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A. Loudermilk

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Nina Simone & the Civil Rights Movement: Protest at Her Piano, Audience at Her Feet

By A. Loudermilk¹

Abstract

American pianist, vocalist, songwriter, and activist Nina Simone (1933-2003) played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement and yet many historical accounts of the era have snubbed her. Bringing into clearer focus the intense and problematic commitment of Simone's identity as a musician to the protest identity of the Civil Rights Movement, this essay will examine Simone as an icon, her songs in historical context, and her audiences over the years. Her concerts, which continued until the last year of her life, make for a fascinating public record of her turbulent relationship with fans during and after the turbulent 1960s.

Keywords: Nina Simone, Civil Rights Movement, Protest, African-American Women, Songwriting, Classical Piano, Black Consciousness, Soul, Essentialism, Racism, Appropriation, Mental Illness, Fan Culture, the 1960s

Introduction

A naïve 21-year-old in 1954, Nina Simone took her stage name because she did not want her religious family back home to find out she was playing piano in an Atlantic City bar in order to pay her bills. She herself did not want to play bars, nor did she want to sing as the gig required, but it is as a singer that she is remembered. Nina Simone was a pianist first, born Eunice Waymon in 1933. A child prodigy, at age two she could play "God Be with You 'til We Meet Again" on the family organ. Her mother, a local minister, committed her to the role of church accompanist by age six and, soon after, to the pioneer task of becoming America's first black concert pianist. "Ironic," writes Simone in her autobiography *I Put a Spell on You* (1991), "that Momma's ambition was so tied to race when she spent her whole life trying to ignore the reality of her color. At home we never talked about race, ever" (32).

Such race-denial may have been less difficult to maintain in their hometown of Tryon, North Carolina—a tourist resort atypical among southern towns in there being no black side and white side but, instead, a checkerboard layout. "Black and white townspeople mixed together all the time," Simone writes, and relations between them were "always cordial" (3-4). Once Mrs. Massinovitch, an encouraging white tutor, taught her Bach, Eunice knew she "never wanted to be anything other than a classical pianist" (23). As noted, other than a classical pianist is what she became. Her allegedly race-based rejection from a Philadelphia music school prompted her

¹ A. Loudermilk comes from a working-class town in southernmost Illinois and now teaches in Baltimore at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). His poetry collection *Strange Valentine* won The Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award; individual poems can be found in reviews like *Assaracus*, *Gargoyle*, *Smartish Pace*, and *Tin House*. He's also a cultural critic with his own website, *Quirky Cinema*, and essays in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *Polari*, *PopMatters*, *River Teeth*, and *Tran(s)udies*.

to sing for her supper and, in due course, to sing for record companies and the Civil Rights Movement.

Even with the release of the third and best-researched biography *Princess Noire—The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* (Cohodas 2010), a slew of compilation CDs, rare live footage now available online, and a controversial new biopic, Nina Simone cannot be fully comprehended by post-CRM generations. It's true for any longstanding artist: the artist as an icon, like the meaning of the music she makes, will change with changing audiences. This is a truth that Simone struggled against, especially as it overlapped with the passing of the CRM. Her concerts, which continued until the last year of her life, make for a fascinating public record of her turbulent relationship with fans during and after the turbulent 1960s. By examining Simone as an icon, her songs in historical context, and her audiences over the years, this essay will bring into clearer focus the intense and problematic commitment of Simone's identity as a musician to the protest identity of the Civil Rights Movement.

Simone claims to have been unaware of racism until her first town recital, at age eleven, when her parents were asked to give up their front row seats to a white family. "Like switching on a light," her innocent assumption that all white people were like Miss Massinovitch was crudely disproved (Simone 26). And so Eunice Waymon at the piano stood up, refusing to play. Intersecting in this story of her first concert for a largely white crowd are three factors—being a classical pianist, protesting racism, and confronting her own audiences—that, at everlasting odds with each other, compelled Nina Simone's career. She recalls in her autobiography how her parents, despite being allowed to keep their seats, were not proud but embarrassed. She felt "cut raw" yet "the skin grew back again a little tougher, a little less innocent, and a little more black" (27). So music, gospel and classical, informed Eunice Waymon's first sense of herself. And then there was racism. And then there was Nina Simone.

Essence, Anger, Politics

A more productive first question than "Who is Nina Simone?" might well be who do we think she is? Many fans and critics tend to exalt her as the essence of blackness. "Regal African queen reincarnate," says her fan club founder (Nathan 45). She's been tagged ebony, mahogany, and obsidian. A *Life* reviewer exoticizes her music as "jungle jazz" (Goldman 11) while a poet's tribute calls her "Witch Doctor Lady" (White 22). Her eyes are ancient, declares another poet, "Done seen and survived slavery eyes" (Ya Salaam qtd. in Tsuruta 54). A fan at SeeingBlack.com considers her "the spiritual essence of three generations of freedom fighters" with a voice that "embodies the pain and power of the scattered African diaspora, ...summon[ing] the spirits of the middle passage, of those under the overseer's lash, of that charred fruit hanging from southern trees" (Neal). So Simone's presence as a dark-skinned black woman was so powerful that she seemed to embody not only blackness but, as well, the whole history of injustice against blacks in the United States. Indeed, what Simone herself has described as a racially cordial if not equal hometown experience (Simone 4) gets recast in one *Guardian Weekend* article as "the racial brutality of her childhood in the Deep South" (Bracewell 30).

