



(l to r) Big Mama Thornton,  
Buddy Guy, Fred Below,  
Jimmy Lee Robinson, Eddie Boyd

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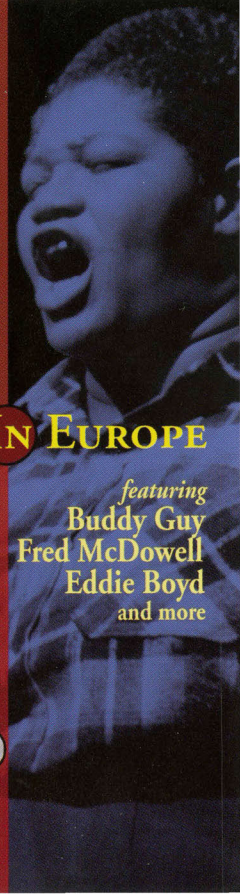


ARHOOLE 9056

# Big Mama Thornton

IN EUROPE

featuring  
Buddy Guy  
Fred McDowell  
Eddie Boyd  
and more





Recorded on October 20, 1965, at Wessex Studio in London, England

1. **SWEET LITTLE ANGEL**  
(arr. by Willie Mae Thornton)
2. **THE PLACE** (C. Morris & H. Rutledge)
3. **LITTLE RED ROOSTER** (Willie Dixon)
4. **UNLUCKY GIRL ‡**  
(Jack Dupree & W.M. Thornton)
5. **HOUND DOG ‡** (take 1)  
(Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller)
6. **SWING IT ON HOME** (take 1)  
(W.M. Thornton)
7. **YOUR LOVE IS WHERE IT  
OUGHT TO BE \*** (W.M. Thornton)
8. **SESSION BLUES \*‡** (W.M. Thornton)
9. **DOWN HOME SHAKE DOWN \*‡**  
(W.M. Thornton)
10. **MY HEAVY LOAD**  
(W.M. Thornton & Fred McDowell)
11. **SCHOOL BOY**  
(W.M. Thornton & Fred McDowell)
12. **I NEED YOUR LOVE \*** (DAR)
13. **GOOD TIME IN LONDON \*‡**  
(W.M. Thornton)
14. **CHAUFFEUR BLUES** (W.M. Thornton &  
Ernest Lawlar)
15. **SWING IT ON HOME** (take 2)  
(W.M. Thornton)
16. **HOUND DOG** (take 2) (Leiber & Stoller)
17. **Big Mama talks with Chris  
Strachwitz**

# 1 through #11 were originally issued as Arhoolie LP 1028: "Big Mama Thornton - In Europe." **Bonus tracks:** # 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, & 17 were previously unreleased and are heard on this CD for the first time.

All songs composed by Willie Mae Thornton are © by Tradition Music Co.(BMI) and administered by BUG Music Co. - Los Angeles, CA

Produced by Chris Strachwitz

All photos © by Chris Strachwitz

Graphic design by Morgan Dodge

**Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton**

- vocals (\* = harmonica &/or drums)

**Buddy Guy** - guitar

**Fred Below** - drums

**Eddie Boyd** - piano (or organ)

**Jimmy Lee Robinson** - bass

**Walter "Shakey" Horton** -  
harmonica on ‡

**Fred McDowell** - slide guitar  
on #s 10, 11, & 14

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**F**orty years ago in October of 1965, although I had been operating Arhoolie Records for more than 5 years, I was still living on a miniscule budget. Finally the opportunity arose to record Big Mama Thornton, and of all places, in London, England! The chance came during our short stay in that great city at the suggestion of Horst Lippmann who along with his partner, Fritz Rau, had been producing the annual American Folk Blues Festival for the previous three years.

Today we realize that these tours of Europe by many of the best, authentic Blues personalities, signaled the start of a world wide appreciation for and fascination with the blues, one of the most appealing and unique of American musical folk traditions. For the first time, largely marginalized and often long forgotten American blues musicians were presented on the stages of Europe's



(l to r) Walter "Shakey" Horton, Big Mama Thornton, Buddy Guy

major concert halls. The tours were initiated at the suggestion of John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet, who made Lippmann and Rau aware of the fact that the blues in the early 1960s were still a vibrant, living part of the African-American music scene.

Underwriting of the tours was greatly aided by Joachim Berendt's being in charge of radio and TV jazz productions at the Southwest German broadcasting network in Baden-Baden. Mr. Berendt persuaded this public supported station to film TV programs of these musicians as part of their jazz and popular culture presentations, which were subsequently broadcast throughout Germany. Selected portions of these annual programs are now available on a series of DVDs produced by Reelin' In The Years Productions, distributed in the US via HIPO & Universal Music.

