

Big Mama Thornton

Group 1:

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Music of the Era

- The Coasters
- The Drifters
- Ruth Brown
- Johnny Otis
- Carl Perkins
- Fats Domino
 - B.B. King

About Mama Thornton

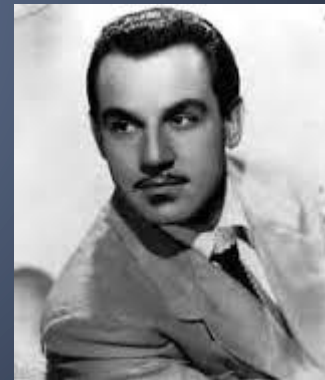
- Willie Mae Thornton “Big Mama”
- Born on December 11, 1926 in Ariton, AL
- Grew up in Montgomery, AL
- Daughter of a preacher
 - 6 other siblings

Thornton's Youth

- First began singing at local church
 - Sang in the choir with mother
- Mother died, began working in a tavern
 - Meanwhile taught herself drums and harmonica while watching other performers
- When a performer failed to show, she filled the spot
- At 14 won local talent show
 - Sammy Green was impressed and she signed to tour the South with his "Hot Harlem Review"

Musical Influences

- Was influenced early on by the music of her church's choir
- Also influenced early on by Johnny Otis, a fellow Peacock Records artist



Thornton's Style



- Early on wore feminine gowns
- Once established wore masculine clothing
- Musical style: First started in gospel
- Later moved to R&B

Thornton's Musical Style

- Sang with considerable volume
 - “Didn’t try to sound pretty”
 - Hollers lyrics in a deep, husky voice
 - Had a “tough demeanor”
- Played the harmonica and drums
- Dominates the song with accompaniment from guitar, bass, and drums
 - This style deviated from typical R&B

Musical Style (Continued)

- Her songs typically hold a quick tempo with a quadruple meter in a measure.
- She followed the 12-Bar Blues form for most of her songs.
- Her band consisted of guitar, bass and drums accompanied by hand-clapping, spoon, or tambourine to drive the rhythm.
- Her lyrics were mostly about love songs but not the entirety of her work was about love.

Musical Beginnings



- 1948 moved to Houston
- Worked performing in clubs
- 1951 signed with Don Robey of Peacock Records
 - 5 year contract

Thornton's Rise to Popularity

- Performed in the “Johnny Otis Rhythm and Blues Caravan”
 - Brought national exposure
- Nickname became “Big Mama Thornton”
 - Weighed over 300 lbs
 - Was a very tall woman
 - And the magnitude of her voice made her sound “big”
- Otis got Jerry Lieber and Mike Stroller to write “Hound Dog” for her

Hound Dog

- Top of R&B Charts in 1953
 - Would be her only top single recorded
- Paid \$500 for the single with no royalties
- 1956 Elvis reproduced the single
 - Thornton achievement was not as well recognized
 - Later on she would end her performances with “Bow wow to you too” as a retort.



Musical Analysis of Hounddog

- Big Mama Thornton produced the original song “Hound Dog” that inspired a rewrite by Freddie Bell, which then became Elvis Presley’s inspiration for his version of “Hound Dog”
- 12-bar blues form
- Country-influenced blues song
- #1 on the R&B chart for 7 weeks
- Vocals are the most prominent musical role and dominate the song
- Strong, raspy, husky vocals that are loud and intense
- Lyrics that are sexual in nature; would have been considered controversial
- Musical accompaniment featuring guitar, bass, and drums

Artists that covered “Hound Dog”

- Jack Turner & his Granger County Gang
- Billy Starr
- Eddie Hazelwood
- Betsy Gay
- Tommy Duncan and the Miller Bros
- Cleve Jackson
- The Dirty Blues Band
- Etta James
- Robert Palmer
- Macy Gray

Thornton's Old Age

- Moved to California 1970's
- Health drastically declined
 - Lost a lot of weight and was down to 95 lbs
- Still continued to perform when sick up to 1983 with Muddy Waters and B.B. King
- Died of a heart attack
- 1984 inducted into Blues Hall of Fame

Social and Political Importance

- Big Mama Thornton was openly gay, which most people were very critical of during this time.
- Her songs, including “Hound Dog,” were very sexual and open about gender expectations, unlike any other R&B during this time.
- She also helped to bend the rigid gender expectations with her masculine clothing and style.
- She was a voice for outspoken women, in R&B and in general. She was a huge influence for women in R&B.

Other artists influenced by Thornton

- Janis Joplin



- Studied “Big Mama” during musical career
- Admired the husky vocal style of Thornton
- Modeled her vocals after Thornton’s, never trying to sing in a “pretty voice”
- Recorded a cover of Thornton’s “Ball n’ Chain”

Evolution of Rock and Roll

- A strong, confident female singer was a new concept to the era.
- Her fast-paced R&B songs were a bit of an oxymoron.
- She did not have the typical band make up of R&B music.
- Breaking through both racial and sexual barriers for music, this opened up the rock and roll stage for any band to start making music.
- Her confidence of being who she was and being as successful as she was, made way for music to be made by anyone.

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