

A Little About the Blues

Willie Mae Thornton, known as "Big Mama" was not only a successful singer/songwriter in her own time, but also influenced performers like Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin. With no formal training for voice or for the instruments she played, like the harmonica and the drums, she was a true musician and learned by watching others play.

Born in 1926 near Montgomery, Alabama, she began singing in her father's church choir and also played harmonica. When, in 1940, her mother died, she took a job scrubbing floors at a local saloon. There she had her first opportunity to sing in public when the regular singer quit her job one night. After her first successful attempt at singing in public, she came to the attention of Sammy Green, who asked her to join his Hot Harlem Review and Thornton toured across the South.

In 1948 she settled in Houston, Texas having signed a five-year contract with Louis Jordan's band. She met such famous musicians as Junior Parker, Lightning Hopkins, Lowell Fulson, and Gatemouth Brown. Then Thornton released her first recording under the name Harlem Stars. Brought firmly into the blues world by this release, she signed onto the Peacock label, which had her heading to Los Angeles to perform with Johnny Otis.

She toured with Johnny Otis's Rhythm and Blues Caravan throughout the early 1950s. In 1952 they went to New York to perform at the Apollo. There Big Mama got her nickname, because she was six feet tall, was large, and had an immense, earthy voice. The name stuck. While touring she recorded around thirty songs of her own.

In 1953 she recorded "Hound Dog. Johnny Otis, asked Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller to write a song for Thornton and that song was "Hound Dog." It went up the R&B charts to number one and was the song that made Thornton a big star. "When Big Mama sings 'Hound Dog' she's slow and easy and also menacing, smiling like a saber-tooth tiger, her black diamond eyes glinting fiercely. Then, she leaves her chair in a swaying promenade, and the whole house cheers like royal subjects."

Three years later Elvis Presley recorded the song and it became an enormous hit. Thornton, always thought she'd never received the credit she should have for the song. Although written by Lieber and Stoller, it was her additions to the song that made it the hit it is today but she received only one check for \$500. Rolling Stone quoted her as having said, "Didn't get no money from them at all. Everybody livin' in a house but me. I'm just livin'."

Thornton went on tour, first with Junior Parker and Johnny Ace from 1953 to 1954, and then with Gatemouth Brown in 1956. In 1961 Thornton was brought into the limelight again with her release of the song "Ball and Chain."

Thornton was well received at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Newport Folk Festival, and the Ann Arbor Blues Festival. She toured Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival in 1964. She signed with the Arhoolie label in 1965. In 1979 she took part in the San Francisco Blues Festival, despite poor health, and gave there what critics called the performance of a lifetime. She was awarded the San Francisco Blues Festival Award. In 1980 she was seen onstage at the Newport Jazz Festival in a program "Blues Is a Woman" (continued on back)

The roots of Left Wing Bourbon go back further than you'd expect for a blues band from West-Central Wisconsin. Weaned from a young age at the famous River's Edge blues jams of the mid-to-late 1990s, along the banks of the Chippewa River, every member of the group was playing alongside blues veterans while young and unformed enough to take the impressions to heart.

While the blues jam venues may have changed over time, the members that would go on to form the core of Left Wing Bourbon continued to cut their collective teeth in various incarnations throughout the Chippewa Valley and south to the banks of the Mississippi. Officially formed in 2007, Left Wing Bourbon is a confluence of regional musical streams—some of which have run together for years, others just mixing.

Seasoned with years of hosting and playing at blues jams, serenading the night from some country porch, or moving the masses to swing their bodies at a summer festival, the collective members of Left Wing Bourbon mix soul, sweat, boogie and booze into a kinetic cocktail that leaves the foot tapping and the body wanting more.

Faith Ulwelling's vocals channel 60's soul and Delta grit, and her brother Jacob Ulwelling caresses the bass guitar until it moans and sings a counterpoint all it's own. Jason Keisler works the guitar with finger, pick or slide, cascading a catalogue of blues from Clapton-like growls to a Waters mudslide. Tim Caswell, the veteran of the group, brings a sawdust-stage savvy, careening the band from ragtime to Motown and back, always solidifying the core. Derrick Biederman exudes seemingly boundless energy on the drums, and his diverse percussive vocabulary woos the audience to stand to attention, move their hips, and wander to the dance floor.

