

# MY HISTORY HERO

Singer, songwriter and actress Ruby Turner chooses

## Sister Rosetta Tharpe

1915-73



Sister Rosetta Tharpe performing around 1938. "She was a musical prodigy with a distinctive way of singing," says Ruby Turner

### IN PROFILE

Sister Rosetta Tharpe (born Rosetta Nubin) was an American singer, songwriter and guitarist who's been dubbed 'the Godmother of rock'n'roll'. She found fame in the 1930s and 1940s, becoming gospel music's first great recording star. Her singing style and guitar virtuosity also influenced early rock'n'roll stars such as Little Richard and Elvis Presley, as well as British blues guitarists in the 1960s. She died in 1973, aged 58, three years after suffering a stroke. She was posthumously inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 2007.

// People don't realise how much the likes of Elvis Presley and Little Richard owe to her – Chuck Berry was just one long impersonation! //



### When did you first hear about Tharpe?

I heard the song 'Up Above My Head' when I was 16, though at the time I didn't realise it was Sister Rosetta singing [with Marie Knight]. It was only later – after I performed another of her songs, 'Didn't it Rain', while touring with Jools Holland, who's also a fan – that I realised I'd been introduced to her music in my teens.

**Ruby Turner** MBE has worked with artistes including Mick Jagger, and had a US number 1 R&B hit with 'It's Gonna Be Alright' in 1990. She's sung on *Jools' Annual Hootenanny* on BBC Two since 2007, and is touring with Jools Holland ([joolsholland.com](http://joolsholland.com))

### What kind of woman was she?

The daughter of cotton pickers, Rosetta was born into poverty in Arkansas. By the time she was six, she had joined her singer mother as a performer in a travelling evangelical troupe. She was a musical prodigy with a distinctive way of singing, and by her teens had become the 'main event'. Music was the saving grace for a lot of black Americans at that time, and Rosetta – she took the surname Tharpe from her first husband – was just born to do what she did. Sadly, for a period after the war she rather disappeared from view, which was a crying shame.

### What made her a hero?

She was such a trailblazer for black female artistes in the show-business world, and influenced so many of the rock'n'roll stars who followed in her wake and achieved fame. A lot of people don't realise just how much artistes like Elvis Presley and Little Richard, among others, owe to her – Chuck Berry was just one long impersonation! I also admire her for the strength and fortitude she displayed in forging a musical career at a time when America was such a segregated, racist society.

### What was her finest hour?

Possibly the concert she gave at a disused railway station in the rain in Manchester in 1964. It was recorded by Granada Television and attended by the likes of Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Keith Richards, who have also cited her as an influence. Take a look at the video of her that day – that's a woman who's armed and dangerous [musically]. The way she twanged that guitar!

### Is there anything that you don't particularly admire about her?

Nothing comes to mind. I just wish she'd taken better care of herself – she died so young.

### Does she deserve to be better known today?

Definitely – so I'm delighted to hear that a campaign has been launched to put up a blue plaque to commemorate her legendary concert in Manchester in 1964. That will hopefully introduce her to a new generation and remind the world of her musical significance.

**What would you ask her if you could meet her?** I'd just say: "Well done, sister! Thank you for your tenacity and your fire!" **H**

Ruby Turner was talking to York Membery



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