

MUSIC



SISTER ROSETTA THARPE – *“Listen, people fighting one another / And think they're doing swell / And all they want is your money / And you can go to heeeeyyyy / That's all / That's all / Ya'll got to have religion, yeah, I tell ya that's all”*

– *“That's All,”* Sister Rosetta Tharpe

Here's a lady sauntering with impassioned glee, performing her gospel hit with such commanding fervor that even the stoic gospel choir was clapping in time with her music. Here's a virtuoso singer crooning about God while still drawing secular fans, playing to mixed-race audiences – in the midst of institutional racism during the 1930s – which scandalized and fascinated listeners. Here's a rollicking, dynamic force of a guitarist, whose unorthodox finger-picking style inspired rock and roll greats like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Johnny Cash.

The sum of these unrestrained, exuberant moments is by a queer, black American woman named Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Not only does she belong to the pantheon of rock and roll divinity, she deserves to be heading it; she was probably single-handedly responsible for the birth of the genre, as one of the first players to incorporate the delightful crunch of heavy distortion on her electric guitar. Yet, she was hardly given due credit and was only inducted to the rock and roll hall of fame in December last year – a sore 35 years after its establishment.

You really have to watch her performances. They're jaunty, brazen and unabashedly breathtaking shows, often punctuated by her charisma – a slight bob of her head, a wide devilish grin, a nonchalant wave of the hand – as she sprightly cajoles a warm, fuzzy tone from her guitar. Then she'll sing, the strength of her voluminous voice mesmerizing her

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listeners as they cheered and clapped to her music. Beginning her career as a gospel musician, Tharpe skillfully weaved jazz and blues stylings into her craft. This took her songs in invigorating and unpredictable directions, which eventually set forth the motions of rock and roll. *“Oh, these kids and rock and roll – that is just sped up rhythm and blues. I’ve been doing that forever,”* she would later say, when asked about the music the young ‘uns were playing.

More than her technical finesse and artistry, it’s also her sheer defiance of conventions, at that time, that gave root to the rock and roll swagger. Could there be anything more incendiary than performing spiritual music not only at the church, but also in the halls of the secular and the even more profane night clubs? Or what about responding to comparisons with her male peers by saying, *“Can’t no man play like me. I play better than a man.”*? This mix of flamboyance and sheer talent turned her into a huge star; in one iconic performance in her later years, she played “Doesn’t It Rain” to adoring crowds in Manchester as it drizzled, the audience enthusiastically clapping along to her music.

So hearing about her – and at 30, too! – unsnarled knots in my stomach I didn’t know I have. While growing up, rock music always appeared to be the domain of straight white men, and I was long starved for a musical role model. But when I finally learned that rock and roll was the creation of a queer black woman, pure exhilarating relief flowed through me. Tharpe’s erasure was painfully undeserved, but she’s finally being recognized for the legend that she is.

– KHEE HOON CHAN

PLAYLIST

- “Can’t Sit Down,” by Sister Rosetta Tharpe
- “Werewolves of London,” by Warren Zevon
- “Baby Outlaw,” by Elle King
- “Blood Runner,” by Uncle Acid and the Dead Beats
- “The Communists Have the Music,” by They Might Be Giants
- “Unlicensed Hall Monitor,” by Drug Church
- “You & Me & the Moon,” by Advance Base
- “THE RED CARPET DAY,” by Versailles
- “Punky Heart,” by LM.C
- “SAN MARCOS,” by BROCKHAMPTON
- “Monster,” by BIGBANG
- “Melon Soda,” by tricot
- “Ba\$\$in,” by Yelle
- “In Bad Dreams,” by Crippled Black Phoenix
- “I Took a Pill in Ibiza,” by Mike Posner
- “Dual Harmonics,” by toe
- “I Am The Wedding Cake,” by The Life and the Times
- “Eye,” by The Smashing Pumpkins
- “Forging the Beast,” by Johann Johannsson
- “Starless,” by King Crimson
- “Julia (or, ‘Holy to the LORD’ on the Bells of Horses),” by mewwithoutYou
- “Werewolves of London,” by Kidz Bop Kids

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