

## NINA SIMONE BIOGRAPHY

### Personal Information

Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on February 21, 1935, in Tyron, NC; died on April 21, 2003, in Carry-le-Rouet, France; daughter of Mary Kate (a minister) and John Divine (a dry cleaner, barber, handyman, and truck driver) Waymon; married Don Ross, 1958 (divorced, 1959); married Andrew Stroud, 1961 (divorced c. 1970); children: (second marriage) Lisa Celeste

**Education:** Studied piano with Muriel Massinovitch, Joyce Carrol, Dr. Carl Friedburg, and Vladimir Sokhaloff; attended Juilliard School of Music, 1950-51.

### Career

Arlene Smith Studio, Philadelphia, accompanist and instructor, mid-1950s; self employed accompanist and piano tutor, mid-1950s; Midtown Bar and Grill, Atlantic City, NJ, performer, 1954-56; performed at various clubs in Philadelphia, 1956; performed at supper clubs in New York City and upstate New York, late 1950s; professional singer, songwriter, pianist, and recording artist, 1957-2003.

### Life's Work

As outspoken as she is talented, as opinionated as she is eclectic, Nina Simone lived as she talked and sung as she lived. A gifted child prodigy who blossomed into the "High Priestess of Soul" in the 1960s, Simone assumed the roles of classical pianist, protest singer, American expatriate, and comeback queen all in a career that spanned more than four decades. While her overt and sometimes extreme statements and opinions have overshadowed her music, even critics can't ignore her soulful voice, which drapes over classically influenced piano lines in a way that defies genre. "Neither as pianist nor as singer can she be categorized as a jazz performer," Leonard Feather wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* about a 1987 performance. "Primarily she is an evoker of moods, often verging on melodrama." Simone was also a firm believer in speaking her mind and staying true to herself, even if that meant poor record sales, angry audiences, and a tempestuous reputation.

### Early Hope Crushed by Curtis Institute

Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on February 21, 1933, in Tyron, North Carolina, Simone was the sixth of eight children born to John Divine Waymon and his wife Mary Kate, who presided over their family in a house filled with music. "Everything that happened to me as a child involved music," Simone recalled in her autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*. "Everybody played music. There was never any formal training; we learned to play the same way we learned to walk, it was that natural." While the other Waymon children had a love and talent for music, it became clear that young Eunice had a special affinity, a gift. By the age of six, Simone was the regular pianist at the family's church.

At about the same time, to earn extra money for the family, Simone's mother had begun to clean the house of a white woman named Mrs. Miller who took great interest in the piano talent of Eunice. Mrs. Miller suggested that her special talent needed to be fostered with formal training and upon learning the Waymon family couldn't afford it, offered to pay for Eunice's piano lessons herself. Soon, Eunice was the pupil of Muriel Massinovitch, an Englishwoman who'd moved to Tyron with her Russian painter husband and a strict devotee of Bach, a devotion which she passed on to her student. "He is technically perfect," Simone declared in her autobiography. "When you play Bach's

music you have to understand that he's a mathematician and all the notes you play add up to something--they make sense.... When I understood Bach's music I never wanted to be anything other than a concert pianist; Bach made me dedicate my life to music, and it was Mrs. Massinovitch who introduced me to his world."

Simone then set off to become the first black concert pianist. During her last year of high school she had won a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music in New York for one year. Her plan was to use that year at Juilliard to prepare her for the scholarship examination at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, a monumental stepping stone if one wanted to become a concert pianist. But it was not to be as the Curtis Institute rejected her application saying her level of piano playing wasn't good enough. "I just couldn't believe it had happened," Simone recalled in her autobiography, "and all I could think about was what I had given up over the years to get to where I was the day I heard Curtis didn't want me, which was nowhere. It was so hard to understand." Simone resolved to work harder and take the scholarship examination the next year, an idea she abandoned when the perception arose that the reason she didn't get into the Curtis Institute was because she was black.

### **Rose to Fame While Working Bars**

Following the disappointment with the Curtis Institute and with her family having migrated from North Carolina to Philadelphia, Simone decided to stay in the Philadelphia area and give piano lessons. When she learned one of her students, a particularly poor student at that, was going to be earning twice as much as she did by playing piano in a bar in Atlantic City for the summer, she decided to do the same. The only problem was Simone's staunchly religious mother--an ordained Methodist minister--would take a dim view of her daughter walking into a bar let alone working in one. To keep her mother from finding out she decided to come up with a stage name. She had loved the way an old boyfriend had often called her *niña*, Spanish for "little girl," and she also liked the name Simone from the French actress, Simone Signoret. Hence her stage name became Nina Simone.

The Midtown Bar and Grill was a seedy, Irish bar two blocks from Atlantic City's boardwalk, and in the summer of 1954 served as Simone's introduction to the performing life. For six hours a night--with a fifteen minute break each hour, where she'd sip milk at the bar--Simone first began to blend the genres that influenced her into a fresh synthesis of music. "I knew hundreds of popular songs and dozens of classical pieces," she wrote in her autobiography, "so what I did was combine them: I arrived prepared with classical pieces, hymns and gospel songs and improvised on those, occasionally slipping in a part from a popular tune." On her first night, the owner told her that her playing was fine, but if she wanted to keep the job, she'd have to sing as well. Soon, the drunken regulars had filtered out of the Midtown, replaced by packed crowds of young people enthused by the new style of music they were hearing.

