

AN ANALYSIS OF THE MUSICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF NINA SIMONE

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Abstract

Nina Simone was a prominent jazz musician of the late 1950s and 60s. Beyond her fame as a jazz musician, Nina Simone reached even greater status as a civil rights activist. Her music spoke to the hearts of hundreds of thousands in the black community who were struggling to rise above their status as a second-class citizen. Simone's powerful anthems were a reminder that change was going to come. Nina Simone's musical interpretation and approach was very unique because of her background as a classical pianist. Nina's untrained vocal chops were a perfect blend of rough growl and smooth straight-tone, which provided an unquestionable feeling of heartache to the songs in her repertoire. Simone also had a knack for word painting, and the emotional climax in her songs is absolutely stunning. Nina Simone did not have a typical jazz style. Critics often described her as a "jazz-and-something-else-singer." She moved effortlessly through genres, including gospel, blues, jazz, folk, classical, and even European classical. Probably her biggest mark, however, was on the genre of protest songs. Simone was one of the most outspoken and influential musicians throughout the civil rights movement. Her music spoke to the hundreds of thousands of African American men and women fighting for their rights during the 1960s. Although Simone is remembered for the lyrics she sang and the emotions she evoked, not enough credit is given to her as an interpreter of song. Simone had an incredible talent at finding the true message of a song and exposing it to her audience. Rather than jazz musician or activist, this thesis will focus on Simone as a gifted interpreter.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER 1	1
Eunice Kathleen Waymon: Child Prodigy	
Nina Simone: The Road Less Traveled	4
CHAPTER 2	9
“I’m not a singer”	
“Be My Husband”	15
CHAPTER 3	18
“I Loves You, Porgy”	
“Strange Fruit”	20
“Pirate Jenny”	23
CHAPTER 4	28
“Black is the Colour of My True Love’s Hair”	
“Children Go Where I Send You”	31
Conclusion	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	37

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Chapter 1

Eunice Kathleen Waymon: Child Prodigy

Nina Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on February 21, 1933 in Tryon, North Carolina to John Divine and Mary Kate Waymon.¹ Eunice's first exposure to music was through her mother's singing and weekly church services. Eunice's father was a deacon for the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and her mother was Reverend. African-American spiritual and gospel music surrounded Eunice from birth. From a young age Eunice displayed a natural ability for music. When Eunice was two and a half her parents found Eunice sitting at their family organ playing a church hymn entirely from memory.² It was apparent that this young girl had a gift that needed to be properly nurtured, but due to the family's poor income something as extravagant as private piano lessons was out of the question.

In addition to being the pastor at the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Eunice's mother Mary Kate worked as a housekeeper for a wealthy family in Tryon. On Saturday mornings Eunice would come visit her mother and walk home with her when she was finished. Mary Kate's employer was Mrs. Miller. Eunice described her as "the first white person I knew at all."³ Eunice's mother often talked about Eunice and explained to Mrs. Miller her great talent as a pianist. One day when Eunice was playing for a choir in town Mrs. Miller decided to come hear her play. Upon hearing Eunice, Mrs. Miller offered to pay for private piano lessons for one year. If Eunice showed promise Mrs. Miller would find a way to allow

¹Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), p. 6-7.

²David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: the Biography*. (Great Britain: Aurum Press Ltd., 2009), p. 10-11.

³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

Eunice to continue her education. Eunice began studying under the local piano teacher, an Englishwoman by the name of Muriel Massinovitch. Eunice would refer to her as Miz Mazzy.⁴

After a year of lessons it was clear to both Mrs. Miller and the family that Eunice should continue her classical training. In order to pay for the lessons, Mrs. Massinovitch set up the Eunice Waymon Fund, a fund to which the people of Tryon could contribute to in an effort to ensure Eunice's musical education for as long as it was necessary. In exchange for the town's kindness Eunice agreed to perform regular recitals at a hall in town so that the donors to her fund could hear the progress their young prodigy was making. It was at one of these recitals that Eunice experienced the reality of racism and prejudice that was surrounding her. Shortly after her tenth birthday Eunice was asked to play a recital at the Tryon town hall with many prominent members of the community in attendance. As she sat down at the piano, Eunice heard a disturbance in the audience. When she looked to the front row, Eunice noticed that her parents were being asked to move to the back of the hall so that a white couple could have their seats. Eunice immediately stood up from the piano bench and exclaimed that she would not begin playing unless her parents remained in their seats. Although utterly humiliated, her parents were allowed to move back to the front row and Eunice gave her performance to the overwhelming applause from her community.⁵