To put it in the parlance of the 1960s, Nina Simone had *soul*. The title of her 1967 album is *The High Priestess of Soul*, which had become her moniker. *The Making of Black America* (1969) explains that soul emerged in the urban ghettos as an in-group form of solidarity-building rhetoric, standing for the essence of blackness—even pushing for the superiority of that

essence—without ever forcing a clear-cut definition of it. “Specifically class-based, however, soul seems to be a folk conception of the lower-class urban Negro’s own ‘national character’” (Ulf 482). Soul was appropriate for Nina Simone yet inconsistent with her small town childhood, her Bachian counterpoint, her last name taken from a French actress, and her genre-jumping multi-dimensionality that the soul music category—that any category—proved too narrow to represent. Furthermore, soul was an inward-focused rhetoric not aggressive like Black Power, not angry enough to badge Simone, whom *Emerge* magazine calls “our voice, embodying the militancy of our justifiably angry impatience with racist white America” (DeVeaux 51).

Whether or not there’s a certain essence to Nina Simone, anger was certainly a defining emotion. *Washington Post* considers her the definitive “combustible artist” who “never hid her intense rage” (Harrington C1). In her autobiography, Simone describes herself in the 1960s as “half crazy with anger...as I watched my people struggling for their rightful place” (Simone 97). Of activist Medgar Evers’ murder in Mississippi followed soon after by four black girls killed in an Alabama church-bombing, Simone, her own daughter then a toddler, writes: “I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn’t the intellectual connection of the type Lorraine [Hansberry] had been repeating to me over and over—it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination” (89). She decided, then and there, to go out and kill some white people. She recalls in the French documentary *La Légende* (Lords 1992): “If I had my way I’d have been a killer. I would’ve gone to the South and gave them violence for violence, shotgun for shotgun.”

Instead of going on a rampage in response to the murders, Simone—encouraged by her second husband Andy Stroud—wrote what would become her most renowned song: “Mississippi Goddam.” She aimed her protest “show tune” at patriarchal white-supremacy as well as the “go slow” politics of liberalism, announcing “You’re all gonna die and die like flies.” One of several anthems, *Black Enterprise* magazine declares, “If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the drum major...Nina Simone was the movement’s singer, providing its musical inspiration and protest songs, particularly ‘Mississippi Goddam,’” adding that her songs are as symbolic of the struggle as boycotts or sit-ins (Boyd 14). By politicizing her anger through song so intelligently, Simone marked a turning point in her career and in the CRM.

Nina Simone’s politics were tricky, though—integrationist or separatist as it suited her. In her autobiography, she writes that she “didn’t believe there was any basic difference between the races,” pointing instead to power as the dividing factor: “Whoever is on top uses whatever means to keep the other down” (100). But this trans-racial theory did not weaken Simone’s anti-interracial stance. Despite her first husband Don Ross being white and her own family accepting the marriage without prejudice (57), Simone told *Interview* magazine in 1997, “I do not believe in the mixing of the races...I never have” (Powell 95).

Interview: What do you think can be gained from keeping the races separate?

Simone: We can get rid of slavery.

Interview: You mean divide and conquer?

Simone: Yes but I think it’s too late....

Interview: You don’t think blurring the race lines is good for desegregation?

Simone: Desegregation is a joke...I believe that America is going to die, die like flies, just like the song says.

The Songs of Nina Simone

Few musicians in the 20th century exhibited a repertoire as diversified as Nina Simone's. So no wonder her fan-base, since the beginning, has been racially mixed. Beyond the sheer range of material, to be addressed later, the songs of Nina Simone can serve as a history lesson in and of themselves.

In 1957, the year the US government forcefully integrated Little Rock's resistant school system, Simone's first recording sessions took place. Her dialect-free version of "I Loves You, Porgy" hit the top twenty in 1959 as lunch counter sit-ins were held in her home state. Though Simone didn't consider herself an activist in these early years, she nonetheless did benefit concerts for civil rights organizations and, as historian Ruth Feldstein notes, "Musically, socially, and politically, she came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of an interracial avant-garde in Greenwich Village and Harlem" that included Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and James Baldwin (1351). The very titles "Brown Baby," "Bye Bye Blackbird," "African Mailman," and "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair" resonated with black consciousness. As well, Simone was performing the African songs "Zungo" and "Flo Me La" as early as 1960. The potential for a song to mean something more, something racially significant, always guided Simone's choices whether or not she considered it activism.

Even with 1958's "My Baby Just Cares for Me," which Simone referred to as a "piece of shit" song,² she can't help but subvert its lyrics. On one level, there's an implied indifference to upper-class aspirations ("my baby don't care for shows... clothes... high-toned places") that might be stressed in any version. With Simone singing, though, the lines "Liz Taylor is not his style" and "Even Lana Turner's smile is something he can't see" ring with specific disdain for upper-class white femininity. *Village Voice* writer Thulani Davis honors Simone's songs, whether covers or original compositions, that always privileged the black woman's point of view (15).

After nine albums with Colpix Records between 1959 and 1963, Simone's debut for Phillips Records was her second stint at Carnegie Hall, recorded as *In Concert*. It hit the stands in 1964 and "Mississippi Goddam" hit the airwaves—in some states played as "Mississippi (bleep)" and sleeved with the title "Mississippi #*#*!" And everybody knew exactly what she was singing about, her song like the crest on a crashing wave. If Simone's overall career can be read as reflecting the history of the CRM, *In Concert* provides that history in just a handful of well-ordered songs.

