

**This interview with  
THELMA HOUSTON  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 17, 2025.**



**Library of Congress: Hi, Ms. Houston. So good to talk to you. Greetings from the Library of Congress. Congratulations on joining the National Recording Registry.**

Thelma Houston: Thank you so much. Thank you. I'm so honored.

**LC: We are very honored to have you. Thank you for sitting down with us to talk about the album. I have some questions for you about the making of the album “I’ve Got the Music In Me.” My first one is: How did you come to work with Sheffield Labs?**

TH: I found out about this project through Bill Schnee. Bill Schnee was the engineer, and so they came to me with the idea. I was fascinated by it because that's the way I've always wanted to record. I always wanted to be able to do it one time, at one sitting. I want it to feel like a performance. There are some people who are very talented with recording, being able to do it over and over again and getting the same... almost like making a movie and being able to keep that same emotion, but for me, it is the freshness of the material and the audience, and being able to tell my story to them is what makes it exciting.

Particularly at this time that this album idea was presented to me by Bill Schnee and Lincoln Mayorga and Doug Sax, I was at Motown. Motown, particularly for artists that don't write their own material, you're trying to go in to cut a hit record. I was in the studio all the time and it was to make a hit. You would end up doing that one song, and you would do it over and over, if they felt that the song was marketable or not.

So to be able to be given this opportunity to do a whole album and being able to do it live was just like a blessing for me.

**LC: How did you go about amassing the songs that you wanted to cut on the album?**

TH: I think "I've Got the Music in Me" was suggested by Bill Schnee. "Don't Misunderstand" and the Stevie Wonder song ["To Know You is to Love You"] were the ones that I wanted to record. "Don't Misunderstand" was from, believe it or not, it was from this movie "Shaq Goes to Africa." Gordon Parks wrote "Don't Misunderstand" and it was for that movie. I think it's a beautiful song. It has also been recorded by Tony Bennett.

**LC: Did he bring that song to you? Did you collaborate with Bill on which ones to do for the album?**

TH: Gordon Parks didn't bring to me. I heard someone else do it... I think the producer that I was working with on Motown at the time--his name was Joe Porter--is the one we kind of... we picked out some songs, because we weren't really necessarily going for the hit. We were going through songs that we really... every once in a while, I got to do songs that I really liked doing.

**LC: Now, the title track had been a big hit for Kiki Dee. Had you heard that version?**

TH: Yes, that's where we got this from, the Kiki Dee version.

**LC: When you heard it, did you think you could bring to it something different than Kiki?... Though some of these British girls do have a lot of soul—**

TH: Yes! Like, Amy Winehouse, who is a fellow inductee this year.

**LC: Yes, exactly.**

TH: Love Amy Winehouse. And if you go back to Dusty Springfield or to Lulu or.... They're very soulful singers.

Well, we had an opportunity to try to do something a little different in the arrangement of it. I think that was the difference. You can't make it too different from what it was. It was already a good song....

**LC: Do you remember how long it took to make the album from start to finish?**

TH: This is another thing that I like, for me, prior to this, the making of an album can take anywhere from a minimum of six months-- by the time you go in to cut the tracks, put on the vocals, put on the sweetening, do the mixing, do the editing and the mastering and all of that, it's a long time. For this [album], it was a three-day project.

**LC: Really!?**

TH: Yes, you rehearse, and then you have the two or three days to do the run. Knowing exactly what you were going to do, how you were going to approach the songs, they allowed me to be able to... I probably sang it differently on every cut that we did in the rehearsal and so forth, but

pretty much, you had it laid out how it was going to go. I think that's really good. That saves a lot of time, if you do the prep work before.

We did spend the time coming up with the arrangements for each song that we did. There was more of that, that wasn't just a day or two. That took some time to come up with that, pick the songs and come up with the arrangements. The actual making of the album, though, was a day of rehearsal and then two days to cut it.

**LC: That's amazing.**

TH: Then, it was done. No editing, no mastering. It was done, ready to go out.