Eunice was sent to the Allen High School for Girls when she was fourteen years old. After her graduation in 1950 she received a scholarship to Juilliard for one year. Eunice planned to use her year at Juilliard to prepare for the scholarship exam at the Curtis Institute in

⁴Reva Marin, *Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement*. 2007, p. 16.

⁵David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: The Biography*, 20-21.

Philadelphia. This was the institution where she truly wanted to study.⁶ The year came to an end, and Eunice took her entrance exam at the Curtis Institute. Shortly after the exams Eunice was informed that she had been rejected. She was devastated. Her entire life Eunice had been groomed to become a professional classical pianist. Her hometown had poured their hopes, dreams, and livelihood into this ambition of creating one of the great classical musicians of the twentieth century. When Eunice received the letter from Curtis, those dreams quickly changed. The Curtis Institute had made it clear that her abilities did not meet their standards of excellence. However, family and friends close to Eunice had another explanation as to why she was not accepted. Carrol, Eunice's older brother, told her that she was not accepted to Curtis because she was black. The Curtis Institute was not going to accept a black woman when they could accept a white one instead.⁷ Carrol's accusation left Eunice wondering for years to come if the real reason she was not admitted to Curtis was her talent or her race.

Shortly after the rejection from Curtis Eunice declared that she was giving up music. Luckily, with encouragement from her brother, Eunice decided to study with Vladimir Sokoloff, a teacher on the faculty at Curtis and the man with whom she had hoped to study had she been accepted there.⁸ Her plan was to retake the Curtis exam after a year of private tutorial with Mr. Sokoloff. In order to afford these lessons Eunice began working as an accompanist for a vocal instructor in Philadelphia. Soon Eunice rented an apartment and there she taught private lessons for the next three years, all the while continuing her education with Vladimir Sokoloff.⁹ Although her ultimate goal was to obtain a scholarship at the Curtis Institute and become a

⁶Sylvia Hampton, *Nina Simone: Break Down and Let it All Out*. (United Kingdom: Sanctuary Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 15.

⁷Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 42-43.

⁸Reva Marin, *Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 24.

⁹*Ibid.*, 24-25.

classical musician, Eunice found it discouraging to work such long hours for such little pay as an instructor. In the summer of 1954 one of her students mentioned that he was going to work at a bar in Atlantic City making twice what Eunice was making as a teacher. Eunice immediately called his agent when she heard this. She booked the gig and headed to Atlantic City to play at the Midtown Bar and Grill.¹⁰ Eunice realized that working in a bar was not going to please her religious mother, so she decided to use a stage name when she performed. She took the name Simone from an old boyfriend who had nicknamed her “niña” and the name Simone from the French actress Simone Signoret whom she greatly admired.¹¹

Nina Simone: The Road Less Traveled

Simone’s job at the Midtown Bar and Grill began in July and continued until September of 1954. She worked from nine in the evening until four in the morning with fifteen minute breaks each hour. From the night she first played at the bar, Simone never played the same song twice in a set. She weaved intricate improvisations between popular and classical pieces. Certain parts of the night she was able to play an entire set with one song. At the end of that first night the bar owner asked her why she hadn’t sung. Simone replied that she was not a singer. His reply was simple, “...tomorrow night you are either a singer or you are out of a job.”¹² The following night Simone started singing. As Simone put it, “It wasn’t hard to fit it to the improvisation because I used my voice as a third layer, complementing the other two layers,

¹⁰Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*. (New York City, New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), p. 60-61.

¹¹Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 48-49.

