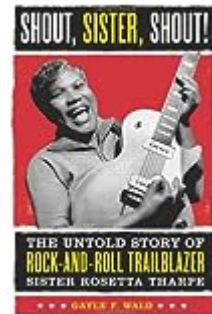


Gayle Wald. *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. xii + 252 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8070-0984-0.



Reviewed by Caleb Maskell

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Strange Things Happening Every Day: The Return of Sister Rosetta Tharpe

On October 16th, 1973, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, one of gospel music's first and greatest stars, died from a blood clot on her brain at the age of 58. She did not depart from the world with the glamour and drama that she had lived in. When she died, she was memorialized with only a fraction of the fanfare befitting her stature and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Northwood Cemetery in the northern outskirts of Philadelphia. Though she had played her music for hundreds of thousands of people, sold volumes of records, toured internationally as an American gospel master, and in the process permanently changed the face of gospel and rock music, she quickly began to fade from popular cultural memory.

But not forever. At the beginning of the new millennium, Sister Rosetta Tharpe began a startling posthumous second act in literate American pop culture. On September 11, 2001, Bob Dylan released his thirty-first album, *Love and Theft*. Throughout the record, a sly, roguish paean to American blues, gospel, and riverboat music, Dylan quotes liberally from a number of his musical heroes, including Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose version

of the Gene Austin song, "The Lonesome Road," can be heard in the melody, lyrics, and delivery of the apocalyptic last track, "Sugar Baby." Just weeks after this, in October 2001, American audiences were enthralled by Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Amelie*. In the film, one of Amelie's friends watches a full-screen, thirty-second clip of Sister Rosetta Tharpe at the peak of her powers performing her incendiary gospel music in 1962 on the influential show *TV Gospel Time*. The year 2002 saw the release of both a four-disc, eighty-one track box set called *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Original Soul Sister*, on the U.K. label Proper Records, and the inception of a now nearly complete edition of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's recordings on the French label, Fremaux and Associates. Less than a year after that, a diverse group of influential women musicians released *Shout, Sister, Shout!*, a seventeen-song tribute to Sister Rosetta Tharpe comprised of cover versions of many of her classic songs. More recently, last year's platinum-selling album *Raising Sand* by Allison Krauss and Robert Plant featured a track called "Sister Rosetta Goes Before Us," a song that speaks to the exuber-

ance tinged with melancholy that reverberates through the spirituality and the sound of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's gospel.

This resurgence is born of happy coincidences, presumably unlinked by a chain of causality. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, far more than in the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a surge of interest in Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Her memory is alive and well in some sanctified tributary to the mainstream of American pop culture.

Gayle Wald's biography, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*, is the crowning achievement of this recent wave of attention. Some earlier work, most recently the provocative chapter on Tharpe in Jerma Jackson's *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (2004), has attended to Tharpe's significance in the interface of gospel music and popular culture. However, Wald's book is the first full-scale scholarly biography of Sister Rosetta Tharpe. That fact alone would be enough to raise a fanfare, but there is much more than that here to praise.

Deeply researched through newspaper and magazine archives in the context of numerous monographs on various aspects of gospel and blues culture, Wald beautifully recreates the arc of Tharpe's career, paying careful attention to the dynamic, generative tensions in her life without sacrificing the momentum of its fascinating story. And there were many tensions in Tharpe's life. Consider the basic facts. Tharpe was an unforgettably talented traveling COGIC guitarist and singer from Cotton Plant, Arkansas who felt called by God to play gospel music on an electric guitar in a swinging style to multiracial audiences worldwide. Leaving a COGIC church ministry for an engagement at the Cotton Club in Harlem, her bold voice and virtuosic guitar playing rocketed her to national fame. She played all over the country and recorded hundreds of sides for several major labels. Her biggest concert, held during her controversial third wedding, was held at a Washington D.C. baseball stadium and had upwards of 22,000 people in attendance. This high-profile success not only brought her fame and influence, but also brought critical scrutiny from the church and the press alike of her music, her faith, her marriage(s), her sexual propriety, and her flamboyant lifestyle.

The presence of such tensions is an academic's dream, potentially invoking every imaginable theory under the sun. Fortunately for her readers, Wald's deft storytelling enables her to explore the very real significance of these

complex tensions without succumbing to the temptation to theorize Tharpe's life into a narrative standstill. Wald does not shy away from controversial questions about Tharpe's life, sexuality, religious belief, and so on. Rather, she simply refuses to let those speculations derail her primary task, but contextualizes her reflections on them in a cogent, interesting biography. One of the ways that Wald keeps the narrative grounded is through the very effective use of her impressive series of personal interviews with high-profile friends, acolytes, and critics of Tharpe. As deliberately elusive as she was in life, the lived experience of Rosetta Tharpe is never far from the page, because Wald gets it from the mouths of her friends and colleagues from the world of gospel music.

