

Sister Rosetta
Tharpe looks to
the source of
her inspiration,
c. 1950.





SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

AMERICA'S FIRST GOSPEL SUPERSTAR ASTOUNDED
AUDIENCES WITH HER GUITAR PYROTECHNICS AND POWERFUL
SOPRANO, PAVING THE WAY FOR ROCK & ROLL.

BY GAYLE WALD



In the fall of 1938, when she stepped out onto the storied stage of the Cotton Club, Rosetta Tharpe did what no performer sprung from the rich musical traditions of black Pentecostalism had ever previously dared, or perhaps even imagined. She presented the music of her church to a predominantly white audience in search of Saturday-night diversion, not Sunday-morning deliverance. Within weeks, audience enthusiasm for the “hymn-swinging,” guitar-slinging “evangelist” had earned her second billing to headliner Cab Calloway. Notable engagements at other legendary New York venues — the Paramount (with Count Basie), the Apollo (with Fats Waller, Lionel Hampton, and others), and Carnegie Hall (at the historic “From Spirituals to Swing” concert) — quickly followed.

With the Cotton Club performance, Tharpe, at age 23, not only took her first steps in a decades-long career as a rock & roll foremother, she also ushered the sounds and

THIS PAGE

Sister Rosetta with a National resonator guitar, 1941.

OPPOSITE PAGE,

FROM TOP Onstage with Lucky Millinder Orchestra, c. 1943; topping the bill in New Bern, North Carolina, early 1950s.





sensibilities of the new “gospel” music into the wider public sphere. Her bold transgression would have powerful effects for herself as well as for American music. She became America’s first gospel superstar. And without the sort of emotional expressiveness that she and others brought from black churches into the musical mainstream, it’s doubtful that rock & roll would have attained the affective force of a secular religion. Without Tharpe, a woman who thrived on thrilling audiences with her guitar pyrotechnics, it’s open for debate whether rock’s archetypal instrument would have become so indelibly associated with the sensual, the sensational, and the sublime.

Rosetta Tharpe’s personal story reads like any good rock & roll yarn. She began life in 1915 as the only child of tenant farmers in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, eventually moving with her mother, Katie Bell Nubin, to Chicago’s South Side in the 1920s. There, mother and daughter joined the Fortieth Street Church of God in Christ (COGIC), where Rosetta’s precocious talents — as a singer, pianist, and guitarist — found an audience in a striving congregation that celebrated brilliance, even in its littlest girls.

Tharpe developed her talents under the tutelage of her mother, a gifted mandolin player, and the larger community of church “mothers”: Itinerant musical evangelists like the Texas-born pianist Arizona Dranes modeled self-sufficiency and black female virtuosity. And although the church had taught her to look askance at “worldly” music, Rosetta undoubtedly soaked up some of the prevailing sounds of the city, including blues.

By her late teenage years, “Sister” Rosetta — the honorific was from the church — had traveled the length of the country on the “gospel highway,” thrilling the folks who came out to see her at revivals and tent shows. She had a clarion soprano and a bright, dimpled smile, and infused her guitar with personality, playing in a manner that emphasized her nimble fingering and steady rhythm. Her charisma on the instrument struck many observers as God-given. They said she played as well as a man — in fact, *better* than a man. They said she could make the guitar “talk” — or even “walk and talk” — if the spirit was upon her.

When she was 19, she married a COGIC preacher, last name Tharpe, perhaps with an idea of supporting his ministry with her music, but his philandering dismayed her, and she fled within a few short years. Most young women would have sought sanctuary with their mother,

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but instead Tharpe (she kept his surname) forged her own path, moving with Katie Bell from Florida to New York City. The geographical and cultural leap from a Miami tabernacle to a Manhattan nightclub might have undone a less self-assured person. But apprehension is nowhere visible in the publicity photos taken around the time she recorded her first Decca sides in 1938. That Rosetta Tharpe — posing with a resonator guitar in hand, not as ornament but as instrument — radiates the poise and professionalism of someone who had already spent the better part of her young life sharing her gift.

Rosetta’s early Decca recordings from 1939 to the early 1940s are exemplified by songs like “The Lonesome Road” and “That’s All” — studio renderings of the music she might have sung at tent revivals, albeit with strategic lyrical changes (“My Man and I” for “My Lord and I”). Her rendition of “Rock Me in Thy Bosom,” a simple song that expresses the speaker’s appeal to a nurturing God, is transformed through her growling intonation of the title phrase as “*rrrock me*” into a more ambiguous expression of desire. Accompanying herself, she played the guitar as a lyrical counterpoint to her voice, not merely a means of supporting it.

During World War II, a time of economic uncertainty for the burgeoning U.S. music industry, Rosetta fronted Lucky Millinder’s popular big band — a role in which she was dubiously cast as the conventional “girl singer,” although occasionally she was called upon to offer up a guitar solo at the break. Mischievous ditties like “I Want a Tall Skinny Papa” ultimately embarrassed Rosetta, who was never at ease playing the come-hither chanteuse, but





OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP Strutting in Cardiff, Wales, 1957; with Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, 1939. THIS PAGE Decca studio session with bandleader Lucky Millinder (left) and manager Moe Gale, 1941.

