

A black and white photograph of Nina Simone. She is shown from the chest up, in profile, looking towards the left. She has a large, dark, curly afro hairstyle. She is holding a lit cigarette in her right hand, which is raised towards her face. She is wearing a dark, high-collared garment and a small, thin, curved earring. The background is dark and out of focus.

# NINA SIMONE

WHAT MORE CAN I SAY?

SEPTEMBER.13.2012 - NOVEMBER.30.2012  
THE ROBERT AND SALLIE BROWN GALLERY AND MUSEUM

# ABOUT

## THE ROBERT AND SALLIE BROWN GALLERY AND MUSEUM

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center's commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American diaspora cultures through the formal exhibition of art, artifacts and material culture.

---

### EXHIBITION CO-SPONSORS

**Carroll Waymon** Carroll Waymon Collection

**Alden Kimbrough** Alden Kimbrough Collection

**Crys Armbrust** The Nina Simone Memorial Project

**Kompleks Creative, Inc.**

**Friends of the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum**

### SPECIAL THANKS TO

*Wax Poetics* Magazine

AP Images

Getty Images

Center for the Study of the American South at UNC at Chapel Hill

Department of Women's Studies at UNC at Chapel Hill

Carolina Women's Center

Department of African and Afro-American Studies at UNC at Chapel Hill

Department of Jazz Studies at UNC at Chapel Hill





## HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF THE STONE CENTER

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University's Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University's academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the intellectual discourse about African Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social, political and cultural issues.

*from left to right: Nina Simone, Duke Ellington and Buddy Rich*



Nina Simone and daughter

# CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Curated by Joseph Jordan

**"I WOULD GIVE ANYTHING  
ANYTHING I OWN  
IF YOU'D BE MINE ALONE —  
WHAT MORE CAN I SAY?"**

— "What More Can I Say?" by Horace Ott

These lines are taken from "What More Can I Say?" as performed by Nina Simone on the *Wild Is the Wind* album (recorded for Phillips Records, released in September 1966) with words and music by Horace Ott. Phillips Records signed Nina in 1963 when she was still searching for a secure place in the industry and this album was one of her last releases on that label before

departing for RCA Records at the end of 1966.

*Nina Simone ... What More Can I Say?* is the culmination of more than a year of preparatory work. First proposed by frequent Stone Center collaborator Alden Kimbrough, this project represents the combined efforts of the Alden Kimbrough Collection, located in Los Angeles California,

the Carroll Waymon Collection of San Diego, California, and the archives and personal collection maintained by Crys Armbrust, founder and director of the Nina Simone Memorial Project located in Tyron, North Carolina, Nina's birthplace.

We selected *Nina Simone ... What More Can I Say?* as the title because it captures the sentiments of an artist who deeply touched many, but still remained an enigmatic and distant figure throughout her career. Nina Simone, born Eunice Waymon, has yet to be fully understood despite the numerous essays, articles and memoirs that have traced the most elusive elements of her story and attempted to capture and define this iconic figure. Few, if any, have succeeded and she remains a person of legend, on the order of Miles, Coltrane or

Dorothy Dandridge, artists who become familiar to us through their work, but who also managed to remain distant and even mysterious ... even as they, and she, became well-known public figures.

Yet, even with the numerous of tales of outrageous behavior,

**"NINA'S LIFE WAS ONE OF INTENSELY LIVED DETAILS AS AN ARTIST; AS A LEADING AND UNCOMPROMISING VOICE IN MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND AS A DAUGHTER, A SISTER, A MOTHER AND A FRIEND."**

personal tragedy and transcendent performances, the legend of Nina Simone still falls far short of the reality of her life. She was an accomplished, classically trained musician who continues to defy categorization. But her struggle, as a Black person and as a woman,

in a profession that respected neither, was often simply to be able to perform and be appreciated in a manner that befit her talent. Legends grow up and persist precisely because they favor the outlines of a story over attention to details. Nina's life was one of intensely lived details as an artist;


as a leading and uncompromising voice in movements for social justice, and as a daughter, a sister, a mother and a friend.

In a provocative and innovative video project entitled *Defying the Linear*, cultural critic Nelson

George explores the poetics of existence and the natural twists and turns that we normally experience in the course of our lives. His understanding and embracing of the unnatural order of things could just as well have been a narrative of Nina's life. Until her passing in April 2003, any order she was able to achieve in her life was most often accomplished through compromises, detours and bargains with various saints and demons. That is why we admired her; she embraced her own unpredictability and the uncertainty of life and understood that she was on a journey where often there would be no path. A phase of that journey ended with her passing on April 20, 2003 at the age of 70.

This exhibition is our humble attempt to trace a few miles of that journey.





