PAMELA SNEED

Featuring a musical tribute to Big Mama Thornton, performed by Pamela Sneed, Mara Rosenbloom, Michael Vatcher and Jasper Stadhouders

June 8, 2024—Doors at 8pm

Torpedo Theater, Amsterdam

playbill

ACT IX X XI XII

Stereo F 1028

BIG MAMA THORNTON IN EUROPE

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton is in my opinion the greatest female blues singer of this and any other decade. She combines the sensitive and personal qualities of the great country blues singers like Memphis Minnie and Lottie Kimbrough and the showmanship and powerful delivery of the great legends of the 1920s such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Big Mama can get as rough as any great blues artist when she blows the harmonica and beats out the rhythm behind a set of drums, she can be as magnificent as Mahalia Jackson when she sings songs like "Summertime", and she can be the real personal and sensitive country blues artist as evidenced on this album by the two selections with Fred McDowell. But at all times Big Mama is herself – she doesn't try to be anybody else. Sometimes she makes up her own songs as she goes along but usually Big Mama takes any song she likes and makes it into her own personal expression. I have heard Big Mama at many different places, from "down-home" beer joints to the stages of Europe's finest concert halls and everywhere Big Mama has been herself. Big Mama sings the music she has known all her life – music she feels – songs which have meaning for her – blues which deal with everyday life as she has experienced it – not always an easy life – mostly a rough and hard life with many disappointments in love and other relationships – but that is the essence of the blues – and they are universal. A person who has never experienced the blues is a rare bird indeed. Different people have many ways to express their blues and Big Mama is sure about her way. She sings and plays in the long and rich tradition of her predecessors – the men and women who have made Negro music the most important influence in popular music throughout the world.

Willie Mae Thornton was born and raised 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 the early 1950s Big Mama Thornton made her first recordings. The first was released under the name of the Harlem Stars with Willie Mae singing. Then Peacock records signed her and in 1952 she was recording for that label in Los Angeles, where she was appearing with the Johnny Otis show, when the then unknown team of Leiber and Stoller handed her a song scribbled on a paper bag. Big Mama looked it over and started singing. She liked the song and finally recorded it but it wasn't released until 1953. When "Hound Dog" finally came out it put Big Mama's name all over the country. She was in Dayton, Ohio, at the time with the late Johnny Ace and once more she went on tour from coast to coast. Later Elvis Presley again made the song into a hit but it really is Big Mama's "Hound Dog" – she feels it and made it her own. In 1956 after a tour with Gatemouth Brown Big Mama came to the West Coast again and decided to stay.

When I first heard Big Mama Thornton in 1961 it was at a small club in Santa Cruz on the beach. The bar was filled with sailors and assorted youngsters obviously enjoying the music. Behind the drums was Big Mama, on the piano was Baby Calloway, and Pete Lewis played the guitar. It was a real down-home blues group and Big Mama really sang up a storm! She also played harmonica which she kept soaking in a glass next to her drums and from time to time she would blow harp with one hand while keeping the drum beat going with the other. Early in 1964 Jimmy Lyons called me to ask whom I would recommend for their Blues Afternoon to be part of the 1964 Monterey Jazz Festival and the first name which 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!".

In the fall of 1964 I had told Horst Lippmann, producer of the now annual American Folk Blues Festival which tours all of Europe, about Big Mama Thornton and her tremendous success at Monterey and he was very enthused about the possibility of finally getting a real low-down female blues singer to tour with the Festival. At first Big Mama was a bit reluctant about the trip because she has similar dislikes for airplanes as does Lightning Hopkins, but she finally agreed to make the trip. As it turned out Big Mama certainly was the topper of the 1965 American Folk Blues Festival. Her rousing "Hound Dog" as well as the finale which she called "Down-home Shakedown" were received with enthusiastic applause everywhere in Europe, and her manager Jim Moore was quoted as saying: "And the reception! Wow! You couldn't believe it! Big Mama cried, really cried."

This album was recorded in London with members of the 1965 American Folk Blues Festival. Side one of this LP features the powerful, rocking, big-beat blues backed by the Chicago rhythm section. Side two opens with two selections where Big Mama is joined by only Fred McDowell who had come along and decided to "help her out" on a couple of things. Fred's eerie Mississippi bottle-neck guitar style was the perfect match for Big Mama's sensitive but strong voice as she poured out a few comments and thoughts on that rainy afternoon far away from home. But the session wasn't over yet. Big Mama asked Fred Below to step aside a minute and took over on drums herself with Buddy Guy and Eddie Boyd joining in. I feel the session was a good party enjoyed by all, giving Big Mama Thornton a chance to present on a record the many different sides of her enormous talent and bringing to an ever growing audience around the world a short but enjoyable visit with the world's greatest female blues singer: Big Mama Thornton.