Simone then moved from the Midtown to more upscale supper clubs in Philadelphia where she continued to have success and build an audience. In 1957 Simone hired an agent, Jerry Fields, who put her in contact with the head of New York's Bethlehem Records to do an album. After recording the album, released the next year called *Little Girl Blue*, Simone unknowingly signed a contract that gave away all her rights--a mistake she estimated, that cost her over a million dollars. The first single from the album, a

version of George and Ira Gershwin's "I Loves You, Porgy," attracted much attention and set the stage for her first real concert at New York's Town Hall. By this time she was signed to another label, Colpix, who released *The Amazing Nina Simone* and would also record and release the concert at Town Hall. At the time John S. Wilson of the *New York Times* hailed Simone as a unique and gifted interpreter who made each song her own. "[By] the time she has finished turning a song this way and that way, poking experimentally into unexpected crannies she finds in it, or suddenly leaping on it and whaling the daylights out of it, the song has lost most of its original colorization and has become, one might say, 'Simonized.'"

### **Music Focused on Civil Rights**

Soon Simone was the darling of the Greenwich Village music scene and began to tour America and abroad. While some of her performances were often in jazz clubs, Simone long resisted the notion that she was a "jazz singer," regarding the term as a racial insult. "To most white people, jazz means black and jazz means dirt and that's not what I play," she declared to Brantley Bardin in a 1997 *Details* interview. "I play black classical music. That's why I don't like the term 'jazz,' and Duke Ellington didn't like it either--it's a term that's simply used to identify black people." In the early 1960s Simone's feelings of racial oppression merged with the influential friendship of civil rights activist and playwright Lorraine Hansberry. Finding a political voice was not hard for the outspoken Simone, and her songs soon began to merge political thought from the civil rights movement with the blend of classical, blues, and gospel, causing some to label her a protest singer, another term she dismissed.

Inspired by the bombing of a Baptist church in Alabama, which killed four children, and the assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers in Mississippi, Simone wrote "Mississippi Goddam," which became an anthem of sorts for the civil rights movement and won her the admiration of such artists and leaders as Stokely Carmichael, Miriam Makeba, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. For the rest of the decade Simone was regarded as the true singer of the civil rights movement and contributed songs like "Sunday in Savannah," "Backlash Blues," and a song declared by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to be the black national anthem, "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." While touring, recording, and working for civil rights won Simone praise and notoriety, her home life slowly unraveled.

Married in 1960 to former police detective Andy Stroud, who became her manager, the couple had a daughter, Lisa Celeste, in 1961 and Simone barely saw her grow up. "After Lisa was born I had sworn to keep a check on the pace of my life," Simone wrote in her autobiography, "but in the movement I lived at twice the speed I ever had and music and politics took up my whole life. I didn't have personal ambitions anymore--I wanted what millions of other Americans wanted, and enjoying any private landmarks was impossible because the outside world always managed to butt in." Simone and her daughter would be periodically estranged from one another for the next thirty years.

### **Spiraled Down in Self Imposed Exile**

Simone and Stroud divorced in 1970 and Simone began what would be a fifteen-year exile from the United States. Disillusioned by the civil rights movement following the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Lorraine Hansberry, and Langston

Hughes; disturbed by the lack of respect given to her by noisy, talkative audiences; hounded by the Internal Revenue Service who accused her of tax evasion; and fed up with the "pirates" of the record companies who she claimed never compensated her properly for her records, Simone left. First to Barbados, then in 1974 to Liberia in Africa. "I left this country [America], because I didn't like this country," she explained in an interview with *Jet* in 1985. "I didn't like what it was doing to my people and I left." For some of the time in Liberia, Simone had her daughter with her and when the need for better schooling arose, the two moved to Switzerland in 1976. At this point Simone's career as a singer was virtually nonexistent, and in an attempt to revive it she went to London where a con man convinced her he'd sponsor her and get her performances. Instead, he robbed and beat her, then abandoned her in London. When the authorities did nothing, Simone attempted suicide by ingesting 35 sleeping pills. She woke up the next day in a London hospital glad to be alive, and hopeful for the future, realizing she couldn't get any lower.

Simone spent the next two years playing small dates and then moved to Paris where in 1978 she recorded the album, *Baltimore*, for a small, independent label. "Phrasing in spontaneous outbursts that vary in style from blunt, speech-song to jazz-gospel melisma," *Rolling Stone's* Stephen Holden wrote, "the singer runs the emotional gamut from fear, sorrow and tenderness to a final exhilarating hiss of challenge.... *Baltimore* is a stunning comeback by one of the very greatest." Although the record was well-received, Simone would have another recording drought that would last seven years.

