



INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

CHRISTEL DEHAAN
STUDENT MATINEE PROGRAM
at the Indiana Repertory Theatre

STUDY GUIDE



OCTOBER 28 - NOVEMBER 23 | Janet Allen Stage

Original artwork by Jake Lebowitz.

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MARIE & ROSETTA

BY GEORGE BRANT



Content Spotlight

Contains profanity including the “n” word, discussions of Christian theology, segregation, racism, domestic violence, corporal punishment, and death.

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INDIANA
REPERTORY
THEATRE

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the roots of rock ‘n’ roll

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was a fierce guitar-playing gospel music legend, an unsung influence on Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix, and Ray Charles. This magnetic play with music unearths the roots of the fearless “Godmother of Rock ‘n’ Roll” and her wide-eyed protégée Marie Knight, as they begin their revolutionary ascent to become one of the most influential teams in music history.

Recommended for students in grades 7-12

The performance will last approximately
1 hour and 45 minutes, without intermission

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PLANNING YOUR VISIT



You, the audience, are one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make each theatre experience enjoyable for everyone:

- Leave mobile phones, cameras, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home or turned off.
- You may think texting is private, but the light and the motion are very annoying to those around you and on stage. Do not text during the performance.
- The house lights dimming and going out signal the audience to get quiet and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.
- Don’t talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage. Even if you think they can’t hear you, they can.
- Never throw anything onto the stage. People could be injured.
- Remain in your seat during the play. Use the restroom before or after the show.
- Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue and sound effects, and look at the scenery, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.
- Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp—whatever the story draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.
- Remain at your seat and applaud during the curtain call; this is part of the performance too. It gives you a chance to recognize a job well done and the actors a moment to thank you for your attention.

STUDENT MATINEE ARRIVAL & PARKING INFORMATION

ARRIVAL & DISMISSAL

- IRT is located one-half block west of Circle Centre Mall on Washington St., between north bound Illinois St. and southbound Capitol Ave.
- The physical address of IRT is 140 W. Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204.
- Buses should unload and load directly in front of the theatre. (Do not block the entrance to Embassy Suites garage.) Please plan to arrive 20-30 minutes before your performance is scheduled to begin.
- You will be greeted at the curb by an IRT Staff Member and directed to the correct entrance.
- For shows on the Janet Allen Stage, students and teachers will take the stairs to the 4th floor.
- The teacher named on the reservation should check in with the IRT Education staff member stationed in the lobby.
- Your group will be ushered to your assigned seats.
- Students and chaperones should follow instructions of all IRT Staff for your safety.

LATE ARRIVAL

- If you believe that you are going to be late, please contact the IRT House Manager, Katy Thompson at 317.916.4803. Provide them with a phone number and the name of the school so that Education staff may be in contact with you.
- You can contact IRT Education (education@irtlive.com) with non-emergency information on the day of the show.

PARKING

- Buses may park for free at Victory Field unless they are having an event - we will inform you if that is the case. The House Manager will give you a parking pass for each bus when you arrive at the theatre. It should be displayed in the windshield.
- Continue east on Washington St. past the JW Marriott and turn left across Maryland St. into the Victory Field lot.
- **PLEASE NOTE that Victory Field no longer has public restroom spaces available. We apologize for any inconvenience.**
- See the map on the next page for full details.
- Additional parking options are located on the next page.
- **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking information in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**



VICTORY FIELD PARKING MAP

Victory Field parking lot is located on the West side of the stadium. From IRT, continue west on Washington Street past the JW Marriott. Turn left on Schumacher Way, and cross Maryland Street into the Victory Field lot.

Some buses may need to double park in the lot. The image is of the Victory Field parking lot.

PLEASE NOTE that Victory Field no longer has public restrooms available to drivers. This is a change from years past. We apologize for any inconvenience.

Thank you,
Indianapolis Indians and
Indiana Repertory Theatre

ADDITIONAL PARKING OPTIONS

In the event that Victory Field is unavailable for free parking, here are some other potential options. **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking info in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**

402 Kentucky Avenue: This is an overflow lot for Victory Field and will be available to buses if the Victory Field Lot is full.

White River State Park: Paid surface parking is located on Washington Street, across from Victory Field. May require advance notice; event rates may apply. (*Approximately .6 mi from IRT.*)



Indianapolis Zoo: Paid parking is available on Washington Street, west of White River State Park. First come, first served. (*Approximately 1.2 mi from IRT.*)



Downtown Indy: Explore all available parking options at the Downtown Indy website. Buses are welcome to utilize street parking if all used spaces are paid.

CAR AND VAN PARKING OPTIONS

COURT STREET GARAGE
Ask a Theatre employee for a voucher that will reduce your parking fee to \$10. This voucher is available at the Court Street Garage when attending an IRT show. This is only valid during the IRT's season.

Address for the Court Street Garage
110 West Washington Street

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

IndyGo's Red Line, the city's rapid bus transit system, connects Broad Ripple and Fountain Square to the heart of downtown and other neighborhoods in Indianapolis. With buses running every 10-20 minutes and a stop directly next to the IRT on Capitol Avenue, the Red Line provides another convenient option for your transportation to the Theatre.

To plan your trip or for more information about the Red Line and other nearby routes, visit IndyGo.net or call IndyGo Customer Service at 317-635-3344.