Starting off with a reprise of her hit "Porgy," from the Gershwin musical about black life in the early 1920s, she then transforms Brecht-Weill's "Pirate Jenny" into a black maid's fantasy to overthrow her white superiors. "I'm counting your heads as I'm making the beds," she sings. In the follow-up Simone original she tells "Old Jim Crow" that "it's all over now"; no time for fantasies, "gotta work together 'til your dead and gone." Simone continues to document the times with what the CD liner notes call "a parodic folk song about an idealistic young woman's political and sexual liberation during a freedom march" (Siegel). The title, "Go Limp," is double-played as 1) what nonviolent marchers are advised to do when arrested—"Go perfectly limp and be carried away"—and 2) as her response to being kissed by a fellow protestor. The next and

² According to Simone's biography *Princess Noire*, Simone in April 1967 became angered that an audience wants to hear "My Baby Just Cares for Me." "When shouts for the song persisted, she slammed down the lid [to her piano], hollered 'Shut up!' and walked [offstage]" (Cohodas 199). Also see an account of the same night in *Nina Simone: The Biography* (Brun-Lambert 158-159) and an eyewitness account in *Nina Simone: Break Down and Let It All Out* (Hampton 31-33).

final song on *In Concert*, “Mississippi Goddam,” is a war cry, anticipating a critical shift in the Civil Rights Movement: from going limp to fighting back.

Ruth Feldstein’s article on Simone, in *The Journal of American History* (2005), details Simone’s contributions as an activist in the CRM. Feldstein closely analyzes songs on *In Concert*, as well as Simone’s performance strategies, to show how “Simone undermined a historically potent gendered politics of respectability that persisted in African-American activism” (1359). Indeed, “Mississippi Goddam” outright mocked the idea that “talking like a lady” would help Simone attain equal rights, just as Simone’s reorientation of “Pirate Jenny” exposed the gendered dimensions of racism through a very unladylike revenge fantasy. Feldstein reminds us that Simone wrote “Mississippi Goddam” and “Go Limp” at a time “when black male activists were just beginning to articulate meanings of African-American sexuality and civil rights under the rubric of black cultural nationalism” (1360).

Less than a year after *In Concert*, Simone played in Alabama to honor the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers. Odetta, Sammy Davis Jr., Joan Baez, Dick Gregory, among others, shared the stage that evening—one fashioned from stacked coffins. With the Watts riots ahead, as well as *Life* articles like “Plotting a War on ‘Whitey’—If Negro Leadership Fails, Extremists Are Set and Eager for Violence” (Sackett 100), paranoia was heightened on a national level. Simone preaches in “Revolution”: “It’s not as simple as talking jive, the daily struggle just to stay alive.” She continued to write and perform songs that reflected the gaining militancy of the CRM as well as the antiwar campaign. Railing against the government in “Backlash Blues,” she sings: “You raise my taxes, freeze my wages, send my son to Vietnam!” Writer Morgan Monceaux, remembering his tour of duty when a friend from home sent him a Nina Simone recording, says, “I played it over and over again. The anger and passion matched exactly my feelings that America was going crazy in Vietnam” (36).

The CRM needed in-your-face banners and so message songs like her adaptation of “Backlash Blues” (a Langston Hughes poem) came to dominate Simone’s set list. She wrote “Four Women” in 1966, partly to expose the color caste system. Concluding as the darkest-skinned, named Peaches, a tough woman bitter because her parents were slaves, she threatens to “kill the first mother I see”—mother, needless to say, being short for motherfucker. Co-written with Abbey Lincoln, “Blues for Mama” also exposed harsh realities particular to black women in the U.S. Simone’s “Young, Gifted and Black” was considered a black national anthem in the early 1970s, thanks partly to covers by Donny Hathaway and by Aretha Franklin. Rounding out her shows and albums, her versions of Richie Havens’ “No Opportunity Necessary,” Hoyt Axton’s “The Pusher,” Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of Hollis Brown,” and *Hair*’s “I Got Life” spoke of and to the disenfranchised. Throughout this era of the CRM, the originally neutral-appearing and dialect-free Simone adopted a more afrocentric look and sound.

A few nights after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968, which sparked riots in over 100 cities, Simone performed at Westbury Music Fair on Long Island. Her bass player Gene Taylor composed an elegy for the Civil Rights leader titled “Why? (The King of Love Is Dead).” Simone reverently delivers his lyrics but her own monologue becomes somewhat unhinged: “What’s gonna happen now, in all of our cities? My people are rising,” she half-speaks, half-sings. “They’re living at last. Even if they have to die, even if they have to die at that moment that they know what life is. It’s alright ‘cause you know what life is. You know what freedom is for one moment of your life.” The performance, like the movement itself, stumbled between irrational grief and a sober call to action. “We can’t afford anymore losses,” she implores. “They’re shooting us down one by one”—her tone turns flat with justified paranoia—“and don’t

forget that ‘cause they are.” Hereby Nina Simone calls her flock: “If you’ve been moved at all, and you know my songs at all, for God’s sake join me. Don’t sit back there. The time is now! You know the King of Love is dead. I ain’t ‘bout to be nonviolent, honey!”³

Simone did not waiver in her break from nonviolence. At Harlem Music Festival ’69, known as Black Woodstock, Simone concluded her set with a poem by Last Poets member David Nelson titled “Are You Ready, Black People?” Juxtaposing questions like “Are you ready to kill if necessary?” and “Are you ready to do what you have to do to create life?”, Simone stirs the chiefly African-American audience: “Are you ready to smash white things? To burn buildings? Are you ready to build black things?” The crowd agrees enthusiastically.⁴

The Civil Rights Movement neared its end, though. And when the marching was over, Simone’s record deals expired. In 1974, she titled her last US album *It Is Finished!* But that was old news by then, for Nina Simone had already renounced the States to live out her life abroad.

