Listening for Willie Mae Big Mama Thornton's voice: the sound of race and gender transgressions in rock and roll.

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Listening for Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s Voice: The Sound of Race and Gender Transgressions in Rock and Roll

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Listening for Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s Voice

The Sound of Race and Gender Transgressions in Rock and Roll

Maureen Mahon (bio)

SINGER WILLIE MAE "BIG MAMA" THORNTON'S story will be familiar to many *Women & Music* readers. Yet I retell it here in a way that emphasizes her voice as an expressive instrument through which she built her career as a musician and that uncovers the critical, personal voice of a black female artist. I am particularly interested in connecting my discussion of her voice, in both senses that I indicate, to an exploration of her transgressive sound and image and their impact on rock and roll. Thornton flouted the expectations of dominant black and white middle-class arbiters of propriety. She tapped into a liberated black femininity through which she freed herself from many of the expectations of musical, lyrical, physical, and sartorial practice for black women. I argue that these transgressions, central to her artistic voice, were at the heart of her musical identity, her appeal, and her influence. Her identity as a black woman, however, has made it difficult to hear and see Thornton in all of her resonant dimensions, especially in standard histories of rock and roll.

I begin with a discussion of the ways black feminist and cultural anthropology perspectives have informed my approach to Thornton's music and career. Then, following an overview of her career, I listen for Thornton's voice, demonstrating her influence on two rock-and-roll artists and telling the story of a well-recognized but little-known figure who traversed the genres of rhythm and blues, blues, and rock, having an impact on all three.

(Black) Feminist Perspectives on Rock-and-Roll History

My motivation for exploring Thornton's rock-and-roll legacy stems in part from a frustration with the marginal position black women occupy in mainstream histories of the genre—for **[End Page 1]** example, in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* and multipart television documentaries produced by Time-Life and PBS during the 1990s.[1] Within

these narratives, assumptions about musical genre and social identity come together in ways that are problematic for black women; the narratives position white male artists at the center of the story as the real rock and rollers and overlook black women's impact on rock and roll. In recent years, race-conscious feminist scholars have examined the involvement of women in a range of musical endeavors and explored the ways factors like race, class, and sexuality shape their experiences.[2] This research critiques and rectifies the absence of white women and women of color in narratives of music production. In her pathbreaking study of all-woman swing bands of the 1940s, feminist historian Sherrie Tucker exposes the race and gender assumptions that underpin the dominant narratives of swing history and render the women she writes about invisible; she also demonstrates that writing on swing is informed by discourses of race that differently affect the representation of black and white women musicians.[3] Tucker's sensitivity to the politics of representation and her recovery of lost musical voices of women is echoed in the work of feminist scholars concerned with the absence of black women in rock-and-roll history. These scholars have revealed the influential contributions of Thornton, gospel guitarist and vocalist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and girl groups of the 1960s.[4] This work also examines the race- and gender-rooted biases that have made it difficult to recognize the presence of innovative black women in the rock-and-roll context and their involvement in cross-racial exchanges.[5] Such attention to black women's cultural production broadens scholarly understanding of music making. Eileen Hayes argues that scholars in musicology and ethnomusicology should draw on black feminist thinking "to interrogate black women's practices as music creators, performers, listeners, and consumers" and to "illuminate the heterogeneity of black women's musical experience."[6] Daphne Brooks advises incorporating black feminist perspectives into rock criticism, suggesting that doing so can help to break down the oppressive race, gender, and genre paradigms that segregate musical productions according to race and gender in spite of frequent boundary crossing.[7]...

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