INDIANA STATE STANDARDS

Seeing a performance at Indiana Repertory Theatre is a great way to help make connections for students and facilitate their understanding of a text. Some key education standards to consider on your trip can be found by scanning this QR Code:



THE PLAYWRIGHT

GEORGE BRANT

George Brant was born in Park Ridge, Illinois. He completed his undergraduate studies at Northwestern University and earned his M.F.A. at the University of Texas at Austin. His best known play to date is *Grounded*, which played at London's Gate Theatre and went on to be directed by Julie Taymor in an off-Broadway production at the Public Theater starring Anne Hathaway. With composer Jeanine Tesori, Brant adapted *Grounded* as an opera that premiered at the Kennedy Center and was performed at the Metropolitan Opera. His other plays include *Into the Breeches*, *Elephant's Graveyard*, *The Prince of Providence*, *Tender Age*, *The Mourner's Bench*, *Salvage*, *Grizzly Mama*, and *Any Other Name*. *Marie and Rosetta* was developed at the New Harmony Project and premiered at the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York in 2016.



THE STORY OF **MARIE & ROSETTA**

The play is set in a funeral home in a small town in Mississippi, 1946. Marie is finishing Rosetta's makeup in preparation for their performance this evening. Sister Rosetta Tharpe is a well-known gospel and blues singer with more than a decade of singing, recording, and touring under her belt, from Carnegie Hall and the Cotton Club to country churches and tobacco barns. Marie Knight is a young, naïve singer and pianist who has just left a job in Mahalia Jackson's backup quartet to share the stage with Sister Rosetta. Tonight is their first concert together, and they need to practice.

Rosetta explains to Marie, who is from New Jersey, that here in the Deep South, hotels and restaurants are not open to Black people. So she and her musicians must depend on the kindness of friendly people like this funeral director, who has offered his casket display room as a temporary dressing room and overnight accommodation. Fortunately the room has a piano, so Marie can show Rosetta her keyboard skills. Rosetta thinks that Marie's deep contralto voice and her more traditional gospel piano style will provide an effective contrast to Sister Rosetta's penetrating belt voice and her driving electric guitar.

Rosetta's unconventional career path, from the church to the nightclub and back and forth again, has cost her some of her more devout gospel fans. She hopes that pairing up with Marie, who has a more "high church" background and style, will bring her back into the fold. Marie at first resists Rosetta's more "secular" musical approach to gospel, but as the two rehearse several numbers together, Marie begins to figure out how she can put some swing into her style.

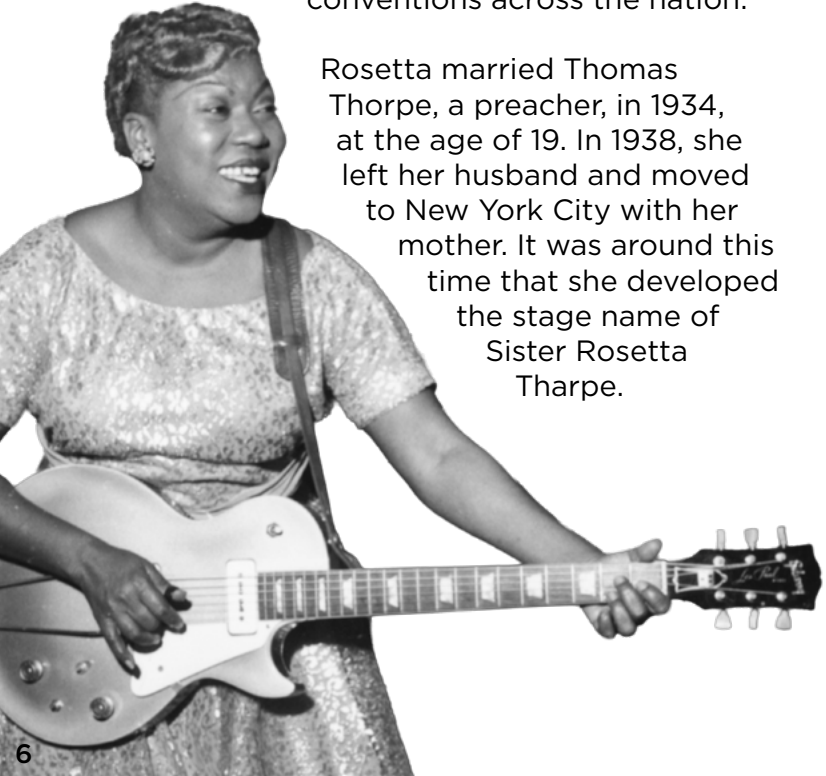
The two women share stories of their childhoods, their mothers, their husbands, and their lives, and they begin to realize that they may be more alike than appears on the surface. Rosetta comes to see that Marie is perhaps not quite as innocent as she first believed. And Marie begins to understand that Rosetta's rock 'n' roll approach to gospel music does not mean that her faith is any less strong and true. As they work through their repertoire for the evening's concert, the two women find common ground to laugh over, cry over, and pray over.

Marie Knight (top) and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (bottom)

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE (1915-1973)



Rosetta Nubin was born in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, in 1915. Her parents were cotton pickers and home musicians. By the time she was six, Rosetta was playing the guitar and singing in church. That year, her parents separated, and her mother, Katie Bell Nubin, joined a traveling evangelist group, taking her daughter with her. In the mid-1920s the pair settled in Chicago, and Katie Bell continued her work as a deaconess-missionary and a women's speaker for the Church of God in Christ. Rosetta came to be known as a musical prodigy, and mother and daughter continued to perform in local gospel concerts and services and at church conventions across the nation.



Rosetta married Thomas Thorpe, a preacher, in 1934, at the age of 19. In 1938, she left her husband and moved to New York City with her mother. It was around this time that she developed the stage name of Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

In 1938, Tharpe recorded four songs for Decca records. They were instant hits, making her one of the first commercially successful gospel singers. That same year she began performing at Harlem's famous Cotton Club with Cab Calloway, and she performed in Carnegie Hall with Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and others in a concert titled "From Spirituals to Swing." Her mixture of gospel-based lyrics and secular-sounding music was controversial but popular. Her virtuoso guitar playing wowed audiences, and the fact that she was one of the few women performing on the guitar publicly at that time brought further attention.