¹²Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 50-51.

my right and left hands.”¹³ Simone’s perfect pitch and flawless memory allowed her to recall popular songs she had only heard once and repeat them in her set. Simone would play a line of a popular song and then use that for the foundation in which to improvise. She would often repeat a line of text multiple times or repeat the chorus while improvising on the piano. This was also the way she started composing songs. Along with writing new pieces, Simone started adding jazz classics to her repertoire. The first of these pieces was “I Loves You, Porgy” from *Porgy and Bess*. Billie Holiday had made it a hit, but Simone’s version would go on to be one of her staples. Playing at the Midtown Bar and Grill opened up new avenues for Simone. She was given offers to play at different clubs outside of Atlantic City, Philadelphia, and New York. In 1956, Simone met a man named Jerry Fields who became her manager. After a few gigs in New York Simone was asked to record an album with the New York record label Bethlehem Records. Although the record sat on Bethlehem’s shelf for nearly two years, that recording laid the foundation for Simone’s career. In the spring of 1957, Bethlehem had not yet released Simone’s album, which was entitled *Little Girl Blue*. A local DJ got a hold of a copy and started playing the piece “I Loves You, Porgy.” Shortly thereafter, Bethlehem released the album. The DJ, Sid Marx, who had first started playing the song in clubs, told Simone to ask Bethlehem to release “I Loves You, Porgy” as a single. “I Loves You, Porgy” became Simone’s first single off of *Little Girl Blue*, and in 1959 it quickly climbed its way up the national R&B charts.¹⁴ Jerry started booking different shows all over New York as the offers came rushing in. Another record label, Colpix, was already vying for her talent and requesting that she start recording albums on their label. At this point in her career Simone was still determined to go back to Juilliard and finish

¹³Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁴David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: The Biography*, p. 57-58.

her education. Playing in clubs and recording albums was just a way to work towards her eventual goal of becoming a classical musician. In the meantime money was money, and Simone couldn't pass up the opportunity to make it. In 1959, Simone signed a contract with Colpix that held her to a ten-album deal.

Over the next four years Simone would work with Colpix Records. She released a total of nine albums with the company, five of which were live recordings.¹⁵ Simone was able to maintain full creative control over the music on each album because she was unwilling to comply with the demands of the music industry. Towards the end of 1964 Simone was coaxed away by the Dutch company Philips Records, owned by Wilhelm Langenberg. With Philips, Simone's repertoire began to change. Simone was finding a new record label at the same time as she was finding her political voice. Early in her career Simone had become close friends with several prominent members of the black community in New York. James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Leroi Jones were among the artists and activists whom she would associate with. Simone's closest friend at this time was the playwright Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry and Simone met in 1961, and their friendship helped to shape Simone's musical direction for the next ten years. Simone was not a political activist in nature. Simone had been raised to turn away from the racism that surrounded them.¹⁶ In Lorraine, Simone found a confidant and teacher. Hansberry and Simone maintained their close bond until Hansberry's death in 1965. After Hansberry passed away, Simone used the title of Hansberry's unfinished play "To be Young, Gifted and Black" to write a civil-rights song dedicated to the memory of her beloved friend.

¹⁵Sylvia Hampton, *Nina Simone: Break Down and Let it All Out*, p. 19.

¹⁶Reva Marin, *Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 33-34.

Thanks to the friendship Simone and Hansberry formed, Simone became involved with civil rights through groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and through compositions such as “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone became infuriated with the civil rights campaign. She began lashing out at concerts, speaking at protest meetings and rallies, and even suggesting that non-violent leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. were not doing enough for the fight. Her songs were the result of her outrage towards the injustice Simone witnessed every day. As tensions and the death toll rose in America, Simone’s musical output strictly pertained to songs about the struggle throughout the nation. In merely six years, Simone released eight albums with a total of eighteen original compositions or arrangements. Of the eighteen compositions, seven were civil-rights themed (“Go Limp,” “Mississippi Goddam,” “Old Jim Crow,” “Four Women”), and the other eleven were arrangements of old African Church hymns and folk tunes. *Black Gold*, released in 1970, was the last album with a new original composition. By 1971, the year *Here Comes the Sun* was released, Simone was back to playing covers. With the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Simone’s faith in the movement had begun to waiver. As the decade ended, so too did her battle for civil rights. In interviews Simone would often say that she felt the fight had been lost and nothing was gained from all of the protests, marches, songs, leaders, and deaths.¹⁷

