

1. **I'm Feeling Alright** (W.M. Thornton)
2. **Sometimes I have a Heartache** (W.M. Thornton)
3. **Black Rat** (take 4)
(arr. by W.M. Thornton & Minnie Lawlars)
4. **Life Goes On** (Morris & Williams)
5. **Everything Gonna Be Alright** (W.M. Thornton)
6. **Big Mama's Bumble Bee Blues**
(arr. by W.M. Thornton & M. Lawlars)
7. **Gimme A Penny** (take 6) (J. Moore & T Rhone)
8. **Looking The World Over** (Ernest Lawlars)
9. **I Feel The Way I Feel** (W.M. Thornton)
10. **Guide Me Home** (W.M. Thornton)
11. **Black Rat** (take 2) (arr. by W.M. Thornton & M. Lawlars)
12. **Wrapped Tight** (W.M. Thornton)
13. **Gimme A Penny** (take 5) (J. Moore & T. Rhone)
14. **Big Mama's Shuffle** (W.M. Thornton)
15. **Since I fell For You** (W.M. Thornton)
16. **I'm Feeling Alright** (fast version)
(W.M. Thornton)
17. **Big Mama's Blues** (My Love) (W.M. Thornton)

All selections: Tradition Music Co. (BMI), and administered by BUG Music Co.

NOTE: #s 1-10 appear here as originally stereo mixed from original 3 track recordings.

#s 11-17 were mixed in 2004 with less stereo effect.

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton – vocals (& drums on # 5 & harmonica on # 14 & 17)

Muddy Waters – guitar

James Cotton – harmonica

Otis Spann – piano

Samuel Lawhorn – guitar

Luther Johnson – bass

Francis Clay – drums

Recorded at Coast Recorders,
San Francisco, CA,
4/25/66

Produced by Chris
Strachwitz
All photos by Jim Marshall

#s 11-17 previously
unreleased

Big Mama Thornton

with the MUDDY WATERS
Blues Band - 1966



Arhoolie 9043

Big Mama Thornton

with the Muddy Waters Blues Band – 1966



In April of 1966 Ed Denson and I under the umbrella of the “Pretentious Folk Front,” produced the 2nd Berkeley Blues Festival at Harmon Gymnasium on the UC campus. The first half presented Mance Lipscomb, Clifton Chenier, and Lightning Hopkins (note Arhoolie CD 484). The second half was given over to Muddy Waters and his incredible Chicago Blues Band who at the time was appearing at a San Francisco night club. The concert was a huge success and I had a chance to get acquainted with Muddy Waters. About a week later Big Mama Thornton came to town. I had gone to Europe with her and Fred McDowell for Horst Lippman’s American Folk Blues Festival and recorded her in London on a shoe-string budget. She was fantastic backed by Buddy Guy and others from Chicago. I had also seen her make an unforgettable

appearance at the Monterey Jazz Festival, but I knew she was having problems keeping a good band together largely due to not enough good jobs. She was still not well known in the US except for the 1950s R&B hit of “Hound Dog.” I had made attempts to get her together with Gate Mouth Brown when he was in San Francisco but somehow it didn’t work out. So when I heard and met Muddy Waters and his incredible band with Otis Spann and James Cotton, I thought maybe I should try again! This time I succeeded and Muddy was interested in getting his band as much work as possible and he really got into it as you can hear especially on “Everything Gonna Be Alright.”

Here you hear most of that great session which I was able to arrange with Muddy Waters and his band – including several previously unissued bonus cuts. I forgot if we had any rehearsals prior to getting to the studio – I don’t think so! In the studio they ran down the numbers Big Mama and her manager, Jim Moore,

wanted to record. As you can hear on the alternate take of “Black Rat” where Big Mama starts it instead of Otis at the piano, the session was sometimes pretty chaotic but the guys in Muddy’s band, especially Otis Spann, were just so good in backing her that I feel this was her best session ever! After we finished the main songs Big Mama wanted to record, the band sort of laid back and let Otis and the rhythm section do most of the work. “Big Mama’s Shuffle” (where you hear both harmonicas), “Big Mama’s Blues,” “Since I fell For You,” “I Feel The Way I Feel,” and “Guide Me Home” came at the end of the session after Big Mama had told me that she would really like to do an album of spirituals. Those last two titles are as close as she ever came to fulfilling that goal. When I note take 5 and 6 for example, that does not mean we got six complete takes! Those numbers were the engineer’s IDs and include false starts and no takes at all!

