

Alice: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact, the podcast bringing you queer history from around the world and throughout time. I'm Alice.

Irene: I'm Irene.

Eli: I'm Eli.

A: And today we're talking about the gospel singer, Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

[intro music plays]

A: We have some content warnings before we start this episode. There's gonna be mentions of slavery and discussions of racism and segregation in the USA, as well as the use of outdated language regarding African-American people in quotes; um, there's also a couple of mentions of domestic violence; the loss of a limb; and deaths in a fire, including the deaths of children. So if any of that sounds like something you don't want to hear, feel free to skip this episode and check out any of our other content.

E: Before we get started, I also wanted to mention our sponsor for this episode, Sudio Sweden. Sudio makes quality headphones. They are beautiful; they have excellent sound quality; I don't think I'm gonna be able to use five dollar headphones again, but that's okay. Ah, so I would encourage you to go their website, which is sudio.com – S-U-D-I-O dot com – to check them out. You can also use the promo code QUEERASFACT – so that's all one word, QUEERASFACT – to get 15% off there.

I: Additionally, I just feel like you should all know that, as you can, hear, we're all sick, especially me – the others might be able to fake it...

E: [laughs]

I: ...but I'm not doing a great job – so just bear with the fact that I sound like I'm dying.

A: [laughs] So Rosetta's born on the 20th of March in 1915, in the small town of Cotton Plant, in Arkansas. Her parents were Katie and Willis Atkins. When Rosetta was six, Katie left Willis, took Rosetta, and took to the road as a travelling evangelist, eventually winding up in Chicago. We don't really know Katie's motivations for leaving Willis – Rosetta's biographer Gayle Wald suggests that even at age six, Rosetta was already showing enough musical promise that Katie saw the opportunity to make a living off her skills, touring.

E: Huh, that's interesting.

A: Yeah, she was a musical prodigy as a child.

E: Okay, I was... 'Cos I was gonna ask more about like, her mother being able to leave her husband and like, make a living doing this...

A: Yeah.

E: ...thing actually, that sounds interesting.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so, from what I could gather – and I was a bit confused when I was reading this about like, how you could actually make money off that...

E: Yep.

A: ...but from what I could gather it was just like, preaching in churches and the money from the offering plate in the church would be given to, if a travelling preacher came to preach that week...

E: Oh, okay.

A: ...or a travelling musician came that week, they would get the money.

E: That's nice.

A: And that was how they were...

E and I: Yeah.

A: ...supporting themselves. Yeah.

E: There's a bunch of those like, interesting ways that, you know, like, women and other disadvantaged people have found to make a living, and it's always...

A: Yeah!

E: ...interesting to...

I: Mm.

E: ...hear about them in various periods of history.

A: Yeah, I thought that it was also interesting, 'cos another reason that Gayle Wald mentioned of why Katie left Willis to do this is because apparently – and I'm not sure of the details of this – a married woman couldn't be a travelling evangelist...

E: Oh, okay. Really?

A: ...but an unmarried woman could, and so she had to leave her husband to do it.

E: Oh, so they're like, officially divorced, or...

A: I don't...

E: ...she just sort of left and was like, "Do *you* see a husband?"

[laughter]

A: It's not clear...

E: "Well I guess there isn't one!"

A: [laughs] It's not clear if they were ever officially married.

E: Oh, okay. Alright.

A: She took his surname and they had a kid together but...

E: Okay.

A: I don't...

E: But it was more of like a de facto relationship, perhaps.

A: Yeah, I don't think there's a record of a wedding between them.

E: Okay. Well that makes things easier.

A: Yeah. From a very young age Rosetta was performing alongside her mother – so her mother was also a musician; she played the piano and the harmonium, and so from a very young age Rosetta was performing alongside Katie. She'd later tell the story of when she was six, being lifted up to sit on top of the piano in church so people could see her while she played her guitar.

E: Aww... I love to picture the guitar being like, way bigger than her.

A: That's what I was about to say – everything I read seemed to suggest that she just always played an adult-sized guitar...

E: Yeah.

A: ...even from age six, so...

E: I mean, I don't feel like child guitars would have been like... I don't know, I think...

A: Yeah!

E: ...child guitars are kinda hard to find now.

A: Yeah.

A and I: Yeah.

E: You know, like...

A: I don't feel like they're a thing that was just around in 1920.

E: Yeah.

I: But playing the guitar with small hands is so hard.

E: Yes.

A: Yeah, I mean she's probably playing single notes in that stage. She also used to...

E: Yeah, children doing anything musical is impressive.

I: True.

A: Yeah, yeah. She also used to sit on her mum's knee and play the right hand of songs while her mum played the left hand.

I: Aww....

E: That's so cute.

A: Very cute. So Katie and Rosetta's church that Katie was an evangelist for is called the Church of God in Christ, and just to disclaimer, I tried my best to research what exactly the Church of God in Christ is, but researching like, different denominations of churches and how they're different is very hard, and I apologise if I get anything wrong. I won't go into too much detail.

E: That's also just a very generic name. Like, I imagine Googling "the Church of God in Christ"...

A: [laughs]

E: ...isn't like, one Google hit.

A and I: Yeah.

A: And there's also like, multiple churches of God in Christ that had like, split off but both kept the name...

E: Yep.

A: ...and like, all that kinda stuff.

I: Oh God, really? Okay.

A: Yeah. So it was pretty fraught, but... [laughs] Yep. The Church of God in Christ is a Pentecostal church. So Pentecostals believe broadly in people having a very close personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, so they're the sort of churches where you see people doing things like speaking in tongues, 'cos the Holy Spirit has come to them and is speaking through them, and that kind of thing.

I: I finally understand why this happens!

A: Yeah, yeah. That's what it's about. So that's as much information as I have about the Church of God in Christ. In Chicago, where Katie and Rosetta settled for a while – and I guess more generally – the Church of God in Christ was mainly known for two things. The first thing is its emphasis on what they called “clean living”.

E: Mhm.

A: So that's like, no alcohol, no smoking, no gambling...

I: Alright...

A: But...

I: That was like, a less suspicious-sounding thing than I expected “clean living” to be.

A: [laughs] Well, it also extends to no theatre, no film, no social dancing, no secular music...

I: Okay guys.

A: So like, it's pretty intense.

E: Yep.

A: So Rosetta grew up in her home without a record-player or a radio or anything like that.

E: So like, music you do yourself is fine, but like, the radio isn't?

A: You performing religious music is fine, but if you're...

E: Okay.

A: ...listening to the radio or going to the theatre you're gonna see secular music...

E: I see, okay.

A: ...and that's not fine.

E: Alright.

A: Yep.

E: Got it.

A: So the Church of God in Christ was very well known for their religious music. To quote one of the elders of the church which Rosetta and her mum went to in Chicago, "The devil should not be allowed to keep all this good rhythm."

[laughter]

A: So, the Church of God in Christ is a working-class black church, and it incorporates a lot of kind of everyday instruments into its music, so things like guitar – which we've mentioned, tambourine, and trumpet. And it also draws heavily from music styles which have their roots in slavery and in African music – so blues, and work songs, and things like that – which weren't at that time being used as much, or as like, directly, in more middle-class black churches, which might have been trying to distance themselves from that part of their past.

E: Okay.

A: So it's time for us to listen to some gospel music now!

I: Oh good, I'm ready.

A: Yeah. So I just want to play you an example of like, the sort of gospel music that was heard in other, more middle-class black churches, versus the sort of gospel music that was heard in the Church of God in Christ. All this stuff was recorded a bit later on than the period I'm talking about, so these recordings are from the 1940s, but it still gives you an idea. Yeah, so this is the song *Didn't It Rain*, performed by the Roberta Martin Singers. Roberta Martin was from a Baptist church, so a different church.

[music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0Du2kqfpPc>]

A: And this is Rosetta performing the same song.

[music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wldzjd6cnl0&t=25s>]

A: So there you go.

E: I like how twangy that was!

A: Yeah, it's very twangy. It's good. It's a good time.

E: Good stuff.

A: Yeah. So that's the difference in Church of God in Christ music versus...

E: Are there ever choirs...

A: ...other gospel music.

E: ...in Church of God in Christ music or, like, that kind of more lower-class working-class...

A: Um...

E: ...church?

A: I'm not entirely clear. It seems like, from what I was reading about – 'cos I was reading about Rosetta and her mother travelling around and performing...

E: Yep.

A: ...I was reading about times when there was like, a soloist coming in to perform...

E: Okay, yep.

A: ...but I don't know if that was kind of, the norm...

E: Alright.

A: ...or if there was also times when just a choir was singing.

E: Reasonable.

A: I'm not sure.

E: 'Cos even that like, creates quite a different sort of, feel...

I: ...feeling.

