred McDowell contributed the right taste of country blues magic. Back in San Francisco a second session came about after I had met Muddy Waters in connection with the first Berkeley Blues Festival which Ed Denson and I produced in 1966 and which included the Muddy Waters band, Lightning Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and the soon to become famous King of Zydeco: Clifton Chenier. I was knocked out by the tough Chicago blues sound the Waters band had with James Cotton on harmonica, Otis Spann on piano and that solid rhythm section. The band was subtle, sensitive and with a superb feel for dynamics. It took almost every dollar I had in the bank to make that session come true but the guys played beautifully behind Big Mama, especially Otis Spann who was no doubt one of the world's best blues pianists. I remember driving Otis back to Berkeley after the session and he suggested I record a solo album with him

but my depleted bank account forced me to turn down a classic record that never got made. They didn't have much time to rehearse the tunes and no hit single came out of the session. Arhoolie was not the label for hits anyway since I was much more interested in getting good music and feelings down on tape instead of creating a product with mass appeal. I was always hoping that the recordings I made would be enjoyed by people who enjoyed natural and creative talents without much sweetening—music as it happened so to speak. If the singers or musicians I enjoyed wanted to have more commercial success, they were always free to find other labels to produce them and I usually tried to get them to record for bigger labels.

Big Mama started getting important gigs here at home which included John Hammond's Spirituals to Swing concerts at Carnegie Hall, the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Newport Folk Festival and the Chicago, Ann Arbor and San Francisco blues festivals. She recorded for Vanguard, Mercury, and other bigger labels and it seemed she was getting her career into gear. At the 1980 Kool



Big Mama and Baby Calloway in Santa Cruz, CA

Newport Jazz Festival, Big Mama appeared with Sippie Wallace, Koko Taylor and other veteran female jazz singers for a special "Blues Is A Woman" program in Avery Fisher Hall. But the years of hard drinking and hard living had taken their toll on this great blues singer and Willie Mae Thornton died at age 57 on July 25, 1984 in Los Angeles. (Chris Strachwitz—1989)

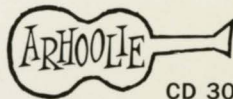
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Big Mama Thornton

BALL N' CHAIN



CD 305

Over 60 Minutes of Classic BLUES

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7. School Boy
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9. I'm Feeling Alright
10. Sometimes I Have A Heartache
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12. Life Goes On
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14. Gimme A Penny
15. Wade In The Water
16. Ball N' Chain

Willie Mae Thornton's father was a minister in Alabama and her mother sang in church as well. At 14 she left home and toured with the Hot Harlem Review out of Atlanta, Ga. In 1952 Big Mama was in Los Angeles recording with Johnny Otis' orchestra when two song writers named Leiber and Stoller handed her a song scribbled on a paper bag. She started singing the lyrics: "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog" and it became a monster hit not only for her but later for Elvis Presley as well. Big Mama toured behind the success of "Hound Dog" for a while but then dropped back to the lower rungs of the "chittlin' circuit" until the early 1960s when she made these recordings and began to tour accompanied by some of the blues world's heavy hitters such as Muddy Waters, James Cotton, Buddy Guy, Fred McDowell and Otis Spann. Appearances at rock clubs, concerts, and blues festivals helped introduce Big Mama to a new predominantly white audience. One of Willie Mae's many fans was a young singer from Texas named Janice Joplin who recorded one of Willie Mae Thornton's own compositions "Ball N' Chain" which helped boost both of their careers.



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