Horst Lippmann was a jazz fan

and musician who realized that blues had always been an important element in jazz. Only a few Europeans however were aware of the fact that the Blues had been a separate but strong element of popular African-American music since the 1920s and that the genre was still very much alive on its home turf in the early 1960s.

In 1964 I persuaded Lightning Hopkins to go to Europe and join this AFBF tour although he was reluctant about flying in airplanes. Horst had contacted me because he had heard that I got along well with this, at the time hard to find, Texas blues bard. Horst also told me that the French promoters were absolutely insisting on having Lightning Hopkins on the program. The three of us met in Houston early in 1964 to finalize the agreement. Since Lightning refused to make the trip alone, my success was rewarded with a free ticket to accompany him!



During that tour I expressed my enthusiasm to Horst for Big Mama Thornton who had recently made a spectacular appearance at that summer's Monterey Jazz Festival in California. I felt Big Mama was one of the very few really authentic down-home blues women active at that time. Lack of such women blues voices or their unavailability had been one of the tour's problems. I persuaded not only Big Mama (along with her then manager, Jim Moore) to join the tour but I also got Horst's consent to bring along my favorite Mississippi blues stylist, Fred McDowell. My reward once again was a free ticket and pass to come along!

Although this recording was made at a multi track studio (I believe it was done on a 4 track machine), I could not afford to pay for the huge, expensive tape. We dubbed the material to 1/4 inch

mono tape that same day and I am sure the big reels were erased and used again for the next session!

Today I sometimes think about what I could have caught if cassette or video recorders had been invented earlier! In the hotel rooms Big Mama and Fred McDowell jammed frequently and on the buses which took us from air ports into each city we were often serenaded. I have especially fond memories of Sonny Boy Williamson in 1964 sitting right in the front of the bus going into Munich. He took the mic designed for tourist guides and with only his harmonica as accompaniment, delighted most of us (but probably shocked Sugar Pie De Santo) with the most obscene version of the "Dirty Dozen" I had ever heard! Of course Sonny Boy was not known for his shyness or lack of imagination!

This recording session was so rewarding largely due to the band

which consisted of several members of that year's American Folk Blues Festival. Special thanks go to the young guitarist, Buddy Guy and the superb Fred McDowell. The band had been backing Big Mama at several concerts in Germany and everyone was in great form and enjoying every minute. On the previously unreleased take of "Swing It On Home" Big Mama was keen to see all of us present getting married! You can also hear the unmistakable sound of Big Mama when she took over the drums to back herself - just the way I first heard her. This was real down-home, Houston, Texas style blues! "Unlucky Girl" was given to her by Jack Dupree who met us somewhere along the tour which started in Germany and went to Switzerland, France, Belgium, England and up into Scandinavia.

Although I was born in Germany and in the 1950s had

served there as a member of the US army, I never enjoyed myself more in my old homeland than during these tours with musicians I loved and admired. It was an amazing experience - not only getting to know the artists and their cultures better - but seeing the enthusiastic reception given them by audiences all over Europe. These fans came from very different cultural backgrounds and in most cases could not even understand the English language. Their reactions were usually most enthusiastic when the performers rendered fast boogies or were powerful entertainers and extroverts. But even some of the more introspective blues musicians were well received and were given the star treatment including autograph hounds constantly surrounding them. Most of the musicians had never experienced anything like this back home! I also enjoyed meeting many of the European blues



fans who had started the groundswell and who had been actively seeking out recordings from the US. I actually started Arhoolie Records with money earned by auctioning off blues 78s to European collectors.

These trips also helped me realize that perhaps the Blues could receive similarly enthusiastic receptions among white Americans. Although Lippmann & Rau made overtures to have the American Folk Blues Festival tour the USA, the Blues festival fever had by then begun to spread and US promoters did not seem to delight in having Germans as their competition nor were American concert halls ready for this type of music. In the states it started on university campuses where especially rural blues became accepted as part of the "Folk Music" scene. Over the next forty some years, blues of many stripes have become more and more popular





mainly among white audiences and today almost every town in America hosts so-called blues festivals. It strikes me as slightly ironic, however, that at the same time the blues have virtually disappeared from the popular music of African-Americans.

Willie Mae Thornton was born on December 11, 1926, 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 later how to play the harmonica and drums. Willie Mae just watched others and tried things. During her stay in Houston Big Mama met and observed many of the great blues men like Junior Parker, who strongly influenced her harmonica style, Lightning Hopkins, Lowell Fulson,

Gatemouth Brown, and many others.