Betrayal and Appropriation

When the subject is Nina Simone, the Civil Rights Movement is inevitably if not immediately the context; the two are equated, as if one were the very essence of the other. But when the subject is the Civil Rights Movement, Nina Simone and her anthems go unacknowledged. “I was desperate to be accepted by the Civil Rights leaders,” Simone told *Q* magazine in 1991, “and when I was, I gave them ten years of singing protest songs. In turn, it was the only time I’ve been truly inspired by anything other than...Mozart, Czerny, Liszt, and Rachmaninov” (Bradley 82). And Bach, whom she’s referred to as her first love.

Simone’s commitment seems evident so it is alarming that Martin Luther King’s major biographies (by Oates, Dyson, and Carson) fail to credit Nina Simone as the civil rights force who sang King’s elegy. I was more surprised that the epic PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* (Hampton 1987) does not mention Nina Simone or play a single one of her songs. In the sequel *Eyes on the Prize II* (Hampton 1990), we hear half a chorus of “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free” during a funeral and that’s it. Original SNCC director John Lewis, in his memoir of the movement, excludes her too, though his successor Stokely Carmichael dubbed her the true singer of the CRM. She may be pictured on the cover of *Chronicles of Negro Protest* (Chambers 1968), as part of Chicago’s “Wall of Respect” mural, but she is not found among the pages inside. And you won’t find her among *Freedom’s Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830-1970* (Olson 2001). She is included in the “Black World as Protest” section of the song lyric collection *The Poetry of Soul* (Nicholas 1971), and on the Mojo compilation CD *Rebel Music: Songs of Protest and Insurrection* from 2008, but she’s not part of the Smithsonian Folkways compilation *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966* from 1997. I began research for this essay at a college town’s public library and of the 29 books on the CRM that I looked at there, not one indexed Nina Simone.

No wonder Nina Simone felt betrayed. Her ego had been stepped on already when certain black radio stations banned “Four Women,” offended by the rawness of its lyrics (Simone 117). On African-Americans post-CRM, Simone told *Q Magazine* that they “just gave up and got respectable”:

³ At the time unreleased from RCA. A suite of three tracks including “Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)” is now available on the RCA compilation CD *Saga of the Good Life and Hard Times*. “Why?” alone is on the Sony compilation CD *Tell It Like It Is: Rarities and Unreleased Recordings 1967-1973*.

⁴ Currently on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHXtB9ssnhw>.

I felt as if my people had just rolled over and played dead and I hated them for it. I was more than let down. I was the most disappointed person in the world and regretted the ten years of my life I'd given them. (qtd. in Bradley 82)

Surely her waning relevance post-CRM and lack of records did not warrant such historical snubbing? More likely reasons for Simone's exclusion from historical accounts are, simply, her being a musician and, not so simply, her being a woman. Ruth Feldstein asserts that Simone's public break from nonviolence in combination with her frankness about gender roles and sexuality made her an unlikely candidate for "respectable" celebrations of African-American history. One result of her absence is that "the politics of sex and gender have been segregated from the politics of race—far more so, in fact, than they were at the time" (1366).

The betrayal may not end there. Also distorting our perception of Nina Simone is the white appropriation of her music post-CRM. With a popular Chanel advertisement, movies like *Point of No Return*, European concerts, posthumous remixes, and a redundant slew of so-so CD compilations eclipsing original albums, Nina Simone has become a watered-down symbol of Black Power. Instead of militancy and revolution, transgression is her appeal.

As noted of Nina Simone's 1959 version of "My Baby Just Cares for Me," her being a black woman in the U.S. gave the song an element of resistance to white standards of beauty. That same song in a 1987 Chanel commercial⁵ featuring rich white people, however, becomes mere accompaniment to "the fantasy of urban love and luxury living that dominated advertising images in the late eighties, ...appear[ing]," as the *The Guardian Weekend* claims, "to articulate every white person's imagining of life and love in an east-coast dive bar where the sound of ice cubes dropping from tumblers of bourbon is mingled with the strictly black lullabies that are wafting from the smallest of stages" (Bracewell 30). The ubiquitous ad attracted new fans and stabilized Simone's finances, as did the soundtrack for *Point of No Return*, but Simone was rendered a ghost of herself.

