

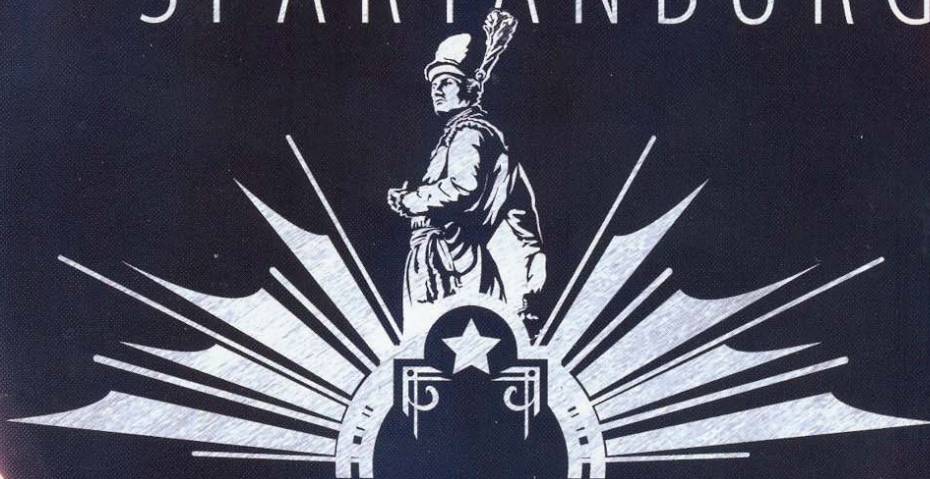
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NINA SIMONE

Tryon celebrates a timeless talent

By **SUSAN CARROLL GALLAGHER**

From Mountain Traditions Magazine

As a child growing up in the small town of Tryon, during the Great Depression, Nina Simone had big dreams. Music moved her heart and soul and she had a natural gift for playing the piano. She could see herself becoming a famous musician, maybe even the first black, female concert pianist in America.

A large part of that dream came true, thanks to Simone's relentless passion for music. Her deep, sultry vocals and classical piano playing reached across a range of music, blending jazz, gospel, soul, pop, folk, rock and blues.

Another side of her legacy is laced with poli-

tics and controversy. Deeply touched by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Simone wrote and performed protest songs.

"She was a powerful voice for a segment of American society and culture who felt that the separation of individuals into hierarchical structures is inherently wrong and inherently damaging to the well-being of the culture in general," says Crys Armbrust, a Tryon musician.

Armbrust is heading up the Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Memorial Project to memorialize Simone in her hometown. The memorial project plans to commemorate Simone through an annual music festival, scholarships and a sculpture. In an unrelated effort, a local couple is working hard on their own to restore Simone's childhood home. (See story on page 111.)

Simone's contributions to the world transcend music, says Armbrust, a former organist and master of the choristers for Tryon's Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross. He organized the memorial proj-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MICHAEL JUSTUS**

AND COURTESY OF THE EUNICE WAYMON-NINA SIMONE MEMORIAL PROJECT



Crys Armbrust

ect to help showcase Simone's music and her Tryon roots.

"I have for a long while had a great love of her music," Armbrust says. "I think she is quite an extraordinary musician and accomplished in any number of modes."

The Waymon family is thrilled with the Tryon efforts to honor Simone.

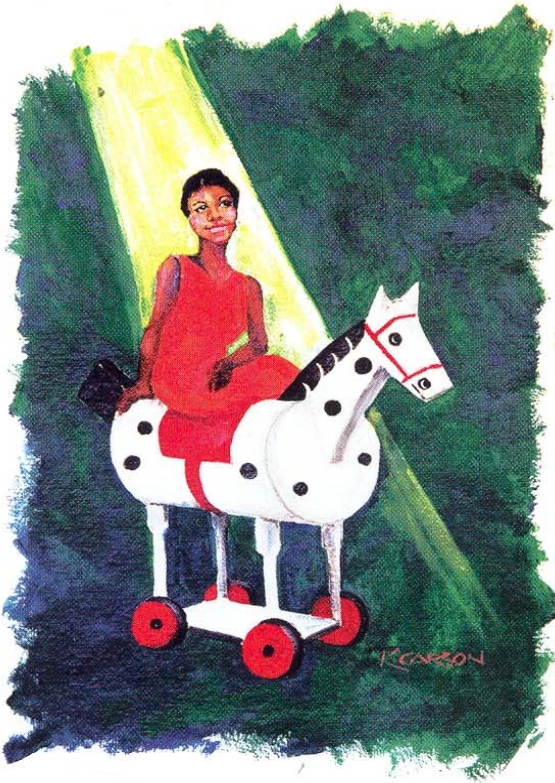
"It's the greatest thing in the world," says Simone's brother Carrol Waymon, 82, from his San Diego home. "It's part of building the Eunice Waymon/Nina Simone legacy."

