

Play Guide

SEATTLE
REP



SHOUT SISTER SHOUT!

BY CHERYL L. WEST

CREATED BY
RANDY JOHNSON
& CHERYL L. WEST

DIRECTED BY
RANDY JOHNSON



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A NOTE FROM OUR Youth Engagement Department



Dear Theatergoer,

I've been trying to wrap my head around just the right thing to say here, and that journey has led me through a series of increasingly complicated questions, probably the most interesting of which – the one we always come back to – what is this play about?

Shout Sister Shout! is centered on The Godmother of Rock n' Roll, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, but it's about so much more. It's about women in rock. It's about gender roles and sexuality as they relate to religion. It's about personal challenge, and facing judgement and adversity, and the decision to choose love – of art, culture, religion, community, music, or of another person. But mostly, *Shout* is about defying expectations – those put on us by our families, our loved ones, our churches, as well as those that we put on ourselves.

In this Play Guide, we hope to provide some social and historical context by looking at the incredible woman that was Sister Rosetta Tharpe throughout her journey, her challenges, her life, and her legacy.

See you at the theater,

Alex Lee Reed
Youth Engagement Manager

P.S. Teachers, look out for links between each section of this Play Guide with EALR and Common Core Standards!

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



Cheryl L. West

Playwright & Co-Creator

Cheryl L. West's plays include *Last Stop on Market Street* (composed by Motown great Lamont Dozier and son, Paris Dozier), *Shout Sister Shout!*, a new adaptation of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963*, *Pullman Porter Blues*, *Jar the Floor*, *Before It Hits Home*, and *Akeelah and the Bee*. Her plays have earned Ms. West several awards, including the Helen Hayes/Charles MacArthur Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Beverly Hills/Hollywood NAACP Best Playwright Award, the National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Award, and the American Alliance For Theatre & Education Chorpenning Award, an award which acknowledges her body of work writing for children. Ms. West's plays have been produced in England, Off-Broadway, on Broadway (*Play On!*), and in numerous regional theaters around the country, including Seattle Rep, Goodman Theatre, Indiana Rep, Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, Seattle Children's Theatre, Arena Stage, Old Globe, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Bay Street Theatre Festival, Syracuse Stage, Cleveland Play House, South Coast Rep, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and Off-Broadway's Manhattan Theatre Club, Second Stage, and Atlantic Theater Company. She has written TV and film projects at Disney, Paramount, MTV Films, Showtime, TNT, HBO, CBS, BET, and is the Webby-nominated writer for the original web series *Diary of a Single Mom*, directed by Robert Townsend. Ms. West is currently working on commissions for Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Chicago Children's Theater, Seattle Children's Theatre, and a co-commission with Seattle Rep and Goodman Theatre. Special thanks to Hedgebrook Women's Writers Retreat for their support.

EXPLORING

Unsung Heroes

A Conversation between Seattle Rep and Playwright Cheryl L. West

SEATTLE REP

How did the idea for a musical portrait on rock musician Sister Rosetta Tharpe come about?

CHERYL L. WEST

I had a copy of Gayle F. Wald's book, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*, when it was first published around 2007 and I immediately thought it would make a great theatrical project. I mentioned it to a few theaters but didn't get any takers. Fast forward to 2015. I was doing another workshop at Arena Stage where I met [director] Randy Johnson. I learned that he had recently acquired the theatrical rights to Gayle's book! I had to mention how I loved the Rosetta Tharpe story. A few weeks later, he called and asked, "Do you want to work on a 'Shout' musical with me?" So, in a sense, it took a decade, but I finally got the opportunity to write the Rosetta story.

SEATTLE REP

What moments from Sister Rosetta Tharpe's life as a Black woman trailblazer did you feel were most important to show in this production?

CHERYL L. WEST

Oh, there were so many. Rosetta lived a rich, complex life, but a life often starved of understanding and shrouded in loneliness. It's a challenge to encapsulate such a flamboyant life in two hours. She was a musical prodigy, learning to play piano and guitar starting at four years of age. Like my family, Rosetta was Southern born and Christian raised. She loved music, often blending jazz, blues, and gospel, much to the chagrin of gospel purists. Her love of all music and her refusal to be pigeonholed caused her to be shunned by some church congregants who thought the music she played was akin to the devil's music. For me, it was important to show a woman living out loud, a woman who was joyful, bold, and ambitious despite enormous criticism and searing heartbreak. Rosetta blazed her own path, influencing and inspiring many in the process. By telling her story, I'm hoping an entire new generation and fan base will come to appreciate the gifts she gave us through her musicianship. I hope her story empowers some other young person to make the music they hear in their soul and the bravery to then share it with the world. My quest is to continue creating shows that explore unsung heroes/heroines whose lives are examples – roadmaps to walking strong on one's courage journey.