A: Yeah, yeah. So as Rosetta got older and her musical skill grew, she dropped out of school and began touring and performing full-time with her mother.

E: So has she been taught by her mother?

A: Yeah.

E: Okay.

A: I'm not aware of her having any other teachers. She might have had a piano teacher at one point, but she's largely self-taught and taught by her mother.

E: Okay.

A: Her school friends who remember going to elementary school with her don't remember her moving up into junior highschool with them...

E: Okay.

A: ...so she dropped out of school quite young...

E: Yep.

A: ...and started touring full-time, and that's what she did for all her teen years, basically. And during this time, she met the Church of God in Christ preacher Thomas J. Tharpe, or Tommy. We don't know much about their relationship or how they met, but on November 17th 1934 – so when Rosetta was 19 – Rosetta and Tommy got married.

E: Is he about the same age?

A: I don't know. I...

E: Okay. That's fine. Okay.

A: ...know nothing about him. [laughs]

E: We have this sometimes, where we have a man essentially show up to give them the surname that they're known by.

A: [laughs]

I: Yeah.

E: And then it's like, "Bye."

A: Yeah, yeah. Tommy's here; he has the surname Tharpe.

E: Yep.

A: Is... that's all we know.

E: Okay.

A: I mean, we know a little bit more. They did actually stay married for a while.

E: Okay.

A: So they based themselves out of Miami, and they kept touring together. Tommy would preach and Rosetta would perform. Ira Tucker Jnr., who know Rosetta well later in her life, says Tommy saw her as a "meal ticket" and that Rosetta thought of it as a business arrangement. And Ira Tucker makes this statement about pretty much all of the men in Rosetta's life.

E: Okay.

A: He sees her relationships with men as basically something she saw as just convenient to her business and her protection of having a man in her life...

E: Okay.

A: ...and stuff like that.

E: So what are they bringing to her business that isn't just the protection of having a man around?

A: Well I think it's just the fact that he preaches, whereas she only performs music, so...

E: Okay.

A: ...they're probably more appealing to a church if they come and say, "Hey..."

E: Oh, okay.

A: "...I'll preach and she sings."

I: Are they... didn't you tell me before that only unmarried women are allowed to become travelling...?

A: Travelling evangelists. So Rosetta's just performing; her mother was the one doing the evangelising.

I: Oh, okay.

A: Sorry if I didn't make that clear. Rosetta just does the music.

I: Okay.

A: Yep.

E: And you're allowed to show up and play music.

A: And anyone can sure up and play music I guess.

E: Yep.

I: Okay.

E: Alright.

A: She definitely keeps touring once she's married. So by this time – in the next few years as she's married to Tommy – Rosetta had become nationally renowned within her church, and then, when Reverend Amaziah Melvin Cohen of the Miami church which she attended, began broadcasting the church services on white radio stations, she became renowned outside of the church as well. And people of many different races and religions started attending the Miami church to hear Rosetta perform. Reverend Amaziah's cousin Zeola remembers this time as being like, quite uncomfortable, 'coz what was a religious service to the people in the church...

E: Mm.

A: ...other people who weren't part of that religion were coming in to just basically see it as a concert.

E: Yeah.

I: Yeah, I can see how that would be uncomfortable.

A: Yeah. And they were paying – so the church started charging entrance fees to people who weren't part of the congregation – and that money went towards renovations and starting a college fund, but it was still kind of a weird vibe, I think. And this is something that we'll see throughout Rosetta's life, and that's a major tension in her life, is kinda when it's appropriate for non-African-American people to enjoy African-American religious music...

E: Mhm.

A: ...just as a secular entertainment. So as you both predicted, Rosetta and Tommy's marriage didn't last.

I: I'm shocked.

A: Zeola, who I mentioned a second ago, says "I knew how he would beat her, but she *loved* him."

I: Oh dear.

E: [sighs]

A: Yeah, but obviously she moved on from that, and in 1938 she left Tommy and with her mother, Rosetta moved to New York, where she began to pursue a recording career. According to Zeola, Rosetta was seduced by, quote "the money and promises" of the white people who came to her Miami church.

In New York, Rosetta signed a recording contract with a record company called Decca Records, and she

was the first gospel artist they'd ever signed. Her first hit was a song called *Rock Me*, which was a gospel song – so it was a gospel song that she herself didn't write; it was already a known gospel song...

E: Mm.

A: ...but when she performed it she changed the lyrics to appeal to a wider secular audience, so she took out the explicit mentions of Jesus, and stuff like that.

E: Mmkay.

I: Can we... hear the song?

A: Sure! She recorded it several times and later on she recorded it with Jesus again, so you'd have to find the right recording.

I: The fact that you said “recorded it with Jesus” made me imagine her and Jesus like, jammin' in the studio.

A: That's right.

E: I'm picturing Jesus playing the sax.

A: [laughs] I was picturing...

I: I think that's a good look on Jesus.

A: I was picturing Jesus on tambourine.

I: [laughs]

[music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25m8kcubLAo>]

A: So yeah, in that first line, you heard where she says “Won't you hear me swinging?”, the original was “Won't you hear me singing?” and she changed it to “swinging” 'coz she thought that would be more appealing to a general audience...

E: I mean...

A: ...as swing was big at the time.

E and I: Okay.

A: [laughs] Yep. Rosetta went on to sing songs that purely secular, that had no gospel roots.

I: How did she feel about that? The Church of God in Christ was not about that.

A: Yeah, um, we don't really know how Rosetta herself felt. So, some people seem to think that it was a part of her contract – in order to get a recording contract she was just kinda forced to agree to sing whatever they wanted her to sing. Rosetta... so she went on to sing in nightclubs as well. She sang at the Cotton Club – I don't know if we mentioned that in our Josephine episode...

I: Yeah.

A: But Josephine Baker also sang at the Cotton Club. But yeah, she went on to sing at nightclubs, and she explained in one radio interview, quote “...that her mission is to save souls, and that she sings in a night club because she feels that there are more souls in the niteries that need saving than there are in the

church.”

E: Niteries.

A: Niteries. [laughs]

E: I love outdated words. Um...

A: I'm going to the niterie tonight.

E: Alright, so is that... true? I don't know. Does that line up with...

A: Um....

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so she also later did tell Zeola, who we've mentioned a few times that, quote “One of the worst things I did was to leave the church” end quote.

E: Okay. So it always stays important to her.

A: Yep.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah. The church definitely stays important to her throughout her life, and she does – we'll see – go back to singing...

E: Mhm.

A: ...just gospel later on, so I think the explanation that she just kinda had to do this to start a career makes sense.

E: Yeah. Uh... do we know anything about what her community thought of her going off and singing less religious music?

A: Yes. They were pretty appalled by it.

E: Alright. I'm unsurprised.

A: Yeah. Um, one... there's a quote I have here from one of her friends in Chicago – Alva Roberts – who said, “When I heard her I said, my goodness, you mean she's gone into the world playing music like the *world* music?”

E: Oh.

[laughter]

I: The world music.

A: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah. Um, yeah, and a lot of them ostracised her and Ira Tucker Jnr., who I mentioned, said, “...they viewed it almost like a death.”

E: What about her mother?

A: Her...

E: Is her mother around still?

A: Her mother's still around.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah, her mother moved to New York with her...

E: Right, yes.

A: ...when she left Tommy, and her mother doesn't seem to have approved all that much – so her mother was still like, not letting her have a radio in the home...

E: Yep.

A: ...so she couldn't listen to secular music in her home or anything, but her mother continued to support her and will come and like...

E: Okay.

A: ...be backstage with her and stuff like that, even though she doesn't...

E: Okay.

A: ...truly approve of her choices.

E: Well, I'm glad.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

I: That's like, fairly good parenting.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah!

E: I just want her to have like, a good relationship with someone.

A: Yeah, no, her... her mother's good.

E: Yes.

A: Her mother's good.

E: Alright.

A: I think they have a good relationship.

E: I'm glad.

A: Yeah. Regardless of the reactions by her community within the church, her fame grew rapidly. Many of her white audience members had never heard gospel music before, and they really loved her, and loved hearing this new genre of music, and she toured throughout the USA and also a little bit in Canada. Her

guitar skills were particularly impressive, and one of the notable things about her was most people played guitar as a rhythm instrument at the time – so just chords to accompany their singing...

E: Oh, okay.

A: ...and she played it the way...

E: She fully shredded it.

A: Yeah.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, yeah. And the reason for that is playing acoustic guitar in somewhere like her church, playing chords like, died away very quickly...

E: Mm.

A: ...in a big space with a large group of people, and they couldn't really be heard, but plucking continuous notes...

E: Okay.

A: ...created a more continuous sound.

E: Okay.