Waymon and two other family members — Simone's daughter, Lisa Celeste Kelly, and Simone's youngest sister, Frances Waymon-Fox, of Atlanta — are working with the memorial project's committee. Following in her mother's footsteps, Simone's daughter is a musician and has starred in Broadway shows. She's known by her stage name: Simone.

Growing up

Simone was the sixth of eight children born to John D. and Mary Kate Waymon, an ordained Methodist minister. They lived in a cozy, white clapboard house next to a tennis court.

Young Eunice began playing piano at the age of 4 and organ by 7. She frequently performed at her family's church, St. Luke CME Church on Markham Road, where her mother preached.



Above, Nina Simone was born in this Tryon house in 1933. At left, "Nina and the Tryon Horse," was painted by Kathleen Carson, owner of Simply Irresistible Gallery in Tryon.

Her deep, sultry vocals and classical piano playing reached across a broad range of music, blending jazz, gospel, soul, pop, folk, rock and blues.

"Everything that happened to me as a child involved music," Simone later wrote in her autobiography. "It was part of everyday life, as automatic as breathing."

After finishing high school in 1950, Simone studied in a summer program with Carl Friedberg at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. Simone hoped to continue her classical piano studies with a scholarship from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where her family had resettled. She

auditioned at Curtis but wasn't accepted as a student. Simone believed the rejection occurred because she was black, even though several black musicians including classical composer and pianist George Walker had previously graduated from Curtis. Shortly before her death in 2003, Simone learned that Curtis had awarded her an honorary degree.

The Curtis rejection became a turning point for Simone. She modified her dream of becoming a classical pianist and began teaching private music lessons. To help support her family, she also started performing in Northeastern clubs, using the stage name of "Nina Simone." She chose Nina, meaning little one, and Simone after the French actress Simone Signoret. The singer adopted the stage name to keep her religious mother from knowing she was performing in bars.

Her first job was in an Irish bar in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1957. In addition to playing piano, she began singing at the bar owner's request and was well received by audiences, especially the college crowd. They loved her eclectic style and vocal range, from deep and passion-



Nina Simone from a 1992 promotion.

ate to soft and tender. She moved on to clubs in Greenwich Village and launched her recording career in New York in the late 1950s.

Simone got married and recorded her first album in 1958. It featured a version of George Gershwin's, "I Loves You, Porgy," from the musical Porgy and Bess and became one of Simone's most famous recordings. Audiences loved her songs like "Plain Gold Ring," "Don't Smoke in Bed" and "Little Girl Blue." She went on to record dozens of albums in the United States and abroad and earned the monikers "High Priestess of Soul" and "Queen of African Rooted Classical Music."

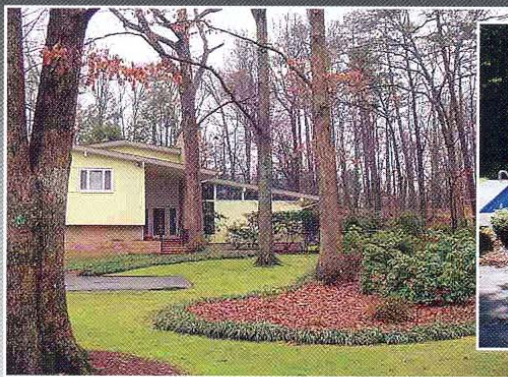
All told, Simone's repertoire included more than 500 songs and some 60 albums.

The memorial project

Awarding scholarships in the musician's honor was a natural direction for the Simone memorial project. It follows the tradition of the community fund that paid for Simone's training as a musician.

So far, the memorial project offers two scholarships: a \$500 stipend open to Ju-

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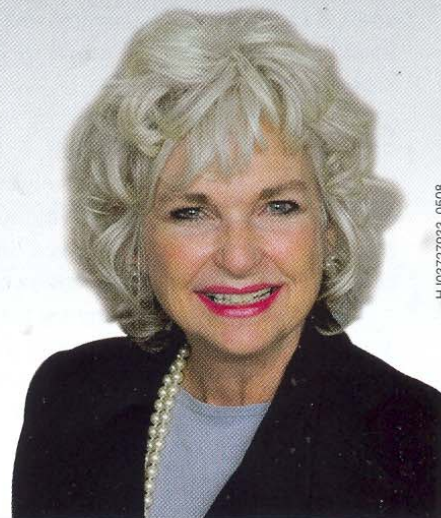
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nior Scholars, rising sixth-graders through rising 11th-graders, and a \$1,000 stipend open to Senior Scholars, rising 12th-graders and older. The scholarships, Armbrust says, are not limited to aspiring musicians and are accepted from applicants worldwide.

Simone's brother, Carrol Waymon, a retired psychology professor, predicts the scholarships will "open vistas for kids who want to go to those places they only dreamed of. The program is going to take these kids' dreams and make them come true."

The scholarship program can also become a way, Armbrust says, to educate public school students about Nina Simone.

The project also includes plans for a life-size bronze sculpture of Simone.