Tharpe recorded "Strange Things Happening Every Day" in 1944. It became the first gospel record to cross over and become a hit on Billboard's Harlem Hit Parade chart (today's R&B chart). The recording has been cited as an important precursor of rock and roll; some considered it to be the first rock and roll record.

A second marriage to music promoter Foch Allen was also brief. In 1946, Tharpe heard Marie Knight singing back-up for gospel singer Mahalia Jackson and invited Marie to tour with her. The two performed and recorded together for four years, but even after they went their separate ways they remained lifelong friends.

Tharpe's popularity began to wane in the 1950s. She was invited to tour England and Europe in 1957, opening a new phase in her career, including

a live televised concert in 1964. She was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1968. In 1970, Tharpe suffered a stroke and subsequently lost a leg due to complications from diabetes. She died of another stroke in Philadelphia in 1973, on the eve of a planned recording session.

Tharpe's powerful vocals and hard-driving guitar style are now acknowledged as important precursors to rock 'n' roll. Such diverse artists as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Aretha Franklin, Jerry Lee Lewis, Isaac Hayes, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Tina Turner,

MARIE KNIGHT (1920-2009)

Born in the South in 1920, Marie Roach grew up in Newark, New Jersey. Her father was a construction worker, and her family belonged to the Church of God in Christ. She taught herself the piano and sang in the youth choir at church, quickly graduating to soloist. In 1941 she married Albert Knight, a preacher; together, they had two children.

Knight first toured as a singer in 1939 with evangelist Frances Robinson. She was singing with a gospel quartet, the Sunset Four, when they were invited to sing behind gospel star Mahalia Jackson. Sister Rosetta Tharpe saw a performance in 1946 and persuaded Knight to join her on tour as co-star rather than backup singer. Knight's deep contralto voice and her more traditional gospel piano style provided an effective contrast to Tharpe's penetrating belt voice and her driving electric guitar. Together, the two proved to be a popular hit on stage and on recordings. After Knight and her husband divorced, her mother would keep her two children while Knight toured. In 1949, the two children and their grandmother died in a house fire.

Although Knight and Tharpe only worked together for four years, they became lifelong friends. Knight continued to tour and record, both on her own and with other musical partners. In the late fifties she expanded her repertoire from gospel to include secular rhythm and blues. In 1965 her rendition of "Cry Me a River" reached No. 35 on the Billboard R&B chart.

As her music career waned, Knight took a job with the telephone company and became a minister at the Gates of Prayer Church in Harlem. But her gospel career was rejuvenated in 2003 when she contributed a song to a Sister Rosetta Tharpe tribute album, and she continued singing up to her

Meat Loaf, Neil Sedaka, and Karen Carpenter have claimed her as an influence on their work. In 2017 she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In March 2025, Amazon MGM Studios announced that Lizzo will portray her in an upcoming biopic.

According to Marie Knight, Tharpe was buried with her white Gibson SG guitar in her hands. Her gravestone—which was not erected until 2009—says, "She would sing until you cried and then she would sing until you danced for joy. She helped to keep the church alive and the saints rejoicing."

death in 2009. One critic wrote, "Her delivery is soulful enough to surely cause some nonbelievers to want to get right with God."



INFLUENTIAL MUSIC

GOSPEL

At its most basic, gospel music features lyrics that focus on a Christian message. It is rooted in the religious revivals of the early 1800s, developing in two different but intertwined branches. White gospel music has its roots in traditional four-part hymns with a verse-and-chorus structure, and it has picked up many influences from country music throughout the twentieth century. Black gospel music has grown out of traditional spirituals sung by enslaved peoples with coded lyrics that used religious imagery to cloak secret messages of escape and freedom. Many of these spirituals were field work songs that employed a call-and-response structure that was also effective in the church. In the 1890s, Black hymnals such as *The Harp of Zion* began to emphasize more syncopated rhythms such as found in African and Caribbean music. Black churches welcomed a wide range of instruments into their services, including banjos, guitars, and percussion. Perhaps influenced by the impassioned delivery of Black preachers, Black singers developed a florid style that went beyond mere notes on a page to create expressive flights of vocal showmanship. Among the most famous early gospel performers are the more traditional Mahalia Jackson and the more flamboyant Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

BLUES

The blues is a secular folk music developed by African Americans in the early 20th century in the South. While it certainly draws from the tradition of spirituals, it has its own distinctive characteristics. The musical mood is usually one of melancholy, and the lyrics tend to focus on themes of hardship and resilience. The typical blues structure uses a three-line verse, where the second line repeats the first, and the third line develops the theme or concludes the thought. The blues is known for its “blue” notes, flattened or otherwise bent pitches and slightly twisted chords that create a distinctively earthy sound. While the blues are rooted in rural soil, it has expanded over the years to reflect urban sensibilities as well. Among the most famous early blues artists are W. C. Handy, B. B. King, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, and Billie Holiday.

ROCK 'N' ROLL

Developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s from a blending of many musical styles, rock 'n' roll can trace its roots to gospel, blues, jazz, boogie woogie, country, and more. The beat is essentially a dance rhythm with a heavy backbeat. Classic rock 'n' roll usually features one or two electric guitars, a string or electric bass, and drums, with a singer, piano, and/or saxophone in the lead. Cleveland DJ Alan Freed, who first applied the term to this genre of music, said, “Rock 'n' roll is really swing with a modern name. It began on the levees and plantations, took in folk songs, and features blues and rhythm.” An important feature in the history of rock 'n' roll is the way it blended Black music traditions with white music traditions to create a new kind of music that appealed to both Black and white audiences. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who emerged from the gospel and blues traditions, is considered an early rock 'n' roll musician. Other early rock 'n' rollers include Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, LaVern Baker, Bo Diddley, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis.