A: So that was a new and exciting thing.

E: That's really interesting. Guitar just as a rhythm instrument is so weird to me.

A: [laughs]

E: Because normally, like when I've been in bands and things, it's like, well we have to showcase this!

A: Yeah.

E: You know?

A: Yeah, yeah. But it was definitely more the... I guess what we'd think of that you hear in like, folk music....

E: Yeah.

A: ...where somebody's just like, strumming guitar.

E: Yeah.

A: Or when someone's playing *Wonderwall* when they're not very good at the guitar.

[laughter]

A: Yeah. So, um...

E: Cool, I definitely have *Wonderwall* in my head now, so, thank you.

A: Don't worry, I'll play you more gospel soon.

I: Yay.

E: I thought you were gonna say "I'll play you *Wonderwall*"!

A: [laughs]

E: And I was like, what possible justification do you have for that?

I: It turns out that Rosetta Tharpe wrote *Wonderwall* and what's-his-name...

A: *Oasis* stole it?

I: ...stole it.

A: So yeah, Alfred Miller, who was the musical director of the Church of God in Christ in Brooklyn, said about her guitar skills, "She could do runs, she could do sequences, she could do arpeggios... she could put that guitar *behind* her and play it; she could..."

I: Oh wow, really?

A: "...she could *sit on the floor* and play it, she could *lay down* and play it."

E: Oh my God.

A: So yeah. [laughs] She was very impressive.

E: She's just a rock star!

A: Yeah! She's actually just a rock star!

E: And...

A: But they haven't invented rock stars yet.

I: Oh no, Rosetta, ahead of your time.

A: Yeah. [laughs] They also haven't invented the electric guitar yet; she's doing this on an acoustic guitar.

E: That... okay.

A: But like, the electric guitar is coming.

E: Okay, good. I was gonna ask.

A: Yeah, no no no, I'll get...

E: I imagine the first time she like, played a chord on the electric guitar, she was like, "Ohhhh...."

A: Yeah.

[laughter]

E: "I can do things with this."

A: [laughs] Yep. Yep. She also did a very good job of establishing herself as a successful woman within a male-dominated industry. Guitar was basically a male instrument at the time – like, women just didn't really play guitar.

E: Mm.

A: Ella Mitchell, who's another gospel musician who knew Rosetta, remembers Rosetta getting male guitarists up on stage with her, and challenging them to guitar basically.

E: [laughs]

A: She'd play something and be like, "Can you play *that*?" and then she'd be like, "Nah, mine was better. You couldn't really play that."

[laughter]

A: I....

I: Wow.

E: So, I just... I just want to... to think about like, *The Devil went down to Georgia* here...

[laughter]

A: Yeah. Basically that.

E: But with a guitar.

A: [laughs] Yep, but with the guitar. As Rosetta became more successful and more confident in her musical skills, she decided in 1943 – so after five years of having a like, secular music career – to return to a solely gospel career.

I: I'm glad she felt like she was able to do that now.

A: Yeah.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah. She later explained in an interview "I sang the blues ... but God didn't like that, and I stopped."

E: Alright, well that's fairly straightforward.

A: [laughs] Yeah.

I: Yep.

A: That's pretty straightforward. Rosetta went back to gospel music, and a lot of her secular fans, who'd discovered when she was singing secular songs, followed her back to gospel music, and continued listening to her, and her move back to gospel also gained her more listeners from within the church, and so this was one of the most successful points of her career. In 1944 she recorded her biggest hit of her career, a song called *Strange Things Happening Every Day*, which is considered one of the first ever rock and roll songs.

I: Oh, really?

A: So I think we should listen to some of it.

I: She invented rock and roll too?

A: That's the.... the premise of Rosetta Tharpe.

I: Cool.

A: Now you know.

I: I know nothing about this woman.

A: Oh, okay. Yeah. She invented rock and roll.

I: Cool.

A: She invented being a rockstar, by inventing rock and roll and then becoming a star of it.

E: [laughs]

I: Okay.

[music plays: <https://youtu.be/LzqGq6jiorg?t=75>]

A: So now she's invented rock and roll.

E: Alright, well she can go home then.

A: Yeah, she can go home.

E: She has contributed enough.

A: Yep. Around the same time she recorded this song, a little bit earlier, Rosetta filed for divorce against Tommy, and married another man called Foch Pershing Allen.

E: What?

A: Yeah, Foch...

E: What's his first name?

A: F-O-C-H.

E: Okay.

A: Pershing - P-E-R-S-H-I-N-G.

E: Okay.

A: Allen - ...

E: Alright.

A: Allen.

E: Okay.

I: Alright, that's his name.

A: Yep.

I: You've described it correctly.

A: That's his name. Once again, we know essentially nothing about Foch, and by January 1946 – three

years later – Rosetta was filing for divorce from Foch. Um...

E: He better have been good to her.

A: I have a quote from her about why she divorced him, which she said in the divorce court, she explained, “He didn't ever appreciate anything I do... and come on my job and he would just argue all the time...”

E: Mm...

A: And this is a common problem for women pursuing careers in gospel...

E: Yeah.

A: ...generally...

I: Yeah.

A: ...just constantly having to fight against husbands who don't want them to have careers, basically. A few months after she filed for divorce from Foch, Rosetta went to a concert at Harlem's Golden Gate Auditorium, where for the first time she heard another gospel performer, whose name was Marie Knight.

I: [whispering] Are they gonna date?

A: [whispering] No spoilers, Irene!

E: [whispering] Yes.

[laughter]

A: According to people who knew her at the time, Marie was incredibly attractive.

I: Okay.

E: Whenever we introduce someone, and immediately point out how attractive they are...

[laughter]

E: ...they're the love interest. That's how it is.

A: Maybe so.... Now you've discerned that she's the love interest...

E: Yeah.

A: ...let's have a bit of background on Marie. So, she was about ten years younger than Rosetta – so she's in her early 20s; Rosetta's by now in her early 30s...

E: Yep.

A: ...but she had a quite similar life story. She'd been singing and playing the piano in the Church of God in Christ since she was young enough that they had to lift her up onto a table to be seen while she sang. She'd done some touring as a religious singer, and then she'd settled down in New Jersey, where she was married to a man named Alfred Knight. Don't know anything about Alfred.

E: He's just here to bring the surname.

A: He brings the surname. Marie described their courtship – she said, “I met him Monday and married him Thursday, real quick.”

E: Oh, gosh.

A: Yeah.

I: Okay, Marie.

A: That's it.

I: Okay.

E: That's not... a good...

A: ...idea.

E: ...way to make decisions like that.

A: No, it's not. No. But her and Alfred now had two sons together who were one and three.

E: He must have been so charismatic.

A: Alfred?

I: Mm.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

E: I guess.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

E: Unless she like, needed a partner real quick for some reason.

A: Yeah, I don't know if she needed a partner...

E: Yeah.

A: ...or if she was just really taken with Alfred or what happened here. They got married very fast, and they had two kids, but, surprise, the marriage didn't last. It's not clear exactly what the situation was in 1946, when Rosetta met Marie, but Marie and Alfred would divorce within the next few years.

When Rosetta heard Marie sing, at this concert she went to, she experienced what Gayle Wald calls “the acoustic version of love at first sight.”

I: Okay. Love at first... sound, I guess.

A: Yeah. Marie apparently says she didn't even notice Rosetta at the concert at all.

[laughter]

A: Marie was the one performing, to be clear, and Rosetta was just in the audience, so this is valid.

I: Okay.

E: Alright. I mean, so she's having that experience that a lot of people have with their rock star love object.

A: Yeah, yeah. [laughs]

E: Yes.

A: Exactly. [laughs] But unlike most people, Rosetta pursued this further, and the following Saturday, she turned up on Marie's doorstep with a touring contract.

E: Oh, okay.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah.

E: That's bold.

A: Well it worked.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah. By Monday they were on the road together to Chicago.

E: So she got married this quick, and now she's kind of doing a similar thing.

A: Yeah, yeah. She is doing a similar thing.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah, they went to Chicago together, where Rosetta's promoter had already begun advertising them as a duo before Marie had signed the contract.

I: Okay.

A: They also signed a deal with Decker Records as a duo and recorded their first hit together, which is "Didn't It Rain?" which we listened to at the start.

E: Oh.

I: Oh yes.

A: According to fellow gospel musician Leroy Crume said, "Rosetta was at the top her the game when they were together." "Didn't It Rain" got them nationally recognised as a due, and they were popular with both black and white audiences. Marie understood that part of the reason Rosetta chose to perform with her, and part of the reason that they were so successful as a duo was that Marie brought back to Rosetta's career some of the respectability that she had lost by moving into secular music. So Marie had been singing gospel her whole life and never sung secular music.

