

*American*<sup>®</sup>  
**MASTERS**



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**THIRTEEN's *American Masters* Launches Season 27 with  
*Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll*  
Premiering Friday, February 22 on PBS**

*New documentary celebrates unsung gospel guitar hero in honor of  
Black History Month*

*Preview videos & connect with other cultural icons at [pbs.org/americanmasters](http://pbs.org/americanmasters)*

***American Masters*** opens its 27<sup>th</sup> season with the story of African-American gospel singer and guitar virtuoso Sister Rosetta Tharpe (March 20, 1915 – October 9, 1973). One of the most influential musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tharpe may not be a household name today, but the flamboyant superstar, with her spectacular playing on the newly electrified guitar, played a pivotal role in the creation of rock 'n' roll. Emmy<sup>®</sup>-winning filmmaker Mick Csáky uncovers her life, music and lasting influence in ***American Masters Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll***, premiering nationally Friday, February 22 at 9 pm (ET) on PBS ([check local listings](#)) in honor of Black History Month.

Southern-born, Chicago-raised and New York-made, Sister Rosetta rose from poverty to become one of the world's most popular gospel singers and the first to cross over successfully into mainstream popular music. She introduced the spiritual passion of gospel into the secular world of rock 'n' roll, inspiring some of its greatest stars, including Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard. A natural-born performer and a rebel, "She could play the guitar like

nobody else ... nobody!” says Lottie Henry, a member of Tharpe’s back-up vocal group The Rosettes. “Elvis loved Rosetta Tharpe,” attests Gordon Stoker of The Jordanaires, who performed with both Sister Rosetta and Elvis. “Not only did he dig her guitar playing but he dug her singing too.”

The child of poor cotton pickers, Sister Rosetta was born in Cotton Plant, Ark. At the age of six, she was taken by her evangelist mother Katie Bell to Chicago to join the Church of God in Christ, where she developed her distinctive performing style. In 1938, at the age of 23, she briefly left the church for show business, causing huge controversy when she performed songs laden with sexual innuendo in New York City venues such as the famed Cotton Club and Café Society, where she immediately became a favorite of both Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. However, Sister Rosetta soon returned to her gospel roots and performed in packed churches and theatres throughout America and Europe, becoming one of America’s most distinctive recording stars on radio and television during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

***American Masters Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll*** features archival performances and new interviews with Joe Boyd, tour manager of the 1964 American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan; Howard Carroll of gospel group The Dixie Hummingbirds, which toured frequently with Tharpe; Anthony Heilbut, gospel record producer and writer; life-long friend Roxie Moore; Ira Tucker, Jr., son of The Dixie Hummingbirds’ Ira Tucker, Sr.; Tharpe biographer Gayle Wald; and others.

“I like to call Sister Rosetta Tharpe ‘The Godmother of Rock & Roll’ because of the huge influence she has had on so many popular musicians during the past 70 years — from Elvis, Johnny Cash and Etta James to Jimi Hendrix, Pete Townshend, Tom Jones, and Eric Clapton, through to the present,” said Csáky, whose past films for ***American Masters*** include *Bob Marley: Rebel Music* (2001), which he executive produced, and *Plácido Domingo: A Musical Life* (1995), which he produced and directed.

“It is my great pleasure to present this British-made film about such a uniquely American woman. Sister Rosetta is unfortunately not known to many of us now, but we have all benefited from her gifts in the music she so deeply influenced,” said Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of ***American Masters***.

Since its 1986 premiere, ***American Masters*** has earned 24 Emmy Awards — including eight for Outstanding Non-Fiction Series since 1999 and five for Outstanding Non-Fiction Special — 12 Peabodys, an Oscar, three Grammys, and two Producers Guild Awards. Now in its 27<sup>th</sup> season on PBS, the series is a production of [THIRTEEN](#). [WNET](#) is the parent company of THIRTEEN and WLIW21, New York’s public television stations, and operator of NJTV. For 50 years, THIRTEEN has been making the most of the rich resources and passionate people of New York and the world, reaching millions of people with on-air and online programming that celebrates arts and culture, offers insightful commentary on the news of the day, explores the worlds of science and nature, and invites students of all ages to have fun while learning.

To take ***American Masters*** beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories and personalities of masters past and present, the companion website (<http://pbs.org/americanmasters>) offers streaming video of select films, interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

***American Masters Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll*** is a production of Antelope South. A presentation of ***American Masters*** for THIRTEEN. Mick Csáky is writer, producer, and director. Tom Herington is editor. Gayle Wald is editorial consultant and Michael Miles is cameraman. Pauline Black is narrator. Susan Lacy is ***American Masters*** series creator and executive producer.

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In 2013, WNET is celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of THIRTEEN, New York's flagship public media provider. As the parent company of THIRTEEN and WLIW21 and operator of NJTV, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to over 5 million viewers each week. WNET produces and presents such acclaimed PBS series as [Nature](#), [Great Performances](#), [American Masters](#), [Need to Know](#), [Charlie Rose](#) and a range of documentaries, children's programs, and local news and cultural offerings available on air and online. Pioneers in educational programming, WNET has created such groundbreaking series as [Get the Math](#), [Oh Noah!](#) and [Cyberchase](#) and provides tools for educators that bring compelling content to life in the classroom and at home. WNET highlights the tri-state's unique culture and diverse communities through [NYC-ARTS](#), [Reel 13](#), [NJ Today](#) and [MetroFocus](#), the multi-platform news magazine focusing on the New York region.