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WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 7 of an Ongoing Series

BIG MAMA THORNTON

1926 – 1984

Willie Mae Thornton — The Woman Elvis Covered and Forgot

Hound Dog: \$500 for Big Mama Thornton — \$10 million in sales for Elvis Presley · Ball and Chain: written by Thornton — copyright held by label for 7 years without release — made Janis Joplin famous · Died of heart failure in a Los Angeles boarding house — penniless — July 25, 1984

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HER

Biography: The Daughter of a Preacher, the Mother of Rock and Roll

Willie Mae Thornton was born December 11, 1926, in Ariton, Alabama — a rural community outside Montgomery. Her father was a Baptist minister. Her mother was a singer in his congregation. She grew up with the sound of the church as her foundation. She was inspired by classic early blues singers — Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie — and taught herself drums and harmonica. She did not need formal training. The gift was already present.

By the time she was a teenager her mother had died. By her early twenties she had joined Sammy Green's Hot Harlem Revue, touring the American South and the Chitlin' Circuit — the network of Black-owned and Black-friendly venues that was the only touring infrastructure available to Black performers in the Jim Crow era. She moved to Houston in 1948 where a new kind of urban blues was developing, and in 1951 she signed a recording contract with Peacock Records.

In 1952, bandleader Johnny Otis introduced her to two young Jewish songwriters from Los Angeles named Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. They had been asked to write a song for her. They listened to her sing. They wrote ***Hound Dog*** in approximately fifteen minutes — specifically for her voice, her personality, her power. The song is a blues lament: a woman throwing a cheating man out of her life. ***"You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, cryin' all the time."*** It was written **for** Big Mama Thornton. It fit her the way a custom instrument fits the hand that commissioned it.

Her recording of Hound Dog stayed at number one on the Billboard R&B chart for seven weeks in 1953. It sold almost two million copies. It became Peacock Records' best-selling single of all time. It was named one of the 500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2013. It was added to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress in 2016. Frank Schiffman, the manager of Harlem's Apollo Theater, gave her the name ***Big Mama*** because of the power of her voice and the force of her presence. She was a woman who stopped shows. They learned — documented in the Library of Congress account of her career — that you did not bring anyone on after Big Mama Thornton.

She also wrote ***Ball and Chain*** in 1960 — a song about a woman's endurance through a destructive relationship. She was the covenant musician in the prophetic tradition: writing about what she had lived, what the women around her had lived, what needed to be said. The song would eventually become one of Janis Joplin's signature performances. **Two of the most important songs in the development of American rock music were written by and first performed by Willie Mae Thornton.** She received \$500 for one of them and initially nothing for the other.

◆ *Big Mama Thornton is the report in this series that makes the pattern most visible, because her case involves the most direct and documented comparison between what she received and what white artists received for the same material. \$500 for Hound Dog. Elvis sold 10 million copies of his*

version. This is not systemic in the abstract. It is specific. It is numbered. It is named. It is the covenant indictment at its most precise.

Born	December 11, 1926 — Ariton, Alabama
Parents	Father: Baptist minister. Mother: congregation singer. Died young.
Career start	Self-taught drums and harmonica; Sammy Green's Hot Harlem Revue, 1940s; Chitlin' Circuit
Peacock Records	Signed 1951 — Houston, Texas
Hound Dog (1952)	Number one R&B for 7 weeks; nearly 2 million copies sold; Peacock Records' all-time best seller
Payment for Hound Dog	\$500 total — one check — no royalties
Ball and Chain (1961)	Written by Thornton; copyright assigned to Bay-Tone Records; held 7 years without release
Elvis version (1956)	Hound Dog — 10+ million copies sold; 11 weeks Billboard pop chart; record stood for 36 years
Janis Joplin (1967–68)	Ball and Chain — Cheap Thrills album #1 for 2 months; Joplin acknowledged Thornton as source
Death	July 25, 1984 — heart failure and liver disorders — boarding house, Los Angeles — penniless
Estate	Described in multiple sources as penniless at death; friends gave her a funeral
Recognition	Blues Hall of Fame 1984. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 2024 (posthumous, musical influence category).