In 1950 Big Mama Thornton made her first recording for a tiny Houston label. It was released under the name of the Harlem Stars but with Willie Mae singing. The next year Peacock Records signed her and she made several singles. On August 13, 1952, while in Los Angeles appearing with the Johnny Otis show, she was again recording for Peacock. Two, at the time unknown songwriters, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller suddenly appeared in the studio and handed her a song scribbled on a paper bag. Big Mama looked it over and started singing. She liked the song and with the help of the band, recorded it that same day. "Hound Dog" was finally released in 1953, and soon put Big Mama's name all over the country. She was in Dayton, Ohio, at the time with the late Johnny Ace and soon she was back on the road with Rhythm &

Blues shows, touring from coast to coast – but on the Chittlin' Circuit, **not** in concert halls. Later Elvis Presley made the song into a super hit but it really is Big Mama's "Hound Dog" – she felt it and made it her own. In 1956 after a tour with Gatemouth Brown, Big Mama came to the West Coast again and this time decided to stay.

I first heard Big Mama Thornton in 1961 at a small bar on the beach

in Santa Cruz, California. The bar was filled with sailors and a few assorted youngsters largely oblivious to the fact that this woman had been a major star on the R&B circuit only five years earlier but light years away from the white entertainment scene. Big Mama was seated behind a set of drums, at the piano was Baby Calloway, and a guitar player named Pete Lewis was supposedly a part of the group but apparently had



(l to r) Big Mama Thornton, Buddy Guy



imbibed a bit too much and vanished! It was a real down-home blues duo and Big Mama really sang up a storm! She played the drums and on a windowsill next to her she kept several harmonicas in a glass of water. From time to time she would blow on a harp which she held in one hand while holding a drum stick in the other. I made several attempts to record her but realized that she needed a good band to give her sympathetic and contemporary backing which I could ill afford. I once spoke with Gatemouth Brown when his band was appearing on Fillmore Street in San Francisco but it never worked out. My lack of funds to pay for such a production was probably one of the main reasons.

One time I was looking for Big Mama in Los Angeles and when I inquired at a record shop on Central Avenue, someone suggested checking out a park a few blocks away. When I

got there I couldn't help but notice a long table with men seated around three sides. At the head of the table was Big Mama, also dressed like a man, a pistol next to her on the table. Everyone was deeply engrossed in a card or domino game of some kind and my presence as a fan was hardly acknowledged with enthusiasm. However Big Mama knew how to take care of herself and survive in the harsh world of the blues. I was once told that Big Mama when she had come into some money would go to her neighborhood bar and treat everyone to drinks. She could be rough but she could also be one of the sweetest, most sensitive persons I ever knew – just listen to her “rap” with Fred McDowell!

Early in 1964 Jimmy Lyons called me to ask whom I would recommend for their Blues Afternoon to be part of the Monterey Jazz Festival and the first name that came

to my mind was Big Mama Thornton. All of us who were there know what happened. It was just the way Ralph Gleason said it in the San Francisco Chronicle: “A six foot, 300 pound blues singer broke up yesterday afternoon’s record crowd at the Monterey Jazz Festival. The singer, Big Mama Thornton, received a standing ovation from the crowd of 6000 for her rendition of “Hound Dog” and a blues of her own composition “I’m Lost!”

Her success at Monterey and later that year in Europe, unfortunately never really boosted her in the direction of steady work. Lack of well paying jobs was probably the main reason for Big Mama’s inability to keep a good band together. Janice Joplin heard Big Mama probably at one of the smaller clubs, was inspired by her and made “Ball And Chain” into a hit. But audiences usually got only Big Mama – the soloist. That







(l to r) Big Mama Thornton, Fred McDowell

was the case when she appeared at Bill Graham's Winterland, a major hippie dance and concert venue in San Francisco. I recorded one of those shows but the sad truth was that the small backing band was at best unsympathetic or even incompetent. She could apparently not afford to bring Bee Houston from Los Angeles and was always saddled with a local group more into cocktail lounge jazz rather than real blues or even R&B. To illustrate this sad situation further, I quote Steve Wise who wrote on March 26, 1973 in Atlanta's *The Great Speckled Bird*: "I recall an early '50s R&B revival show sponsored by WAOK at the

Municipal Auditorium here two years ago. Thornton had flown here from the West Coast without her band, and like the other performers in the show, she was backed by the Paul Mitchell Trio, a smooth Underground Atlanta group unaccustomed to blues. Thornton tried to sing her blues but couldn't find any rhythm behind her. Twice she asked the drummer to "hit it harder!" Finally, disgusted, she strode over, grabbed the sticks from the hapless drummer, and then proceeded to bash out the blues with a drive and abandon that left Paul Mitchell's mouth hanging wide open."

Chris Strachwitz – 2005

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**Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton** –  
vocals (+ harmonica &/or drums on \*)

with:

**Buddy Guy** – guitar

**Fred Below** – drums

**Eddie Boyd** – piano (or organ)

**Jimmy Lee Robinson** – bass

**Walter "Shakey" Horton** –  
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**Fred McDowell** – slide guitar  
on #s10, 11, & 14



FILE UNDER: BLUES