In John Badham's *Point of No Return*, released in 1993, Maggie (Bridget Fonda) is a one-time violent drug addict forced by a government agency to become 'Nina' the slick undercover assassin. No better voice could echo his heroine's raw emotions, Badham told *Entertainment Weekly*: "Simone is a woman who doesn't take any crap from anybody" (qtd. in Gerosa 95). True enough, but Simone's songs in the film have nothing to do with firing up our action hero. Instead, "Feeling Good" and "Wild Is the Wind" serve to quell her anger while "I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl," as Maggie interprets it, means "just stick it in me twice a day and I'll do anything for you, I'll lick the ground you walk on." Later, after Simone's sappy cover of "Here Comes the Sun" scores a lovers' montage, Maggie explains Simone as a legacy: "My mother loved Nina Simone...so passionate, so savage..." Is she talking about "Here Comes the Sun"? Worse yet is the inclusion of "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair" even as the film reinforces white standards, marking the protagonist's transformation from unrestrained/trashy with black hair to well-mannered/glamorous as a blonde. When Maggie is symbolized as a slip of a girl on a wild black horse—to be exact, a wild black mare—the film caves in on its own racist symbolism by aligning black female passion and animalism.

A cleverly self-aware appropriation of Nina Simone can be found in the film version of Sandra Bernhard's off-Broadway hit *Without You I'm Nothing* (Boskovich 1990). This mockumentary situates the Jewish and sexually ambiguous comedian—more or less playing a

⁵ Directed by Ridley Scott and featuring French model Catherine Bouquet.

character version of herself—on a shaky tour for which her first number is a dashiki-clad cover of “Four Women.” What the sketch draws attention to is an identity alignment of Bernhard the queer icon and Simone the “essential black woman” about which we are *supposed* to feel uncomfortable. This is reinforced throughout the film by the camera showing African-American audience members shaking their heads impatiently or dismissively. The final audience member, a young African-American woman, writes “Fuck Sandra Bernhard!” on a tablecloth. Tension over race as an identity signifier is a major motif, one set up back in the film’s opening. Bernhard’s name and the title appear right as the camera has panned halfway between a white male harpsichordist in a powdered wig and an African-American female classical pianist in modern formalwear.

On a more everyday level than Bernhard’s point-driven extreme, what does it mean for white listeners to sing along to a song like “Four Women”? If Nina Simone is the essence of blackness, wouldn’t non-black listeners be appropriating a black experience every time the laser hits the disc? There is good reason to be suspicious. The white boys of contemporary gay culture have been riffing on black girl attitude for decades. The beloved gay stereotype Buddy on the satirical *Kids in the Hall* describes God as the ultimate other: “That fat black lesbian in the sky.” Cultural critic Ann DuCille complains in her 1996 book *Skin Trade*: “There is so much interest in black women that I have begun to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally...but me as a black woman, the other... the quintessential site of difference” (81). Nearly two decades later, diversity still seems to be fetishized in North America as much as it’s honored. One typical example is a recent meme showing an angered white lady in Victorian attire wagging her finger and declaring: “Sometimes my inner black woman comes out and says ‘Aww Hlllll Nah!’”

Narrowing our focus for a moment to the music industry, Nina Simone’s songs have been appropriated by many performers both black and white, often quite sincerely. Simone’s anti-interracial position seems to undermine her own fertile exchange with white songwriters over the years but, really, grains of salt are required here given factors like the contradictory opinions in Simone interviews and the dual primacies in her life of gospel and classical. Simone’s repertoire includes material by African-Americans like Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, Oscar Brown Jr., Paul-Laurence Dunbar, and Duke Ellington, as well as white songwriters like Leonard Cohen, Dorothy Fields, Jacques Brel, and Sandy Denny. British vocalist Julie Driscoll, with Brian Auger & The Trinity in 1969, rearranged a folk song Simone performed at Carnegie Hall and their liner notes honored her: “When I was a young girl I used to seek pleasure...Nina Simone *IS*.” Returning the compliment, Simone performed Driscoll’s arrangement. David Bowie was so inspired by Simone that he covered “Wild Is the Wind” for his *Station to Station* album in 1976 as a nod to her. In the early 1990s, Jeff Buckley (son of avant-garde folkie Tim Buckley) covered several Simone songs, most notably “Lilac Wine.”

Simone complained fiercely about the exploitation of African-American artists, being a victim of underhanded contracts early in her career. She was not against artists of different races connecting through each other’s material, as exemplified above; what she considered stealing was a white artist covering a black artist’s material and making more money than the black artist. In the *Princess Noire* biography, author Nadine Cohodas comments on this, providing accounts of Simone’s altercations with Blood, Sweat & Tears (over their hit cover of Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child”) and The Animals (who covered “House of the Rising Sun” and “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood,” both associated with Simone). The anecdote about Simone and Animals’ singer Eric Burdon is legendary. She snapped at him, “So you’re the honky motherfucker who

stole my song and got a hit out of it?" Most fans, however, do not know the story's conclusion. Burdon explained to Simone that their two covers, as major hits in the UK and across Europe, have paved the way for her to tour there. After absorbing his comment, Simone extended her hand and invited him to sit down (160, 233).

Since the 1990s, the proliferation of Simone's music into the mainstream continues to serve mostly white projects. Of the nearly 100 movies and TV shows that utilized a Nina Simone song in the last two decades,⁶ little more than a dozen star African-Americans or primarily reflect African-American experiences. Of the films/shows about white people, thirteen feature that "piece of shit" pop song "My Baby Just Cares for Me." Just as many, to my surprise, feature "Sinnerman"—a black gospel tour-de-force from 1965 that harkens back to Simone's childhood playing revival meetings. Its presence on episodes of the BBC's *Sherlock* and Fox's *So You Think You Can Dance*, or in films like the *Thomas Crown Affair* remake (scoring a rich playboy's theft of a priceless painting) and the documentary *Sharkwater* (scoring shark attacks), is bewildering if not offensive.