I: Okay.

A: Yeah. Yeah, and so she brought that back to Rosetta's career. Because their careers depended so much on them looking like respectable church women, it's very difficult for us to uncover for sure what the relationship between Marie and Rosetta was.

E: I hate it when we have these episodes.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, we do have these episodes.

I: Is this going to be one of those, "Okay, so was she gay?" episodes?

A: I'm pretty sure that she was queer.

I: Okay.

E: Okay.

A: Mainly what I mean is that we don't have direct quotes from Marie or Rosetta about it.

E: Mmkay.

A: Barney Parks, who was close with Rosetta at the time, when she was touring with Marie, described them as being "intimate". Various other friends have also said that they were lovers.

E: Oh, okay, well...

I: Okay.

A: Yep. Mostly I mean that we don't have it from their own words. More broadly Rosetta does seem to have been interested in women as well as in men. Another friend said Rosetta had had multiple female lovers in her life, and Tony Heilbut, who knew her later on in the 1960s, said she would often comment on the attractiveness of women in the audience to him when she was performing.

[laughter]

A: And he says, quote, "Rosetta belonged to the Whosoever Will church, as in Whosoever Will, let him (or her) come".

E: [sniggers]

A: Yes.

I: Okay.

A: But yeah, Rosetta never spoke publicly about her sexuality, and Marie in later interviews has actively denied that they were lovers.

E: Yeah but like...

I: They're gospel singers, like...

E: They're gospel singers in like, the '40s or whatever, so what are they gonna say...

A: [laughs] Yeah, like, I'm pretty convinced that they were lovers. They did live together even when they weren't touring. With the money from their success, Rosetta bought a house in Richmond, Virginia, where she, her mother, and Marie all lived. They had a white baby grand piano. They had a shed where they kept all their performing costumes, and they had a horse.

I: A horse?

A: A horse.

I: Do you know the horse's name?

A: The horse's name is Margaret.

[laughter]

E: Margaret. I love it. That's my grandmother's name.

[laughter]

A: Well I hope she's proud to share a name with Rosetta Tharpe's horse.

E: Yeah.

A: Another thing that Rosetta bought with the money they made was a bus.

I: A bus?

E: Like a tour bus?

A: Like a tour bus.

I: Ah, okay.

A: Tour buses weren't a thing at the moment, at-

E: So she invented tour buses.

A: She invented tour buses, yes.

E: That's very cool.

A: The bus had beds where they slept while they were on tour, and it had a dressing area at the back and all that kind of stuff.

E: Yeah.

A: So Rosetta and Marie would sit up the back and do each other's hair and make-up before shows.

E: Oh, that sounds nice.

A: And on the side it said Rosetta Tharpe in big letters.

E: Did it say Marie Knight?

A: No, it didn't say Marie Knight. I think because Rosetta owned the bus.

I: Okay.

A: It said Rosetta. Gordon Stoker, who's a member of the white gospel group the Jordanaires who later backed Elvis, remembers thinking that the bus was highly desirable. He also heard that they kept booze in the back, which made it more desirable.

E: Did they?

A: They did drink. I don't know whether they kept booze in their bus, but Rosetta and Marie did drink.

E: Okay.

I: I mean, if you live on a bus, and you drink alcohol, you will have alcohol on your bus probably.

A: Yeah, yeah, presumably so.

E: So, um, what's the deal with... is gospel a particularly black kind of music that then white people start doing because it gets popular?

A: Yep, yep.

E: Okay. As with many...

A: As with many. Yeah, yeah. So the Jordanaires are white people singing African American music, basically.

E: Okay, so you mentioned Elvis.

A: Yeah.

E: So we're gonna talk about how Elvis stole rock and roll from Rosetta?

A: Yeah. We're gonna talk about Elvis quite soon.

E: Okay.

A: Elvis is coming up. First what I want to talk about is what Gordon notes that did not occur to him at the time, was why Rosetta would need to have her own bus. He said later on, I know we would go into the restaurant sometimes, and get a bag of food and bring it out, but even then, I didn't think about the

fact that she couldn't go in that restaurant and eat with us, so the reason she needed a tour bus was because she couldn't stay in hotels, she couldn't eat in restaurants, she...

E: Yup.

A: Yep. Segregation was here.

E: Mhm.

A: Before they had the bus, sometimes the only place that Rosetta and Marie could find to put them up in a town where they were performing was black funeral homes.

E: Oh... Wow.

I: Wow, why funeral homes?

A: I'm not entirely clear why it was funeral homes that would put them up, but...

E: I thought you were just gonna say that like, members of the local black community would just be like, "Stay with me," but no, funeral homes. Okay.

A: Yeah, funeral homes! I'm not clear why, but that's apparently the case. Um yeah, other black female musicians who toured remember things like doing their make-up by the light of their car headlights because they weren't given dressing rooms, and at the same time, they're drawing record breaking crowds and...

E: Yeah, yeah.

A: Nationally popular...

E: So they're perfectly happy to come and see these women as entertainment, but they won't eat next to them in a restaurant.

A: Yeah, yeah. Exactly.

E: Was she also playing for black audiences?

A: Ah, yeah, she did also play for black audiences. There was one theatre, and I haven't got it written down so I can't remember which theatre it was, on a Thursday night had a night that was basically for domestic service workers and stuff like that? And she'd perform at that. And she was still singing in churches, black churches... Yeah.

E: But would you describe most of her audience as white, or is it like, hard to tell...

A: I'm not sure. Yeah I don't really know. One way that Rosetta and Marie were able to go out and buy food from white establishments and stuff, was to take the white bus driver with them as their chaperone. And Marie explains, quote, "In the south, a white man and a black woman is the charm. They can get anything they want, but you gotta keep your mouth closed." So there's very much this

double standard here where like, a black man could never go out with a white woman, and a black woman couldn't go out by herself, but if it's a black woman and a white man, it's considered kind of okay enough that you know, they'd give them food, but they couldn't come in and sit down, but they would serve them food, and stuff like that.

E: What's the presumed relationship between - like is it clear that he's their employee?

A: No, I think it's presumed...

E: The reverse?

A: Yeah, or it's presumed to be a sexual relationship, and...

E: So who was this bus driver?

A: We don't know who the bus driver was anymore.

E: Okay, I was just sort of...I dunno.

A: He was a white man, that's all I know.

E: Yeah, like being a white man in this time in the... like, working for a black woman strikes me as an unusual arrangement.

A: Yeah, yeah, like it was definitely a weird arrangement, but...

E: I just kinda wonder what he was like and what he was doing. I dunno.

A: Yeah. I dunno. Um... Yeah, Gayle Wald says she couldn't find out anything about him when she wrote the biography. So.

E: Okay.

A: I don't even know his name.

E: Okay.

A: yeah, and Alfred Miller, who I mentioned earlier, from the Brooklyn Church of God and Christ thinks that Rosetta's very bubbly, flirtatious personality that she was known for was partly like, an effort to protect herself from racism and basically flirt with white men so they would not be horrible to her. But on the other hand it draws unwanted attention, and you know, inappropriate sexual advances from men, so there's no winning here basically.

I: Yep.

A: Rosetta herself was never heavily involved with politics, or with the civil rights movement. She did occasionally perform at concerts raising money for the NAACP, and she also fought against racism in her own personal life. So in 1950 she made her first national TV appearance, and that was for an all-white

studio audience, and the white producers, when she arrived, she discovered they'd planned for her to appear on stage in kind of farm clothing, and sitting on hay bales, and basically dressed as a farm worker would be, and she always dressed very well, when she performed, and she was absolutely appalled by being put in this stereotypical position of black people are farm labourers. The song they were performing was White Christmas. Which made no sense aesthetically.

I: Yeah.

A: And, ah, one of her backing singers remembers that she had never seen Rosetta as angry as she was when she discovered what these producers expected of her.

E: So what happened?

A: Rosetta ended up being able to choose what clothes she would wear, but they still performed on this farm set.

E: Okay.

A: So they kind of reached a compromise.

E: So, I mean I'm glad that she didn't have to wear that clothing, but it did make it even more aesthetically a mess.

[laughter]

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, she was like a very well-dressed woman, sitting on like, a hay cart, singing White Christmas, like...

I: [laughs]

E: Alright. Sure.

A: Um, she also circumvented concerns about black and white performers appearing on stage together, for example when she was touring with the Jordanares, by simply not telling the venues that her backing group was white.

E: Oh.

A: Gordon Stoker, who was one of the Jordanares, remembers turning up at the stage door and saying, you know, "I'm Rosetta's backing singer", and the man sort of said, "You're a white man, you can't be."

E: To which I suppose he like, burst into song?

A: [laughs]

E: Until they let him in.

A: Presumably, yeah.