SONGS HEARD IN THE PLAY

The text of **“Amazing Grace”** was written in 1772 by English Anglican clergyman and poet John Newton. The version most frequently sung today uses the tune “New Britain,” as published by American composer William Walker in his 1835 book *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion*. It is possibly the most sung and most recorded hymn in the world; it is especially popular in the United States.

“Beams of Heaven” was first recorded by Tharpe in 1939. Tharpe and Knight recorded it together in 1948; Knight considered it their best work together.

“Didn’t It Rain?” is a spiritual about Noah and the flood. In 1919 it was published by Henry Thacker Burleigh, who often created “classical” arrangements of traditional African American spirituals. The song was Tharpe and Knight’s first studio recording together in 1947.

“Four or Five Times” was written by Byron Gay and Marco H. Hellman. Tharpe recorded it in 1941 as a “Soundie”—a short 16 mm film made to play on a “Panoram” machine, a sort of video jukebox.

“I Looked Down the Line” was written by Tharpe. She first recorded it in 1939.

“Lord, Search My Heart” was written for Mahalia Jackson by Mosie Lister. It was recorded by Knight in 1950.

“(There’ll Be) Peace in the Valley for Me” was written for Mahalia Jackson by Thomas A. Dorsey. Dorsey wrote the song in 1939 while traveling by train through the rural hills and valleys of southern Indiana. It is considered one of the top ten best known gospel songs.

“Rock Me” was written by Thomas A. Dorsey. Tharpe began to sing it in churches in her early Chicago years. For her first studio recording in 1938, she gave the song a harder, more suggestive swing. It was a breakthrough hit.

“Sit Down” was written by Tharpe. She first recorded it in New York City in 1941.

“Strange Things Happening Every Day” is a traditional African American spiritual. Tharpe’s 1944 recording, with her vocals and electric guitar, was the first gospel record to cross over and become a hit on *Billboard’s* Harlem Hit Parade chart (today’s R&B chart). The recording has been cited as an important precursor of rock and roll; some considered it to be the first rock and roll record.

“Tall Skinny Papa” was written by Tharpe and Lucky Millinder and first recorded in 1942.

“This Train” also known as “This Train Is Bound for Glory,” is a traditional African American gospel song. It was popular during the 1920s and became a gospel hit for Tharpe in the late 1930s. In the early 1950s she made another recording of the song, this time with electric guitar rather than acoustic.

“Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” is a traditional African American spiritual. It was first published in William Eleazar Barton’s 1899 *Old Plantation Hymns*, but it had been mentioned in writings prior to that date. In 1940, it was included in the Episcopal Church hymnal, making it the first spiritual to be included in any major American hymnal. It is the only African American song included in the Catholic Church’s Liturgy of the Hours.

“Up Above My Head” is a traditional gospel adapted by Tharpe. Tharpe and Knight’s 1947 recording is the best known version of the song.

INFLUENTIAL MUSICIANS

PEOPLE

Cab Calloway (1907–1994)

Cab Calloway was a regular performer at the Cotton Club in Harlem, where he became a popular vocalist of the swing era. He was a master of energetic scat singing and led one of the most popular dance bands in the United States from the early 1930s to the late 1940s. He was the first African American musician to sell one million copies of a record: 1931's "Minnie the Moocher," with its famous "hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho" chorus.

Johnny Cash (1932–2003)

Johnny Cash was a singer-songwriter known for his deep, calm, bass-baritone voice. His genre-spanning music embraced country, rock and roll, rockabilly, blues, folk, and gospel sounds. His best-known songs include "Folsom Prison Blues," "I Walk the Line," "Ring of Fire," "A Boy Named Sue," "Jackson" "Orange Blossom Special," and "Rock Island Line." He is one of the best-selling music artists of all time, having sold more than 90 million records worldwide, and was inducted into the Country Music, Rock and Roll, and Gospel Music Halls of Fame.

Duke Ellington (1899–1974)

Duke Ellington was a jazz pianist, composer, and bandleader. Based in New York City from the mid-1920s, he gained a national profile through his band's appearances at the Cotton Club in Harlem. He wrote or collaborated on more than one thousand compositions, including "Caravan," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," "I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)," "In a Sentimental Mood," "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," "Mood Indigo," "Solitude," "Sophisticated Lady," and many more.

Jimi Hendrix (1942–1970)

Jimi Hendrix was a guitarist, songwriter, and singer, perhaps best known for his song "Purple Haze" (1967). Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992, he is widely regarded as one of the greatest and most influential guitarists of all time.

Mahalia Jackson (1911–1970)



Mahalia Jackson is considered one of the most influential vocalists of the 20th century. During a time when racial segregation was pervasive in American society, she sold an estimated 22 million records and performed in front of integrated and secular audiences in concert halls around the world, making her one of the best-selling gospel music artists. The granddaughter of enslaved people, she was born and raised in poverty in New Orleans. She moved to Chicago as an adolescent and joined a gospel group, eking out a living with odd jobs and singing gigs at Chicago churches, funerals, political rallies, and revivals. Her 1947 recording of "Move On Up a Little Higher" sold two million copies and hit the number two spot on *Billboard* charts, both firsts for gospel music. With her newfound fame, she began to appear on television and radio, performing for presidents and heads of state. She

participated in the Civil Rights movement, singing for fundraisers and at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. She was a personal friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his family. She was renowned for her powerful contralto voice, range, an enormous stage presence, and her ability to relate to her audiences, conveying intense emotion during performances. Her success brought about international interest in gospel music.