An unauthorized Nina Simone biopic will be released later in 2013, already stirring controversy due to its casting of light-skinned Zoe Saldana as the dark-skinned Simone. 11,000 people so far have signed a Change.org petition to boycott the film, considering such casting "whitewashed" and "revisionist." Makeup artists have broadened Saldana's nose to resemble Simone, however, and darkened her skin, not that such a conspicuous practice lends the film credibility. Also troubling is the film's fictionalized romance between Simone and her gay personal manager Clifton Henderson.⁷ This is what it takes to make the already mythified Nina Simone palatable for today's mainstream viewers.

The Audiences of Nina Simone

Over half of Nina Simone's discography was recorded live. When she had an audience hooked, electricity hanging in the air, she was a mass hypnotist. Like riot-inciter Jim Morrison, perhaps, or as Simone put it, like a toreador mesmerizing a bull,

turning my back on this huge animal, which I knew would do nothing because I had it under my complete control. And, like they did with the toreadors, people came to see me because they knew I was playing close to the edge and one day I might fail. This is how I got my reputation as a live performer. (Simone 92-93)

On stage she was both in her element and, as she said, on the edge. With an audience under her control she could be ecstatic, subtle, clever, vulnerable, spontaneous, and grateful. But her legend is due, by and large, to a diva-daggered hypersensitivity that made inattentive audiences and deceitful venue managers intolerable. Cohodas says she was walking out on unsatisfactory gigs as early as 1961, detailed in *Variety*. In fact, Simone's blowups were so well documented that her official press release noted them: "Unfortunately business relationships in the past, coupled with the built-in problem of a Negro-American, have made her susceptible to hurt and

⁶ According to Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

⁷ Quoted in Tanzina Vega's *New York Times* article in September 2012, Nina Simone's daughter Lisa Simone Kelly asserts: "Clifton Henderson was gay. He was not attracted to women." Brun-Lambert's biography is downright suspicious of Henderson's "designs" and his "upper hand" with Simone as her personal nurse/secretary in the final years of her life (314-317).

impatient with ignorance” (qtd. in Cohodas 256). So tied in with her personal history as a musician, with the history of the CRM itself, and with the appropriation of her music post-CRM, was Simone’s increasingly agitated relationship with her own audiences.

The mix of Simone fans, as mentioned, reflects the wide range of her material—well beyond her gospel and classical roots. It was her defiance of category that warranted attention from the antiestablishment back in the late 1950s. Her genre-blurring style emerged during her first gig—a gig she had to take to pay her rent. She arrived at the Midtown Bar & Grill in Atlantic City “prepared with classical pieces, hymns and gospel songs” and improvised on those, “occasionally slipping in a part from a popular tune” (Simone 50). Each genre-blurred improv lasted thirty to ninety minutes and found diehard fans among the white college kids employed for the summer at area hotels.

If Simone wasn’t blurring genres in a single song, she was jumping genres within a set. At Town Hall in 1959, the set that made her Queen of Greenwich Village included a Southern folk song as well as a Norwegian one, Billie Holiday’s bluesy “Fine and Mellow,” a Cuban-flavored Simone instrumental, and two versions of the classic “Summertime.” For her first time at Carnegie Hall, in 1963, she did Israeli and British folk songs, a Leadbelly cover, a children’s song, a classically rapturous “Samson and Delilah” and a plinkingly syncopated “Sayonara.” So if her fan-base was multiracial, mostly young, and mostly intellectual, how could it not be? There were many dimensions to Nina Simone, many unanticipated connections made within her repertoire. All she required was dutiful attention. And she usually got it. If a drunk became rowdy at Midtown, for example, Simone would simply stop playing until the college kids chucked him out (Simone 52).

More and more over the years, audiences tested Simone’s patience. On one early recording she can be heard teasing the chatty crowd: “You just don’t want to know what’s in my mind so do you mind?” She laughs a bit, returning with: “Which one do you want? Do you want me to ask you to be quiet? Or would you rather I rely on your own sense of taste?”⁸ During “Go Limp” on *In Concert*, she congratulated the crowd on their audience participation: “That makes up for all the times you went to the bar when you weren’t supposed to!” These milder razzings hinted at the contempt Simone felt for audiences of popular music, regardless of race, whom she considered not serious enough. Her glare at the audience, as pictured on the cover of *In Concert*, epitomizes Simone’s confrontational stage persona.

Simone had never stopped wanting to be a classical pianist. She admits in her autobiography that, until the success of “Mississippi Goddam,” had someone donated her tuition money she would have re-committed to her piano studies, never playing a club or tour date again. “And I wouldn’t have missed the life because I hated it anyway. The cheap crooks, the disrespectful audiences, the way most people were so easily satisfied by dumb, stupid tunes” (65). As the 1960s intensified, so did Simone’s militancy. Her demand that audiences be serious about the music, typical of classically trained musicians, gave over to the activist’s demand that they be serious about Black Power and the Black Arts movement. She told one interviewer that her job was to get black listeners “more aware of themselves and where they came from...and I will do it by whatever means necessary.”⁹

⁸ From an excellent recording of “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out” performed at Club Lake Meadows in Chicago in 1960. On the now rare double-album *A Portrait of Nina* (Trip Records 1971).