E: I can't think how else they'd resolve that situation.

A: Yeah, I'm sure that's what happened. Rosetta also spoke out against other more narrowminded views of her time. So she appeared on a Christian radio station talking about venereal disease, and telling listeners to see a doctor and get tested.

E and I: Oh!

A: And she not only appeared on Christian radio talking about this, but she tied this in with being a good church member and kind of protecting your community, and looking after yourself, and therefore, you know, it's the right thing to do as a member of the church, you get tested and treated for venereal disease.

E: What year is this, roughly? What decade...

A: Um, it's '40s or '50s.

E: That's super cool!

A: Yeah, it was very progressive. I was very surprised by that. Also surprised that a radio station like...

E: Was like, yeah, sure, we'll air this.

A: Yeah, let's have this on.

I: How does she um... her church fell about divorce? 'Cause she's got divorced twice now.

A: I don't know.

E: Were they for real married? Like with a ceremony. They were married-married?

A: Mm. Yeah. I don't know how her church feels about divorce.

E: I mean, like, even if you're not super religious in the '40s and '50s divorce is pretty intense.

A: Yeah. Yeah, that's true.

E: So I'd presume not great.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, it never came up as being a huge issue, but...

E: Alright. I mean I guess she's already, you know, singing secular music for a while then talking about venereal disease on the radio, so maybe they have other things to worry about.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, I think divorce was one of the least contentious things she did.

E: Yeah.

A: So, in 1949, while they were performing in Chicago, Marie received a telegram during a performance which, as Marie recalls it, read, "Your mother and your two children were just destroyed in a fire."

I: What.

E: Oh my god!

A: I told you there was gonna be death in a fire.

E: Ooh, I'd forgotten.

A: Yeah, yeah.

E: Oh, that's terrible. Destroyed is a... such an intense verb to use there.

A: Yeah, I don't know if that's word for word what the telegram said. This is what Marie remembered years and years later, but...

E: I mean, I feel like, plausibly that could stick in your mind.

A: Yeah, yeah, no.

E: Yeah, wow, okay.

A: Yeah. Um.

E: Aww, the children.

A: This was apparently during a performance. So she went back on stage and finished a show after receiving this telegram.

E: Good Lord.

I: Wow.

A: Yeah.

E: Did she... I mean, she must've been in shock or something, though.

A: Yeah, yeah I guess so. Then so the next day, Marie and Rosetta flew back to New Jersey, where Marie and her family lived together to look after funeral arrangements and all that. And then, two days after the funerals, they returned to continue the tour.

E: Ooh. [sighs]

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah, wow, okay.

A: Yeah. So, when they went back to touring, Rosetta told Marie, "I'm gonna stick with you whatever happens. You'll always be my little sister, and as long as anybody on Broadway has got a dime, we're going to survive."

E: So where do we have that quote from?

A: I assume it comes from Marie, 'cos I can't remember, but um, Gayle Wald, who write Rosetta's biography, did a lot of interviews with Marie.

E: Okay, yeah. I was just thinking about like, for what audience we were getting "little sister".

A: Ah, apparently she did just call her "little sister".

E: I mean, we've talked before about how that's a thing sometimes.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There are several reports, and even Rosetta herself, saying "Yeah, I always called her little sister".

E: Okay.

A: Yeah, we've talked before about how in same-sex relationship, people will sometimes use terms like "little sister" or "little brother" or anything like that. As a way of kind of expressing their intimacy when they can't necessarily use language that would be more telling of what their relationship was.

I: I still feel this is way less weird than calling your partner "babe".

A: Yeah, I mean we do have that.

I: Yeah, but...

A: Soon after this happened, Rosetta and Marie stopped touring together. Rosetta published a rather terse note in the newspaper in late 1949 which reads, "I would appreciate your placing an announcement in your newspaper that Madam Marie Knight is no longer associated with Sister Rosetta Tharpe".

E: Okay.

I: Sister Rosetta?

A: Yeah, so...she...

I: Did she become a nun?

E: Do you just miss her becoming a nun?

A: No no no no no.

E: Okay.

A: She uses Sister as her performing name, and basically sister is just a term of respect within her church.

E: Okay, okay.

A: So a woman who's respected will be called sister, and if she's an older woman she might be called mother, but it's not an official title gained through any kind of study or qualification.

E: Okay.

I: So she didn't just become a nun and you forgot to tell us.

A: [laughs] No.

E: Okay good.

[laughter]

A: In later press releases, Marie explained that she wanted to pursue a solo career, quote, "to gain recognition on her own merits".

E: Mmkay...

A: We don't know whether there was tension between them at the time, perhaps just caused by the stress that Marie was obviously going through.

I: Yeah...

A: But, um, they do remain close throughout their lives. We will see Marie again. And they came back together to tour and record several times.

E: Mm.

I: Okay.

E: Before we continue, I also wanted to say another quick word about Sudio, which is our sponsor for this episode. As I mentioned at the top of the podcast, ah, Sudio has really great sound quality in their headphones. They're also very nice looking, very fancy headphones. And they also have a really nice variety of products, so maybe you like in-ear headphones or over the ear headphones, or maybe you've been wanting to try out wireless headphones. Whatever you're looking for, they'll definitely have something to suit your preferences, so if you go to sudio.com, hopefully you'll find something you like, and if you do, you can use the promo code "QUEERASFACT" all one word, to get 15% off.

A: So um, that was all in 1949. And then in 1951, Rosetta decided to get married again. In this instance,

the choice of groom, a man named Russell Morrison, seems to be even more of an afterthought than any man she's married thus far.

I: Do we know anything about this one?

A: We do know a little bit about him. He um... he worked kinda in the music industry, but he wasn't a musician himself. Ira Tucker Junior, who I've quoted a couple of times, described him as "the slickest man he'd ever known".

[laughter]

A: He was apparently very slim, very well dressed, very slick hair. Um...

E: Okay. Yup. Sounds like a cartoon character.

A: He does. But yeah. Russell didn't appear to be a key factor in this wedding. The key factor was that the wedding took place at Washington DC's Griffith Stadium, which was a baseball stadium, in front of a crowd of 21,000 paying spectators.

I: What?

E: What...?!

I: Why?

E: That's so weird.

A: It was a publicity stunt. It was a show.

I: Okay.

E: Did she play any music?

A: She did, yeah. She performed, she performed. So they - a lot of her wedding party was her friends, people like, Marie was her maid of honour, and all the people she performed with, and those were the people that she knew, and after the ceremony itself, they did a concert. So it was kind of a concert that was incidentally also a wedding.

I: I'm so confused.

A: She played her electric guitar in her wedding dress, which had, you know a very long train. It was a very traditional fancy wedding dress, which I couldn't find a photo of, which I'm sad about.

I: That's a shame, yeah.

A: Yeah. Many of her friends were very surprised that she was marrying Russell. Shirley Feld, the wife of Rosetta's promoter Israel Feld says, "It wasn't exactly a love affair, but it was a good way of having a husband and a wedding."

E: Okay.

A: Yeah.

E: That's... fine.

A: So yeah, on the 3rd of June 1951, they got married. And it appeared to have been a very weird vibe, so obviously like we said, it was a concert, but a lot of the crowd also just behaved as they would going to a regular wedding, so people bought wedding gifts like silverware and household appliances...

E: Oh my God. Imagine how much stuff they had at the end of that.

A: Yeah. I don't know what they did with all this stuff.

I: She came out of this with like 4000 spoons.

A: Yeah, I really don't know.

E: I guess they had to like, on the sly, sell like 100 toasters.

A: [laughs] Yeah, I guess they did. I guess they did.

I: That's so weird.

A: Rosetta's dress, alone, cost \$1500. For comparison, her house in Richmond cost \$7500.

E: Oh, okay.

A: So it's quite an expensive dress. The dress came from Thahlimer's department store, in Richmond. The same shop just a year earlier, had called the police when Rosetta tried to shop there, because they assumed that a black woman with enough money to shop there must be a criminal.

E: Yup, okay.

A: But now they sent a white bridal consultant to drive the dress personally up to Washington DC and help dress Rosetta.

I: Was it just the last time they hadn't heard of Rosetta, and now they have?

A: Yeah. Basically.

E: And now they're sucking up to her for her money.

A: Yeah, exactly, exactly. That's exactly what it is.

E: That's disgusting.

A: It is disgusting. And Shirley Feld commented that like, seeing a white woman help a black woman dress at the time was just, so unheard of.

E: Yeah.

A: But she was paying \$1500, so, they were suddenly willing to do it. I'm gonna play you a little bit of the recording of the wedding ceremony, which you could buy on record at the time!

E: Oh my god! [laughing]

A: So you could hear how much of a kind of a... you can hear what the vibe of it was, basically.