Reprinted Courtesy *Wax Poetics* Magazine

# NATURAL FACT

Nina Simone had no filter. She spoke with candor about civil rights when many in her position didn't dare. She sang about uncomfortable subjects and made sure her audiences understood what those songs were really about. Whether due to the demons that haunted her or the overpowering desire for social justice that burned deep in her heart, Simone always told the goddam truth. —Michael A. Gonzales

Episcopal Mission School, Nina Simone seated, far right

## "WHITE PEOPLE HAD JUDY GARLAND. WE HAD NINA."

—Richard Pryor

It was a humid summer evening in Philadelphia in 2000 when I met the legendary singer, pianist, and activist Nina Simone. At sixty-seven years old, the squat Simone, who began her musical journey as a child playing gentle classical music and gospel hymns in her hometown church, Old St. Luke's CME in Tryon, North Carolina, was back in "the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection" to be honored for her contributions to Black music.

Since leaving the country in 1970, Simone lived in Barbados, Liberia, Switzerland, and England; in 1993, she finally settled in the South of France. However, thirty years after becoming what her friend LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) once dubbed "the classic Black exile," Nina was back in her adopted hometown.

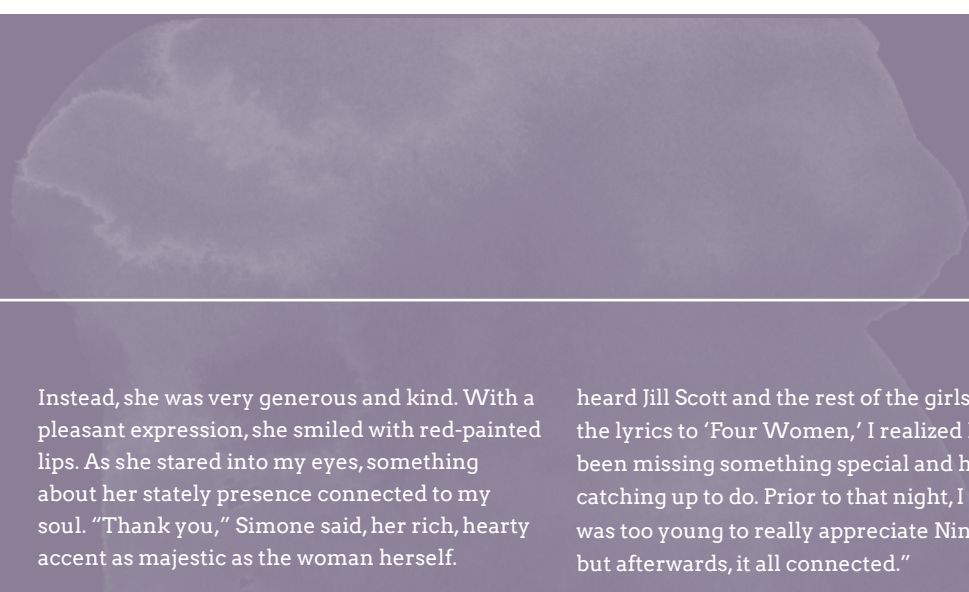
With its cracked bell and cheesesteak sandwiches, Sigma Sound Studio and *Rocky* movies, Philadelphia was where a teenaged girl named Eunice Waymon changed her name to Nina Simone and launched a successful career after throwing away a rejection letter from the city's prestigious Curtis Institute of Music.

Based in the same city where Nina once faced many disappointments and challenges, the International Association of African American Music (IAAAM) was elated when "the Black poetess of protest" accepted their invitation to be honored at their tenth annual Diamond Award for Excellence. Previous honorees of the award included Nancy Wilson, Little Jimmy Scott, Gladys Knight, Teddy Pendergrass, and Billy Eckstine.

Held in the grand ballroom of the landmark Bellevue Hotel on Broad and Walnut Streets, the event was a sit-down black-tie dinner for a thousand people. Although warned the star could be tough and demanding, eleven years after the event, IAAAM cofounder Dyana Williams describes the Simone experience as "satisfying and rewarding."

With a guest list that included soul, jazz, and rap luminaries Kenny Gamble, Eve, Freddie Hubbard, Eddie and Gerald Levert, McCoy Tyner, Nicholas Payton, Queen Latifah, and others, there was also a moving tribute to Simone performed by then divas-in-training Jill Scott, Angie Stone, Jaguar Wright, and N'Dambi Blue. "I was already a fan when I was first asked to be part of the tribute, but out of respect, I was nervous about doing Nina's material," N'Dambi says. A year later, she recorded "Ode 2 Nina" on her second album *Tunin Up & Cosignin*.

Talking via telephone from Los Angeles, N'Dambi continues, "I performed 'Four Women' with the other singers, but by myself I sang 'Mississippi Goddam.' With that song, she gave a voice to so many people who would've been otherwise ignored. She gave awareness to the entire world of what it means to be us."