⁹ See the documentary *Nina Simone: Great Performances: College Concerts and Interviews*, containing footage from 1968. Released on iTunes in 2009.

The message songs, in particular, prompted Simone to address the racial makeup of her audiences. Cohodas says it became Simone's habit to scan the crowd for black faces (226). On her 1968 live album *Black Gold*, in her introduction to "Young, Gifted, and Black," Simone tells the audience that the song "is not addressed primarily to white people. Though it does not put you down in any way. It simply ignores you." White fans in the mixed audience are audibly jovial in their response. Being segregated, though, went too far. And that's what Simone did to at least one audience in 1970, disregarding white patrons as "accidental and incidental," as only there "because they think it's the thing to do"; she then insisted black patrons move up toward the stage (Cohodas 244).

In necessarily vague asides throughout *Princess Noire*, Cohodas refers to mental illness as a factor exacerbating Simone's hostility and shifting moods. Simone's own account of her life paints a picture of the exhausted performer maddened by relentless touring. As of 1966, Simone on the road was experiencing what she called "the weirdness," hallucinating "visions of laser beams and heaven, with skin—always skin—involved in there somewhere" (Simone 111). Live recordings provide evidence of disorientation, like a Paris gig in 1968 during which she despaired: "Sometimes I don't know where I am. What country I'm in. What the people are like." At this same concert, though, the number of empty seats enraged her and she broke from a song to thunder at the ticket holders: "I don't like empty houses! I don't like empty houses!"¹⁰

From the mid-1970s on, Nina Simone's bad reputation got worse. She titled one obviously confessional lament from 1982 "Fodder in My Wings." The ongoing pattern of erratic behavior, regardless of touring schedule or finances, supports the mental illness diagnosis. Biographies by David Brun-Lambert and Sylvia Hampton can only speculate about chemical imbalances, schizophrenia, cyclothymia, and manic depression, all underscored by Simone's inclination to skip daily meds. An example of Simone's troubled onstage behavior can be seen on the DVD *Nina Simone Live at Montreux 1976*. Instead of greeting her audience, she scans them slowly, staring them down until their applause gradually stops. At last she plays a mediocre set, disdaining the audience yet winking at them too. For a finale, as if punishing them, she makes them sing along to the kind of schmaltz she had often claimed to hate: "Feelings... Woh oh oh feelings." Brun-Lambert describes the concert as "a snapshot of Nina's psychological and artistic situation upon arriving in Switzerland in 1976—a dramatist torn between her madness, her excesses, the disaster of her odyssey, and, despite all, hope" (237).

Other than gospel, Simone had deemed all music inferior to classical—until she plugged into her protest songs. Then the cause faded, the music industry turned away from her, and the history books erased her. She was "the most disappointed person in the world" and regretted the ten years of her life she'd given the Movement (qtd. in Bradley 82). This is why it irked her to play protest songs in the later years, especially for European audiences whom she believed didn't care what those songs stood for. So why keep playing them? Perhaps she thought being that Nina Simone, the protestor of yesteryear, guaranteed gigs, subsidizing the leisure-life abroad to which she'd grown accustomed. Money was a chronic worry for her. Or perhaps she was herself stuck in that protest role. Simone could have gone in almost any direction musically, in several directions at once, and her fans would have gone with her. Because that's what most empowered Simone's repertoire: her integration of genres, what Cohodas praises as the synthesis of the different parts of Simone's musical life (64).

Nina Simone in the 1980s-1990s became DIVA: "eager diva," "slighted diva," "shameless diva," "last of the great divas." By then, regrettably, the term diva tended to represent

¹⁰ From a slow, murky, gripping concert on CD as *Suzanne* (Moon Records).

performers who rely on attitude over substance. This may well have been true of Simone in her later years. She told *Essence* magazine:

I don't think being a revolutionary artist at this time is going to help me. Not in 1985. I don't think it's going to help me survive. Or pay my bills.... At this point in time, my music is chosen because I want to make a hit record. That's entirely different from the way I chose it before. When Martin Luther King was alive. (DeVeaux 121)

As noted in her autobiography, Simone characterized herself in later years with more self-determination than may have been the case. Audience members in this era consisted of the loyal who forgave all and the morbid impressed by self-destruction. Commenting on Simone's extended gig at Ronnie Scott's, the *London Times* accused some admirers of indulging her neuroticism for their own voyeuristic satisfaction (Davis 13). Concert reviews and blogs noted her unpredictable behavior as much as her predictable set-list, especially her disorientation and a tendency to leave the stage inexplicably.¹¹ Simone's longtime manager, Raymond Gonzalez, recalled "nasty concerts" to *Bienvenue*; Simone, "obviously loaded," insulted one audience so badly that there were "complaints of public abuse" (qtd. in Zwerin 57). Promoters who used to worry Simone might walk out on a gig in a huff became nervous about her showing up drunk or turning mean.

