



**MAKING NOTES**

**MUSIC OF THE CAROLINAS**

*Edited by*

**ANN WICKER**

# Nina Simone Put A Spell On Us

BY CHARLES BLACKBURN JR.

**N**ina Simone grew up in a pretty little 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, made her a unique figure in jazz and popular music for nearly fifty years.

Her music embraced jazz, folk, classical, pop, gospel, blues, Broadway, rock, and opera, in more than fifty albums. As one reviewer said of her style, "It's Bach, boogie, and bebop all mixed together."

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 forty miles south of Asheville. "The house on East Livingston Street where she was born is being restored by its current owners," according to Crys Armbrust of Tryon, who was among the singer's fans long

*Erratum:*

*Zenos Frudakis is the sculptor of record for the Nina Simone sculpture in Tryon, N.C.*

before he became executive director of the Waymon-Simone Memorial Project.

Launched in 2006, the 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, 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 working on an original piece called "Five for Nina Simone," based on writings of significance to her. The memorial project is his brain-child, 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."

He says Waymon came from a musical family and was playing the piano by the age of three. Her father, a businessman and jack-of-all-trades, was a performer earlier in his career. Her mother was a religious woman who later became a Methodist minister. By the time

she was six, Waymon was the main accompanist at St. Luke's CME Church.

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

In her autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*, Nina Simone said of those lessons: "Mrs. Mazzanovich only allowed me to practice Bach, and soon I loved him as much as she did." At the end of the year, when the money ran out, Mrs. Mazzy started the Eunice Waymon Fund so the gifted student could continue her studies.

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 school's music teacher and had private lessons from Clemens Sandresky, now 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 fifteen-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. Everyone

was enthusiastic about the performance, "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."

## ROAD TO SUCCESS

After a year at Juilliard, she had hoped to attend the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, 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. "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 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," 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 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."

She 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 and Bess*, became a Top 40 hit and made her a star.

Later, she began composing songs of her own. The searing lyrics to “Mississippi Goddamn,” written 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, “Why? The King of Love Is Dead.”

## GREAT COLLABORATION

One of her best collaborations was with Grammy-winning jazz pianist and educator Billy Taylor, who grew up in Greenville, N.C. Now retired, Taylor has been the Kennedy Center’s artistic adviser on jazz for a dozen years. 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 from his home in New York. “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 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.

## FAME AND EXILE

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 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. Fans wildly applauded every song and demanded an encore—to which she responded by shouting affectionately, “Go home!” Support for the Waymon-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.”