Etta James (1938–2012)

Etta James was a singer and songwriter in various genres, including gospel, blues, jazz, R&B, rock and roll, and soul. Her most beloved song is "At Last" (1960). Her deep and earthy voice is considered to have bridged the gap between R&B and rock and roll. She won three Grammy Awards and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Little Richard (1932–2020)

Little Richard (1932–2020) was a singer, pianist, and songwriter, an influential figure in popular music and culture for seven decades. His most celebrated work dates from the mid-1950s, when his flamboyant showmanship and dynamic music, characterized by frenetic piano playing, pounding backbeat, and powerful raspy vocals, helped lay the foundation for rock and roll. He is cited as one of the first crossover Black artists, reaching audiences of all races with such hits as "Tutti Frutti" (1955) and "Long Tall Sally" (1956).

Scotty Moore (1931–2016)

Scotty Moore (1931–2016) was the studio and touring guitarist for Elvis Presley from 1954 to 1968. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000, and he was ranked 29th in Rolling Stone magazine's list of 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time in 2011.

Hot Lips Page (1908–1954)

Hot Lips Page (1908–1954) was a jazz trumpeter, singer, and bandleader who made more than 200 recordings. He played and sang with Count Basie in the 1930s, and he was the leader of the house band at the Apollo Theater during the early 1940s. He is considered by many to be one of the founders of what is now known as rhythm and blues.

Elvis Presley (1935–1977)



Elvis Presley, the "King of Rock and Roll," is regarded as one of the most significant cultural figures of the 20th century. His sexually provocative performance style, combined with a mix of influences across color lines during a transformative era in race relations, brought initial controversy that quickly became great and lasting success. He was commercially successful in many genres, including pop, country, rock and roll, rockabilly, rhythm and blues, adult contemporary, and gospel. He also starred in 33 movies, all of them featuring his music. He is one of the best-selling music artists in history, having sold an estimated 500 million records worldwide.

MORE INFLUENTIAL MUSIC

PLACES & TERMS

Barrelhouse music, often associated with boogie-woogie, is an early form of jazz characterized by raucous, improvised piano playing with a strong, accented two-beat rhythm. It was a common sound in bars, saloons, and other such establishments during the early 20th century. The term comes from cheap saloons with barrels stacked against the walls rather than bottles.

Boogie-woogie is a style of blues piano playing characterized by an up-tempo swung-note or shuffle rhythm, a repeated melodic pattern in the bass, and a series of improvised variations in the treble.

Carnegie Hall in New York City is one of the most prestigious performance venues in the world, principally for classical music but often for popular music as well.

The **Cotton Club** was a nightclub in New York City, located in Harlem from 1923 to 1936, then in the midtown Theatre District until 1940. The club operated during Prohibition and Jim Crow era racial segregation: while the venue featured many of the most popular Black entertainers of the era, only white people could patronize the Cotton Club. The décor frequently reinforced the racist imagery of the era. A 1930 photograph of the stage shows a bandstand that appears to be the porch façade of a typical Southern plantation.



First marketed in 1932, the **electric guitar** was quickly adopted by jazz guitar players who wanted to play single-note guitar solos in large big band ensembles. Sister Rosetta Tharpe was one of its early proponents. The instrument went on to become a major component in the development of electric blues, rock and roll, heavy metal, and many other genres of music.

A **metronome** is a device that produces an audible click or other sound at a uniform interval that can be set by the user, typically in beats per minute (BPM).

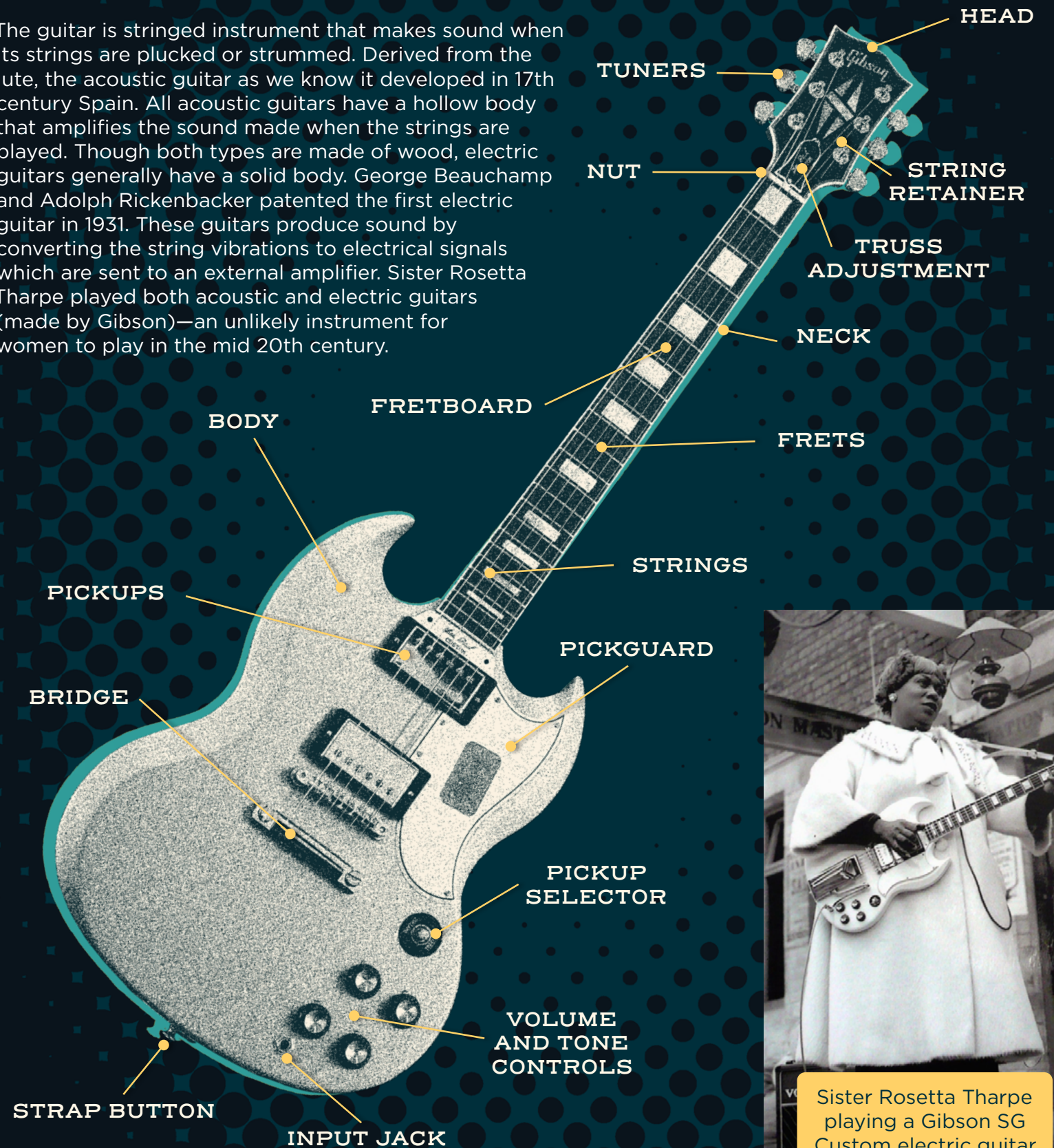
The **Savoy Ballroom** was a large venue for music and public dancing located in Harlem, New York City. It was built in 1926 to give Black people a place to dance that would equal or even surpass the elegance of the segregated Roseland ballroom in Midtown Manhattan.