SEATTLE REP

As Seattle Rep's most-produced living playwright, tell us a bit about your writing process and your experience working with us over the years.

CHERYL L. WEST

It's been a gift and a true blessing to have an artistic home, a theater that has supported me for almost three decades. My first show at Seattle Rep was *Holiday Heart* in the early 90s. Doug Hughes and Dan Sullivan were the organization's leaders at the time. Since then, I have been produced by every Seattle Rep Artistic Director since and I'm truly grateful.

For me, writing is similar to creating a big vat of sumptuous, linguistic gumbo. Basic ingredients: dogged curiosity, a rather empathic imagination, and a willingness to always employ that pesky question, "What if?" After which I proceed to throw in my favorite theme ingredients – the mysteries of family, identity, ethnicity, and how any one or more might ricochet against contemporary American society. Upon simmer, I taste and stir in an element of surprise, a few thrills, a bit of whimsy, then cover it with a lot of love and massive revisions. Eventually, after silencing the inner critic, I offer up my creation to the world. And that's my recipe for being a writer for 30-plus years.

SEATTLE REP

Which other musicians inspire you?

CHERYL L. WEST

I'm a great lover of music. All kinds. I actually write to music – old-school soul, blues, and gospel. It's hard to narrow my musical tastes, but recently I've been grooving to Esperanza Spalding, Lizz Wright, Lizzo, Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman. And the list goes on...

SEATTLE REP

What do you hope audiences feel upon leaving the theater?

CHERYL L. WEST

Like Rosetta, I want to leave an audience with joy and perhaps a deeper realization that there's power in love, however it comes "packaged." And hopefully, people will be intrigued enough to explore more about this great trailblazer.





What Story Would You Bring to Life?

What story would you want to bring to life on the stage? It could be from a book, movie, comic, or story that you have experienced. Once you select your piece, brainstorm what the opening scene would look like. Where would the play be set? What character(s) would be there? Would it be set in the past or the future? When you are done, share your opening scene with a partner.

BONUS: in groups, pick someone's opening scene and act it out for the class!



THE GODMOTHER OF Rock 'n' Roll

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was the first guitar heroine of rock and roll. Her heartfelt gospel folksiness gave way to her roaring mastery of her trusty Gibson SG, which she wielded on a level that rivaled the best of her male contemporaries. She is one of the essential figures in the history of rock and roll.

Sister Rosetta became famous in 1938 with a record called “Rock Me.” She was a star through the 1940s, a black woman singing gospel music to the accompaniment of her own driving electric guitar. Her 1944 recording “Strange Things Happening Every Day” has been credited as the first gospel song to cross over to the R&B charts – reaching number two and becoming an early model for rock and roll. Fast forward two years and Tharpe meets musician Marie Knight and the two performed and recorded together for the next decade.

Rosetta continued to be a sensation, selling out arenas into the 1950s. In 1947, Sister Rosetta was the first person to put a 14-year-old boy named Little Richard Penniman on a stage. It changed Little Richard’s life – he decided right then to become a performer.

Throughout the 50s, Rosetta was the hottest act on stage with a guitar. She became a model for Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Johnny Cash called her his favorite singer and biggest inspiration.

By the early 60s, the musical revolution she inspired had forgotten her. With the rise of white male rock singers who appealed more to mainstream culture, she was pushed to the fringes of the musical movements she helped inspire. So Sister Rosetta went to England and played electric guitar for the young blues fans of London and Liverpool. Sister Rosetta Tharpe died from a stroke and diabetes-related complications in Philadelphia in 1973.