### **Staged Comeback**

In 1985 Simone returned from her self-imposed exile to the United States and played a series of concerts, recorded the album *Nina's Back*, and even settled into a home in Los Angeles. The response from her fans was gracious and Simone appeared to have mellowed. "I'm ready to accept what the public has to give me," she confessed to Don Heckman of the *Los Angeles Times*. "And they're giving me a lot. The response I've been getting at all of my programs lately has been fantastic. I wasn't ready for that before, but now I *want* recognition in this country." Simone also made it clear that she wanted a hit record, telling Alexis DeVeaux of *Essence* that being a revolutionary is fine, but it doesn't pay the bills. "Before now, I was always led by whatever was going on politically at the time," she said. "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.... And it doesn't have anything to do with what's going on in this country. It has to do with what's best for Nina Simone."

Simone would have to wait another two years for a hit and it was an unlikely one at that. For a Chanel perfume commercial in England, the advertising agency chose "My Baby Just Cares For Me," the last song she recorded for the *Little Girl Blue* album in 1958. The song was re-released in Europe in 1987 and became a hit. The hectic pace of America, however, proved too much for Simone and she moved to the Netherlands for a few years before settling in Bouc-Bel-Air in the South of France in 1991. That same year she published her autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*, which received positive reviews. Two years later, Simone signed to the Elektra label and recorded her first recording for a major label in nearly twenty years, *A Single Woman*. Labeled "a hit and miss affair" by Zan Stewart of the *Los Angeles Times*, Kristine McKenna of *Musician* hailed the album

calling it, "a classy piece of work." Arion Berger of *Rolling Stone* said that while Simone's voice was in fine form, song selection and heavy-handed production work by Andre Fischer limited the album's potential. Simone was also featured on the soundtrack of *Point of No Return* in 1993 as her music served to calm the lead character played by Bridget Fonda. She also made a brief appearance in the film.

Simone made some unwanted headlines in 1995, none of which had to do with music or politics. While gardening in her backyard, she was disturbed by the loudness of two teenage boys swimming next door. When they persisted to be loud after she asked them twice to keep it down, Simone responded by shooting a buckshot rifle over the hedge towards the two boys. One of them was slightly injured and Simone was ordered to pay a fine of \$4,600 plus damages to the injured boys' family. She was also put on probation for 18 months and forced to undergo psychological counseling where it was discovered that Simone was "incapable of evaluating the consequences of her actions." Later that same year Simone was fined \$5,000 for causing and leaving the scene of a car accident that occurred in 1993.

From there, the path was brighter for Simone with Verve, Rhino, and RCA all releasing anthology collections of her music in 1996 and 1997. And while she remained outspoken--she openly disliked America and thought the country would die like flies as she predicted in "Mississippi Goddam"--Simone insisted her anger had subsided. "My anger was fire," she told Alison Powell of *Interview* in 1997, "and I was pushing that all that time, but *I'm* not angry now. I'm philosophical, and I am happy where I am because I can't change the world. I'm getting older and I have no business being out there preaching like I did."

Simone spent the last eight years of her life at her home in Carry-le-Rouet in France. On April 21, 2003, she died of natural causes. People from around the world mourned her death. Over 300 grievors attended her funeral at Our Lady of the Assumption church, including the South African singer Miriam Makeba, one of Simone's close friends. Ben Ngubane, a South African leader said of Simone in the *Africa News Service*, "It is with profound regret that we have received the news of the death of Nina Simone. Ms. Simone was an artist par excellence who lent her unique talent to contributing to the betterment of the world." Simone's daughter, who has been seen on Broadway in a new version of "Aida," spoke at her mother's funeral as quoted by the *Europe Intelligence Wire*: "She loved France and the French. I ask you not to let her memory fade. Talk about her, listen to her music."

In a 1997 interview Simone gave to Alison Powell, she bemoaned another point about America: the younger generations' lack of historical knowledge. "Their parents don't teach them anything about history. If they had, we wouldn't need to give this interview. People would know who the hell I am, they would know who Lorraine Hansberry was, they would know who Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, they would know who Malcolm X was, and get their inspiration from them." She would be happy to know, then, that only three months after she died BMG Heritage released a two-disc anthology of her work, running the gamut from her very first recording to her very last. Nina Simone left a powerful impression on the world, one that is not likely to dissipate any time soon as more and more people are introduced to her legacy and to her incredible, wonderful music.

Works

## **Selected works**

### **Books**

- *I Put A Spell On You*, Pantheon, 1991.

### **Discography**

- *Little Girl Blue*, Bethlehem Records, 1958.
- *The Amazing Nina Simone*, Columbia Picture Records (Colpix), 1959.
- *Nina's Choice*, Columbia Picture Records (Colpix), 1963.
- *I Put a Spell on You*, Philips, 1965.
- *Baltimore*, CTI, 1978.
- *Nina's Back*, VPI, 1985.
- *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, Mercury, 1988.
- *A Single Woman*, Elektra, 1993.
- (Soundtrack) *Point of No Return*, RCA, 1993.
- *The Essential*, volumes 1 and 2, RCA, 1993.
- *Sings Nina (Jazz Master 58)*, Verve, 1996.
- *Saga of the Good Life and Hard Times*, RCA, 1997.
- *Anthology*, BMG Heritage, 2003.