

The Clerk's Black History Series



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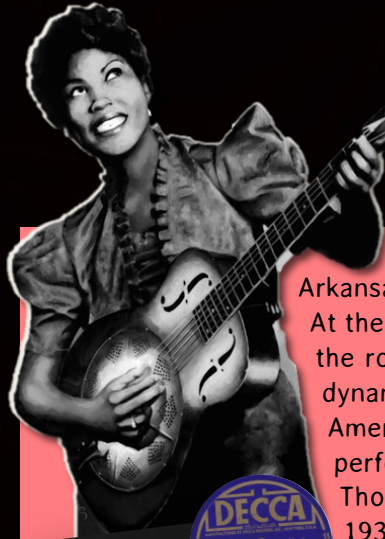


Sister Rosetta Tharpe

(March 20, 1915 – October 9, 1973)

“Godmother of Rock & Roll”

“Gospel Guitar Pioneer”



Sister Rosetta Tharpe was born Rosetta Nubin on March 20, 1915, in Cotton Plant, Arkansas to Katie Bell Nubin and Willis Atkins. Rosetta's mother was a singer, musician and preacher. At the age of four, Rosetta learned to play the guitar and by the age of six, had joined her mother on the road in a traveling evangelical act, singing and playing the guitar as Little Rosetta Nubin. Their dynamic performances were part sermon and part gospel concert before audiences across the American South. In the mid-1920s, her mother relocated to Chicago, Illinois where they continued performing while Rosetta perfected her guitar playing skills. In 1934, at age 19, Rosetta married Thomas Tharpe, a preacher, who accompanied her and her mother on many of their tours. In 1938, she left her husband and moved with her mother to New York City. Although she married several more times, she performed as Sister Rosetta Tharpe for the rest of her life.

At the age of 23, Rosetta recorded her own music for the first time with Decca Records. It was the first time Decca recorded gospel music. Her first four songs were instant hits and established Rosetta as one of the first commercially successful gospel recording artists. Her spirited recording of “Rock Me” influenced Rock & Roll singers such as, Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. Her style of singing was described as “Rock & Roll Spiritual Singing”.



While a guitar playing woman singing gospel music along-side blues and jazz musicians and dancers was unusual, Rosetta made the most of her newfound fame. She worked with Cab Calloway in Harlem's Cotton Club and in John Hammond's “Spirituals to Swing” concert in Carnegie Hall, in December 1938. But conservative religious circles frowned upon a woman playing the guitar in such settings and Tharpe fell out of favor with segments of the gospel community. During this time masculinity was directly linked to guitar skills. Tharpe was often offered a back-handed compliment that she could “play like a man”, when demonstrating her skills in guitar battles at the Apollo.

In 1943, Rosetta was one of only two African-American gospel acts to record “V-Discs.” “V-Discs” were created by Victory Records to provide records for U.S. Military personnel during WWII. By 1943 she considered rebuilding a strictly gospel act, but was contractually required to perform her secular music.

In 1947, she heard Little Richard sing before her concert at the Macon City Auditorium and later invited him on stage to sing with her for his first public performance outside of the church. Rosetta paid Little Richard for his performance and inspired him to continue with his music career. In 1951, Rosetta married her manager, Russell Morrison (her third marriage), followed by a vocal performance at Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. The wedding/performance attracted 25,000 paying customers. She continued touring with a Blues and Gospel Caravan, over the next 20 years.

In 1970, while Rosetta was touring Europe with the American Folk, Blues, and Gospel Festival, she felt the first signs of a serious health issue. Doctors discovered that diabetes was the source of the problem, but not before her leg had to be amputated. Rosetta, ever lively and spirited, didn't let that slow her down. During subsequent shows, she could be seen hopping around the stage on one leg. She had a series of strokes following the amputation and on October 9, 1973, on the eve of a scheduled recording session, she died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from another stroke. She was buried at Northwood Cemetery Blues and Gospel Caravan, in Philadelphia.

Nearly 20 years after her death, legendary country singer Johnny Cash referred to Rosetta Tharpe as his favorite singer in his induction speech at the 1992 Rock n Roll Hall of Fame.