---

Following the performance, Simone gave a speech. “Nina talked about how hard it was to come back to Philly,” explains Dyana Williams, who was instrumental in getting Simone to the city. Williams remembers, “She always believed racism kept her out of that school. But the night of the gala, it was obvious, as she said in her speech from the stage, ‘Success is the best revenge.’”

**“I WASN’T THAT MUCH INTO NINA SIMONE BEFORE THAT NIGHT, BUT I LEFT THE BELLEVUE HOTEL ONE OF HER BIGGEST FANS.”**

– Mister Mann Frisby

Standing next to the exit door as Dyana escorted Simone out of the ballroom, I was introduced to the grande dame and became a bit flustered. Shaking her soft hand, I mumbled nervously about how touching her speech was. Having heard about Simone’s strange behavior and wicked tongue more than I ever listened to her music, I was prepared for the worst.

Instead, she was very generous and kind. With a pleasant expression, she smiled with red-painted lips. As she stared into my eyes, something about her stately presence connected to my soul. “Thank you,” Simone said, her rich, hearty accent as majestic as the woman herself.

Writer and Soulmusic.com co-owner David Nathan, an old friend of Simone’s from the days when he was president of her British fan club

in the ’60s, also stood next to her. “Believe it or not,” he says, “that was the first time Nina had ever been honored in America, and she loved it.”

Former *Philadelphia Daily News* entertainment reporter Mister Mann Frisby, who also attended the IAAAM event, says, “I wasn’t that much into Nina Simone before that night, but I left the Bellevue Hotel one of her biggest fans. When I

heard Jill Scott and the rest of the girls singing the lyrics to ‘Four Women,’ I realized I had been missing something special and had a lot of catching up to do. Prior to that night, I felt like I was too young to really appreciate Nina Simone, but afterwards, it all connected.”

When the then twenty-five-year-old writer met Simone, he was surprised by her sly sense of humor. “After telling me how much she liked my name, she said, ‘Can I ask you a question?’” Frisby recalls leaning in to hear what Nina Simone could possibly want. “She said, ‘Could you please move over, you’re blocking my bodyguard.’ And we both started laughing.”

Like Frisby, I too entered the ornately decorated ballroom a Nina novice. Having grown up with a mom who preferred the pop of Sinatra over the gritty protests of Nina Simone’s classics, my knowledge of her was limited to 1993’s *Point of No Return* soundtrack and Lauryn Hill proclaiming on the Fugees’ “Ready or Not” in 1996, “So while you imitatin’ Al Capone, I be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone.”



More than a few artists I'd interviewed—including Tricky, Joi, Q-Tip, Fiona Apple, Massive Attack, Mary J. Blige, DJ Premier, and Erykah Badu—raved about Simone, referring to her as a genius, but I was baffled by her brooding brilliance. Yet after diving deep into her discography, listening continuously to her mesmerizing (some say unconventional) voice, it finally clicked. "No fear!" Nina blurted once when asked to define her idea of freedom. "No fear."

Listening to her music, especially the revolutionary sides recorded from 1963 to 1970, it is obvious that the one place Simone felt free was in the studio. Be it the haunting romanticism of "Wild Is the Wind," the Molotov cocktail of "Mississippi Goddam," the whimsy of "My Baby Just Cares for Me," the enticing strut of "Feels Good," or the joy of "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," one can hear the freedom in her voice.

While her world could be heavy or dark, she never sounded fearful when singing into the microphone. As Mister Mann Frisby says, "Nina Simone didn't give a fuck."

## "SHE WAS BLACK BEFORE IT WAS FASHIONABLE TO BE BLACK."

—Gil Scott-Heron

In the beginning, she was just a simple Southern girl blessed with the talent to play piano. Born Eunice Waymon, the precocious child began playing in church, where her mother was a preacher. Later, she furthered her musical education under the guidance of local White teachers who schooled her in Bach and Beethoven. "I started off as a child prodigy," Simone explained to *New Music Express's* Gavin Martin in 1984. "You know what that is? A child prodigy plays anything they hear. I didn't start playing gospel; I started playing bop, gospel, jazz, blues, and hymns...anything I heard."

Simone strived and practiced with the desire to be a classical pianist and began setting her goals

on playing onstage in symphony halls, not on the floors of sawdusted saloons. Graduating from high school in 1950, young Eunice relocated to Harlem for the summer and began studying at Julliard. With her musical sights set on attending Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where the Waymon family relocated that same year, she used her time at Julliard to prepare for the arduous audition.

Yet, while confident in her abilities, when Eunice finally performed for the judges at Curtis, she was rejected.

"The Curtis Institute refused to consider my scholarship application because I was black," Simone told writer Lloyd Bradley in 1991. "I knew I was much better than many of the students who had passed it. That rejection left me hurt and bitter for many years, because although I was aware of the racial divisions from growing up in the South, up until then the white people I'd come into contact with through my music—at home and in the schools—had always been very supportive.