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HER

The Exploitation — Two Songs, Two Thefts, One Pattern

Wound One: Hound Dog — \$500 and Nearly 2 Million Copies

The numbers are documented across five independent sources and require no interpretation. Big Mama Thornton recorded Hound Dog in 1952. The record sold nearly two million copies. She received one check for \$500. No royalties. Peacock

Records owned the recording. Leiber and Stoller, who wrote the song, also received a check that was subsequently stopped by Peacock Records.

In 1956, Elvis Presley recorded his version of Hound Dog — not based on Thornton's recording but on a bleached-out pop version by Freddie Bell and the Bellboys that had stripped the blues sound and changed the original lyrics. Presley's version of Hound Dog sold over 10 million copies. It spent 11 weeks on the Billboard pop chart — a record that stood for 36 years until Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You* in 1992. It launched Presley into international superstardom.

Thornton received \$500. Presley had access to the mainstream pop market, mainstream radio, and mainstream television — The Steve Allen Show — because he was white. Thornton was confined to the R&B chart and the Chitlin' Circuit because she was Black. The disparity is not a matter of merit or talent. It is a matter of access. **The same song, performed first and better by its intended interpreter, generated \$500 for the Black woman and superstardom for the white man.** This is the cover system in its most documented and specific form.

HOUND DOG	Big Mama Thornton (1952): 500,000–2,000,000 copies sold — \$500 total — no royalties — R&B chart only — Chitlin' Circuit	Elvis Presley (1956): 10+ million copies sold — fortunes in royalties — pop, R&B, and country charts — national TV — superstardom
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Britannica documents: *"Reportedly, Thornton was paid only \$500 for her recording, whereas Presley's version reaped him immense fame and much greater financial rewards."* The Alabama News Center confirms: *"Thornton's version stayed at No. 1 on the Billboard R&B chart for seven weeks in 1953 and sold almost two million copies. She earned \$500 for her trouble."* The Library of Congress National Recording Registry documentation confirms her recording as foundational to rock and roll. **Three independent authoritative sources. Same number. \$500.**

Wound Two: Ball and Chain — The Copyright Held for Seven Years

In 1961, Big Mama Thornton wrote Ball and Chain — a blues song about endurance through mistreatment. She assigned the copyright to Bay-Tone Records, a small San Francisco independent label. Bay-Tone recorded her version. Then the label chose not to release it. **They held the copyright for approximately seven years without releasing the recording** — meaning Thornton could not release it elsewhere, could not record it for another label, and received nothing from it.

In 1967, Janis Joplin heard Thornton perform Ball and Chain at the Both/And Club in San Francisco. Joplin asked permission to cover it. Thornton agreed. Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company performed it at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 — a performance that became one of the defining moments of that festival and of the entire San Francisco rock movement. The album *Cheap Thrills* was released in August 1968. **It spent two months at number one on the Billboard Hot 200.** Ball and Chain made Janis Joplin an international star.

What did Thornton receive? The Wikipedia account is precise: "*Thornton did not receive compensation for her song.*" Bay-Tone held the copyright. When Joplin's version became a hit and the song began generating commercial revenue, the money went to Bay-Tone — the label that had held the song for seven years without releasing it.

Thornton wrote the song. She was denied both the artistic credit and the financial compensation for the work that made another artist famous. Joplin, recognizing this injustice, invited Thornton to open her shows as a personal act of acknowledgment. The industry had no mechanism for it. Joplin created one herself.

"That girl feels like I do." That is what Thornton said about Joplin's performance of Ball and Chain. Not bitterness. Not accusation. Pure covenant recognition: **the sound was true.** The gift had passed from one carrier to another. Joplin felt what Thornton had felt when she wrote it. **This is the zamar tradition functioning as Yahweh designed it** — the sound carries the truth across generations, across race, across the commercial structures that tried to contain it. The system failed to contain it. It could not stop the song. It could only steal the money.

Wound Three: The Cover System and Cultural Erasure

Elvis Presley never acknowledged Thornton. The biographer Michael Spörke, who wrote *Big Mama Thornton: The Life and Music*, documents that Presley "*never acknowledged any debt to Thornton and declined to perform with her.*" By 1957, the Library of Congress documentation confirms, Presley's version of Hound Dog was so dominant that most people had either forgotten or had never heard Thornton's original. The song that was written for her, that she had sung into existence, that she had made a number one hit — had been commercially associated with the man who covered it for a mass market.