Zenos Frudakis of Philadelphia was named in September as the project sculptor. Frudakis studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and received a master's degree in fine art at the University of Pennsylvania. His works of art are in public and private collections throughout the United States and abroad.

Armbrust hopes the sculpture will be located in downtown Tryon at the site of the old train depot because "it is the most central of locations, most appropriate to recognizing a star of Simone's international caliber and the most accessible of the locations."

Andrew Foster, president of the Tryon Downtown Development Association, would like to see the sculpture as close to downtown as possible. Ideally, Foster says, the statue could be just off U.S. 176, which goes right through the center of town.

Music fest

October 2009 is the date set for the first Nina Simone music festival. Armbrust envisions a festival that covers many genres of music, just as Nina Simone did.

"It is not a music festival wherein only Nina Simone's music will be played," Armbrust says. "It is a trans world music fest in the name of Nina Simone. 'Trans world' because that umbrella incorporates all forms of music, replicating her own performing career."

He also hopes Simone's daughter might perform or participate in the festival. She starred on Broadway in the musical *Aida*, appeared on Broadway in *Rent* and was lead singer for the acid jazz band *Liquid Soul*.

Ideally, Armbrust says, the festival will spread beyond Tryon, taking place in performance venues in cities such as Asheville, Hendersonville or Saluda to recognize the magnitude of Simone's talents.

Project organizers are seeking corporate sponsors and local government support for the festival. Tryon government and business leaders are enthusiastic about the festival and hope it might boost the local economy.

"Any time you can bring people into our community is a good thing," says Bill Hillhouse, board chairman of the downtown development association. "Tryon is a neat place and when people come here, they enjoy it. Also, they spend money here, and that's good for our downtown merchants." ♦

For more information on the Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Project, go online to www.ninasimoneproject.org.



Couple plans preservation of Simone's Tryon birthplace

BY SUSAN CARROLL GALLAGHER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL JUSTUS

Kipp and Julie McIntyre want to preserve the story of the modest frame house at 30 E. Livingston St. in Tryon, where Eunice Waymon, known to the world as the legendary musician Nina Simone, was born in 1933.

The Waymon home, built in the mid-to late 1920s, stood at the center of a vibrant African-American community. The McIntyres want to bring that history to life by restoring the house and grounds to the way they were when Eunice Waymon, her parents and five older siblings lived there.

'There are people out there who will want to see, look into the windows and peer into the past, and we're going to provide that.'

KIPP MCINTYRE

"There are people out there who will want to see, look into the windows and peer into the past, and we're going to provide that," says Kipp McIntyre.

McIntyre, who has an art degree and works as Polk County's economic development director, and his wife, Julie, an architect, bought the house

two years ago and are financing its restoration themselves. They call their private endeavor the Eunice Waymon Birthplace and Garden. (It has no connection to the Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Memorial Project.)

"My wife and I own the birthplace and are slowly documenting it," McIntyre says. "We have three goals: that it never be thought of as anything other than the birthplace of Eunice Waymon, that it be protected and preserved in perpetuity and that it appear on the inside and out as close to as it did in 1933 when Eunice was born."

McIntyre hopes the house will be ready this summer. "The house will be restored within reason — no plumb-



ing, no electricity,” he says. “It will remain as an exhibit.”

It would be fantastic if the project could lead to economic development and job creation on Tryon’s east side, he says.

“I don’t see it as a museum,” McIntyre says, “but as a physical connection to our past, Tryon’s past, specifically the African-American community’s past.”

A historical journey

McIntyre offers a vivid glimpse of that past during a recent walk through the site.

The Waymons’ neighborhood echoed with the sounds of children playing and their elders tending to busy lives. In her autobiography, Simone recalls spending winter days with her mother in the kitchen, where the stove kept her warm while her mother prepared food and sang to her.

“All the kids would play on that side,” says McIntyre as he looks east across the yard and beyond. “Down in that kudzu swale, there was a baseball field and a larger playground where they would have community gatherings and such.”

Just up the road to the west stood the family’s church, St. Luke CME (since replaced by a newer building), where Eunice played piano. Her mother, Mary Kate, played the organ and served as an elder and minister. As in many other Southern towns, church was a focal point for the community’s social life in Tryon.

McIntyre calls John Waymon the “classic entrepreneur.” In addition to cutting hair and pressing, he also delivered goods by truck, sold box lunches



to job sites, traded vegetables from the family garden for other staples and cooked at Lake Lanier and Chimney Rock.

Next door was the Lyles house, a centerpiece for the community that included a library. A library for African-Americans was important to the community at a time when institutional segregation existed, McIntyre notes. And Fred Lyles, who owned the home, enjoyed pulling people together.

The demolition of the Lyles home a few years ago prompted the McIntyres to buy and preserve the Eunice Waymon/Nina Simone birthplace.

“We know people come to Tryon looking for this house. They come here looking for the birthplace of Nina Simone,” McIntyre says. “We want them to be satisfied when they get here.” ♦

Kipp and Julie McIntyre, top, are working to preserve the birthplace of Eunice Waymon in Tryon.