"Going to the Curtis Institute was something I'd practiced for six hours every day and I don't think I've ever quite recovered from that disappointment." Nevertheless, it was that rejection that set into motion her career as a recording artist when she began performing popular songs in bars and supper clubs. In order not to bring shame on her family, Eunice changed her name to Nina Simone.

In the biography *PrincessNoire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* (Pantheon, 2010), author Nadine Cohodas points out the contradicting statements Simone offered about her stage name: " 'I chose the name Nina because I had always been called Nina—meaning little one—as a child,' she told the Philadelphia *Sunday Bulletin* in 1960, though...her older siblings had [no] recollection of the nickname. In a different interview the same year with the magazine *Rogue* she said 'Nina' was adapted from a boyfriend who called her Niña. 'I don't know where the hell I got Simone from.' When she published her memoir [*I Put a Spell on You* (cowritten with Stephen Cleary)] in 1991, Nina said that 'Simone' came from her appreciation of the French film star Simone Signoret." Whatever the truth was, as a Southern girl attempting to reinvent herself as a worldly show-business star, "Nina Simone" had the perfect ring.

Playing piano in Atlantic City and Philadelphia, Simone became a singer when some club



Photo Credit: Tim Douglas, Camera Press London

owners insisted. While she didn't think that being a singer was "any big thing," she began covering show tunes and pop songs in her sets. With a voice that could be haunting or haughty, spellbinding or savage, virginal or seductive, Nina discovered that people loved her singing.

While her newly adopted hometown had disappointed her with the Curtis Institute rejection, Philadelphia had a lot to offer the budding artist. In addition to studying with Vladimir Sokoloff, a noted teacher from Curtis, Nina played at the New Hope Playhouse Inn where she met guitarist Al Schackman, who would become her band director, as well as being her good friend for fifty years.

Signing with Bethlehem Records, which was owned by King Records honcho Syd Nathan, she released her debut album *Jazz as Played in an Exclusive Side Street Club* (aka *Little Girl Blue*) in 1958. "We recorded the whole session in fourteen hours and the last song we did was 'My Baby Just Cares For Me,'" Nina recalled in her autobiography. The only reason her new friend Al Schackman didn't play on the session

was because of a prior commitment with Burt Bacharach on the West Coast.

Originally titled *Central Park Blues*, after a song on the album, the charming cover photograph was shot in the Manhattan park by jazz lensman Chuck Stewart. In the liner notes, Joseph Muranyi writes, "A rare commodity in jazz is a new singer who has something to say and sufficient technique and voice with which to express it. It's always pleasant to hear a good voice and hers, with its strong individuality, assuredly commands your attention while the aural reward for listening is bountiful."

When Philly radio personality Sid Mark played Simone's cover of George Gershwin's "I Loves You, Porgy" on his program *The Mark of Jazz*, the local singer began generating a little heat.

According to a 1993 article by *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Karl Stark, "Mark liked the tune so much that he would play it on the radio three or four times in a row. Within six months, it had spread up and down the East Coast. Because of the demand created by *Little Girl Blue*,

Simone was signed to play a concert at New York's Town Hall on September 12, 1959, and the performance—later released as the now out-of-print *Nina Simone at Town Hall*—turned her into a celebrity."

In 2007, Sid Mark told Victor L. Schermer of the All About Jazz website, "Nina was something else. We had hours of discussions on the numerous radio and TV shows we did together. When I discovered her, she was just playing piano at a little joint in Philly at 22nd and Chestnut. It was a bar, and she wasn't singing, just playing the piano.

"At the time," Mark continued, "I was working at a jazz room called the Red Hill Inn in Pennsauken, New Jersey. I brought her in, she started singing, and for some strange reason people objected and wanted her to just play the piano! Boy, they were proven wrong."

In Simone's autobiography, she wrote: "To cast the spell over an audience I would start with a song to create a certain mood which I carried into the next song and then on through into the



third, until I created a certain climax of feeling and by then they would be hypnotized.”

Years later, her daughter, Lisa Celeste Kelly—who had a sometimes stormy relationship with Simone—says, “I don’t ever recall Mom singing around the house. I often wonder if she even liked her voice.”

## **“IF ART MOVES US—TOUCHES OUR SPIRIT—IT IS NOT EASILY FORGOTTEN.”**

—bell hooks

Like many brilliant artists, including her friend Richard Pryor who used to open for her at the Village Gate in New York City, Nina Simone began her career playing it safe in terms of material. However, listening to her live, one could hear what set her apart from her contemporaries. “When I saw her at the Village Vanguard in the

early ‘60s, I was in awe,” jazz aficionado and record collector Carl Campbell recalls. “Nina was a deep musician, and it was obvious even then that she was ahead of her time.”