**LC: Did you ever get to record that way again?**

TH: Well, when I think about it, when I was in the ninth grade, I went to a junior high school in Long Beach, California, called Franklin Junior High School. We had a very progressive principal. His name was Mr. **Buck Catlin**. Mr. Catlin took great pride in presenting this talent show every year. On the year that I was the star of the show, which was my ninth year, Mr. Catlin had us make a record, and that was how it was done, one take, all at once. That was a 1959.

But, no, I have not had an opportunity to do any recording like ["I Got the Music In Me"] again, except if you do a live recording of something. But, nothing that has been recorded live and then put out. No, this is it.

**LC: Can you tell me about some of the musicians that you worked with on this album? They had to be just superb.**

TH: Well, some of these musicians were musicians that had worked with me on other projects. Let's see. Larry Knechtel and Michael Omartian. Jim Gordon. I can't think of everyone right now, but they were all... They were all the top musicians at the time. These were the musicians that were so busy, that they had a company that would come to the studio and pick up their instruments and then took them to the next place that they were going to be working. They were that busy. They were that type of musicians.

My background singers, Morgan Ames and Jim Gilstrap. I can't think of every single person. We were all in this room. We were all in the studio together. Of course, we had to be at the same time. It was just so much energy and just, I don't know, we were feeding off each other and I don't know, it was just... I don't know! I have not had that experience since. I've had that experience in performing live when everything comes together with the band and the background singers and the audiences, kicking it with you and having a great time. I can't say that I've had that experience since then in recording.

**LC: I'm going to be interviewing Bill Schnee next week. What sort of producer... what did he bring to the sessions?**

TH: Ears! His ears, and also giving me... I think the main thing or a big part of this is confidence, the confidence level that you have. It's confidence. They gave me confidence that they believed in what I was doing, and they allowed me to be creative in my performances during the rehearsal and also to have an input in the arrangements: "Well, how do you feel about this?" And I'd say, "What if I would make this a little bit more..." They were all in agreement. It was just a wonderful experience. I wish all recording artists could have that.

**LC: Why do you think they don't do that?**

TH: Well, for one, at the time, and you can ask Bill if this is correct or not, but I think that at that time, we're talking, I think, 1975, I think, you could only press up to a certain amount of records. I believe it was 150,000. To most record companies, that was not feasible. You'd have to sell each for so much money.

It was so funny. I would be at pride festivals and things back in the day, the real "Don't Leave Me This Way" crowd, and here would come someone with a copy of "I've Got the Music in Me" under their arm, a person that looked totally like... it wouldn't be like the rest of the folks there. It was a different audience. It was some real audiophile, that would spend tons of money on audio equipment for their house.... The album was also used as a sample for selling for Corvettes or some other high-end car. They would use that record as a demonstration to demonstrate the sound. That's brought me a whole other different group of people, too.

**LC: Why do you think this is such an enduring classic of an album? Do you think it's your most enduring album? You've had a long career.**

TH: Well, I think, and let me say this, too, let me add this, Sheffield Lab was the most consistent with paying royalties. Let's just throw that out there.

**LC: Very good. That's important. You don't hear that often, do you?**

TH: No.... What did you ask?

**LC: I want to know why you thought that this was such an enduring classic.**

TH: I think people feel it. They feel the energy, they feel like they're a part of it, I think. It doesn't sound like most of the music that is out there, somewhere. You feel surrounded by it, I think, and I think that's why it's still viable, and why new attention has been brought to it. Thank God.

**LC: Were you able to tour with this album or no?**

TH: Well, I didn't tour with this album, per se, but I still use that song [which song?] as part of... that's my opener for my show. I use it for live shows, and I do a lot of tracking shows, as well. I use it for that, as well.

**LC: Thank you for taking this time to talk with us. I appreciate it.**

TH: Again, thank you so much. I feel so honored, and it was so special for me to get this news...these years later. That's wonderful. That's so good. That's so exciting.