E: What a weird time!

I: Yeah.

A: It is a weird time.

Minister: [shouting] Rosetta, will you have this man to be thy wedded husband? To leave after god's audience in the holy state of a matrimony? Will thou obey him? Serve him? Love him?! Keep him?! In sickness! And in health! And forsake all others! And keep to him only?! As long as you both should live. Your answers...

Rosetta: [barely audible] I do.

A: But yeah, there you go.

E: That was... interesting.

A: Yeah, that was how her wedding was.

I: Okay.

A: How that wedding was.

E; That was very like... performative.

A: Yeah.

I: It was very, yeah.

E: Like, hearing the crowd scream in the background?

A: Yeah. It was weird. It was very weird.

I: Yeah, like his tone is very like, "Are you ready?!"

[laughter]

A: Yeah. I did read one person who was like, "This wedding was the invention of stadium rock."

I: [laughs]

A: Which I guess it was...

I: It was certainly a concert in a stadium.

A: Yeah.

I: Incidentally also a wedding.

A: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so that was a weird time. Um, the whole performance/ceremony ended with a fireworks display, including a series of fireworks which apparently, and I can't picture how this would be, were in the shape of Rosetta playing the guitar.

E: All right, sure.

I: I don't even know how like, physically, you can do that, if you're not Gandalf.

A: [laughing]

E: I don't understand fireworks and I'm not gonna pretend that I do.

A: Yeah, no, I dunno, but apparently that happened. Um, speaking to reporters outside her dressing room, at the wedding, Rosetta said, "I am happier than I've ever been in my life."

I: I don't really trust anything she said to reporters at this event, in terms of it being an accurate representation of her mental state.

A: [laughs] Nor do I. Nor do I. One of the women who performed at Rosetta's wedding was her friend Dolly Lewis. Dolly Lewis was a singer, an evangelist, and also a psychic healer, incidentally.

I: Okay.

E: Okay, cool...

A: [laughs] Who had met Rosetta and Marie while they were touring together. The reason I wanted to mention Dolly is because Alan Bloom who worked for the Felds, um, Rosetta's promoters, who I've mentioned, reports that on the honeymoon tour, following Rosetta's wedding, he was sent one day to fetch Rosetta from her hotel room, and walked in on Rosetta, Marie and Dolly, having sex.

E: Oh okay.

I: Okay.

E: Nice.

A; Yeah. I tried to follow that up and found nothing more about that.

E: I mean, what else do you want?

A: I wanted to find when Alan Bloom had said this, but I think the biographer just spoke to Alan Bloom.

E: Okay. And they were like, “Hey,” and he was like, “I’ll come back later,” or like what?

A: I don’t know. That’s what I tried to follow up, like, more context, but he was just like, “Yeah, I walked in on them.” And that occurred.

E: Okay.

I: Alright, yep.

A: And Dolly and Marie seem to have, if not had a relationship, been very close. After the death of Marie’s mother and her children, the Encyclopedia of American Gospel credits Dolly with, quote, “perking up Marie”.

E: [sniggers]

I: A euphemism.

A: Maybe. Yeah, they went on to live together for many years, and Marie became a minister in the Gates of Prayer Church in New York, which Dolly had founded.

I: Alright, okay. She founded a church?

A: Yeah, she was a psychic healer, she founded a church.

E: God. We should do an episode on her.

I: Yeah.

E: I assume there’s not that much information out there about her, but...

A: I don’t think there is, no, no. I think she was you know, well known, or medium well known, at the time, and has now faded into obscurity.

E: She was medium well-known?

[laughter]

A: After the success of Rosetta’s wedding, as a publicity stunt, her career began to flag after this, because as times changed her gospel performances started being seen as kind of old fashioned and outdated, and as a woman who was now middle aged, it was difficult for her to gain respect from her male colleagues. Leroy Crume who played guitar with her in the 1950s said, “You know, women when they’re in the power seat, it might be a little bit too bossy, and dominating, and I can’t deal with that.”

I: Well he was sexist.

A: Yeah.

E: Yup.

A: Leroy Crume was a sexist man. Yeah, and I imagine that Leroy Crume was like, reasonably representative of what she faced.

E: Yeah.

A: Similarly, the media was only prepared to have one famous female gospel singer, and Mahalia Jackson, who was I think about ten years younger than Rosetta, became their new favourite, and they were really determined to play Mahalia and Rosetta off against each other as rivals. Mahalia and Rosetta were actually friends in real life.

E: Yeah. We still do this.

A: Yeah, absolutely.

E: Yeah.

A: Like, when I read this I was like of course this happened.

E: That's the terrible thing about reading about awful stuff in the 20th century is that like, it's still here.

I: It's still happening.

E: You know, the thing where like she as a black woman went into a department store and they thought she was a criminal, like this still happens to black people today. They get followed around in stores and stuff like that.

A: Yeah, yeah, and this still happens to any famous woman. The media was so determined to make this false competition that years later when Rosetta died, there were these rumours that Mahalia had refused to attend Rosetta's funeral. Mahalia died two years before Rosetta did.

E: Well I mean I guess she did then.

[laughter]

A: So I guess she did not attend her funeral.

E: She very definitely did not come to that funeral.

A: Yeah.

E: Did Rosetta go to her funeral?

A: I'd assume so but I'm not sure, I don't know.

E: Be funny if the newspapers were like, they refused to go to each other's funerals, so offensive, what awful women.

[laughter]

A: Yeah. So yeah Rosetta's career wasn't really going very well at this point. In Spring 1957 her house in Richmond was repossessed by the bank. Some of her friends blame Russell for this, he was working as her managers and handling their finances at the time. But it may also actually be that she just wasn't earning enough money to keep that house.

E: Yeah.

A: I don't know. At the same time that Rosetta's career was going downhill, rock and roll was this new thing that was on the rise. Though, as Rosetta told a reporter in 1957, "All this new stuff they call rock 'n' roll, why, I've been playing that for years now."

I: I mean true, we have recorded evidence, we heard it before.

A: We heard it, she had. So in the mid 1950s, Strange things happening everyday, which we heard before, which Rosetta had recorded ten years earlier, was rediscovered by a group of young white musicians including Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash.

E: And they're about to make a lot of money off it.

A: Yeah they are. So Johnny Cash's daughter says that Rosetta was Johnny Cash's favourite singer.

E: Oh man.

A: Gordon Stoker, who we've mentioned, sang with Elvis and said, "Elvis loved Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Not only did he dig her guitar picking, he dug her singing too." So to give you an idea of her influence on Elvis, I just want to play you a couple of songs. So this is the first recording we have of Elvis, and I just want to give you an example of what Elvis was doing in 1953 in his early career.

[music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54CQg1Mbrzo>]

A: So I just want to demonstrate that that's just definitively not rock and roll at this point.

I: No, no it is not.

A: And now I just wanted to play you some of what Rosetta was doing around the same time.

[music plays: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-_B51ACv5Y]

A: That's what Rosetta was doing around that time. Keep that guitar solo in mind, I'm now going to play you the guitar solo from Blue Suede Shoes, which Elvis brought out in 1956.

E: Oh no.

A: That's about the time that Elvis and all these other white people 'discovered' Rosetta. Blue Suede Shoes was also written by Carl Perkins, who also cited Rosetta as being one of his favourite artists.

[music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm5HKlQ6nGM>]

E: Elvis is very well-known for being very... for dancing and moving around a lot.

A: Yeah.

E: That wasn't said very well but you know what I mean.

A: Yeah.

E: Was she also a very lively performer?

A: Yeah she was a very lively performer yeah.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah she definitely was.

E: Yeah, so Elvis is like, that seems like a nice career, I'll take that thanks.

A: Yeah basically. That's exactly what happened. Elvis was like, looks good I'll do that.

E: And then he did. And now he's a massive icon.

A: Yeah, and no-one's heard of Rosetta Tharpe.

E: Wouldn't it be great if there were Rosetta Tharpe impersonators in Vegas instead?

[laughter]

A: Do you know of that like small Australian town where they were like we need to put ourselves on the map somehow and they started having an Elvis impersonator festival every year?

E: No, and I was happier.

A: What if Rosetta Tharpe?

E: I mean, people should show up there and play Rosetta Tharpe.

A: They should.

I: Yeah.

A: Let's do it. I can't play the guitar.

E: No, we're not the people to do this. Just other people should do this.

A: So as I've mentioned already, what we hear in rock and roll, a lot of it can be traced directly to the Church of God and Christ and the environment that kind of Rosetta was performing in. So I mentioned how she basically invented lead guitar as a thing. The things you hear in rock and roll like people kind of shouting out to the audience between lines, that also comes straight out of the Church and kind of

trying to get audience interaction.