While both fans and critics initially thought of Nina Simone as a mere jazz singer, it became apparent that she was much more. “Nina broke new ground, made new shapes of sounds we thought we knew, but didn’t really know before her,” says memoirist/journalist AshaBande. “She refused confinement, classification, or even to be commodified.”

Moving to New York City in 1959, Nina began breaking out of her shell at a time when “If you’re Black, step back” was the vibe of the country. When Jim Crow soared over the South, Simone was one of the few “Negro” pop idols with the courage to speak out against America’s social injustices.

Inspired by her literary friendships with novelist James Baldwin, author LeRoi Jones, poet Langston Hughes, and playwright Lorraine Hansberry—the author of *A Raisin in the Sun* whom critic Harold Cruse sarcastically dubbed the “great mentor”—Simone transformed

from supper-club vocalist to militant musician whose tunes became the soundtrack of an angry generation. “Nina sang songs directly aimed at the civil rights movement and Black liberation movement,” remembers Baraka. “She was very vocal on her own struggle against racism.”

While Simone came from a humble background, her new friend Hansberry was reared upper-middle class in Chicago. Hansberry’s father, Carl, was a real estate broker who was sued by racist Whites when he dared to move to then segregated Hyde Park. Forced to vacate his home when he violated a law prohibiting Negroes from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, he took the case to the Supreme Court and won a landmark decision in 1940.

Moving to New York City in 1950, Hansberry lived in Greenwich Village and took classes in writing at the New School for Social Research. As evidence of Hansberry’s motivational skills, she delivered a speech in 1959 declaring, “Let no Negro artist who thinks himself deserving of the title take pen to paper—or, for that matter, body to dance or voice to speech or song—if in doing so the content of that which he presents or performs suggests to the nations of the world that our

people do not yet languish under privation and hatred and brutality and political oppression in every state... The truth demands its own equals."

The friendship with Hansberry played a major role in Nina's conversion from pop pacifist to rhythmic revolutionary. According to her biographer Nadine Cohodas, "Nina knew she needed prodding to get more involved [politically], and her good friend Lorraine Hansberry turned out to be the catalyst."

Nina married Andrew (Andy) Stroud in 1961 in her uptown apartment, and a year later her only daughter, Lisa Celeste Stroud, was born on September 12, 1962. A professional singer and actress, Lisa performed in *Aida* on Broadway and often does tributes to her mother under the stage name Simone. In 2010, along with Laura Izibor, Ledisi, and her mother's voice, Lisa appeared on the *For Colored Girls* soundtrack version of "Four Women."

"My father was Mommy's manager, and they both were extremely aggressive, ambitious, strong people," she says. "When you have two

personalities like that, sparks can fly. I do believe he's the one who should be thanked for the world knowing who she is, because he took his retirement money from the NYPD to put her up at Carnegie Hall as a top-billed act, which was her dream. He told me that the show broke even, but then he did it again, and that's when promoters started calling wanting to book her. Europe started calling, and it went from there."

*Blues & Soul* writer David Nathan first met Nina in 1968 when he greeted her at the airport in England. "Some people, when they're very sensitive, they cover it up," he theorizes. "Nina expressed her sensitivity through her music. When you got to know her, you had to let her know that you weren't scared, but I was sixteen when I met her, so I was terrified.

"When Nina came to the U.K., it blew her mind that all these young White Brit kids were asking for her autograph. It was so not the world that she was used to, and she loved it. We did a signing at the record store [Soul City] where I worked, and we asked her if she wanted any LPs,

and she picked up a Sam & Dave album. 'I like them,' Nina said. 'They're cool.' "

With Andy by her side, David got a chance to talk to them both. "I think her husband's desire for Nina's success was greater than her own. He thought of her as the best-kept secret and was aggressive in making sure that Nina was marketed well. He made her deals with Philips and RCA, but that kind of popularity comes at a price. It was exciting and a conflict."

Seven months after being born, baby Lisa was christened at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Harlem, and Hansberry was named her godmother. In a picture published in *Jet* magazine, a tired Nina holds her crying baby while the minister, Andy, and Hansberry smile brightly. "Through [Hansberry], I started thinking about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men," Simone said of her friend in her autobiography.

"All the truths that I had denied to myself for so long rose up and slapped me in the face. The [1963] bombing of the little girls in Alabama

and the murder of Medgar Evers were like the final pieces of a jigsaw that made no sense until you fitted the whole thing together. I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn't an intellectual connection of the type Lorraine had been repeating to me over and over—it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination."

Sharing an intellectual and artistic sisterhood, their passions soon fed the creativity of other Black female painters, poets, political prisoners, playwrights, and other artistic souls including Angela Davis, Ntozake Shange, Faith Ringgold, Michelle Wallace, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Julie Dash, Tamar-kali, Wangechi Mutu, and countless others.