Alice Walker published a short story in 1981 — "*Nineteen Fifty-Five*" — that offered a fictionalized account of a Presley-like character taking a Black blues singer's song and becoming famous from it while the original artist remained poor. Walker was writing about Thornton without naming her. **The injustice was so well known by 1981 that a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist used it as the basis of a published short story.** The industry did not correct it. Thornton died in 1984. She died in a boarding house.

Wound Four: The Boarding House and the Pauper's End

Big Mama Thornton died of heart failure and liver disorders on July 25, 1984, in a boarding house room in Los Angeles. She was 57 years old. She was penniless. Her friends gave her a funeral. Johnny Otis — the bandleader who had first brought her to Leiber and Stoller, who had helped launch the career that produced Hound Dog — conducted the funeral.

One of her closest friends said: "*She lived as she wanted to do. She wasn't a millionaire and I don't think she was trying to be one. She always said that the blues were more important than having money.*" This is an act of love — speaking well of someone at the end. But the covenant research standard cannot accept this framing without noting what it obscures: **Big Mama Thornton did not choose poverty. She was forced into it by a system that extracted the commercial value of her gift and returned almost none of it to her.** She may have been at peace with the blues being more important

than money. The covenant is not at peace with a system that used that grace to justify paying her \$500 for a song worth millions.

SECTION THREE — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

WITNESS One: *Encyclopedia Britannica* — peer-reviewed reference: confirms Thornton received \$500 for her Hound Dog recording; confirms Elvis Presley's version 'reaped him immense fame and much greater financial rewards'; confirms Thornton did not receive compensation when Joplin's version of Ball and Chain became a hit; confirms Thornton died in a Los Angeles boarding house of heart failure and liver disorders, 1984. Britannica is a peer-reviewed academic reference with editorial standards equivalent to a university press.

WITNESS Two: Library of Congress National Recording Registry documentation ('Hound Dog — Big Mama Thornton, 1953, added to National Registry 2016'): confirms Hound Dog is 'an important beginning of rock-and-roll, especially in its use of the guitar as the key instrument'; confirms the commercial and cultural significance of Thornton's original recording; confirms the cover system by which her song was commercially appropriated; confirms that by 1957 Presley's version had so dominated public memory that Thornton's original was largely forgotten. This is the official documentation of the United States national archive.

WITNESS Three: Wikipedia (Big Mama Thornton article — sourced from Michael Spörke's biography *Big Mama Thornton: The Life and Music*; NYU music professor Maureen Mahon; and multiple documentary sources): confirms 'Though later recordings of her songs by other artists sold millions of copies, she was denied royalties by not holding the publishing copyrights to her creativity'; confirms Bay-Tone Records held Ball and Chain copyright for approximately 7 years without release; confirms Thornton 'died of a heart attack and liver disorders, penniless in a boarding-house in Los Angeles'; confirms Presley 'never acknowledged any debt to Thornton and declined to perform with her.' Source confirmed against Britannica and Library of Congress documentation.

Additional corroboration: Alabama News Center (\$500 payment documented); Songs That Saved Your Life newsletter (Joplin's acknowledgment of debt to Thornton; Ball and Chain copyright history); WBSS Media biography; Top40Weekly biography (pauper's grave documentation).

SECTION FOUR — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges — Applied to Big Mama Thornton

Charge One: Theft by Cover — Vayikra 19:11, 13

"You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another... You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The

wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:11, 13

The cover system operated as a legal mechanism for cultural theft. **Leiber and Stoller wrote Hound Dog for Thornton.** It was conceived in her voice, performed in her register, recorded in her presence. The song was hers in every meaningful sense except the legal one the label controlled. Presley recorded a cover — technically a legal act under the copyright framework of the era — and the commercial infrastructure that was available to him as a white performer and unavailable to her as a Black woman did the rest. **The Torah does not recognize the distinction between legal theft and illegal theft.** The Hebrew *lo tignov* — you shall not steal — and *lo ta'ashoq* — you shall not oppress — apply to any taking that deprives the rightful creator of the fruit of their creation. The \$500 against 10 million copies sold is the measure of the taking. It does not require a court ruling to be a covenant violation.

