

Throwback: Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Up Above My Head



Sister Rosetta Tharpe recorded "Up Above My Head" with Marie Knight in 1947 for Decca Records. The traditional gospel song was first recorded by the Gospel Sons in 1941 but Tharpe and Knight's version is the most known. Their rendition reached

number 6 on the Billboard Race Records chart in 1948. Tharpe had already asserted herself as a pioneer of gospel turned into rock and rhythm and blues since her 1938 recording of "Rock Me." Her unique style included being one of the first to play the guitar using distortion with a technique that would lead the way for future rock icons like Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eric Clapton, and many others. "Up Above My Head" became one of her signature songs and she gave a solo performance of the song sometimes in the '60s on the show *TV Gospel Time*. Tharpe's early contributions in the '30s and '40s as a gospel artist who was accepted by secular audiences had the music press calling her the Original Soul Sister and the Godmother of Rock and Roll. Conservative gospel organizations were critical of her, but she was invaluable to the development of American pop, rock, and English blues. Her 1945 single, "Strange Things Happening Every Day," was the first gospel record to cross over, with a number two position on the race records chart.

Okeh Records came up with the name race records in 1922 to describe music that was marketed to Black people. By 1942, Billboard created the Harlem Hit Parade to list songs popular with Black audiences. In June of 1949, the term race records was replaced with R&B. Tharpe's music survived all of the music industry politics and her music is still recognized in 2025. Tharpe passed away in 1973 and received several posthumous honors. The United States Postal Service issued a stamp in her honor in 1998. In 2007, she was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. The BBC aired the documentary *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll* in 2011. The play *Marie & Rosetta*, based on Tharpe's relationship with Knight, was staged at New York's Atlantic Theater Company in 2016. Tharpe was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2017.