Probably the governing tension in Wald's account of Sister Rosetta's life lies between the secular and the sacred in her life and music. Though she began her musical career playing with her mother Katie Nubin Bell in COGIC church services, even marrying a COGIC preacher early in life, Tharpe made her name when she left the COGIC church to play her brand of gospel music to secular audiences at the Cotton Club in New York City. While this rapid turn to the secular stage scandalized many in COGIC and other Sanctified circles, she found grounds for it in her own faith, becoming known as a "spiritual entertainer" (p. 139) among believers and unbelievers alike. Her identity as a solo performer was so tied to her religious songs that when, in the early 1950s, she recorded some purely secular blues songs for Decca, they met with abject commercial failure even though they were quite well reviewed by the critics. The "storms of displeasure at her venture into the pop realm" (p. 175) made it clear that most of her audience was interested in her as a singer of her particular rhythm-and-blues driven gospel music. Even after Tharpe's career peaked and trailed off into obscurity in the United States, she played swinging gospel music in Europe and in American churches until her first stroke in 1970.

Tharpe's relationship to COGIC Pentecostalism is usefully invoked throughout the book as a backdrop to her personal life, musical career, and self-assessment. However, Wald treats Tharpe's Pentecostal background primarily as a constraining factor against which Tharpe lived in a perpetual state of conflict. Presumably this is not far off the mark, given Ira Tucker Jr.'s remark that "she didn't limit herself to the *doctrine* that came with the music" (p. 107), even after her departure from the strict Sanctified scene. However, in spite of Sister Rosetta's theological latitudinarianism, it would be interesting to see some interpretation of her willingness to en-

gage the “secular world” in comparison to the somewhat radical COGIC women’s mission practices and their attendant music that have been highlighted by such scholars as Anthea Butler. Also, Wald offers some tantalizing comments here and there about the possible nature of Tharpe’s spirituality, over and against the strictures of traditional Sanctified ideology. It would be very interesting to hear more about Tharpe’s spirituality in contrast to a more traditional COGIC one. She wanted to sell records, no doubt, but she also hoped that what she was doing and saying on stage was “reaching inside people” (p. 167). One wonders about her sense of the spirituality of the “in-between place” (p. x) as she brought the (modified) sounds of the Sanctified churches to the living rooms of America.

Regarding Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s ultimate cultural significance, I am ambivalent about Wald’s commitment to the general interpretation of her music as a precursor to rock-and-roll. While Tharpe’s music indubitably is that, Sister Rosetta is not important because she is important to the history of rock-and-roll. Of course Wald knows this and says so trenchantly in a number of places in the book, most notably when she lampoons the perverse irony of a British reporter bizarrely referring to Sister Rosetta as resembling a “blackened-up Elvis in drag” (p. 217). Clearly the Sister-Rosetta-as-rock-and-roll-trailblazer narrative is true. One can imagine a teenage Jimmy Page or Angus Young bowing before the *TV Gospel Hour* footage of Tharpe in furs playing pyrotechnic so-

los on a white Gibson SG. However, Wald gets a lot of mileage out of framing Tharpe as a rebel, a transgressor of boundaries, in a way that seems to occasionally be more interested in the fact of the rock-and-roll impulse to transgress than it does in the nature of the culture that is being transgressed. To be fair, this book is a biography of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and thus it is her character that should be first and foremost assessed. Nonetheless, I occasionally found myself wanting to know Tharpe better in all the complex problems presented by her overlapping social worlds, particularly the Pentecostal church and the racialization of the recording industry of her own era before I imagined her as a forebear of the rock-and-roll ethos of transgression, tolerance, and boundary-bending.

These critiques, though sincerely held, are only small quibbles about a book that pays groundbreaking attention to the rich details and dynamics of a great musical life that flourished on the fault line of the important elements of twentieth-century American culture: race, religion, gender, sexuality, economics, and media. In 2008, in the wake of the publication of Wald’s book, Governor Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania named January 11th, 2008 as “Sister Rosetta Tharpe Day,” a proclamation issued in conjunction with a concert in Philadelphia that was a fundraiser to put a gravestone over Tharpe’s grave. Wald’s book has helped to ensure that Sister Rosetta Tharpe, having returned so dramatically after a quarter century of relative obscurity, will not be easily forgotten in the new millennium.

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