Charge Two: Holding the Copyright as a Weapon — Vayikra 19:13

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:13

Bay-Tone Records held the copyright to Ball and Chain for approximately seven years without releasing Thornton's recording. **This is not a passive failure. This is an active use of legal copyright ownership as a mechanism of control and extraction.** Thornton could not release the song elsewhere. She could not record it for another label. She could not authorize any release. The company held her creative work hostage to its commercial calculations. When Joplin's version made the song commercially valuable in 1968, the royalties flowed to Bay-Tone — the company that had done nothing with the song for seven years except prevent Thornton from benefiting from it. **Lo ta'ashoq:** you shall not oppress your neighbor. Holding someone's creative work for seven years and then collecting the commercial value when someone else makes it famous is oppression in the covenant's most precise sense.

Charge Three: Race as a Weapon Against the Gifted — Devarim 1:17

"You shall not show partiality in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is Elohim's."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 1:17

The disparity between Thornton and Presley is not a talent disparity. Every scholarly source in this report confirms that her voice was the foundation. The song was written for her. Her version defined the sound. **The disparity is a racial disparity in access to commercial infrastructure.** Presley had access to mainstream pop radio, mainstream television, and mainstream record distribution. Thornton had access to the R&B chart and the Chitlin' Circuit. These were not separate but equal channels. They were separate and radically unequal. The Torah's standard of *lo takiru panim* — do not show

partiality — governs every system that assigns different value to the same creative labor based on the race of the creator. The music industry of the 1950s was built on that partiality. **The covenant names it and condemns it regardless of whether the legal system of the era enforced it.**

Charge Four: The Pauper's End — Mishlei 13:23

"The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice."

— Mishlei (Proverbs) 13:23

Big Mama Thornton's gift was abundant. Two songs that shaped rock and roll. A voice that produced standing ovations at the Apollo Theater, at Monterey, in European blues festivals. A stage presence that could not be followed by anyone. **Her fallow ground yielded much food.** The music industry swept it away through injustice: \$500 for two million copies, a copyright held without release for seven years, a cover system that moved the commercial value of her creation to a white artist with better distribution access, and a boarding house at the end of a life spent feeding a system that never fed her back. **Mishlei** names this with economy and precision. The fallow ground of the poor yields much food. The injustice sweeps it away. The Torah has seen this before. It names it. It condemns it.

SECTION FIVE — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

Let me be direct about what \$500 means. I have been a working musician since I was fourteen years old. I know what a session costs. I know what a number one hit on any chart is worth. I know what seven weeks at number one means for the publishing revenue of a song. \$500 for a song that sold nearly two million copies and spent seven weeks at number one is not a payment. It is an insult dressed as a payment. It is the music industry's version of what the Torah calls ***ona'at devarim*** — wronging someone through the language of a transaction designed to obscure the injustice of the exchange.

◆ *Hound Dog was written for her. Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller heard her sing and wrote a song specifically for her voice, her personality, her power. They wrote it in fifteen minutes because she inspired it in fifteen minutes. The song was hers in every way that matters to the covenant understanding of creative labor. The label owned the legal copyright. The label gave her \$500. Elvis got superstardom. I have been playing guitar since I was fourteen. I have never received what I was worth. No working musician has. But \$500 for that song is not poverty. It is a statement about whose creativity the system considered worth paying.*

Janis Joplin did the right thing. When Ball and Chain made Joplin famous, she did not pretend it was hers. She acknowledged the debt publicly, brought Thornton on her tours, and gave her a platform. **This is the covenant in action** — one carrier of the zamar recognizing another and acting accordingly. It is not what the industry did. It is what Joplin did as an individual, against the industry's logic. *"That girl feels like I do."* Thornton said it. That is the sound of two covenant musicians recognizing each other across race, across generation, across the commercial system that tried to keep one invisible.

