

Addressing a grave injustice

By **Brian Rademaekers**
Star Staff Writer

For 35 years, the remains of Rosetta Tharpe have been in an unmarked grave in West Oak Lane's Northwood Cemetery, just a few yards from 15th Street.

It could be regarded as just a depressing footnote to the final chapter in the life of an impoverished Philadelphian.

But to many people — even people around the world — Tharpe is much more than just another person who died too poor to afford a gravestone.

Her life was a grand celebration of music. Widely considered to have been gospel music's first superstar, Tharpe, who was just 58 when she died in 1973, has had a lasting impact on American music and was an inspiration to a generation of iconic musicians — ranging from Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash to Little Richard and The Who's Pete Townsend.

The list goes on, and the stories of artists who say they owe their style to Tharpe are many. Which makes the empty plot that is her gravesite an unsettling and embarrassing reality to those who appreciate her contribution to American popular music.

That's what motivated one person, Robert Merz, to do something about it.

"This was a woman who could pack concert halls and command triple encores," said Merz. "Elvis Presley once said that he would run home from school every day to listen to her records."

Tharpe, born in Arkansas in 1915, was touted as a guitar prodigy by age 6, and she stunned audiences with her prowess on that instrument for her entire life.

Many music historians describe her unique style as a lively blend of blues, jazz and gospel. Her work also is regarded in some circles as one of earliest forms of what later would be called rock 'n' roll, a judgment that seems valid once you've heard her rollicking and surprisingly modern guitar riffs.

Tharpe's biggest contribution, though, is often considered her role in bringing gospel music out of black churches and into mainstream American culture. That towering legacy grabbed the attention of Merz, who found Tharpe's uncelebrated history in Philadelphia odd at best.

► **Now-deceased Sister Rosetta Tharpe is regarded as gospel music's first superstar. But you would hardly know it by the way she was laid to rest after her 1973 death.**

Merz, a Jenkintown native and author of books about Philly heroes Ryan Howard and racehorse Smarty Jones, learned of Tharpe's unmarked grave last year while listening to an interview with Gayle Wald, who recently wrote a book about Tharpe's life.

Appalled that Tharpe's legacy in Philadelphia, where she lived for the final 16 years of her life, has been so under-appreciated, Merz contacted Wald to learn more



Rosetta Tharpe performs for bandleader Duke Ellington.

about her gravesite.

Wald told Merz that others who were similarly shocked to learn of the unmarked grave in West Oak Lane had sent donations, but the money wasn't sufficient for a marker.

That's when Merz decided to put together a concert — it will be presented on Friday night at the Keswick Theatre in Glenside — to raise the funds that will finally place a proper memorial at Rosetta Tharpe's gravesite.

The performance itself is likely to be one for the history books. On the bill are The Dixie Hummingbirds and Marie Knight, both legendary gospel acts in their own right who joined Tharpe on her groundbreaking tours during the 1940s.

Also appearing on the Keswick stage is Odetta, who was

hailed as "the queen of American folk music" by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1961.

Other gospel artists paying tribute to Tharpe will be the Johnny Thompson singers, the Huff Singers and Willa Ward.

"These performers are pioneers of American music, and they are as important as they are forgotten," says David April, a Fishtown resident who hosts a weekly gospel show on Radio Delaware Valley 107.3 FM (as well as 107.9 FM in Bensalem). "This is going to be one of the last chances to see them all perform together, so it really is a historic concert."

Except for Odetta and Marie Knight, all the performers on Friday night's lineup have deep Philadelphia roots, a testament to the city's rich gospel history.

"Philadelphia was and still is a major gospel city," said April, who featured The Dixie Hummingbirds as guests on his Tuesday night show. "A lot of African-Americans came up here from the South in the thirties, and in that way gospel has the same history as jazz and blues."

It was that vibrant scene that brought Tharpe to Philadelphia in 1957. She first set up at the Carlyle Hotel on Poplar Street and later did sold-out shows at the nearby Metropolitan Opera House, along with The Dixie Hummingbirds, while continuing to tour in the U.S. and Europe.

Today, Poplar is also designated as Dixie Hummingbird Way between Broad and 21st streets in honor of the gospel greats.

In her final years, Tharpe had a dire case of diabetes, an illness that eventually required the amputation of a leg. During that time she lived with her third husband, Russell Morrison, at 11th and Master streets in the Yorktown section and continued to perform.

Exactly how Rosetta Tharpe ended up in an unmarked grave is a point of contention, but friends say that Morrison, who is deceased, managed Tharpe's profits poorly and that he either didn't have money for a headstone or wouldn't pay the expense.

Roxie Moore, 91, a longtime friend of Tharpe's who recalled her funeral at the Bright Hope Baptist Church in North Philadelphia as "peaceful and quiet," put the blame for the unmarked grave on Morrison.

"With Russell, it was always like you had to do something to see Rosetta," said Moore. "He sure was something. He was always the guy in charge."

Tharpe, Moore explained, had an innocent and easy-going outlook that made her a vulnerable target for