

I'm Shouting!

BY AL TIZON

Let's take a pop quiz:

- Who invented rock and roll?
- Who first let gloriously loose on an electric guitar?
- Who laid down the tracks for the coming of the soul train?
- Who catalyzed the cross-over phenomenon, ignoring the lines that separated men from women, black from white, church from nightclub, gospel from pop?

Feats of this sort are usually attributed to male pop icons like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, James Brown, Larry Norman, and André Crouch. But all of these must pay a tithe to a black, female, Pentecostal virtuoso named Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the high priestess of pop according to the order of Melchizedek.

I may be overstating the case, but someone's got to try to tip the scales of justice. Tharpe's unmarked grave in a cemetery in Philadelphia tragically symbolizes the way history has relegated her to the ash heap of musical obscurity. So no amount of credit toward the Sister is too much, no affirming statement an overstatement.

So claims Gayle F. Wald, professor of English at George Washington University and author of *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Beacon, 2007). "Directly or indirectly," she writes, "[Tharpe's] spirit had infused everything from the rock and roll of Chuck Berry to the rockabilly sounds of Elvis to the groovy, tripped out summer of Woodstock . . ." This, while maintaining lyrical fidelity to her faith. "Believing her talents to be divinely inspired,"

Wald asserts, "she saw herself doing God's work as a popular musician."

I consider myself somewhat knowledgeable of popular music, but I never heard of Rosetta Tharpe until someone shoved a CD into my hand a few years ago titled—what else?—*Shout, Sister, Shout! A Tribute to Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (M.C. Records, 2003). "Here, you gotta listen to this."

Now given the long list of "must-listen CDs" that friends have passionately recommended through the years (as I have done unto them), I wouldn't have given this one the time of day if it hadn't been for the fact that those paying tribute were perennial favorites. The roster included the Holmes Brothers, Joan Osborne, Bonnie Raitt, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Odetta, Michelle Shocked, and Victoria Williams. I figured this eclectic cast of creative, thoughtful musicians knew something I didn't know. So I gave the CD a listen. And I kept listening . . . and listening . . . and listening. Three years later, it still gets extended play on my five-rotation CD player. "That's All," "Music in the Air," "Up Above My Head," "Didn't It Rain," and other catchy simple tunes are now and forever a part of my permanent mental iPod. Her songs make you laugh, cry, tap your feet, and play air guitar. Some of them make you worship. Some of them make you do all of the above at the same time.

But did I get hooked because my favorite bands were singing the songs? This nagged at me until about a year ago when I set out to find some of Tharpe's own work. A friend lent me his copy of *Tharpe's Gospel Train* (Mercury Records, 1956) album, and then I found a few CD reissues of her earlier recordings on Document Records. To tell the truth, I was disappointed. Although I enjoyed listening to the original versions of the covers I had grown accustomed to on *Tribute*, they felt hollow, as if the 1940s equipment they were recorded on could

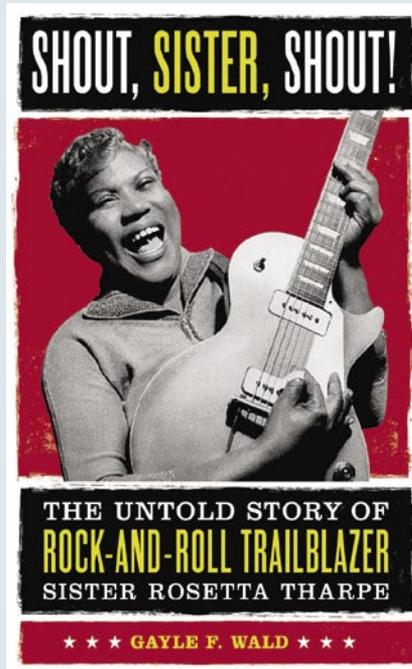
not capture Tharpe's greatness, thus rendering anemic the power of both her voice and instrument.

This was confirmed when I discovered a video trailer on the CD (after having it for several months, I embarrassingly admit). It is Rosetta Tharpe live, singing "Down by the Riverside" in what seems like a church setting; the well-dressed choir behind her is a dead giveaway. You know, however, that this is no ordinary church service when she starts things off with an electric blues riff. The control of her deep but decidedly feminine voice and her command of the audience are the first things to strike you. (Actually, the fact that she has a Gibson SG strapped around her neck strikes you even before the music begins.) But then in the middle of the song, she goes instrumental on everybody. The guitar suddenly looks like a part of her being, as if she had been born with it. It moves and sings at her command, as her fingers dance up and down the neck. I swear I saw smoke rising from the strings when I first beheld the clip. I also saw all of the lead guitar greats as youngsters sitting at her feet. Indeed, says Wald, "Whenever a rock musician lets loose a glorious guitar solo, we're in the living presence of [the] strong and mean vibrations of Rosetta Tharpe . . ." The video clip is worth the price of the CD. Do yourself a favor: Skip amateur hour on YouTube, find Sister Rosetta on it, sit back, and let the Spirit wreak holy havoc on your soul. Then, buy the CD so you can own at least one of the video clips for anytime encores.

The Sister's electric guitar-based spiritual music is legendary—or should be. It gave birth to something. "Even though I was just a child," recalls singer Etta James, "I knew immediately that this woman was playing a different kind of music. It was gospel, but the way she put it across, in her bluesy-jazzy style, was a real 'revelation.'" Yes, a revelation—for, hallelujah, through this woman, the elec-

tric church was born! So was rock and roll. So was contemporary R&B. So was every conceivable musical cross-over.

But Tharpe's life and work influenced some much deeper issues than music. To those who pitted faith against popular culture and vice versa, she sang of God's presence whether she was performing for church folks or for social elites at New York's Apollo Theatre. To those who wanted to keep women "in their place," she entered into a man's world wielding a man's instrument and basically showed them up. To those who wanted to keep the line solidly drawn between blacks and whites, she freely went back and forth from one side of the line to the other, as she performed with black and white performers for black and white crowds. She made a holy mess of society's gender and racial boundaries.



I know, I know; she was just a musician. But given who she was and what she dared to do, she was also a kind of accidental prophet, in the best sense of the word, challenging both religious misperceptions and social injustice. Sister Rosetta Tharpe deserves our attention for all of these reasons, and the CD/book tandem certainly helps to make her fascinating life accessible to the public.

And now if someone would just make the movie ... 🎵🎵

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Insure Justice

continued from page 21.

at the time of the trial and knows nothing about them or their case? Why do poor people sit in jail for weeks or months rather than go home with a radio ankle bracelet to await trial (as the wealthier accused do)? What about those who spend a week or two in jail because they cannot pay a \$100 fine?

People say, "What can we do? This is not our responsibility as Christians. We cannot fix everything." Fortunately, B.T. Roberts did not stand silently by as he looked at injustice. Because of him and others like him, things did change.

The Bible calls us not only to have personal righteousness but also to help develop a righteous, just community. Although God will ultimately judge

injustice and establish total justice, he calls on his followers to work for righteousness and justice today. In Isaiah 58, he says that the kind of fasting he chooses is that which will loose the chains of injustice and set the oppressed free. "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear" (v.8).

Although we cannot rid the world of injustice, we can attempt to establish justice within our sphere of influence. We live in a nation where we vote and give input to the legislators. We should speak out, not just on issues of personal morality but also on issues of economic morality and justice. Jesus identified with the poor and calls on the church to do

the same.

In the biblical story, David had only five small stones, yet he defeated the giant, Goliath. Jesus asks each of us to use the small power and opportunities God has placed before us. Our political strength may not be great, but when we do what we can, God will help our efforts hit the mark. ■

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