Without Sister Rosetta Tharpe, rock and roll would be nothing like it is today. If she had not been there as a model and inspiration, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and dozens of other rock originators would have had very different careers. In 2018, she was rightfully inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

“Rock Me,” “That’s All,” “The Lonesome Road” (1938)

“Shout, Sister, Shout!” (1942)

“Strange Things Happening Every Day” (1945)

“Nobody’s Fault But Mine”

EXCERPTED FROM

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame: “Sister Rosetta Tharpe”

Afropunk: “Queer, Black & Blue: Sister Rosetta Tharpe is Muva of Them All”

Ready, Set, Rock

Pick a song of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's to listen to. This could be as a whole class or individually. Print out the lyrics and read them along with the song. While you are listening, think critically about the words that she is saying: do any of them resonate with you? What type of mood is the song trying to set? Does the mood change? Once the song ends, share with a small group your reactions to the song and what you liked and/or what you didn't.

WOMEN WHO ROCK

A New Understanding of the Foundations of Rock Music

When you think of rock and roll, what comes to your mind? Some people see Elvis with his thrusting dance moves. Some see Chuck Berry and his energetic performances. Look deeper and you will see the strong black women who created rock and roll. **Sister Rosetta Tharpe** birthed rock from the pain, love, and rhythm of the Black community. She hopped onto the church stage at the age of four with her electric guitar and started a whole new genre of music. In the mid 1940s, Sister Rosetta's popularity skyrocketed and she blew up the charts with songs like "Strange Things Happen Every Day" and "Shout Sister Shout."

Tharpe's influence can be seen in artists like Elvis and The Beatles, and within their hits like "Hound Dog" and "Twist and Shout." While these white male musicians are often credited as defining the genre, the heart of rock and roll was truly founded by black women like Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Black and brown communities have embraced music as a form of resistance for centuries, and it should be known that blues and rock share this same root. The African American community in the U.S. built both blues and rock in the turmoil of segregation and racial tension in the early 20th century. For a bit of historical context, **Jim Crow laws** – laws that called for and enforced racial segregation of public schools, public places, and public transportation in the American South – were in effect from the 1870s all the way up until 1965. So to see Sister Rosetta have the guts to stand up alone on stage, face to face with her oppressors, in a time when Black people were being purposely othered in society and treated inhumanely, playing her tunes and singing her songs in spite of (or perhaps because of) all of it, was inspiring to say the least.

However, Sister Rosetta's refusal to conform to what was expected of her was also met with great resistance within the Black community. She was told many times along the road that the music she was making was inappropriate, blasphemous, and ugly. Nevertheless, she persisted. She channeled her resistance through her guitar, and from it a countermovement was born.

Unfortunately, as with so many inventions born of black culture, soon came **appropriation** – the act of taking something for one's own use or gain, typically without permission or credit. Many white artists "took inspiration" from (began to appropriate) black music (as they still do), passing it off as their own originality. Artists like Elvis stole from artists in the black community and rose to fame off of their tracks. This can be seen in the musical *Shout Sister Shout!* when Sister Rosetta says "Why? 'Cause he's a white boy that's borrowed the Negro sound? What's wrong with the real deal?" when asked if Elvis was an inspiration for her.

This brings to the mind a question: if Sister Rosetta Tharpe hadn't dared to step onto the stage and change the game, would any of the subsequent rock artists have dared to break out either? Although the music industry has undergone a huge metamorphosis since her final concert in 1973, Sister Rosetta's influence certainly doesn't stop there. The decades since her death have brought us brilliant artists like Tina Turner with her righteous voice, and seen artists like Kelly Rowland and Mary J. Blige navigate the pop music scene without disclaiming their gospel roots.

Some would say Black women in rock is unconventional but, in reality, rock as we know it would not exist without them. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, specifically, mixed blues with gospel, bringing a whole new sound to the musical arena of the 1940s and 50s.

While old-school rock was the mother of rebellion against "the man," punk rock and other counter-culture genres have developed over the years by adopting this rebellious nature. Contemporary Black women have also been in the forefront of these genres, including punk rock (Poly Styrene, X Ray Spex) and blues rock (Brittney Howard, Alabama Shakes).

We can also see Tharpe's rebellious, boundless influence in genre-defying artists like Tank and the Bangas, who are constantly redefining rock music. The band mixes different sounds that are traditional to the African American community and creates beautiful melodies that are hard to label as just one genre. Sister Rosetta's influence can also be seen in music by Janelle Monae as she mixes rap, rock, jazz, and more to create sounds that are entirely her own. Artists like Alabama Shakes' Brittney Howard bring soul and jazz into rock and redefine music in a way that is not strictly singular in genre or subject, just like Sister Rosetta did in her own time. These women bravely blend rock and rebellion and turn it into the people's music.