According to Gonzalez, instances of violence in Simone's personal life date back at least to the early 1980s, e.g. her pulling a knife on a cabdriver in Spain (Brun-Lambert 261). She made it clear to Tim Sebastian of BBC's *Hard Talk* that it was not a knife she pulled on a record executive, whom she claimed ripped her off, but a loaded gun. Simone's shot at him in a Swiss restaurant missed, perhaps on purpose, and she immediately fled the country (Brun-Lambert 279). 1995, in France, was especially bad for Nina Simone: in July she was given an eight-month suspended sentence for firing scattershot at noisy teenagers next door to her home (injuring one), and in October she was given a two-month suspended sentence for causing and fleeing an auto accident (injuring two).¹² Fans marvel at the knife-wielding Nina, the black freighter shooting guns from her bow. Hip-hop innovator Lauryn Hill raps about Nina Simone "defecating on your microphone." Simone's anger, however, once a channeled force for the CRM, became irrational like the scattershot she fired at those French teens, weakening more and more her credibility as a Civil Rights icon.

Also, her voice changed. Once a "vibrant and husky contralto," according to her first album's liner notes, "tonally sound[ing] like a combination of Marian Anderson and Ma Rainey," the voice of her later years was described as "a glowering alto...cracked and sometimes off-pitch," "a shadow of what it had been in her prime," "eroded...dry and blunt...near-parody." Yet her houses, when she came out from self-imposed exile, were packed anyway.

Many fans over the years remained so loyal that the changed voice, the extreme and inconsistent politics, the embarrassing behavior, and even the no-shows did not discourage them.

¹¹ In a review of Simone's appearance at the *Boston Globe* Jazz Festival in 1986, Cathy Lee writes: "Nina, who had up until then avoided addressing the audience directly, said, 'Am I the only one who thinks these mysterious thoughts?' Later she declared, 'I know who I am—I'm in Boston on a Sunday night.' Toward the end, she mused about knowing you're born again and being tired of it. She suddenly left the stage." I should stress that not all latter-day concerts were "Frighteningly Sad" as Lee titled this review for *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*. See more celebratory reviews by Diski, Holden, or Fordham.

¹² The injuries were not serious (Cohodas 354-355). Also reported in *Rolling Stone* (Weiderhorn 26) and elsewhere.

In 2000, Simone tested the devotion of one audience by upturning her palm to them. And their reaction? “Absolutely Pavlovian,” wrote a VH1 correspondent. “The fans freely consented to play by her rules” (Pellegrinelli). The audience at the 2001 JVC Jazz Festival, thinking they’d been commanded, stood up *en masse* when Simone started to sing Bob Marley’s “Get Up! Stand Up!” (Powers E5). Very few performers have as complex and enduring a fan-base as Nina Simone. She died at age 70 in 2003 and an obituary by one loyal fan recalls his disappointment over a concert she cancelled last-minute because a security guard didn’t recognize her: “I understood,” he writes: “It was all about respect” (Amana).

Contradictions

The very victories of the Civil Rights Movement created a new situation, according to John Anner’s *Beyond Identity Politics: Emerging Social Justice Movements in Communities of Color*. “The original promise of politics based in communities of interest or identity has been diverted into middle-class campaigns for affirmation, assimilation, and ‘a piece of the pie’” (9). This is what Simone criticized as getting “respectable,” settling for what white culture had to offer instead of further developing black culture.

As Simone’s commitment to black culture deepened, alas, it also grew more tyrannical, coinciding at times with mental illness or sheer exhaustion and at times with her bitterness over a lost career as a classical pianist. Simone’s own gaining belief in herself as the essence of blackness, as so many heralded her, served her like a pedestal—limiting her persona and encouraging her megalomania. Concerning the kind of protest identity Simone’s essential blackness certified, controversial scholar Shelby Steele points out: “If the greatest problem in coming from an oppressed group is the power the oppressor has over your group, the second greatest problem is the power your group has over you” (36). For Nina Simone, a third problem seems to have been her sense of power over frequently mixed or all-white audiences at live performances where she thought of herself as a toreador mastering a bull.

When the Civil Rights Movement died, perhaps Nina Simone was not able to be reborn. How could she as its essence, her identity fixed in a historical era passing before her eyes? Steele, addressing racial orthodoxy, identity, and subsequently limited black artists, writes: “[T]heir racial identity will be held hostage to the practice of their art. The effect of this is to pressure the work of art, no matter what inspired it, into a gesture of identification that reunites the artist and the group” (331). Nina Simone’s most insightful critics and fans do not want to burden her with an essence any more than they want to fit her into a category. We should appreciate Simone as category-defiant. And if there is an essence to her at all it must be contradiction—vital and irresolvable, churning its own nuclear energy.

Like her genre-jumping sets, Simone’s personality contained a mountain range of contradictions. As Maya Angelou observed in 1970, Simone is a consummate performer yet apathetic to personal appearance. She offers up her pains and joys but is unsocial and ungiving. She engages with her audiences and rejects them. “America is itself a contradiction,” Simone pointed out (qtd. in Angelou 133). And the Civil Rights Movement was a contradiction in its way, hinging on the tension between nonviolent protest against racial injustice and a ballot-or-bullet war for power.

Nina Simone and her songs will continue to be appropriated by a changing culture that grows more and more distant from her lifetime, it can be no other way. Nonetheless there is history at high tide under the lid of her piano. Her songs—especially her live recordings—offer

us the rawest time travel possible. When experiencing the transformative powers of her songs, just don't forget: First there was Eunice Waymon playing gospel music and committing her life to classical. Then there was racism.

And then there was Nina Simone.

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