

“Big Mama” Thornton and the Holding Company

TPL

NEW YORK (LNS)—Tuesday night at Ungano’s Discotheque, located just west of Amsterdam Avenue at 70th St., the atmosphere: dark, the clientele: negligible.

Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, who headed the bill, relaxed in the back room between sets, as the hard throb of records splayed out across the empty dance floor. One of the truly all-time great blues artists, with a powerful emotive and oh-so-sensitive voice that transcends those of both the classical female giants, such as Bessie Smith, and many of the traditionally-styled male bluesmen, Big Mama even now has received scant attention for her dynamic performances here and in Europe.

Singing blues ever since she was 15 (when she left her Alabama home to tour with the Hot Harlem Review out of Atlanta, Georgia), her first recordings were not made until 1953, in Houston. Referring to her current schedule she told me that, “this is the first time I’ve been over this way in a year and a half. I work mostly on the West Coast.” (She presently lives in L.A.)

Typically for the black artist, a degree of renown has come indirectly from a white superstar—in this case from Janis Joplin, who recorded “Ball and Chain,” one of Big Mama’s two biggest sellers (the other is “Wade in the Water.”).

“Janis is real nice,” Big Mama concedes. “She always like me and I like her singing too.”

No one denies that Janis poured her Southern-Comfort lubricated heart out on Big Mama’s tunes. But there is a lesson in why the main inspiration for Janis’ vocal style didn’t pull a good house, albeit a Tuesday night. (Mid-week and weekend attendance was better, but according to Nick Ungano, “We didn’t draw big with her.”) Big Mama, after all, doesn’t claim to know about the record business and a slew of exploitative contracts have taken full advantage.

“Don’t ask me how the business works,” she cautioned. “I’d like to know that myself; when I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

Big Mama’s current road manager, a warm, young white Arkansan named Ron Wyler, led me into the dressing room. I had called in advance and was told that I could talk to Big Mama any time for as long as I liked: she, however, hadn’t been hipped to our scheduled appointment, leading me to think that she wasn’t consulted about or notified of such decisions.

We were introduced face to back (my face to her back) as she tipped a quick gulp of Old Grand Dad. (“She drinks a lot of it, but holds it good,” Wyler told me). After a couple of lusty, biting comments, vaguely directed at me, she turned around and together we retired to the mellow (black-lighted, stained glass windowed) lounge.

“The blues ain’t never died for me,” she retorted when asked if she had been affected by the recent insurgence of blues music. Irrespective of size of audience, Big Mama sings the blues. Period. “I like all types of music,” she added, “but I am a blues singer.”

“Do you listen to anyone in particular,” I asked. “Don’t listen to nobody right now. Me, I’m a TV fan. If there ain’t a soap opera, there’s always a good shoot-em-up.” “When you’re on tour,” I continued, “do you get a chance to do anything outside of giving concerts, like catching some other scenes or listening to artists you know who are in town?” “Well,” she said absently, “I never featured myself running out of the building much.”

In spite of the humiliating machinations Big Mama has been put through as a recording artist, she is known to be tough about doing a song her way.

In 1953, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, now veteran songwriters whose compositions have been recorded by such heavies as The Coasters and Elvis Presley, presented “Hound Dog” to Big Mama during a recording session. When they reputedly explained how the number should be done, she made it clear that she had a better idea than all of them how to do it. I asked her how much she was to make her own decisions. “They don’t push me none,” she said, “don’t push me to do nothin’ I don’t want to do. Artists have to be completely free to do what they want. You can’t mess with nobody that’s creatin’ or they’ll lose their ability to perform.”

Although Big Mama’s performance of “Hound Dog” (for Peacock Records in Houston) was a very substantial hit (she says it sold over two million copies) and preceded Elvis’s revised version by three years, she only received a total of \$500 for doing it. There are in fact, a good many records produced for various labels (Galaxy, a division of Fantasy Records, among them) for which Big Mama has received little or nothing.

It is difficult to get her to talk at length about this, but her manager indicated that his brother (Miss Thornton’s personal manager has hired some good lawyers to try to reclaim some of the money due her. By the time Mr. Wyler’s brother took over, Big Mama was thousands of dollars in debt. Wyler said that this debt is all but liquidated and added that Big Mama now has a good house and a ’66 Pontiac.

It’s not clear how the management transition occurred, but Big Mama has naturally become very distrustful of people in the business and it took a long time for a good working relationship to be established between herself and the Wylers.

“There’s enough money to go around,” Wyler claimed; he also implied that it was equitably distributed. If true, this is clearly the exception to the rule. And one wonders what “equit” means when the Wylers are somehow finding the coin to establish a mini-empire for themselves while, Big Mama, as Mr. Wyler told me, is only now in the process of buying clothes for herself.

“Big Mama doesn’t see things politically.” Wyler said in response to my question, “she’s been shafted in so many ways that she can’t be involved with causes; she worries about herself.”

Under the capitalist system, the promoter and image-maker has the right to claim a disproportionate share of the profits for himself since, without him or another like him, even the best artist hasn’t a successful leg to stand on.

The irony is that for a manager or promoter to be successful at his level, he must maximize his profits and undertake further commercial ventures in order to compete.

B.B. King who has been playing beautiful blues on a shoestring for 20 years, now pulls \$7,500 for a two-night gig for himself and his promotion organization. To understand why the rate has gone up significantly even since the end of last year, one must, as an agent put it recently, “chart his career since then,” when the market-oriented promoters began to reap the commercial benefits of a rapidly expanding blues audience.