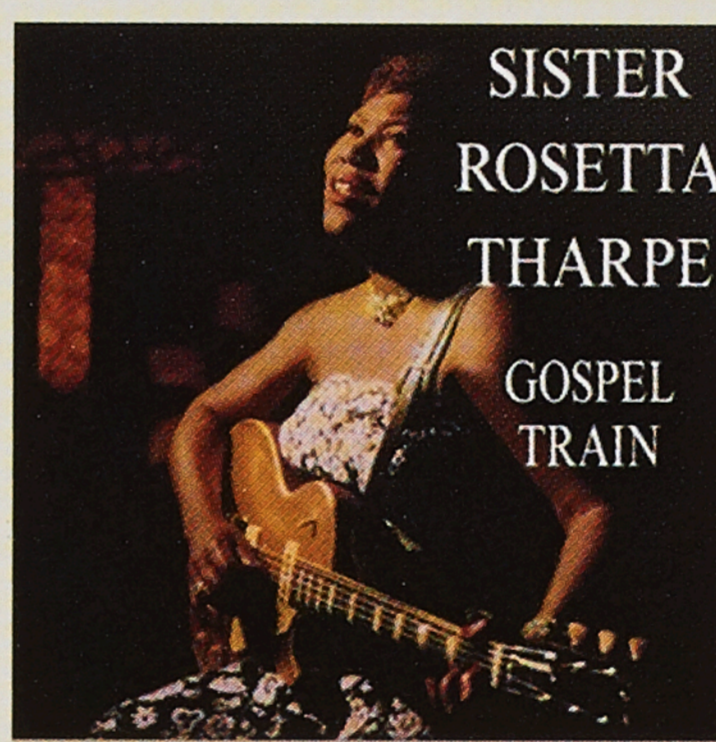


they earned her an audience of young swing fans, including those she serenaded on V-discs made expressly for black servicemen and women.

But to many of her latter-day musical heirs, from Elvis Presley to Johnny Cash to Little Richard, the highlights of Tharpe's career emerged after she had abruptly walked away from her contract with Millinder and reinvented herself as a solo act, and Decca made the inspired decision to team her with a trio helmed by the versatile pianist Sam Price. "Strange Things Happening Every Day," their influential 1944 single, has the galloping cadences of rockabilly, the bounce of early rhythm & blues, and — with Rosetta's jaunty vocalizing and feisty fast-picking at the break — the attitude of what would soon go by the name "rock & roll." Thanks to Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips, a fan who was still spinning "Strange Things" on his massively popular radio show in the mid-1950s, the song was on the lips of Jerry Lee Lewis when he auditioned before Sam Phillips at Sun Studio.

Equally beloved among Tharpe fans are her gorgeous, late-1940s duets with gospel chanteuse Marie Knight, also recorded with the Price trio. "Didn't It Rain" (1947) and "Up Above My Head" (1948) are infused by the undeniable energy of their personal chemistry as "sisters" (and, if rumors are to be believed, as lovers). The two also toured widely, attracting huge audiences with their "Saints and Sinners" act, and traveling in a tour bus purchased by Tharpe as a bulwark against the exclusions and indignities of segregation. Marie was Tharpe's "maid of honor" at a 1951 concert spectacular staged at Washington, D.C.'s Griffith Stadium, where she married her third husband, Russell Morrison, before 20,000 paying "guests." After a brief ceremony, the bride serenaded her audience, playing electric guitar from center field in an elaborate wedding dress.

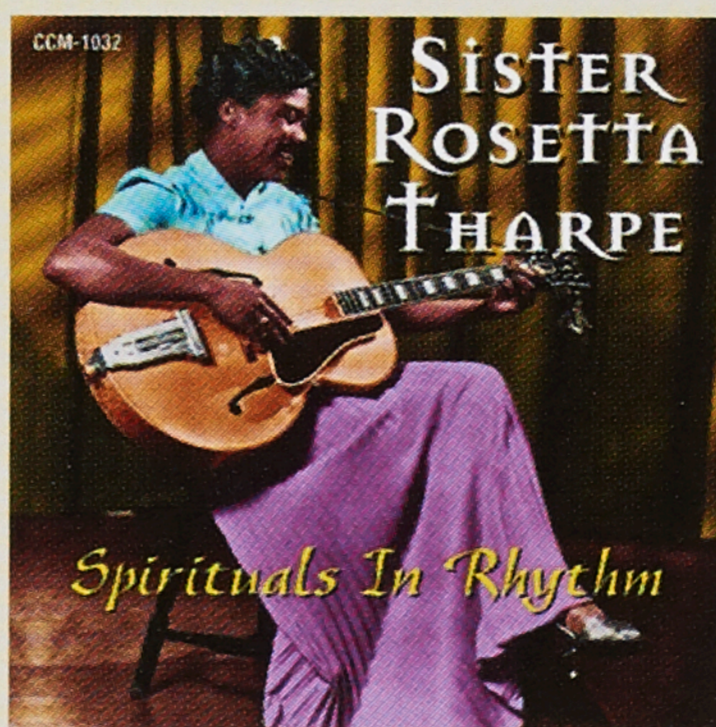
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Gospel Train
1956 (Mercury)