Swing music was the dominant form of American popular music from 1935 to 1946, known as the swing era. Swing bands usually featured soloists who would improvise on the melody over the arrangement. In swing rhythm, the pulse is divided unequally (dum da dum da dum da dum) rather than the regular even beat of quarter notes or eighth notes.

V-discs ("V" for Victory) was a not-for-profit record label formed in 1943 to provide records exclusively for U.S. military personnel serving in World War II.

ANATOMY OF A GUITAR

The guitar is a stringed instrument that makes sound when its strings are plucked or strummed. Derived from the lute, the acoustic guitar as we know it developed in 17th century Spain. All acoustic guitars have a hollow body that amplifies the sound made when the strings are played. Though both types are made of wood, electric guitars generally have a solid body. George Beauchamp and Adolph Rickenbacker patented the first electric guitar in 1931. These guitars produce sound by converting the string vibrations to electrical signals which are sent to an external amplifier. Sister Rosetta Tharpe played both acoustic and electric guitars (made by Gibson)—an unlikely instrument for women to play in the mid 20th century.



Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing a Gibson SG Custom electric guitar

THE CHURCH & THE BIBLE

The word **communion** often refers to the Christian rite of consecrating and consuming bread and wine or juice in commemoration of the Last Supper. But when Rosetta says, “Can’t invite a tsk-tsker up on stage with me to sing with me every night into that holy space, that communion space,” communion refers to fellowship: the bond uniting Christians as individuals and groups with each other and with Christ.

The parable of the **Good Samaritan** is told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke in the Bible. It is about a Jewish traveler who is robbed, beaten, and left half dead alongside the road. A Jewish priest and then a Levite pass by, both avoiding the man. A Samaritan happens upon him and—although Samaritans and Jews were generally antagonistic toward each other—helps him.

In Judaisim, Christianity, and Islam, **Gabriel** is an archangel who is the primary messenger of God.

The term **high church** refers to Christian churches whose beliefs and worship practices emphasize ritual, priestly authority, the sacraments, and a standard liturgy. (The term low church is sometimes use in reference to those Christians who give little emphasis to ritual, with a greater focus on preaching, individual salvation, and personal conversion.)

The term **Holy Roller** originated in the 19th century referring to dancing, shaking, or other boisterous movements by certain Christian church attendees who perceived themselves as being under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The term has often been used derisively by those outside of these denominations, but those within such churches have reclaimed the term as a badge of honor.

In the Biblical books of Exodus and Numbers, **Joshua** is Moses’s assistant. In the book of Joshua, he succeeds Moses as leader of the Israelite tribes. In the Battle of Jericho, he leads the Israelites in marching around the city for seven days, with priests blowing their horns and the people shouting, until the city walls fall down.

King Jesus | Many Christian denominations view Jesus as having three functions or offices: prophet, priest, and king. The title “Christ the King” is frequently used as a name for churches, schools, seminaries, hospitals, and religious institutes.

The story of **Noah**, found in the Biblical book of Genesis, recounts how God, disgusted with humanity’s wickedness, decides to destroy the world with a flood. God instructs Noah, a righteous man, to build an ark to save himself, his family, and two each of all living creatures from the impending deluge. Then God sends rain for 40 days and nights, resulting in a massive flood that covers the entire earth. After the rain stops, Noah sends out a raven to see if the waters have receded, but the raven never returns. Next Noah sends a dove, who returns with an olive leaf, indicating that the earth is drying and that there is once again dry land. After the flood, God establishes a covenant with Noah, promising never again to destroy the earth with a flood, and the rainbow becomes the symbol of this promise.

“Praise Him with the sounding of the trumpet. Praise Him with the harp and lyre” | Quoted from the Bible: Psalm 150, verse 3.

To be **sanctified** means to be made holy or set apart for a sacred purpose, either through a religious ceremony or through a spiritual process of growth and purification. In essence, it signifies becoming pure and dedicated to a higher calling.

seven times seventy | A reference to this passage in the Bible, Matthew 18:21-22 (King James Version): “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” Metaphorically, an uncountable, infinite number of times.

