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# Carolina *Chanteuse*

Tryon native Nina Simone put a spell on music lovers around the world with her soulful voice and extraordinary talent.

BY CHARLES BLACKBURN JR.



Nina Simone's image captured the imagination of her fans, as illustrated by *Lady Midnight*, painted by Zimbabwe-born artist Mucha Kachidza, who now lives in Durham. The painting's inspiration is the album cover of Simone's *For a Single Woman*.





**N**ina Simone grew up in a picturesque tourist town in the North Carolina mountains, but by the time of her death in 2003 at her home in the south of France, she belonged to the world. Her deep, raspy, forceful voice, along with a gift for composition and a piano style that reflected her classical training, had made her a unique figure in jazz and popular music for nearly 50 years.

She was called the “High Priestess of Soul,” but it was a bit of a misnomer for someone whose music embraced jazz, folk, classical, pop, gospel, blues, Broadway, rock, and opera in more than 50 albums. As one reviewer said of her style, “It’s Bach, boogie, and bebop all mixed together.”

Those influenced by her include The Beatles, Cat Stevens, Aretha Franklin, and Norah Jones. What’s more, she often sang with a larger purpose, providing a lift to the American civil rights movement and helping to raise the consciousness of a nation.

### Musical upbringing

She was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in 1933 in Tryon, about 40 miles south of Asheville. “The house on East Livingston Street where she was born is being restored by its current owners,” says Crys Armbrust, who was among the singer’s fans long before he became executive director of the Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Memorial Project.

Launched last year, the local effort to honor the world-famous diva is ahead of schedule in providing scholarships to deserving students in all disciplines. Plans also call for an annual Nina Simone Music Festival, the first of which will be held in 2009, as well as a bronze statue of her by renowned local sculptor William Behrends.

A former university English professor, Armbrust is an accomplished musician in his own right and is working on an original piece called “Five for Nina Simone,” based on writings of significance to her. The memorial project is his

brainchild, in pursuit of which he has become an authority on the singer/songwriter. “She’s the most famous person ever to come from Tryon,” he notes, “and I felt we should recognize her. Local people were very supportive of her during her formative years here.”

Eunice came from a musical family and was playing the piano by the age of 3. Her father, a businessman and jack-of-all-trades, had been a

on,” Armbrust says. “Mrs. George Miller agreed to pay for formal lessons here for a year with Mrs. Muriel Massinovitch, a transplanted Englishwoman known to the community as Mrs. Mazzy.”

In her autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*, Simone wrote of those lessons: “Mrs. Massinovitch only allowed me to practice Bach, and soon I loved him as much as she did.” At the end of the year, when



By 1959, Eunice Waymon had become Nina Simone, and her recording of “I Loves You Porgy” had made her a star.

performer earlier in his career. Her mother was a religious woman who later became a Methodist minister. By the time she was 6, Eunice was the main accompanist at St. Luke’s CME Church in town.

“Her talent was recognized early

the money ran out, Mrs. Mazzy started the Eunice Waymon Fund so the gifted student could continue her studies. Many townspeople contributed to it.

Everything in the prodigy’s adolescence revolved around music.



When the time came, it was decided that she would attend Allen High School in Asheville, a four-year boarding school for African-American girls.

### Early influences

In Asheville, she studied with the high school's music teacher and also had private lessons from Clemens Sandresky, who today is dean emeritus of the Salem College School of Music. In the late 1940s, he was a young man just starting his own career, following military service and studies at Dartmouth and Harvard.

"She was my first private student when I opened a

piano studio in my Asheville apartment," Sandresky recalls from his home in Winston-Salem. He was impressed with the 15-year-old from the start. "I remember saying to friends, 'There isn't anything I say to this girl about music that she doesn't understand immediately.' I found she had an extraordinary affinity for Bach and decided that she should be heard."

He arranged a recital for her at his studio, inviting a number of local people. "I told Eunice she could bring some of her friends as well, and she did, but they were too shy to come inside,"

he recalls. "The weather was good. They sat outside on the lawn and heard her play through an open window."

Everyone was enthusiastic about the performance, including local classical pianist

Grace Potter Carroll, a veteran of European concert halls. "It was apparent that Eunice had to go on," Sandresky says. "Money was raised in Tryon to send her to the Juilliard School of Music in New York. I recommended that she work with Carl Friedburg there. Everything she did was incredibly musical. Her touch was really extraordinary."