After hearing about the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, Simone claims that she tried to make a gun in the house. When her husband/manager Andrew Stroud saw her on the kitchen floor, the former NYPD detective said, "Nina, you don't know anything about killing. The only thing you've got is music."

Dragging herself from the floor to the piano, she began playing and singing, "Alabama's got me so

**"I SUDDENLY REALIZED WHAT IT WAS TO BE BLACK IN AMERICA IN 1963, BUT IT WASN'T AN INTELLECTUAL CONNECTION OF THE TYPE LORRAINE HAD BEEN REPEATING TO ME OVER AND OVER - IT CAME AS A RUSH OF FURY, HATRED AND DETERMINATION."**

– Nina Simone

upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest / And everybody knows about Mississippi—Goddam!" Soon after, the song was finished. It appeared on her first Philips Records release, *Nina Simone in Concert*, recorded at Carnegie Hall in 1964.

" 'Mississippi Goddam' I wrote in about an hour," Simone told *NME* in 1984. " 'Four Women' was written overnight, but it took me four months before I had the nerve to play it to somebody, because I thought it would be rejected. I played it for my husband on an airplane one day; I thought he wasn't going to like it because it was so direct and blatant."

Growing out her permed hair in favor of a natural, and shedding her stage gowns for African dresses, the jazzy soul singer who looked so genteel in her pretty dress on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1960 began frightening folks with her

appearance and lyrics. "Nina was very intense," Amiri Baraka says, "both on and offstage."

"With the Civil Rights movement, though, I saw that by singing protest songs and appearing on platforms for the various organizations, I could use my interpretations of popular music to speak out to and for black people all over the world," Nina told *Q* magazine in 1991. "I was desperate to be accepted by the Civil Rights leaders, and when I was, I gave them ten years of singing protest songs. In turn, it was the only time when I've been truly inspired by anything other than the music of composers like Mozart, Czerny, Liszt, and Rachmaninov."

Sadly, less than two years after Simone recorded "Mississippi Goddam," Lorraine Hansberry died from cancer at the age of thirty-four. Hansberry's husband and literary executor, Robert Nemiroff, described his wife as "passion-



ate about everything in life. She loved a good argument and would forcefully defend ideas she cared about."

Still mourning her friend's death while also celebrating Hansberry's teachings and legacy, Nina marched with Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery and also performed for the crowd from a rickety stage. "A number of stars came down to perform, but I think Nina Simone stole the show," Andrew Young told a news reporter. "Her music so reflected the soul and the feelings of the people there."

Five years later, Nina borrowed the title of a Hansberry collection of short plays, articles, and essays, and cowrote with Weldon Irvine the seminal song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." In 2004, a year after Nina's death, her daughter, Lisa, says, "One of the first things I remember as a child was being in the studio when she and Weldon Irvine were working on 'Young, Gifted and Black.' Weldon was very laid-back and talented. He and my mother got along well. A personality like my mother's was offset very well by his laid-back personality. The first things I think about were his eyes, which were very big. He was the man when it came to organ and piano."

In 2000, Irvine told music journalist Oliver Wang, "I saw Nina Simone when I was second year at Hampton [University]. She was such a perfectionist. I said, I'd give anything to just play one gig with Nina Simone. But I didn't think it would come to pass because she was a pianist and I was a pianist. In 1968, she decided that she wanted to be liberated from the piano. She wanted to hire an organist. She auditioned for two weeks, hadn't come up with anyone. On the last day of the second week, I was maybe the last person that she saw. I came in [and] she said, 'Look, turn that thing up, I don't want to hear any lip, turn that thing up so I can hear.' I went in, played one chord. She said, 'You have perfect pitch. You're hired.' "

Soon after getting the job, Nina gave Irvine the title and asked him to write the lyrics for "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." Playing him the song's melody, Simone told him she wanted lyrics that "will make black children all over the world feel good about themselves forever." Two weeks later, he finally delivered. "It was the only time in my life that I wrestled with creating," Irvine told Wang. "Usually, I just open the door and it comes. I was in my Ford Galaxie on my way to the bus station to pick up a girlfriend from down

South. I was stopped at a red light at Forty-First Street and Eighth Avenue when all the words came to me at once.

"I tied up traffic at that red light for fifteen minutes, as I scribbled on three napkins and a matchbook cover. A whole bunch of irate taxi drivers were leaning on their horns. I wrote it, put it in the glove compartment, picked up the girl, and didn't look at it until she got back on the bus to go home." When he finally read it, he was blown away. "I didn't write this," he thought. "God wrote it through me."

The song was placed on the best-selling album *Black Gold* and became an instant classic. For Weldon Irvine, the gig with Simone lasted two and a half years. "She is temperamental," he told Wang. "I'm not going to say anything bad about you, Nina, not on this interview, but we had a long run." After leaving Simone, he released a handful of classic solo sides in the 1970s, mentored many Queens musicians, and later collaborated with Q-Tip, Common, and MosDef before tragically committing suicide in 2002.