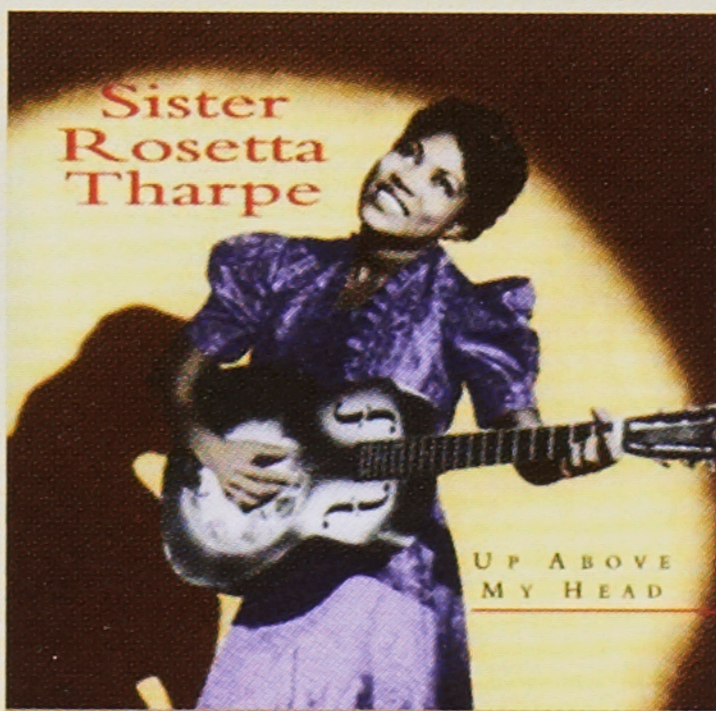
The Gospel Truth
1959 (Mercury)



Spirituels in Rhythm
1960 (Celebrity)



Precious Memories
1968 (Savoy)



Up Above My Head
1999 (Indigo)



The Gospel of the Blues
2003 (MCA)



**“SHE BLAZED A
TRAIL FOR THE
REST OF US WOMEN
GUITARISTS WITH HER
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AND ACCOMPLISHED,
ENGAGING STYLE.”**



In the late 1950s, when she began to tour abroad, Rosetta became a favorite among blues and gospel fans in Europe, including the young Brits who would soon mount their own British Invasion. “All this new stuff they call rock & roll, why I’ve been playing that for years now,” she told London’s *Daily Mirror* in 1957. In her 1964 performance for a British TV special, the *Blues and Gospel Train*, filmed at a defunct Manchester train station, she plays a white Gibson, entertaining teenagers braving a light downpour to see her fancy licks and sanctified stepping. “Pretty good for a woman, ain’t it?” she called out.

For all the success she had enjoyed in her career, when Tharpe died in Philadelphia in 1973, money was tight. The consummate show woman of gospel was interred in a local cemetery, in a grave without a headstone.

By the 1990s, the generation of U.S. fans who had treasured her 78s and LPs was dying, and their children knew of Rosetta Tharpe only from those dusty recordings. But the musicians never forgot her. A group of them contributed to *Shout, Sister, Shout!* (MC Records, 2003), paying homage to her genius through their covers of some of her best-loved material. Then *Shout, Sister, Shout!*, a 2007 biography, gathered up the memories of those still alive to tell her story, and in 2011, the film *The Godmother of Rock & Roll* took advantage of footage circulating on YouTube of Tharpe executing her daredevil guitar moves — including an early version of the “windmill” move later popularized by Pete Townshend.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe left her mark on generations of musicians in gospel, rock, blues, country, folk, and rhythm & blues. An up-and-coming Little Richard called her inviting him onstage — at a 1945 show in Macon, Georgia — “the best thing that had ever happened to me.” When the Million Dollar Quartet (Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins) warmed up in the studio, it was to Tharpe’s “Down by the Riverside.” “Elvis loved Sister Rosetta Tharpe,” testified the late Gordon Stoker, of the Jordanares. Cash recalled one of her 1960 concerts as “one of the most moving musical experiences” of his life. Ginger Baker, who played drums for Tharpe on a 1958 Scandinavian tour, remembered her salty wit, warm smile, and show-stopping delivery of “Didn’t It Rain.” “She was a big, good-lookin’ woman, and divine, not to mention sublime and splendid,” gushed Bob Dylan in 2006, on the first episode of his *Theme Time Radio Hour*.

At this moment of #GirlPower and #BlackGirlMagic, Tharpe is particularly celebrated as a model of resilience, self-sufficiency, and brilliance for female musicians. “She blazed a trail for the rest of us women guitarists with her indomitable spirit and accomplished, engaging style,” noted Bonnie Raitt. “She has long been deserving of wider recognition and a place of honor in the field of music history.”



At a French
TV shoot in
the late 1950s