Chris Strachwitz – 2004

Otis Spann &
Big Mama Thornton



Big Mama the Queen at Monterey

By **PHILIP ELWOOD**
San Francisco Examiner jazz critic

MONTEREY - Willie Mae Thornton, the Big Mama blues singer, with voice and heart to match her huge body, met all comers at yesterday's Monterey Jazz Festival.

She remained, after a strenuous afternoon of competition, the monarch

of Monterey blues.

Nobody came close to Big Mama's singing, although Muddy Waters and Memphis Slim had their moments. Miss Thornton, relaxed and looking wonderful, dug in for keeps when she started dancing to Big Black's conga drums at the beginning of the "Blues All the Way" narrative, which framed the whole concert.

Big Mama Sings The Blues She Likes

Ralph J. Gleason

Big Mama is the woman who made a hit out of "Houn' Dog" before Elvis Presley ever heard the tune.

"I didn't write it," she says, "Lieber and Stoller wrote it. That was back In 1953. I was singing with Johnny Otis' band and we were recording In Hollywood for Peacock Records out of Houston. They were just a couple of kids then (Lieber and Stoller are two of the most successful rock'n roll song-writers now - RJG) and they had this song written out on the back of a brown paper bag. So I started to sing the words and I put in some of my own. All that talkin' and hollerin', that's my own."

Big Mama paused a moment and added, "That song sold over two million copies. I never got what I should have. I got one check for \$500 and I never seen another. All I'm tryin' to do now is get another 'Houn' Dog.'"

"I like my own old down home singing, with the feeling. I learned to sing blues by myself. The first blues I ever heard was Bessie Smith, Memphis Minnie and Big

Maceo. My singing comes from experience. My own experience. My own feeling. I got my own feelings for everything."

"I never had no one to teach me nothing. I never went to school for music or nothing. I stayed home to take care of my mother who was sick. I taught myself to sing and to blow harmonica and even to play drums by watching other people. I can't read music but I know where I'm singing! If I hear a blues I like, I try to sing it in my own way. It's always best to have something of your own. I don't sing like nobody but myself."

Willie Mae Thornton got the name "Big Mama" when she was billed in a battle of the blues with singer "Little Esther."

"Big Mama Thornton and Little Esther,' they put on the posters. I been singing since I was 15 years old. I left Montgomery, Alabama, with Sammy Green's Hot Harlem Review. I played opposite Johnny Otis' show with 'Little Esther' in 1952 and I didn't have no records and I was singing The Dominos song, 'Have Mercy, Mercy, Baby' and I stole the show!"

"I went with Johnny Otis and 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 pok-ing me in the arms with his finger (it was sore for a week) 'You said you had a star and you got a star! That's your star! You got to put her on to close the show!'"

"I traveled with Johnny Otis but I went even further on my own after I recorded 'Houn' Dog.' That man put it on the shelf and when I switched on the radio one day and heard the man saying 'Houn' Dog by Big Mama,' I had to go out and buy that record. I had forgotten how I did it. And then I had to buy a record player, I didn't have one, to play it on and I sat there in my dressing room, me and that record player learning my own record all over again!"

(Reprinted from the San Francisco Chronicle and the San Francisco Examiner)



Big Mama Still The Best Around

Philip Elwood

There's a big hunk of Americana at the Both/And Club this week. She's Willie Mae Thornton, a real American original who has been "Big Mama" for quite a spell. Physically, she certainly makes it; and as for voice and heart, I've never had any larger quantities of either (or of enjoyment) than I've gotten over the years from Big Mama. Vic Green's Quartet, with her this week, adds to the fun.

In her voice I can hear Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey; Mahalia Jackson, and Julia Lee. But mostly it's the unadulterated joy of this huge human being, charging her whole audience with infectious glee.

She shouts and wails, stomps and dances, handles drums and harmonica with the best of them; and when she reveals her less brusque nature (which is frequently) she's really still just a minister's daughter from Alabama who loves to stand up there and sing.

In spite of American and European concert triumphs in recent months, Big Mama has retained her giggling informality and hilarious repartee with the audience and her bandmen. "Little Red Rooster," for instance, with guitar by Piney Clark and Mama's voice had the entire club in a convivial uproar.

And as for the blues: Big Mama just won't let go! I'm inclined to think that she's the best around. And I mean it: there's no one that can even challenge her.

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CD 9043

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