

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



# Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton

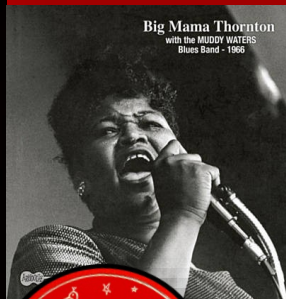
(December 11, 1926—July 25, 1984)

"American Rhythm and Blues Singer"



Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton was born December 11, 1926, in Arton, Alabama to a Baptist minister father and a church singing mother. One of six children, she grew up singing in the church choir with her mother and siblings. When her mother died in 1940, 14-year-old Willie Mae left school to clean spittoons in a local tavern. The time she spent in the tavern exposed her to a style of music she never heard before in church. In that same year, music promoter Sammy Green discovered Willie Mae and recruited her to join his Atlanta-based Hot Harlem Revue. Willie Mae played drums and harmonica beside vaudeville entertainer, Diamond Teeth Mary, the half-sister of famed blues singer, Bessie Smith. While on the road, she studied the style of the other singers that included Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie and was determined to become a singer as well.

After a few years on the road, at the age of 22, Willie Mae moved to Houston. A new style of blues was burgeoning that fit right into Willie Mae's brassy and bold style. She signed a recording contract with Peacock Records in 1951 and performed at the Apollo Theater in 1952. It was there at the Apollo Theater, she was given her nickname, "Big Mama," by Frank Schiffman, the manager of theater.



Later that year, "Big Mama" recorded a new song written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller called "Hound Dog." "Big Mama" Thornton's original rendition of Hound Dog went to number one on the R & B chart. The record's success made her a star, but as with many artists of the time, she saw very little of the profits. Big Mama's success with "Hound Dog" was followed three years later by Elvis Presley recording his hit version of the song. Similarly, Thornton originally recorded her song "Ball 'n' Chain" for Bay-Tone Records in the early 1960s, and though the label chose not to release the song, they kept the copyright, which prohibited "Big Mama" from collecting publishing royalties when Janis Joplin recorded the song later in the decade.



"Big Mama" Thornton continued to record for Peacock until 1957, touring with various performers, including Junior Parker. But by the early 1960s, "Big Mama" was playing small venues and offers to play and record started to wain. Thornton left Houston and settled in San Francisco, where she continued to perform locally.

Popular interest in folk and blues music, beginning in the mid-1960s, helped revive her career, and in 1965 she toured Europe as part of the American Folk Blues Festival. She performed at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1966 and 1968.

In the 1970's, "Big Mama" continued to perform, shocking crowds by wearing men's three piece suits and singing the songs she chose, whether they were on the program or not. Heavy drinking and a life on the road took a toll on her health, but Big Mama's powerful voice never failed. On July 25, 1984, Willie Mae, "Big Mama" Thornton, died of heart attack in Los Angeles, California. She was 57 years old. Her funeral was attended by many blues greats and officiated by her old Peacock Records collaborator, Johnny Otis, who had since been ordained as a minister. In 1984, Thornton was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. Her songs "Hound Dog" and "Ball 'n' Chain" appears in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame list of "500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll."

In 2004, the nonprofit Willie Mae Rock Camp for Girls, named for Thornton, was founded to offer a musical education to girls from ages eight to eighteen.



Watch "Ball & Chain"