I: I mean yeah, this makes sense.

A: Yeah, and also improvisation was a very important part of church performances. Because like we saw Rosetta was a travelling performer, so you'd often be performing with people you've never performed with before. And yeah, that's another thing that exists in rock and roll. So yeah, that's basically where that came from and then Elvis stole it. So yeah, where Rosetta's career as I mentioned was impeded by her being middle-aged, being a black woman, Elvis had no such obstacles. Within fifteen years Rosetta's influence had been all but forgotten. One London reviewer of Rosetta in the 1970s described her as quote "...so rhythmically exciting that when she accompanies herself on guitar she might be a blacked-up Elvis in drag."

E: [horrified] Oh my god.

I: [unimpressed] Wow.

A: Yeah, yeah.

E: [screams]

A: I'm sorry that you had to hear those words.

E: Jesus. Oh my God.

A: Yeah.

I: Ugh.

E: That was printed in a newspaper.

A: That was printed in a newspaper. He was like, these are words that I want to put out into the world. So, in 1957 Rosetta was invited to tour Europe, which was a dream that she'd had since she first started recording and she'd mentioned in very early interviews. Possibly inspired by Josephine Baker, who was another black singer we've talked about who'd had a very successful career in Europe. And at the time in Europe and especially in the UK there was a growing interest in blues and jazz, but many people had never heard African American people perform this music live. It was something they only knew from listening to records. So when Rosetta arrived they loved her. Andy Hoogenboom, who heard her perform in London, said "Not only were we not used to playing blistering guitar, but we weren't used to a woman playing blistering guitar... She was ripping the wallpaper off, you know. What you have to understand is we were only just starting to play electric guitars... and to suddenly hear this kind of booming blues music, you'd think, Wow, I must do some of that!"

E: So she's playing an electric guitar now?

A: Yeah she's playing an electric guitar now.

E: Okay.

I: Is she lying on her back on the floor doing it?

E: Probably sometimes.

A: I mean we know that she did do this at times so maybe she is.

I: I really want to see video of her.

A: There's a lot of video of her on the internet, you can definitely see it.

I: Okay.

A: We'll put some up on our blog. There was also a political element to this European interest in African-American music. John Broven, who co-founded the UK magazine Juke Blues, said "We were part of that generation that saw blacks as oppressed. So there was that kind of moralistic approach to it. We felt that by supporting the blues, we were supporting the civil rights movement."

E: Well that was a bit of a mixed statement.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, and I think it was a bit of a mixed kind of reaction. Like on the one hand they did want to support the civil rights movement, and support these black artists, and in that way support the civil rights movement. But on the other hand they had this kind of romanticized idea of that and not Rosetta but earlier black musicians who came to Europe and played the electric guitar wouldn't get good reactions from audiences because they were picturing these kind of older sounds of people playing the acoustic guitar and this kind of romanticized idea they had of what a black musician would be like. One of the women Rosetta sang with does mention, she was a white women, she does mention she felt uncomfortable that she was making a living, very happily making a living off singing the music from these people who were being oppressed. Music that had come out of their you know slavery and ongoing oppression.

E: Yeah.

A: So it was something that they kind of were aware of and not necessarily dealing with in a way that we would think of as 100% correct now, but well-intentioned.

I: But I mean when we decide what's an acceptable way to deal with that, we have like that fifty years of background that they don't. We've learnt from how they responded to this.

A: Yeah that's true too.

E: I mean were musicians like Rosetta a part of that conversation at the time?

A: Rosetta and Otilie talked about the fact that Otilie was performing black people's music and Rosetta

basically said that she liked the way Ottilie performed, and she seemed to be happy with that and seemed to really enjoy performing with Ottilie and actively sought out to perform with some of these people. And she seems to have had a very good time in Europe, but I just wanted to mention that this wasn't like fine.

E: Yeah, sure.

A: And also obviously there was no segregation in Europe, which she'd always lived under in America.

I: Yeah.

A: So that was a good thing. Rosetta's success in Europe led to more success back at home in America. By 1960 she was travelling back and forth from Europe to America several times a year and although she wasn't as well known as she had been in the '40s, the '60s were actually her most prolific time for recording. She made back the money she'd kind of been losing, and with Russell and her mother she was able to buy a new house in Philadelphia, and this time instead of a horse, she had a dog. A white poodle called Chubby.

E: [chuffed noises] I love it. Chubby.

[laughter]

A: Chubby apparently hated everyone except Rosetta.

E: I love him. Do we have photos of Chubby?

A: I haven't seen a photo of Chubby, but there might be some.

E: I hope so.

A: Yeah, I don't know.

E: I want a picture where he's like, looking askance at someone in the photo, and like cuddling up to Rosetta.

I: Chubby just like glaring at the cameraman from Rosetta's arms.

E: Yeah.

[laughter]

E: That's exactly what I want, someone do us fan art.

A: A lot of Rosetta's friends didn't like Russell, who she was still married to.

E: Oh right, this guy.

A: Yeah, this guy. Because they felt that he was kind of making money off her, mismanaging her money,

controlling, all this kind of stuff.

E: That's reasonable.

A: And they were very happy that Chubby also hated Russell.

[laughter]

E: I love Chubby.

A: Chubby is good. On a more serious note, in 1968 Rosetta's mother died. Rosetta became quite depressed and cut back on her touring after this happened. Around the same time, Rosetta herself was diagnosed with diabetes. Rosetta hated doctors and she had to be really bullied by her friends into seeing the doctor.

E: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

A: So, you know, this got quite bad before she did anything about it. And eventually that led to her having to have her leg amputated.

E: [sadly] Oh. Does her health kind of recover a bit now that she's seeing a doctor, or is she just in pretty bad shape?

A: She's just not in great shape.

E: Okay.

A: Ira Tucker Jr. says "...when she lost that leg, she lost a lot of her passion..." She did continue performing though, mostly now in churches. Russell really encouraged her to keep performing and kept organizing these shows, and some people have sort of said that he was trying to kind of give her a distraction and that she kept to keep doing that but others have said that he was still just trying to make money off her even now she was getting sick.

E: Yeah. So how does she feel about him at this point? Do we know?

A: She seems to just genuinely have always really liked Russell and be very happy with Russell.

E: So are they just like friends who did a stunt, or are they romantically involved for real, or like what?

A: I don't know.

E: We don't really know.

A: I do not know.

E: Okay. Well, I mean at least she's happy.

I: Yeah.

A: It seems like her friends were always pretty dubious but she seemed okay and happy with him. And like, knowing that she'd gotten divorced twice before, you know it seems likely that if this relationship wasn't what she wanted she would get divorced, because she's willing to do that.

I: Yeah.

A: As you brought up before she was a very dynamic performer on stage and now that she couldn't kind of walk around on stage as she had she would hop around or she'd sit down on the stage with her guitar and bounce around instead.

E: Oh wow. Do we have footage of that?

A: I haven't seen any footage of her after she had her leg amputated.

E: Okay.

A: But I think there's a concert from her in 1970 that's recorded, so we might have footage of that.

E: I'm just picturing her lying on her back on the stage, going to town.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so she was still doing pretty okay in terms of her career. The last recording we have of her is this concert in Copenhagen in 1970, so she was still touring. And in 1973 she was approached by Savoy Records with a recording contract. But on the day that she was supposed to record, the producer came round to her house to take her to the studio and nobody answered the door, and he discovered that she'd had a stroke and had been rushed to hospital. And the next day she died, on the 8th of October 1973. She was 58.

E: Oh that's quite young.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, she wasn't that old. Marie arranged her funeral, she didn't trust Russell to handle it. And she explains, "We lived our lives together. We shared each other while she was alive... I only want to see her buried as the person that she was." And so she did Rosetta's hair and make-up for the funeral as she would have done when they were touring together, and she looked after all of that.

E: Aww. That would've been so intense.

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah, very intense. Apparently Marie, throughout her life, was still kind of very emotional about her relationship with Rosetta.

E: Yeah.

A: And the pianist who used to play at Dolly Lewis' church says he remembers that when they played songs in church that Marie used to play with Rosetta, Marie would get really emotional and say oh you know, I'm thinking about Rosetta.

E: [sadly] Oh. I imagine that Rosetta would've been happy that Marie was the one who got her ready though.

A: Yeah, yeah. I think it's true. So it wasn't a very big funeral, and once again some friend blamed Russell for skimping on the money basically.

E: Well, I would've been really uncomfortable if she'd also had a gigantic stadium funeral where like people paid for tickets or anything.

A: Yeah no, she had a small church funeral. But she was also buried in an unmarked grave.

E: [shocked] What?

A: Yeah he didn't buy her a gravestone.

E: What?

I: [judgemental] Russell.