"Mommy wanted 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black' to be the next Black national anthem,"

says Lisa. "She wasn't a fan of 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' and thought 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black' was more revolutionary. I can remember her telling me, 'You need to know where you come from, and you need to know these words.' "

While the song was covered by Donny Hathaway on 1970's *Everything Is Everything* and Bob and Marcia in the U.K., it was Aretha Franklin's 1972 version that proved the most popular. "When Aretha Franklin was planning to cover 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black,' she came and asked permission," Lisa says. "We were in Barbados, and Aretha also came down, and we all spent time together. She was one of the sweetest people in the world. I thought Aretha did a great job with the song. I never heard Mom complain, so I think she thought the same."

According to David Nathan, "Nina really liked Aretha Franklin a lot. She mentioned her a few times. Nina was considered a jazz singer, but Franklin was really hip. When she covered 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black,' which was also the name of Franklin's album, the record went

gold. Since Nina was the co-writer of that song, Franklin's cover generated money for her. The first time I met Nina, when she was signed to Philips Records, Dusty Springfield was one of her labelmates. Nina told me she thought Dusty Springfield was nothing but an Aretha Franklin imitator."

Simone's startling tracks "Mississippi Goddam," "Old Jim Crow," "Four Women," " (You'll) Go to Hell"—which was nominated for a Grammy in 1968—and "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" made her a controversial artist on par with Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. "An artist's duty is to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself," she once told a television interviewer. "How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?"

Still, her mood swings and bad behavior were unpredictable. She was diagnosed in the mid-1960s with what is now called bipolar disorder, and later in life diagnosed with schizophrenia, according to Cohodas. Nina began getting a reputation as being volatile, angry, and unap-

proachable. Singer/producer Alicia Keys, who cites Simone as an influence, says, "Sometimes when a person is too real, it can be a little scary. When you're telling the truth, sometimes people don't want to think about it."

Lisa, once estranged from her mother for ten years, agrees. "Mommy scared a lot of people, but that's who she was," she says. "Imagine her being that way being born in Tryon, North Carolina, living on the other side of the tracks, being told she was ugly, that her skin color was ugly. You know, that scars you. But, underneath her hard exterior was actually a very funny, loving, warm person. When she felt safe enough to let her guard down, she'd laugh and have a good time.

"Mommy could intimidate people by not even opening her mouth. I told her once, 'The warrior in you, that's Nina. But put down your buckler and spear and let Eunice come forth for a little while.' She looked at me like she was considering it. She didn't curse me out. It was the one

---

**"I CAN REMEMBER HER TELLING ME, 'YOU NEED TO KNOW WHERE YOU CAME FROM, AND YOU NEED TO KNOW THESE WORDS.'"**

– Lisa Simone

time I gave her some advice and left with my head on my shoulders."

In 1970, *Life* magazine hack Albert Goldman wrote "The Return of the Queen of Shebang" for *Life*, slandering Simone with his venom. "She still pollutes the atmosphere with a hostility that owes less to her color than to the rasping edge on her pride," he scribbled. Although I've never been a fan of Goldman, who liked to throw around racist terms like "SuperSpade" when describing Jimi Hendrix and classist terms when dissecting Elvis, I must give him props for describing Simone as "the toughest, funkiest, most hand-clappin' 'n' finger-poppin' of soul sisters."

Yet, while she could be amazing in front of an audience, behind the scenes was a different story. "Mommy would be extremely nervous before

she went onstage," says Lisa. "The older she got, the more nervous she became. Her fingers weren't as nimble, her voice wasn't like it was, and she had to work harder. She was extremely difficult to be around, but once she got onstage, she was in her element. Every show that I know of went off without a hitch, so why there was all this drama beforehand is still a mystery to me. Mommy proved that sometimes it took really dark moments for us to reach our highest heights."

On songs ranging from "Mississippi Goddam" and "Four Women" to "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" and "Strange Fruit," one can hear the revolutionary spirit of a modern woman unafraid of confrontation. "When she recorded 'Mississippi Goddam' in 1964," David Nathan says, "Nina was revolutionary, because entertainers of '50s and '60s weren't militant; they didn't





Speak out. People were intrigued by her, because there was no one like her. Nina was Afrocentric long before it was fashionable."

Nathan also saw Nina live numerous times. "I can remember concerts where she would berate the audience and tell them to be quiet," he says. "I never saw her do it in England, but in the States was a different story. If she felt as though she wasn't being respected, Nina slammed down the piano and walked off. Once, in the late '70s or early '80s, one of the most memorable performances I can think of, was at Avery Fisher Hall. Nina was an hour late, and when she finally came onstage, she was dressed in a gold Egyptian kind of outfit. There were only a few claps, then in a deadpan voice, Nina said, 'You been waiting for me, huh? Well, I'm here now.' She went to the piano and kicked ass. She just sang and played, and the audience was mesmerized. She knew she had that power, and once she had you, that was it."

