

“Down by the Riverside”-- Sister Rosetta Tharpe with Lucky Millinder and His Orchestra (1944)

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Sister Rosetta Tharpe

“Down by the Riverside,” a slave spiritual that dates to the 19th century, was recorded dozens of the times in the 20th century by religious as well as secular artists. But no treatment of the song is as revealing of cultural trends in the commercialization and popularization of “sacred” music as the jaunty version recorded in 1944 by the Lucky Millinder Orchestra featuring “Sister” Rosetta Tharpe. Perhaps no “Down by the Riverside” has ever been so toe-tappingly entertaining.

Tharpe, born in the hamlet of Cotton Plant, Arkansas in 1917, was one of the foremost gospel musicians of the 20th century, known equally for her vibrant singing and her virtuosity on guitar. She developed her musical skills under the tutelage of her mother, an evangelist for the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal denomination that encouraged robust and lively musical expressions of faith. For the first two decades of her life, Tharpe performed entirely within religious contexts. She played frequently at traveling meetings and tent revivals, particularly in the South. Yet by the late 1930s, her desire for freedom from a rocky marriage and thirst for bigger and different audiences led her to New York City, where she was signed as a solo artist for Decca Records. Eventually, she came to work with Millinder, also a Decca artist and one of the era’s most celebrated bandleaders.

In the early 1940s, the Millinder Orchestra was known for churning out danceable pop hits, of the sort that offered listeners relief from the somber drumbeat of world war. Although she was not comfortable playing the role of the sexy chanteuse, as the band’s “girl” singer, Tharpe contributed vocals to some mildly risqué numbers, such as “I Want a Tall Skinny Papa” and “Four or Five Times.” In contrast, with “Down by the Riverside,” Tharpe was able to produce a decisive interpretation of a song that had long been in her repertoire. If “Tall Skinny Papa” required Tharpe to alter her aesthetic for the sake of a hit, on “Down by the Riverside” she sings with unforced conviction and with a confidence evidenced in her inventive play with both rhythm, melody, and vocal timbre. We also get a tantalizing taste of her remarkable guitar playing.

Recorded live by the Armed Forces Radio Service as a “Jubilee” broadcast for US troops serving abroad, the Millinder-Tharpe version of the tune begins with an extended instrumental lead-in, before the band pulls back to create a space for Tharpe’s charismatic vocals. She begins with a four-line introductory riff, her voice supported by the brisk response of a male chorus:

I feel so bad in the morning [*in the morning*]
I feel so bad in the middle of the day [*yeah!*]
I feel so bad in the evening [*in the evening*]
That’s why I’m going to the river to wash my sins away

Tharpe approaches the familiar lyric “I’m gonna lay down my heavy load / Down by the riverside” with notable agility, improvising on the melodic line and working within and against the beat laid down by Millinder’s top-shelf rhythm section. The swing arrangement, abetted by Tharpe’s vivacious performance, gives rise to a performance that is sonically located at the crossroads of sacred and secular. If “Down by the Riverside” is a song about baptism, here it is equally about “redemption” through the rituals of leisure. If the spiritual encodes a subversive message—imagine the speaker approaching the Ohio River, the dividing line between slave and free states—then this version articulates black Americans’s longstanding dreams for political freedom with the deliverance of the dance floor.

The sound the singer and band produce together is hybrid, neither “gospel” (a term still then in the infancy of its usage) nor “jazz” but a fusion of the two. Observers of the day referred to Tharpe as a “Swinger of Spirituals,” casting her as a crossover figure who translated the music of the tent-meeting circuit for consumption outside of the church. “Down by the Riverside” is a quintessential example of such “translation,” with Tharpe and the Millinder outfit taking an ostensibly religious song and opening it to broad interpretation. By the time Tharpe gets to the second verse, in which she sings about donning a “long white robe,” it is easy to imagine this reference to a baptismal garment as a chic gown befitting the Savoy Ballroom, the famed African-American dance hall where the Millinder band was a favorite.

In addition to showcasing Tharpe’s gospel-pop crossover, this “Down by the Riverside” affords listeners a taste of her guitar playing. At the bridge, she launches into a solo on an acoustic instrument, displaying the rapid-fire picking technique, rhythmic attack, and bluesy note-bending that would earn her a reputation as a woman who played guitar “like a man.” That formulation was both conceptually flawed and historically inaccurate: if anything, Tharpe’s guitar playing emulated the great Pentecostal pianist Arizona Dranes; and plenty of guitarists, male and female, would go on to emulate *Tharpe*. But it does alert us to the novelty of Tharpe’s sound and of the gender norms that usually restricted women to the role of vocalists in all-male bands.

“I ain’t gonna study, I ain’t gonna study, I ain’t gonna study war no more.” In the era of Vietnam, “Down by the Riverside” would be mined for the pacifist implications of its swords-into-ploughshares allusions. This version, recorded at the height of US

involvement in World War II, did not connote opposition to war, yet its message was hopeful and future-facing.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.