“Sing to the Lord a new song” | Quoted from the Bible: Psalm 98, verse 1.

there ain’t no room at the inn | A reference to the story of the Nativity in the Bible, where Jesus is born in a stable because the inn at Bethlehem is full.

In the Biblical Book of Esther, **Vashti** is the queen of Persia, the wife of King Ahasuerus. During a men-only banquet for princes and nobles, Ahasuerus drunkenly summons Vashti to appear in her crown and show off her beauty. (Some scholars believe that the King summoned Vashti to appear only in her crown, thus showing off her naked body to the King’s drunken guests.) Vashti refused, and the King removed her as his queen and subsequently married Esther. Scholars have debated how much of this story is true and how much is myth. In some interpretations of the story, Vashti is seen as beautiful but wicked and vain, a symbol of wifely disobedience who should be punished. In other interpretations, she is viewed as a brave, independent-minded heroine at a time when even royal women were allowed little power.

“Washed in the blood of the lamb” is a Christian expression referring to the purification and cleansing of sin through faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. The phrase uses the imagery of blood, traditionally associated with sacrifice and atonement, to symbolize the forgiveness and salvation offered by God through Jesus (the Lamb).

Sister Rosetta Tharpe performing on the show *TV Gospel Time* with the Olivet Baptist Church Choir in 1964



SEGREGATION

After the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in America, southern states enacted laws that mandated strict segregation (separation) of the races. Facilities and services such as housing, healthcare, education, employment, and transportation were systematically separated based on racial categorizations. Black people were banned from so-called “whites only” establishments in the many parts of the United States, including Indiana. (The Indiana Theatre—where the IRT is now located—was segregated when it first opened in 1927.) Under segregation laws, Black people could not eat at the same restaurants, drink from water fountains, use public toilets, attend schools, go to movie theatres, ride buses, rent or purchase homes, rent hotel rooms, go to supermarkets, or attend places of worship with white people. Because it was not always easy for Black people to know where was safe, guidebooks and word of mouth became essential to those traveling from home. Between 1936 and 1966, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was published, helping Black people to find services and places that would be open and safe to them. Additionally, African Americans often sought out Black-owned businesses and churches for help in knowing where to go. Legalized segregation lasted up to the 1960s.



EVOLUTION OF A NAME

The word **negro**, literally meaning “black,” was used in the 1400s by Spanish and Portuguese explorers as a simple description to refer to the Bantu peoples that they encountered in southern Africa. In the Colonial America of 1619, John Rolfe used *negars* in describing the enslaved people who were captured from West Africa and then shipped to the Virginia colony. Later American English spellings included *neger* and *neggar*. Etymologically, *negro*, *noir*, *nègre*, and *n****r* ultimately derive from *nigrum*, the stem of the Latin *niger* (black).

The word **n****r** was commonly used in both England and America by the seventeenth century; at that time, it was considered nothing more than an alternate pronunciation of Negro. By 1825, however, Black people and abolitionists found the word offensive and began to object to its use.

The term **colored** appeared in North America during the colonial era. The first twelve Census counts in the United States counted “colored” people; beginning in 1900 the census counted “negroes.” The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909.

Eventually, the word **negro** returned to fashion, as some began to see the word *colored* as generic and demeaning. The United Negro College Fund was founded in 1944.

In the 1960s, many favored the word **black**. Malcolm X and others objected to the word *negro* because they associated it with the long history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination that treated African Americans as second-class citizens, or worse. Martin Luther King Jr. used both *negro* and *black*.

While there was a brief vogue of **Afro-American** in the late sixties and early seventies, *black* continued as the favored word until the 1990s, when **African American** became popular.

In today’s diverse world, many different terms are used. Recently, there seems to be a drift away from *African American* and back to **Black**, now capitalized.

Some Black people today use the n-word without irony, either to neutralize the word’s impact or as a sign of solidarity. Often when a word is employed as a slur against a certain group, members of the group will use that word among themselves to rob it of its negative power. The n-word is still controversial. While it may be heard frequently in rap songs and in conversation among younger African Americans, many older African Americans are deeply offended by it. Even within generations, not everyone agrees whether the word should be used within the African American community. Society at large, however, has condemned the word as a racial slur; its use by other races against Black people demonstrates an ignorance and hatred that should not be imitated. Recently, there seems to be a drift away from African American and back to Black, now capitalized, when describing people, culture, art, and communities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before Seeing the Play

- 1. What do you know about the history of rock 'n' roll? Who are the earliest rock 'n' roll musicians whose work is familiar to you? Listening to rock 'n' roll, what do you imagine might be other, earlier types of music that influenced its development?
- 2. What do you know of contemporary Christian music? How is the work of today's Christian music artists similar to that of other pop, rock, alt, and country artists? How is it different?

After Seeing the Play

- 1. Singers like Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Chuck Berry all cite Sister Rosetta Tharpe as a major influence on their work. Why do you think they are so much more famous than Rosetta, whose career faded out of the public eye long before she died?
- 2. What does Rosetta mean when she tells Marie "'Bout now Leroy's out there slappin' on aftershave and Wandalyn's done picking out her dress?" Who are Leroy and Wandalyn?
- 3. While Rosetta is trying to give Marie a pep talk about their act, she tells her to repeat over and over "Rosetta and Marie, Rosetta and Marie." However, the play is titled *Marie and Rosetta*. Why do you think the playwright made this choice?
- 4. How are Rosetta and Marie similar as characters and musicians? How are they different from each other? How do their various personal and professional qualities balance each other? How does each supply what the other lacks? Think of other well-known pairs in music, movies, sports, TV, literature, and theatre. Think of you and your best friend. How do these pairs balance each other?
- 5. How do the characters of Rosetta and Marie change over the course of the play? What do they learn from each other—as musicians and as friends? In what ways does each remain unchanged?
- 6. Why do you think the playwright chose to set the entire play in a funeral home? How does this unique setting affect the characters? the action of the play? the audience's response?
- 7. Think back to the series of musical numbers in the show. How did each song illustrate different musical aspects of the two artists? How did the sequence of songs demonstrate the expanding influence of each artist on the other? How did the music's evolution reflect the growing personal relationship between Rosetta and Marie?
- 8. Near the end of the play, there is a surprise revelation; you might call it a plot twist. Did you suspect it in advance? Did you find it effective and/or plausible? Why or why not? What did it add to the play?