◆ *The Peace of Blues. The Kepha Arcemont Experiment. Every performance I have ever given stands on the foundation that Big Mama Thornton built and was denied compensation for. Every blues-rock guitarist playing in 2026 stands on that foundation. The British Invasion — the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, the Yardbirds — stands on that foundation. Rock and roll itself stands on that foundation. She was paid \$500. She died in a boarding house. The foundation she laid is still holding up an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The covenant indictment of that industry is not complicated. It is \$500 against the world it helped build.*

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted her in 2024 — 40 years after her death. The Grammy Hall of Fame inducted Hound Dog in 2013 — 29 years after her death. The Library of Congress added it to the National Recording Registry in 2016 — 32 years after her death. **Every institutional acknowledgment came after she could receive it.** This is the pattern the covenant documentation establishes across every report in this series: the system acknowledges the worth of the gifted after the gifted are no longer alive to benefit from the acknowledgment. ****Yahweh**'s record does not wait for the institution's schedule.**

SECTION SIX — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Big Mama Thornton

The Big Mama Thornton case is the most numerically precise indictment in this series because the comparison is exact, documented, and named: \$500 against \$10 million in sales. One song. Two performers. The same material. Radically different commercial outcomes based entirely on the race of the performer and their access to the commercial infrastructure that race determined. The covenant does not need probability or inference to render a verdict here. The numbers render it themselves.

COVENANT VERDICT ONE — HOUND DOG: Big Mama Thornton recorded a song written for her voice, made it a number one hit, sold nearly 2 million copies, and received \$500 with no royalties. Elvis Presley covered the same song, sold 10+ million copies, and received superstardom. The disparity is documented across five independent authoritative sources. It stands in

violation of Vayikra 19:11 and 19:13 — theft and oppression of the hired worker. The racial partiality that created the disparity stands in violation of Devarim 1:17. The judgment of Yahweh is entered.

COVENANT VERDICT TWO — BALL AND CHAIN: Thornton wrote Ball and Chain. Bay-Tone Records held the copyright for approximately 7 years without releasing her recording. When Janis Joplin's cover made the song commercially valuable, the royalties flowed to Bay-Tone. Thornton received nothing for a song she wrote. This stands in violation of Vayikra 19:13 — the oppressor who holds back wages through legal mechanisms — and Bemidbar 27:8-9 — the creator's right to the inheritance of their own work. The judgment is entered.

COVENANT VERDICT THREE — THE BOARDING HOUSE: Big Mama Thornton died penniless in a Los Angeles boarding house in 1984. Her two most important songs had shaped rock and roll and made other artists famous. She received \$500 for one and initially nothing for the other. The fallow ground of the poor yielded much food. The injustice swept it away. Mishlei 13:23. The judgment is entered. It does not expire in 1984 or in 2024 when the Hall of Fame finally called her name.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted her in 2024. **Forty years after her death.** The Hall inducted Elvis Presley in 1986 — nine years after his death. The Hall inducted Janis Joplin in 1995 — 25 years after hers. Big Mama Thornton: 40 years. The woman whose songs made them both. **Yahweh does not keep that schedule.** His record was open in 1952 when she received \$500. It was open in 1984 when she died in the boarding house. It was open in 2024 when the Hall finally read her name. It remains open today.

"For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 9:18

The hope did not perish. The songs survived. Ball and Chain is still sung. Hound Dog is still recognized as hers by every honest music historian. The Library of Congress holds her recording in the permanent national archive. Her name is on the wall of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, 40 years late. **But the covenant record holds something the Hall of Fame does not:** every dollar she was owed from 1952 to 1984. Every night in a boarding house that should have been paid for by royalties. Every song that made another artist famous without returning her share. The full accounting. **Selah.**

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 8 — Chuck Berry (1926–2017). The Father of Rock and Roll — who drove to play his own hit Maybellene and was turned away from the club because they had not known he was Black; who was forced to share songwriting credits with a DJ and a money-lender for a song he wrote alone; who served multiple prison terms including one widely believed to be racially motivated; and whose catalog battles with his own estate continued beyond his death.

Research standard: All charges require a minimum of two to three independent authoritative sources per Devarim 19:15.

Selah.

*Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly · Pearl River, Louisiana · March 2026
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