

# **Nina Simone: Music, Identity, Activism, & The Civil Rights Movement**



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# Eunice Waymon: Beginnings



Image of Eunice, age 8, outside of her elementary school in Tryon, NC. 1941

Born in Tryon NC, on February 21st, 1933.

Learned Piano at age 3.

Official pianist at Methodist Chapel of Tryon at age 5, 1938  
High school music teacher helped further this talent -  
helped set up fund to aid in schooling costs.

This allowed her to attend school at Julliard school of Music  
in NYC.

# Schooling & Music

Funding eventually ran out & Eunice left to live in Philadelphia with her family.

She saved money and worked to attend Curtis Institute of Music - denied access & career took a different turn.

Moved on from classical music, “started playing American standards, jazz and blues in Atlantic city clubs in the 1950s”.

Released her first full album in 1957, included the song ‘I Loves You, Porgy’.



Eunice, age 12.

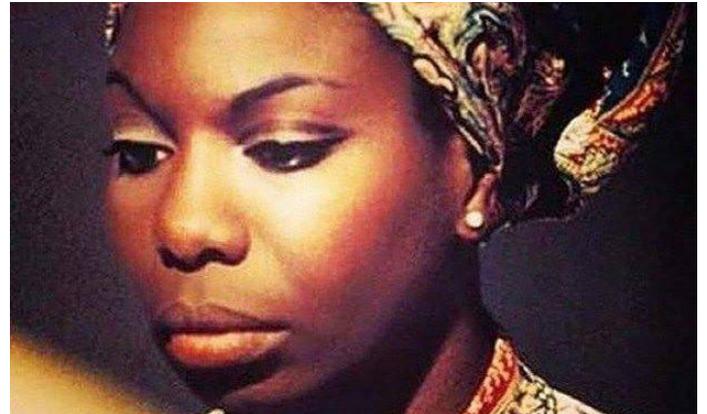
# Activism & Identity

Stage name - Nina Simone was created through the combination of an old nickname from a previous partner “niña” and inspiration from the famous french actress Simone Signoret.

Her music directly contested standards of classical and jazz music; combined gospel, pop, folk, jazz etc. as she constructed her sound around her identity.

Simone’s music began to shift toward issues within the civil rights movement as she became intertwined with its’ efforts.

Her identity & her music were inextricably connected and it was clear to listeners everywhere that she was expressing a clear political message.



# Music & Civil Rights

Simone's music became drastically geared toward the fight for Civil Rights, especially after the assassination of Medgar Evers and the murders of the four African American girls in the Birmingham church bombing in 1963.

What had previously been love songs and upbeat ballads was swiftly shifting to protest songs, and activism centered tunes.

A few being, Mississippi Goddam, her cover of Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday, Old Jim Crow, Why (The King of Love is Dead) etc.

Music was a powerful protest tool and her tunes carried tremendous political weight.



## Nina Simone - Mississippi Goddam Live



<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=mississippi+goddam+live+netherlands&view=detail&mid=D2797C3332048AF2A38AD2797C3332048AF2A38A&FORM=VIRE>

# Contemporary Issues

Erasure of Simone's political stances/ activism during and after the movement.

What was the extent of the pressures of respectability politics and the assimilation tactics she faced through record labels and performance spaces?

What pressures did she face through political palatability, colorism as well as racial essentialism, both then and now?

Is her story being purely portrayed or is it being muddied up with misinformation?

What does her legacy mean today? As an activist / singer?



Zoe Saldana in the 2016 film, *Nina*.

# Simone's Legacy & Dedication to Justice

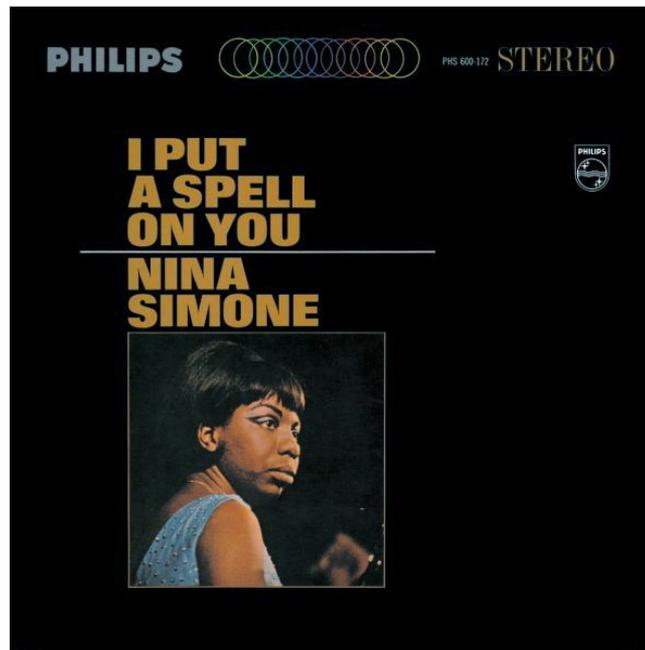
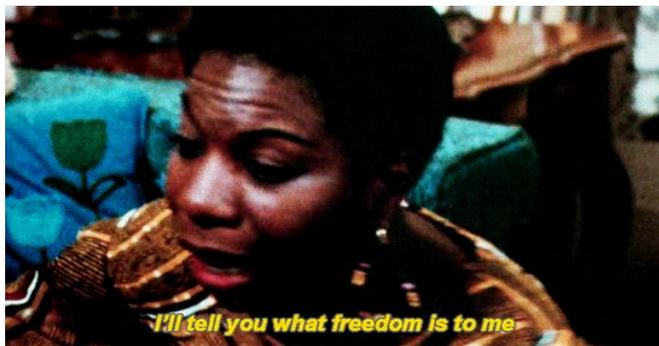
As her civil rights career progressed, “the lyrics to her songs changed and became more explicitly political” (1362, Feldstein).

Simone's music “helped raise her listeners' consciousness about various socio-political issues, preparing them for political action” (247, Mena & Saucier).

Simone's work became dedicated to the progression of the Civil Rights Movement and those stuck in the struggle alongside her. She made this clear through her political stances and musical advances, she was unafraid of the challenges that lied ahead.

# Lasting Impact

Simone 'matters not necessarily because she definitely caused a specific number of fans to change their behavior, but because the perspectives on black freedom and gender that she among others articulated circulated as widely as they did in the early 1960s' (Feldstein, 1352).



Nina Simone passed away on April 21st, 2003 in Carry-le-Rouet, France, but her message and the power behind it, still resonates all the same.

# Sources

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