In 1969, at the height of singing out for civil rights and confronting her audience about racism, *Ebony* magazine writer Phyl Garland, who later became the first African American and first woman to earn tenure at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, described

Nina as "a wily sorceress" who "casts her spell with the fluid but frequently complex patterns of notes she etches on her piano and with the distinctive sound of her richly reedy voice." That same year, in Garland's book *The Sound of Soul*, she quoted Simone as saying, "Now that my people have decided to take over the world...I'm going to have to do my part."

Says Lisa, "It wasn't about strength; it was about 'Fuck you.' Mom told me when she first recorded 'Mississippi Goddam' that she was so angry and strained her voice so much that it dropped a bit. Her voice was never the same after that album. I used to love that song. I went to a Montessori school when I was five years old, and I would run around the school singing it loud," she remembers. "Mommy would tell the truth from the stage, and people would stand up and applaud with tears running down their faces. She told me how radio stations used to send back boxes of broken 45s, because they refused to play that song."

In 1969, Nina Simone was one of the top-billing acts at the uptown festival billed as the Harlem Cultural Festival 1969 or, to some folks, as the Black Woodstock. Held in Mount Morris Park

(aka Marcus Garvey Park) over six consecutive Sunday afternoons, the festival featured Sly and the Family Stone, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Staple Singers, David Ruffin, Mongo Santamaria, Ray Barretto, Cal Tjader, Herbie Mann, B. B. King, Hugh Masakela, Max Roach, Chuck Jackson, Abbey Lincoln, the 5th Dimension, B. B. King, and Stevie Wonder.

"When she was coming up in the civil rights movement, she told me she had finally found something she really believed in and could sink her teeth into," explains Lisa. "She didn't care about the rewards or accolades that most people might do it for. She had a podium to voice her feelings. She was extremely let down when the civil rights movement kind of deflated, because certain things didn't end; it just got a glossier finish."

By mid-1970, at least for Nina Simone, the revolution was dead. The marches were over, the benefit concerts were finished, and Tom Wolfe was sharpening his carving knife with copies of *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, which ridiculed the entire movement.

---

If this was what her friends Lorraine Hansberry, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King died for, then Nina couldn't see the point of staying in the country. When she saw how the revolution had been squandered, she realized it was over. "I don't like [America]," she told journalist Gavin Martin in 1984. "I get really physically sick every time I'm there."

Simone's last album, 1993's *A Single Woman*, was recorded for Elektra Records. While critics dissed the disc, most noticeably *Rolling Stone* who accused the label of presenting a saccharine Simone, British singer Mica Paris believed it "was as powerful as anything she had put out in her earlier career." The last time her daughter saw Nina Simone alive was when she came to see *Aida* on Broadway in 2002. "Mommy sacrificed a lot in order to stay true to her music, in terms

of the message, in terms of being unafraid," Lisa says, holding back the tears.

On April 21, 2003, seventy-year-old Nina Simone died at her home in Carry-le-Rouet, France, near Marseille. Dedicated to preserving the memory of her mother, Lisa launched a new website, [ninasimone.com](http://ninasimone.com), featuring music and vintage photos.

Eight years after her death, Nina Simone's material is often heard in film, rap songs, television commercials, cocktail lounges, and stylish boutiques. In addition, Lions Gate Films is currently in production with a biopic starring Mary J. Blige.

"The most that I want is for people to not let her memory die," says Lisa. "It's a wonderful thing to hear her voice everywhere, see her image

everywhere. Sometimes, as her child, I had mixed emotions, and it could be a little hard, but she would be pleased to know how much she has moved up in the ratings."

Without a doubt, the so-called "high priestess of soul," who rarely felt loved or appreciated in America, has become a posthumous icon in her own country. As Amiri Baraka concludes, "Nina's material is still right on it; it is American classical music."

---

Michael A. Gonzales has written about pop culture for *Essence*, the *London Telegraph*, *New York*, *Vibe*, and *XXL*. He is currently completing the Harlem crime novel *Uptown Boys*.

**This exhibition and all events associated with it are free and open to the public. The Stone Center is ADA compliant. Limited free parking is available in the Bell Tower Deck behind the Stone Center after 5 p.m. Call to confirm.**

**Gallery Hours**

Monday - Friday from 9:30 a.m. - 8 p.m. or by appointment; closed University holidays.

**For more information:** Visit <http://sonjahaynesstonectr.unc.edu> or call 919-962-9001.

---



**UNC**

THE SONJA HAYNES STONE  
CENTER FOR BLACK CULTURE  
AND HISTORY

150 South Road  
Campus Box 5250  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5250