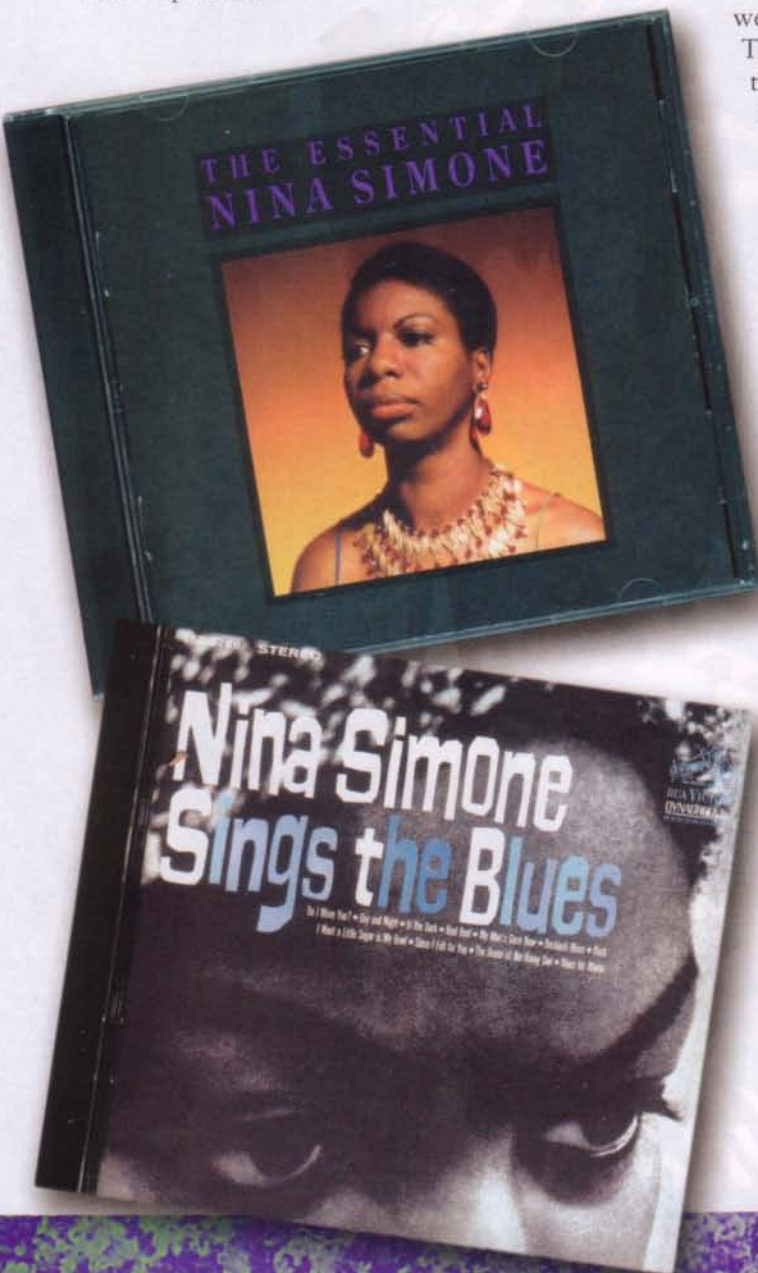
### Road to success

After a year at Juilliard, Waymon had hoped to attend the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but was refused admission on the grounds that she wasn't good enough. This rejection would haunt her for the rest of her life.

She moved to Philadelphia anyway to be with her transplanted family and study piano. "She still wanted to pursue a classical career," Armbrust says. "She gave piano lessons to make money and studied as a private student with the same instructor she would have had at the Curtis

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Institute. When he remarked one day that she should have been a scholarship student there, it confirmed to her that she had been rejected because of her race, not because of a lack of talent.”

On a trip to New York around this time, Sandresky stopped in Philadelphia to visit his former student. “She had just started playing in a nightclub in Atlantic City [New Jersey],” he says, “and didn’t want her religious mother to find out. That’s why she changed her name to Nina Simone.”

She had discovered that a nightclub performer could make more money than a piano teacher. “The club owner suggested she sing as well as play,” Armbrust explains. “She had a regal presence onstage and demanded that her audiences respect her by being quiet during her sets.”

As word spread of her eclectic mix of classical, Broadway, and popular music, Simone gained a following among local college students and attracted the attention

of a record producer. Her 1959 recording of “I Loves You Porgy,” from the opera *Porgy & Bess*, became a Top 40 hit and made her a star. Soon she was in demand on the concert circuit, both here and abroad.

Some years later on a trip to France, Sandresky’s son spent a sensational day on the town with her. “He told me, ‘Everybody in Paris knows her.’ But she didn’t have any money with her that day, and he finally sent her home in a taxi to preserve what was left of his meager finances.”

By then, Simone had begun composing songs of her own. The searing lyrics she wrote after the 1963 murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers were both an indictment and a plea for justice. Her other songs included “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” and, in memory of Martin Luther King Jr., “Why? (The King of Love Is Dead).”

Simone also recorded songs by artists as diverse as Leonard Cohen


and the Bee Gees and made them her own.

## Great together

One of Simone’s most successful collaborations was with a fellow North Carolinian, Grammy-winning jazz pianist Billy Taylor, who grew up in Greenville. Now retired, Taylor has been the Kennedy Center’s artistic adviser on jazz for more than a decade. He is also revered as an educator for his work with young people and for broadening the audience for jazz. Each spring, East Carolina University holds a jazz festival named for him.