The Wyler enterprises referred to earlier include a partnership in radio station KPPC, and “underground” station in Pasadena that has been under this new management for about two years (once a church station, it’s still located in a church basement) and, I believe, an interest in WBCN-FM, which is currently buying some radio stations in Los Angeles.

These stations, Wyler pointed out, are going to be pushing a lot of blues. Ron Wyler’s brother is also involved with the Pointer Setter Publishing Company, located in Los Angeles and Vermont, which primarily handles country and western music, an emphasis adroitly in key with the 1968–69 boom in country music.

Furthermore—as is becoming common among entrepreneurs in the business today, the Wylers, as part of Celler Theatre Productions—have built their own recording studio, finished last year.

A key advantage of this kind of arrangement is that the artists under their jurisdiction can record and practice there “at no cost to them.”

Now that the Wyler enterprises appear to be getting off the ground, they are launching a big promotion campaign for Big Mama Thornton, of which the current tour is a part.

At the Boston Tea Party for a week (“the only happening place in Massachusetts,” one agent told me) before appearing at Ungano’s, she will be at the Electric Circus. She will take in Chicago, Denver and San Diego before returning to Los Angeles and will appear at the Ann Arbor blues festival on August 3.

A Mercury LP is timed to capitalize on the impact of the tour, expected to hit the stores in late May or early June. A big publicity push will follow the release of the record, entitled "Stronger Than Dirt."

The Arhoolie Record Company (Berkeley, Calif.) apparently still claims that Big Mama is under contract to them, but I cannot comment on this, not knowing what the actual contractual arrangements are. At any rate, the Mercury album, put together by Wyler's brother and produced by Al Smith (who also produced the Jefferson Airplane), is scheduled to include "Ball and Chain," "Sunshine of Your Love" (Cream's tune), "Born Under a Bad Sign" (Booker T's song, most ably recorded by Albert King for Stax) and others.

Big Mama wasn't sure what the complete contents would be, but observed that some of the cuts might be instrumentals. Another means of promotion currently being employed is television.

Wyler said Big Mama was beginning to get spots on numerous TV shows, including that of Roosevelt "Rosie" Greer, the football ace-turned-campaigner who apprehended Sirhan Sirhan after the Robert Kennedy assassination last year.

Similar promotion campaigns are presently being waged for other little-heard blues artists by those who understand the possibilities for good return on their investments.

Slim Harpo and Lightnin' Slim, for example, both recording artists for Excello Records (Nashville), are touring again after years of slow gigs. Things were so bad musically for Lightnin' Slim after he was un-able to collect \$9000 owed him by the record company outlet in Crowley, La., that he all but abandoned his career to work in a factory and live in a small town outside of Detroit.

Steve Paul, who reportedly bought Excello from Randy (of Randy's Record Shop and WLAC fame in Tennessee), is responsible for their tour and for the re-releases of their old records, now packaged in misleading cheap psychedelic jackets.

Back to Ungano's. After a lengthy rap, Mr. Wyler and I sat down near the bandstand to hear Big Mama and troupe perform for the handful of listeners present.

The subtlety and power of Big Mama's voice impressed me even more than I thought it could. Her phrasing and overall delivery are natural and relaxed, yet wrought with tension and a sense of urgency. She has lost a lot of weight since her European tour in 1966 and her dancing was full of force and grace. The fact that she was dressed in a bright afro blouse, gold felt beret, a colorful neck scarf and knee socks, fortified my feeling that she is the kind of individual who is clearly her own woman on stage.

Her presence was shattered only by her feeling of resentment toward her band, a group of young white blues enthusiasts, who, while to turn out a respect sound, just aren't Big Mama's band (her original band, called the Hound Dogs, do not yet share in the benefits of the blues revival, although Mr. Wyler indicated that he planned to get that group back together if possible.)

At one point, Big Mama turned on the group in frustration; it was evident that they too were restricted by the tension in the air. The performance continued, but Big Mama said later that she just couldn't get it together with them; conversely, the band felt that she often misled them by telling them to play in a different key from the one she sang in.

Big Mama demonstrated her self-taught versatility on harp and drums before closing out the set. Two other harpists added their fine contribution to the evening: sharing the bill was George Smith, also now of L.A., a very moving harmonica-man, and vocalist, whose most recent side for World-Pacific is an LP called "Contributing to Little Water." He is currently cutting another LP with the Flying Dutchmen, being produced by Bob Thiele. A surprise visit by James Cotton provided the other harp contribution, indeed a heavy if somewhat gimmicky one.

There are of course, many talented blues artists who came to the attention of a white promoter or (New Rock) performer belatedly or not at all, or who were deemed to have little moneymaking potential by those with the financial power to make hay. Just one case in point of the latter phenomenon is Little Miss Cornshucks, who recorded a dynamite album about eight years ago for a now discontinued line of Chess Records; Miss Cornshucks hasn't been heard from since. (Chess, established in the 1940s, is run by Phil and Leonard Chess, white middle class immigrants, who maintain such control over even their hottest artists that they were to get both Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf to record total hype "psychedelic" albums at a time when the market for acid music was high.

It is one of the countless tragedies of American 'capitalism that the performers of the music (especially traditional blues and folk) that grew out of the injustices of the system have, in many cases, remained unheard because their

talent was not considered market and/or they have found themselves deeply in debt because of exploitation and mismanagement by music industry sharks and by the nature of most recording contracts. Even the most equitable contract, like those of some of the newer, more business-wise artists are landing, necessarily subjugates content to market value—and the market itself is determined more by the impact of promotion and advertising on the docile consumer than by any other factor.



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