(Chris Strachwitz – 1966)

Personnel for each selection:

"Swing It on Home", "Sweet Little Angel", "The Place": Big Mama Thornton vocals; Buddy Guy – guitar; Fred Below – drums; Eddie Boyd – piano; Jimm Lee Robinson – bass.

"Little Red Rooster": same as last but Eddie Boyd – organ.

"Unlucky Girl" & "Hound Dog": same as above but add Walter "Shaky" Horton – harmonica.

"My Heavy Load" & "School Boy": Big Mama Thornton vocals; Fred McDowell – guitar.

"Down-home Shakedown": Big Mama Thornton – harmonica; Shaky Horton – harmonica; Eddie Boyd – organ; plus Below, Guy & Robinson.

"Your love is where it ought to be": Big Mama Thornton – vocal, harmonica, and drums; Buddy Guy – guitar; Eddie Boyd – piano.

"Session Blues": Big Mama Thornton vocal and drums; Shaky Horton – harmonica; plus Guy and Boyd.

Thornton

SWING IT ON HOME
SWEET LITTLE ANGEL
THE PLACE
LITTLE RED ROOSTER
UNLUCKY GIRL
HOUND DOG
MY HEAVY LOAD
SCHOOL BOY
DOWN-HOME SHAKE-DOWN
YOUR LOVE IS WHERE IT OUGHT TO BE
SESSION BLUES

Best Wishes

Big Mama

Cover Photo: Chris Strachwitz
Cover Design: Wayne Pope
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Produced by: Chris Strachwitz

Ruth Love

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PROGRAMME

8pm
Introduction to Pamela Sneed

8.10pm—Set
The hits of Big Mama Thornton
Performed by Pamela Sneed (vocals), Mara Rosenbloom (keys), Michael Vatcher (drums) and Jasper Stadhouders (guitar)

9:30pm—Drinks

New York-based poet, performer and visual artist Pamela Sneed's genre defying work is rooted in her commitment to activism and intersectional modes of thinking, from the 1990s AIDS crisis to the Black lesbian working class experience. An example of this is her most recent and widely celebrated book, *Funeral Diva* (2020)—a poetic memoir about coming-of-age in the AIDS era, and its effects on life and art.

Often working from an autobiographical impulse, Sneed's contribution to ACT IX is no different. For the occasion, she brings her recently developed performance project A Tribute to Big Mama Thornton to Amsterdam for the first time. Premiering in New York at the beginning of 2023 and brought to life in the style of a juke joint—a term within African American vernacular to refer to an establishment featuring music, dancing and drinking—A Tribute to Big Mama Thornton honours singer and songwriter Big Mama Thornton. Until her recent induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2024, Big Mama Thornton was an unsung pioneer of rock and roll known for her gender-expansive style. Through bringing her hits to life on stage, Sneed locates the legacy of Big Mama Thornton within the queer canon through an examination of her presence as a Black and transgender performer.

In a prose poem-cum-newsletter for the Poetry Project in 2020, Sneed writes: 'Like Big Mama Thornton, I too was raised in the church. My grandfather was a baptist preacher. My grandmother sang spirituals. I credit the Black church for my love and introduction to poetry, the music and art I was surrounded by, and through the lyricism of preachers and women's testimonies I learned poetry. Through this upbringing I identified with Big Mama Thornton and how she came to music.'

Sneed will be joined on stage at Torpedo Theater by Mara Rosenbloom on keys, Michael Vatcher on drums and Jasper Stadhouders on guitar. For the evening, Torpedo Theater will open its doors under the name of Juke Joint, and its stage will be dedicated to the coalescence of voices raring to be heard—ones joyously singing their refusal to adhere to what could be understood as normative femininity.

IMAGE Backside of the record *Big Mama Thornton In Europe* (1966), signed by Big Mama Thornton.

COLOPHON Torpedo Theater is a long-running, thirty-seat theatre in the heart of Amsterdam's city centre. Originally founded by *Het Parool*, a Dutch national newspaper, the theatre has been committed to the spoken, written and performed word from the beginning. playbill is an event-based project invested in the presentation of experimental language and text-based artistic works on the (small) stage. It is curated by Martha Jager and Isabelle Sully, and designed by Maud Vervenne. playbill: ACT IX has been made possible thanks to the Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsdeel Centrum and Mondriaan Fonds. This playbill has been printed by Terry Bleu, Amsterdam.