Activity

Identify something you find unjust. How, with music, can you counter that? When you have found a song or sound to fight that injustice with, present it to the class. Are you and your classmates fighting against the same opponent or are you on opposing sides? Discuss as a class one injustice that you all can fight against in your daily lives, and decide what steps can be taken next.

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE:

A Legacy

While Sister Rosetta Tharpe is known for being the “Godmother of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” the scope of her influence across the entire landscape of American—and international—music is largely unknown. Tharpe was able to blend the secular and sacred, playing classic gospel tunes with a blues twist with her iconic Gibson guitar, and she incorporated countless other genres into her music to create a genre-bending, groundbreaking sound. She defied classification and paved the way for other legendary musicians to make their marks on popular music. Here we trace Tharpe’s impact: from reinventing gospel and blues, to crafting an early version of the rock ‘n’ roll genre, to setting the stage for other artists to cross boundaries and reimagine popular music.

**ARETHA FRANKLIN**

Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s use of gospel outside of the church was a major influence on later soul musicians like Aretha Franklin. Sister Rosetta paved the way for Aretha Franklin and other artists to bring soul and gospel into the pop music world.

Who did Aretha Franklin influence?

Mariah Carey, Dolly Parton, Whitney Houston

**BOB DYLAN**

Bob Dylan was one of many musicians inspired by Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s ability to marry classic gospel sounds with rock ‘n’ roll riffs. He called Tharpe a “powerful force of nature, a guitar playing, singing evangelist.”

Who did Bob Dylan influence?

Bruce Springsteen, Patti Smith, Johnny Cash

**CHUCK BERRY**

Remember Chuck Berry’s famous “duck walk?” Tharpe predated Berry with her own early version of the duck walk. Berry, known as the “Father of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” once said that his entire career was “one long Sister Rosetta Tharpe impersonation.”

Who did Chuck Berry influence?

The Beach Boys, David Bowie, Elvis Presley



JIMI HENDRIX

Tharpe’s mastery with her Gibson Les Paul inspired many of the guitar-playing greats. Jimi Hendrix was a rock legend who wanted to emulate Tharpe’s unique guitar distortion and is credited as saying that he wanted to play just like her.

Who did Jimi Hendrix influence?

Queen, Pearl Jam, Prince



ERIC CLAPTON

In the 1950s, Sister Rosetta Tharpe toured throughout Europe. She wowed UK audiences with her guitar licks and vocal styling, and was a huge inspiration for musicians like Keith Richards and Eric Clapton to create the British blues scene. The British blues scene went on to be the catalyst for the “British Invasion,” when bands like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones caused a storm of rock ‘n’ roll fanaticism in the United States.

Who did Eric Clapton influence?

The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles



ETTA JAMES

Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s fearless secular performances (that often drew the ire of churchgoing audiences) paved the way for many Black musicians. Her legacy was integral to the formation and evolution of the entire R&B genre. This can be seen in her influence on Etta James—a legend in her own right—who was “blown away” by Tharpe’s music.

Who did Etta James influence?

Janis Joplin, Diana Ross, Beyoncé

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Written by Catherine Huber

Who Do You Admire?

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was an inspiration to many and helped others break into careers they never thought was possible. Who in your life has given you inspiration? It could be someone you know or someone that you've read about. Take five minutes to free write on how this person inspired you, then share with a partner or with your table.

BONUS: Try mixing up your answers and then guess who chose who to get to know each other better!

A BRIEF JOURNEY THROUGH GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In Religion

Shout Sister Shout! opens with Sister Rosetta Tharpe singing “Up Above My Head” on the Chicago Gospel Time TV Show in 1962. From this first moment, we have a very clear sense of time and place, and – for those of us who grew up in the church – a looming sense that something very complicated is about to unfold.

It is no secret that the subjects of gender roles, particularly the roles of womxn, and sexuality are very fraught topics, especially in religious communities. In Shout Sister Shout!, we see Sister Rosetta, a black, bisexual, Christian, female musician in the early 20th century, navigate these intersections of her identity from the time she’s 18 through the end of her life.

Here, we asked one member of our theater community (who requested to publish anonymously) to share with us a little about her own experience navigating the intersections of religion, gender roles, and queerness. These are her thoughts.