E: What the hell, that's so messed up. I'm surprised no-one stepped in and was like, we need to organise this.

A: Yeah nobody did.

E: Was this a more normal thing then, does this just happen sometimes?

A: I don't really know, I'm not sure. She has a gravestone now, so the woman who wrote the biography of Rosetta which I used as my major source for this episode kinda discovered her just by finding a video of her in the '90s and got really interested in her, wrote a biography and also organised a concert to raise funds for her to have a grave.

E: Oh that's nice.

A: And people like Marie performed at that concert. And she now does have a gravestone.

E: So is that where her actual grave is, or is it roughly?

A: Yes.

E: So we never lost it.

A: We never lost it. It wasn't marked, but cemetery records had cemetery maps showing where people were buried.

E: Oh that's good.

A: So her grave is now marked but it wasn't at the time. And Marie also said that Rosetta was buried with her electric guitar.

I: Oh really?

A: But there are also rumours that Russell sold that electric guitar, so-

E: Okay. I mean if it turns up one day we'll know I guess.

A: Yeah.

E: So did she have like a main distinctive guitar?

A: Yeah, she had one guitar.

E: Did it look cool or was it just her guitar?

A: I think it just looked like an electric guitar.

E: That's fair.

A: Yeah. I also wanted to mention that in 2002 there was a tribute album to Rosetta Tharpe recorded, and on that album Marie recorded "Didn't It Rain", the first song that she recorded with Rosetta and she covered both parts herself, so she layered it with her voice.

I: Aww.

E: Aww, that's nice.

A: Yeah.

E: Is Marie alive, or is she passed away?

A: Marie is dead now, but quite recently I think.

E: Okay.

A: Yeah. She lived to 84, a good long life.

I: And she was already like ten years younger than Rosetta to start with.

A: Yeah. The day that they held the concert to raise money for Rosetta's grave was January 11th and the Governor of Pennsylvania was there and he named January 11th as Rosetta Tharpe Day. And finally this year in 2018 Rosetta was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

E: Oh good, because-

I: Oh yeah, about time.

A: Yeah.

E: Wow, that's late as hell. When did this Hall of Fame begin? Because that's how many years late it is.

[laughter]

A: That's true, that's true. I don't know when this Hall of Fame began.

E: Yeah.

A: I know that Johnny Cash was inducted before Rosetta and he mentioned Rosetta in his speech when he accepted his award.

E: Okay.

A: As an influence on him, but she was not yet in the Hall of Fame.

E: Well I'm glad she's there now. There's probably a lot more black people who we should put in there.

A: There probably are.

I: Probably.

E: Let's keep doing that.

A: We'll probably find more of them for this podcast.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah. One thing I wanted to bring up that I thought of while researching Rosetta and just thinking about her sexuality something that I wanted to have a chat about. I've mentioned Josephine Baker a couple of times in this episode as somebody who was also a prominent black performer around the same time, though Josephine was a little bit earlier. And Josephine and Rosetta had quite similar lives in terms of their sexualities. So they both had several marriages to men which you know-

I: Yeah.

A: Kind of appeared just to give them their surname as you said.

[laughter]

A: But also relationships with men that appear to have been long and loving. And they both had relationships with women that they themselves never spoke about, but that other friends have attested to having happened.

E: Yeah.

A: But in reading about Josephine I found that people generally refer to Josephine as being bisexual and nobody I have ever seen refer to Josephine Baker as a lesbian. Many articles on Rosetta will refer to her as being a secret lesbian or just a lesbian.

I: That's-

E: That's interesting.

A: I was wondering if you had any thoughts on what's going on.

I: I mean, does Josephine Baker ever say anything... although I suppose Rosetta seemed to be at least positive about Russell.

A: Yeah like Rosetta and Russell's relationship seems to have been from their point of view good. Rosetta seems to have been happy with Russell. And Josephine was married for a while to a man named Pepito.

I: Yeah.

E: I remember Pepito.

A: Yeah and Pepito was, according to Josephine's friends, pretty awful and controlling and abused her, but Josephine really really loved him and was apparently happy in that relationship. So we have these kind of comparable experiences.

E: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

I: I mean, is it just maybe that people conceptualize Josephine Baker in such a way that denying a kind of heterosexual desirability there for her seems less plausible.

A: Yeah, that was kind of what I thought it might be, because Josephine Baker was a sex symbol basically.

I: Yeah.

A: And maybe it just hasn't occurred to people to deny the heterosexual relationships of someone who was a female sex symbol who appealed to men.

I: They've kind of conflated that men found her desirable with her desire being there.

A: Yeah.

I: Which is not to say that she's not bisexual, obviously but that's possibly the reason why people tend to default to bisexual there rather than Josephine Baker was a secret lesbian.

A: Yeah, yeah no I think that's probably the explanation. I just thought that was weird and I was

wondering what your thoughts were on it.

I: There was also in the Josephine Baker episode, didn't somebody specifically say that, it was somebody that performed with her that was like, yeah we all had relationships with women as well as men, you would call it bisexuality now or something.

A: Yeah, yeah that was Maude Russell who performed with Josephine when they were quite young, did explicitly say what we did you would call bisexual today. And we don't have that with Rosetta, although we do have that one man Tony Heilbut saying she belonged to the Church of you know, whoever so will let him or her come. I guess it's less of an explicit reference to bisexuality.

I: But it's certainly an explicit reference to being like, attracted to multiple genders.

A: Yeah, yeah no that's definitely true. I guess there's also that kind of image of we know Josephine Baker did drugs, she was in Berlin between the wars.

I: Yeah.

A: We know Josephine Baker, she had all these affairs and stuff. I think people put these things together, you know, she did drugs, she drank, she had affairs, she slept with men, she slept with women.

I: Yeah, it's that kind of, what's the word.

A: It's kind of that sexualising of bisexuality which makes it easier therefore to label somebody who's a sexualised figure as bisexual and somebody who's a pretty like, conservative, well not conservative-

I: Religious figure at least.

A: Yeah, somebody who's a more religious Christian figure as just being a lesbian who had we only know of one female partner, and Dolly.

I: I was going to say, we know of two at the same time.

[laughter]

A: Yeah, I was wrong. We only know of one long-term female partner.

I: Okay yeah.

E: So, is the bulk of stuff that you saw that's out there about Rosetta Tharpe just straight up like yup, she was a lesbian. Or is there a bunch of stuff that's like nah she was straight as well.

A: Most of the things I read either said she was bisexual or she was a lesbian.

E: Okay, that's refreshing.

A: And I'm not saying people didn't say Rosetta Tharpe was bisexual, I just found it unusual no-one said Josephine Baker was a lesbian and like, a reasonable number of people said Rosetta was. But yeah,

nobody's really saying she was straight because she was kind of forgotten until Gayle Wald wrote this biography, and Gayle Wald does talk about her relationship with Marie.

E: Oh, okay.

A: Do you have any closing thoughts on Rosetta before we finish.

E: I like her, and I hope that we can do our little bit to make people know that she was good and more good than Elvis was good.

[laughter]

A: Yeah.

I: And her dog was good.

E: And her dog was good.

A: Chubby was good. Yeah, I just wanted to end by reading a quote from Rosetta's eulogy which was given by her friend Roxie Moore, and Roxie said, "She started out when the going was rough and when gospel was not very appealing... and the only thing to be gained was a hope of Salvation. But she sang in season and out of season. She would sing until you cried and then she would sing until you danced for Joy."

With that, we've been Queer as Fact. Thank you very much for listening. If you've enjoyed this episode, you can find us on Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter as Queer as Fact, or you can email us directly at queerasfact@gmail.com. If you want to listen to more of our episodes we're on Podbean, iTunes or wherever else you find your podcasts. If you do find us on iTunes or if you don't, we'd really appreciate it if you review us and leave us a rating out of five stars. It really helps us to find a wider audience. And if you do leave us a review, we'll also read it out on this podcast, and Eli's about to read us one of those reviews now.

E: So the review is titled 'A wonderfully thoughtful queer history podcast' and it's from annettir, I hope I'm pronouncing your username right and they say "I just found Queer as Fact and I'm so grateful I did. I have been listening to past episodes and so happy. Queer histories are so often lost and not included by cis straight historians. Hearing the histories of people like me brings comfort and context to our lives now". Aww.

A: Well that's nice, I'm glad.

E: "The podcast hosts present historical people and events with quality research into their lives and the time in which they lived. They are thoughtful about queer historical context, their group discussions are deep and entertaining. Thank you all for your work".

A: Thank you.

E: Yeah thank you very much, that's really high praise.

I: Yeah.

E: Thank you for taking the time to review us.

A: We'll be back on the 22nd of July with our Queer as Fiction episode on the book and recent film, Call Me By Your Name. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you then.