“Nina Simone was a student at Juilliard when my bass player brought her to see me perform in a club,” Taylor recalls. “She heard me play a song titled ‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free.’”

He had written the song for his daughter and considers it his most important work. “Later, when Nina got a record deal with RCA Victor, she called me to say she’d like to include it




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and invited me to the recording session," Taylor says. "I was enthralled listening to her play it. She asked, 'Does it have any words?' And I told her it did."

Did it ever. The lyrics resonated with the times. It was 1967. Her version of "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free" became an anthem of the civil rights movement.

The song has been played many times in movies and on television. In 2004, a Coca-Cola commercial featuring British singer Sharlene Hector's a cappella rendition won the song new fans. Scores of singers have covered it over the years.

"Everyone who has sung it has imitated Nina," Taylor says fondly. "She was a very special musician, very personal. Her club performances were legendary. She epitomized what was going on at the time. She made a song her own, made it universal."

### Fame and exile

Nina Simone left the United States in 1973 and lived in the Caribbean

and Africa before settling in Europe. She said she felt freer there than she did in her native country. She returned to the United States in 1985 for a concert tour and remained a top draw in her later years, making records into the 1990s.

"Nina last visited Tryon in 1992 and played music at St. Luke's CME Church here, where her career began," Armbrust says. One of her greatest performances came at Carnegie Hall in 2001. She was somewhat frail, having battled for a number of years the cancer that would ultimately claim her life. Fans wildly applauded every song, and demanded an encore — to which she responded by shouting affectionately, "Go home!"

Her legacy and fame continue. When a choral ensemble Armbrust then directed was touring England last year, Simone's music was playing in pubs and restaurants everywhere they went. "A new CD compilation had just come out, and everyone we met was delighted to hear that we

were from Nina's hometown," he says.

Support for the Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Memorial Project in Tryon has come from far and wide. "While local people are interested in the life of Eunice Waymon," Armbrust notes, "the world is still in love with Nina Simone."

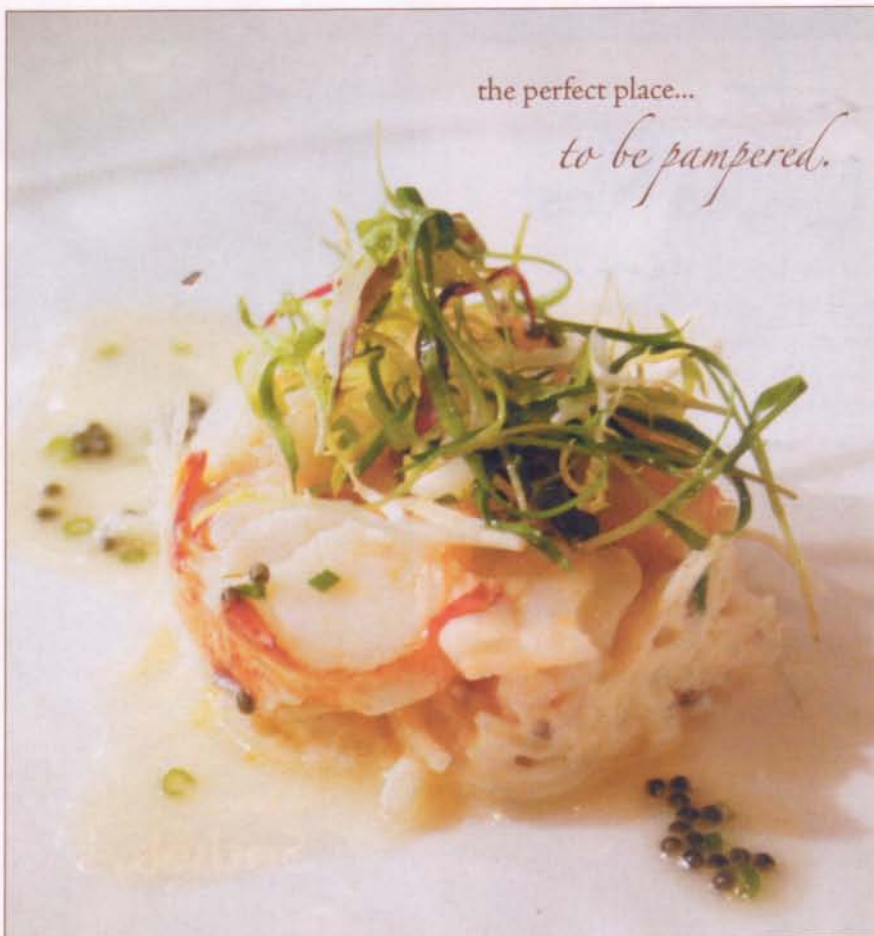
*Charles Blackburn Jr. lives in Raleigh.*

## to know more

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For a link to the Waymon-Simone Memorial Project's website, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on "This Month's Issue."

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