Islam has a complicated relationship with gender, as do most contemporary major religions. Back in college, as a staunch feminist, queer woman, and devout Muslim, I had an answer to all of the questions people posed about the Quran. I had an in-depth interpretation of all the standard passages and pop-culture references people frequently raise, and was certain in the integration of my feminism, my queer advocacy, and my religion. It wasn’t until I re-read Surah Al-Nisaa (the Verse of the Women) in the Quran that I began to question how abstract my interpretations needed to get to justify what I read.

Every Muslim’s experience of the religion is vastly different, especially depending on geographic location and family traditions. I grew up in a feminist U.S. family, doing Quran study casually with my mom every Friday, and reading the Quran in both Arabic and English (depending on how fluent I felt at the time). So I had read the holy book through, in sections, throughout my childhood. With many hundreds of pages, certain verses are more skimmed over and others get a lot of focus. Plus, as a kid, I didn’t analyze or question as deeply as I did when I got older.

So when I revisited Surah Al-Nisaa, I was surprised I hadn’t thought more deeply about the passage before. I mean, I was always a girl, so this passage should have always been a focus for me. That being said, there is plenty about women in other passages as well, and the Hadith (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) along with cultural practices all come together to shape any individual Muslim’s experience of the feminine.

In Surah Al Nisaa, I read about . . .

- Progressive inheritance rights for women
- That men are worth two times what women are worth in many legal respects
- Advice on peaceful reconciliation between spouses
- Rules around trials for sex crimes – 4 male witnesses can condemn a woman to death
- Many rules around marriage
 1. How to deal with a disobedient wife (not well)
 2. Who a man can and cannot marry
 3. How men can have multiple wives (but not vice versa)
 4. Not to commit adultery or sex out of wedlock
 5. A required bride’s gift (money or property) given to the bride by he husband
- A bunch of other things not directly related to women, including:
 1. Not to kill yourself
 2. Not to pray while intoxicated
 3. Progressive property rights for orphans
 4. A little bit about holy war
 5. General advice on how to go to Heaven

It’s pretty juicy. And for a verse called “The Women,” there is a surprisingly large portion of it that doesn’t speak specifically about women. And there isn’t anything there about Islamic divorce rights of women, which continue to be a pretty empowering aspect of the religion. But reading this verse in my twenties was challenging. It made me question whether I could take this text literally when it clearly outlined unequal rights for women. I had to re-assess how my gender fit with my religion. And I had to accept that I could not take the text literally.

The conclusion I came to is that feminism and religion are not mutually exclusive. We just need to be able to interpret, redefine, and choose what is right for each of us in a religion. I still identify as a Muslim and as a feminist.

Islam was very progressive with regard to women’s rights when the Quran was written. It set the tone, but we need to expand from there, especially in regards to queer rights and women’s rights now. We need to be as progressive with our Islam as the tribe of Quraysh (the tribe of prophet Muhammad) was at their time. That means reinterpreting and redefining. That is the way to be close to the fore-fathers and the fore-mothers of Islam.

SHOUT SISTER SHOUT

Play Guide Contributors



ALEX LEE REED, Youth Engagement Manager

is a recent Seattle transplant via Flint, MI. Alex received a B.A. in Theatre Performance from the University of Michigan – Flint in 2012. In addition to their current role as Education Program Manager at Seattle Rep, Alex has worked locally as a teaching artist for Seattle Children's Theatre, Lathyrus Theater Company, and The 5th Avenue Theatre. As a writer, director, poet, performer, artist, educator, and mentor, their work is centered on the intersection of being a queer, gender nonconforming person of color. With a strong focus on equity and social justice, Alex is a champion for underrepresented groups, particularly QTPOC youth.



YANCI HUEZO, Youth Engagement Intern

A former National Thespian Honor Society member and President of her school's theater Honor Society, Yanci Huezco is Seattle Rep's Youth Engagement Intern for 2019/20. She has co-written two plays, *El Otro Lado*, that deals with immigration in the Hispanic community, and *Who We Are*, that focuses on the struggles of teens' mental health. She is currently in the process of earning her degree in theater at Hudson County Community College. She aspires to be an arts educator and an advocate for diversity and equality in her community.

ALEX LEE REED
Content Curator

CATHERINE HUBER
Supplemental Copywriting

SARA ALBERTSON
Supplemental Copywriting

NOELLE MCCABE
Editor

OLIVIA MANGIONE
Graphic Designer