# Beverley Knight’s vibrant portrayal revives Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s legacy on stage



With her formidable electric guitar, which appears almost coffee table-sized on stage, and a voice that can soar over the electrifying sound of gospel melodies, Sister Rosetta Tharpe remains a towering figure in the annals of music history. Widely regarded as the godmother of rock’n’roll, Tharpe's legacy as one of the first gospel singers to achieve mainstream success in the 1930s has endured despite her posthumous fading from the public consciousness. Her early recordings, including classics like "Rock Me" and "That’s All," established her as a sensation, influencing a myriad of future icons such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard.

In the recent production "Marie and Rosetta," by George Brant, audiences are transported to a crucial moment in Tharpe's life, set over a single night in 1946. At the height of her career yet grappling with mounting competition from the likes of Mahalia Jackson and the societal controversies that come with taking religious music to nightclubs, Tharpe finds herself at a pivotal crossroads. The narrative unfolds as she mentors a young, starry-eyed singer, Marie Knight, whom she has chosen to accompany on a tour through the segregated Southern US. This interaction not only highlights Tharpe’s own struggles and aspirations but also offers a glimpse into the complexities faced by women of colour during this turbulent period.

The portrayal of Tharpe in "Marie and Rosetta" is powerfully rendered by West End musical stalwart Beverley Knight, whose performance captures both the fun-loving spirit and defiance of an artist unafraid to challenge societal norms. Her on-stage chemistry with stage newcomer Ntombizodwa Ndlovu, playing Knight, brings an engaging emotional depth to the performance. Their harmonies shine vividly through beloved songs, reviving the soulful essence of Tharpe’s music while introducing newer audiences to her extraordinary talent.

Despite the dazzling musical moments, the script falls short in its exploration of Tharpe’s experience as a boundary-breaking artist. Critics note that the dialogue tends to be overly didactic, failing to fully exhibit the intricate realities of navigating faith, art, and racial discrimination in the 1940s. This lack of depth raises questions about what it meant for Tharpe to persist in pursuing a broader audience amidst political and cultural barriers. The production might hint at these themes, but the retelling of Tharpe's story offers only a cursory glance at the profound conflicts that defined her journey.

Tharpe's contributions to music extend beyond mere entertainment; they served as a bridge between gospel and rock, a synthesis that would inspire artists across generations. Notably, her influence played a pivotal role in shaping the sound of rock 'n' roll—her electric guitar work and vocal style created a new musical lexicon that would go on to inspire rock legends and contribute to the cultural shifts of the 1960s. The rigorous blend of spiritual themes with the rhythms of rock laid the groundwork for a revolution in music that continues to resonate today.

As audiences leave the theatre, they may find that the emotional performances by Knight and Ndlovu have brought a layer of visibility back to Tharpe's powerful music. While "Marie and Rosetta" may not fully engage with the complexities of Tharpe’s identity and legacy, it certainly sets the stage for a reinvigoration of interest in one of music history's most innovative figures. Through her story and songs, Tharpe's indomitable spirit emerges, inviting new generations to discover the richness of her legacy—one that insisted on the power of music to transcend barriers.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: Sources 2, 3, 4
2. Paragraph 2: Source 1
3. Paragraph 3: Source 1
4. Paragraph 4: Source 1
5. Paragraph 5: Sources 5, 6, 7
6. Paragraph 6: Sources 1, 4, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

* <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/11/marie-and-rosetta-review-beverley-knight-rose-theatre-london-sister-rosetta-tharpe> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/snapshot/sister-rosetta-tharpe-gospel-electric-guitar-driven-rock-n-roll> - This Smithsonian article highlights Sister Rosetta Tharpe's pioneering role in blending gospel music with electric guitar-driven rock 'n' roll. It details her early recordings, such as 'Rock Me' and 'That’s All,' which established her as a sensation in the 1930s. The piece also discusses her influence on future rock legends like Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and Little Richard, and notes her 2018 induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.
* <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sister-rosetta-tharpe> - This biography from the National Women's History Museum provides an overview of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's life and career. It covers her early life in Arkansas, her rise to fame in the 1930s and 1940s, and her innovative fusion of gospel and rock music. The article also touches on her influence on artists like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard, and her legacy as the 'Godmother of Rock and Roll.'
* <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/sister-rosetta-tharpe-rocknroll-pioneer/> - This article from uDiscover Music delves into Sister Rosetta Tharpe's pioneering role in rock 'n' roll. It discusses her early recordings, including 'Rock Me' and 'That’s All,' and her influence on artists like Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. The piece also highlights her unique guitar technique and her ability to blend gospel with secular music, paving the way for future rock musicians.
* <https://www.seattlerep.org/about-us/inside-seattle-rep/sister-rosetta-tharpe-a-legacy> - This Seattle Repertory Theatre article explores Sister Rosetta Tharpe's lasting legacy. It highlights her influence on artists like Bob Dylan, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton. The piece discusses how Tharpe's fusion of gospel and rock 'n' roll inspired these musicians and contributed to the development of the British blues scene and the 'British Invasion' of the 1960s.
* <https://www.arkansas.com/media-room/media-kit/sister-rosetta-tharpe-heads-rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame> - This Arkansas.com article covers Sister Rosetta Tharpe's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. It details her early life in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, her rise to fame in the 1930s and 1940s, and her influence on artists like Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. The piece also mentions her 1998 U.S. Postal Service stamp and the naming of Highway 17 as the Sister Rosetta Tharpe Memorial Highway.
* <https://www.npr.org/sections/world-cafe/2018/04/12/601808069/sister-rosetta-tharpe-gets-her-day-in-the-rock-roll-hall-of-fame> - This NPR article discusses Sister Rosetta Tharpe's posthumous induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2018. It covers her early life in Arkansas, her rise to fame in the 1930s and 1940s, and her influence on artists like Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Little Richard. The piece also touches on her unique fusion of gospel and rock 'n' roll and her lasting impact on the music industry.