WRITING PROMPTS

- 1. In the play, Rosetta tells Marie "Own up to your gifts, girl." What are your gifts? What do you bring to the world to make it better? Write a personal journal entry that honestly assesses your strengths and weaknesses and outlines a path for your continued development in this area. Then write a job application letter or a college entrance essay that deals with these qualities in yourself. How does writing to yourself and then to other people change how you see yourself and how you express yourself?
- 2. What if you had to write an obituary for Rosetta Tharpe? What would it say? Perhaps try to write one for a living artist. How do you condense the events of their life into one piece of writing?
- 3. As an older artist with a more established career, Rosetta acts as a mentor to Marie. Who is or has been a mentor to you? Write about that relationship, and what that person did or does to guide and teach you, and how those experiences have helped you.
- 4. Write a review of the play. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of the theatrical aspects—scenery, lights, costumes, sound, direction, acting—as well as your impressions of the script and the impact of the story and/or themes and the overall production. What moments made an impression? How do the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound work with the actors' performances of the text to tell the story? What ideas or themes did the play make you think about? How did it make you feel? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not? To share your reviews with others, send to: education@irtlive.com

ACTIVITIES

- 1. Listen to Sister Rosetta Tharpe's hit recording of "Strange Things Happening Every Day" (1944), followed by Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" (1957). What are the similarities that demonstrate Tharpe's influence over Presley? What does Presley bring to his music that is new? Do the same with Tharpe's "I Want a Tall Skinny Papa" (1942) and Chuck Berry's "No Particular Place to Go" (1964). How are the styles similar? How are they different?
- 2. Create a playlist of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's biggest hits, along with songs by the artists she influenced. What similar elements can you hear?
- 3. Imagine your life story is being portrayed on stage. What ten songs would you choose to represent different phases and moments of your life? How would they demonstrate the range of your personal taste? Make a playlist of them!

RESOURCES

Books

Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, by Gayle Wald

People Get Ready: A New History of Gospel Music, by Robert Darden

The History of the Blues: The Roots, the Music, the People by Francis Davis

Devil’s Music, Holy Rollers, and Hillbillies: How America Gave Birth to Rock and Roll, by James A. Cosby

Websites and Articles

[Forebears: Sister Rosetta Tharpe, The Godmother Of Rock ‘N’ Roll - NPR](#)

[“How Did Gospel Music Influence Rock and Roll? - Our Music World](#)

[Sister Rosetta Tharpe - National Women’s History Museum](#)

[Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll - American Masters, PBS](#)

[Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Essay, Sister Rosetta Tharpe by Gayle Wald](#)

[The Godmother of Rock and Roll - Picturing Black History](#)

[The Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul Project](#)

[Rock and Roll Started with Sister Rosetta Tharpe - Vulture](#)

[Strings Attached: Electric Versus Acoustic Guitars – Which Suits You?](#)

Documentaries

How They Got Over: Gospel Quartets and the Road to Rock and Roll (2017)

How Sweet It Was: The Sights and Sounds of Gospel’s Golden Age (2010)

The Story of Gospel Music: The Power in the Voice (1998)

Videos

[“Didn’t It Rain, Children”](#)

[“This Train”](#)

[“That’s All”](#)

[“Up Above My Head”](#)

[Guitar Solos in Motion Picture](#)

[Black Nouveau, Sister Rosetta Tharpe - PBS.org](#)

[Brittany Howard, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction for Rosetta Tharpe performs “That’s All”](#)

GLOSSARY

Bronzeville | a neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. In the early 20th century, Bronzeville was known as the “Black Metropolis,” one of the nation’s most significant concentrations of African American businesses and culture. Prominent residents have included Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Louie Armstrong.

café society | In the United States, café society came to the fore with the end of Prohibition in 1933 and the rise of photojournalism. The term referred to wealthy people who tended to do their entertaining semi-publicly—in fashionable restaurants and nightclubs such as the 21 Club, the Stork Club, and El Morocco.

diabetes | (sometimes called “the sugar”) A condition where a person has high blood glucose, either because the pancreas does not produce enough insulin, or because cells do not respond to the insulin that is produced. Type 1 diabetes results from the body’s failure to produce insulin. Type 2 diabetes is primarily caused by obesity. African Americans are almost twice as likely to have diabetes as white people.

Gout | a painful form of inflammatory arthritis characterized by sudden, intense pain, swelling, redness, and tenderness in the affected joint (most often the big toe).

“Pennies from Heaven” | a popular song with music by Arthur Johnston and lyrics by Johnny Burke. It was introduced by Bing Crosby in the 1936 film of the same name.

World War II began in September 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. Soon the conflict spread to most of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The two sides in this war were the Allies, which included England, France, and eventually the United States, and the Axis, which included Germany, Italy, and Japan. The United States joined the war in December 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. It was the most widespread war in history, with more than 100 million military personnel mobilized. In a state of “total war,” the major participants placed their entire economic, industrial, and scientific capabilities at the service of the war effort, erasing the distinction between civilian and military resources. Marked by significant events involving the mass death of civilians, including the Holocaust and the only use of nuclear weapons in warfare, it was the deadliest conflict in human history, resulting in 50 to 70 million fatalities. The war ended in 1945 with an Allied victory.