

Nina Simone Biography

Author, Pianist, Civil Rights Activist, Musician, Singer (1933–2003)

Legendary performer Nina Simone sang a mix of jazz, blues and folk music in the 1950s and '60s, later enjoying a career resurgence in the '80s. A staunch Civil Rights activist, she was known for her tunes (e.g. "Mississippi Goddam", "Young, Gifted and Black" and "Four Women", among many others).

Background and Early Life

Born on February 21, 1933, in Tryon (North Carolina), Nina Simone took to music at an early age, learning to play piano at the age of 3 and singing in her church's choir. Simone's musical training over the years emphasized classical repertory along the lines of Beethoven and Brahms, with Simone later expressing the desire to have been recognized as the first major African-American concert pianist. Her music teacher helped establish a special fund to pay for Simone's education and, after finishing high school, the same fund was used to send the pianist to New York City's famed Juilliard School of Music to train.

Simone taught piano and worked as an accompanist for other performers while at Juilliard, but she eventually had to leave school after she ran out of funds. Moving to Philadelphia, Simone lived with her family there in order to save money and go to a more affordable music program. Her career took an unexpected turn, however, when she was rejected from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia; she later claimed the school denied her admittance because she was African-American.

Turning away from classical music, she started playing American standards, jazz and blues in Atlantic City clubs in the 1950s. Before long, she started singing along with her music at the behest of a bar owner. She took the stage name Nina Simone—"Nina", derived from the Spanish word "niña", came from a nickname used by her then boyfriend while "Simone" was inspired by French actress Simone Signoret. The performer eventually won over a lot of fans – the writers Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin among others.

Prominent Civil Rights Singer

By the mid-1960s, Simone became known as the voice of the Civil Rights Movement. She wrote "Mississippi Goddam" in response to the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young African-American girls. She also penned "Four Women", chronicling the complex histories of a quartet of African-American female figures, and "Young, Gifted and Black", borrowing the title of a play by Hansberry, which became a popular anthem. After the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Simone's bassist Greg Taylor penned "Why (The King of Love Is Dead)", which was performed by the singer and her band at the Westbury Music Festival.

During the '60s, Simone had prominent hits in England with "I Put a Spell on You" and "To Love Somebody", with the latter penned by Barry and Robin Gibb and originally performed by their group.

(486 words; BASED ON: <http://www.biography.com/people/nina-simone-9484532>)