Left Wing Bourbon plays funk, blues, and feel good. Left Wing Bourbon mixes the season of experience with the zest of youth. Left Wing Bourbon sweats the blues out its skin and moves the room until you have no choice but to join in too. And why not? Funky blues won't hurt a bit.

Left Wing Bourbon Upcoming Schedule

- 6/24 The Mousetrap, Eau Claire
- 6/30 Firecracker International, Chippewa Falls
- 7/3 Jakes Supper Club, Menomonie
- 7/8 Trails End Campgrounds, Fairchild
- 7/10 Shari's Chippewa Club, Durand
- 7/22 Nighthawks Tap, La Crosse

leftwingbourbon.yolasite.com

Next Week (June 28) Sparky & Friends

Born out of Sparky & the Wipers, Paul 'Sparky' Hintz, Mike Schlenker, Terry DeMars & Tony Basley will be delivering an evening of boogie-blues that will leave you on the edge of your seat.



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Westside Andy & Mel Ford Band

SUNDAY

Yata, Do Da Day
Lonesome Dan Kase
Pete Neuman Band
Ross William Perry Band
Catya & Code Blue, Combo Flambe
Left Wing Bourbon, Lamont Cranston

**Saturday & Sunday
Aug 6&7**

Memorial Park - Durand

A free will donation of non-perishable food or cash for the Pepin County Food Pantry will be appreciated!
No pets allowed on the grounds
Classic Car Show, Motorcycle Show, and Craft Show also held on Saturday
www.bluesonthechippewa.org or call (715)672-8785 for more information

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Tuesday Night Blues 2011

Owen Park, Eau Claire

In case of inclement weather, Tuesday Night Blues be held at the House of Rock, 422 Water Street.

*August 3 will be held at Phoenix Park.

- May 31 Lucas K & the Cool Hand Saints**
facebook.com/lucasandthesaints
- June 7 The Jonestones**
AMBlues.com
- June 14 Howard 'Guitar' Luedtke & Blue Max**
HowardLuedtke.com
- June 21 Left Wing Bourbon**
LeftWingBourbon.yolasite.com
- June 28 Sparky & Friends**
Facebook.com/SparkyAndTheWipers
- July 5 Jayson Collins Group**
- July 12 Code Blue with Catya & Sue**
Catya.net
- July 19 The Steve Meyer Band**
MySpace.com/SteveMeyerAndTheBluesDogs
- July 26 Deep Water Reunion**
MySpace.com/DWReunion
- Aug 2 *Pete Neuman and the Real Deal**
PeteNeuman.com
- Aug 9 The Love Buzzards**
LoveBuzzards.com
- Aug 16 The Sue Orfield Band**
SueOrfield.com
- Aug 23 Ross William Perry**
http://www.rosswilliamperry.com/
- Aug 30 Mojo Lemon**
MojoLemon.com

alongside other veteran female singers.

Known to be a heavy drinker, her hard living finally took its toll in the 1970s and '80s. Thornton performed in her lively fashion to the end. After a serious car accident in 1981, she performed at a cabaret in Pasadena, California though she was unable to walk or stand during the performance. She died on July 25, 1984 in a boarding house in Los Angeles, California of a heart attack and complications from cirrhosis.

Thornton was inducted into the Blue's Foundations Hall of Fame in 1984. In 2000 Thornton was remembered in a dance show "Sweet Willie Mae." "What makes Willie Mae Thornton's music so intense and personal," according to Andrea E. Woods, "is that she owns the music." Part of an exhibit at the Woman's Museum in Dallas, her recording of "Hound Dog" playing continuously in a room dedicated to female musicians. The Fund for Women Artists website has a page dedicated to The Big Mama Thornton Project, a collaboration for a play based on Thornton's life. These are high honors for a woman who died penniless and alone.

Taken from:
answers.com/topic/willie-mae-big-mama-thornton

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WE NEED YOUR HELP

We would love to keep bringing you the Tuesday Night Blues concert series for many years to come. To do so, we need sponsors. If you know of someone who would like to be a sponsor of the series, please feel free to contact one of the Chippewa Valley Blues Society members here today or contact Mike Fischer at (715) 309-9721.

Tuesday Night Bluesletter

June 21, 2011 at Owen Park

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