In September of 1970, Simone left the United States for Barbados. She would make several of these trips over the course of the rest of her life. From that point on Simone’s music took a backseat to her personal life. She divorced her husband and manager of ten years, Andy Stroud. She used her new freedom to focus on herself, her daughter Lisa, and was still

¹⁷LaShonda K. Barnett, “Nina Simone,” *I got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on their Craft*. New York, New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007, p. 153-154.

able to perform various concerts around the world.¹⁸ She recorded a few albums between 1970 and 1987, but it wasn't until an advertisement for Chanel No. 5 perfume that her music became popular again. The commercial was broadcast in the UK in 1987, and used Simone's 1958 recording of "My Baby Just Cares For Me."¹⁹ The demand for a re-release of that classic led to a number five in the UK singles chart. Simone followed this triumph with the release of her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, in 1992, and recorded her last album, *A Single Woman*, in 1993. Simone settled in the South of France near the city Aix-en-Provence. After a long battle with breast cancer, Simone passed away on April 21, 2003.

¹⁸Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the autobiography o Nina Simone*, p. 124-25.

¹⁹David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: The Biography*, p. 279.

Chapter 2

“I’m not a Singer

The many books, dissertations, theses, journal articles, and other scholarly writings on Nina Simone available now focus on her talent as a pianist and her work as an activist. It is rare to find a published document that focuses on the study of her vocal technique, which, one could argue, is one of the main reasons for her great success. Works that review her performances quickly brush aside Simone’s technique with the insertion of clichés and sound bytes. Simone herself admitted that she was not a singer. “I never set out to be a singer, so I don’t think much about singing.”²⁰ Simone goes on to say that she is most concerned with the message she is singing.

If I am singing a protest song, it is crucial that the audience feel the way I feel. They have to understand the injustice that I am trying to name, you see. If I am singing something intimate, I want utter silence and I want an audience that I can see, so I know whom I’m singing to. I am very concerned with the perfection of my piano playing and articulating the song’s message, but I don’t worry about my voice.²¹

This attitude was very similar to another African American protest singer/songwriter of the 1960s, Abbey Lincoln. In a similar interview, Lincoln also describes her singing. Barnett inquires as to what makes a good singer. Lincoln’s response has several similarities to Simone’s.

I’ve always been concerned about the story I’m telling.
This music is social. Nobody cares whether it sounds pretty or not. Look at Billie Holiday. She had a wee-bit voice that cracked. But she sang about black bodies hanging from trees and about the child who has his own and the people loved her. Armstrong had a funny, squeaky voice, and there would be no jazz singing if not for him. We don’t come from a tradition

²⁰LaShonda Katrice Barnett, *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft*, p. 150.

²¹*Ibid.*

that worries about pretty singing. Good singing is in the way you use your voice. It's in what you are saying and how you say it.²²

Simone's vocal training came from her youth. She started accompanying at her Mother's church when she was three and was constantly surrounded by gospel singers. Gospel music is a form of impassioned rhythmic spiritual music rooted in the solo and responsive church singing of rural blacks in the American South, central to the development of rhythm and blues and of soul music.²³ Gospel music dates back to the 1800s with the revival movement of the Second Awakening. Participants of gospel music were the common people, black and white, of all the Protestant denominations. Gospel is rooted in the African tradition of participatory services in which the music needed to be capable of much repetition and rhythm.²⁴ Gospel is characterized by dominant vocals, strong harmonies, and syncopated rhythms. Up until the 1960s, the harmonies were built on major and minor triads, as well as seventh chords. After the 1960s there was an introduction of altered chords, augmented sixth chords, and occasional modulations. Another distinguishing characteristic of gospel music is improvisation. Just as in jazz, improvisation in gospel music is the rule, not the exception.²⁵ Gospel music was a huge influence in Simone's life from a very young age.

Gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to my music...at that time I learned valuable lessons in musical

²²LaShonda Katrice Barnett, *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft*. (New York:Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 8.

²³"Gospel Music." Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. 17 March. 2010. <Dictionary.com [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gospel music](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gospel%20music)>.

²⁴Richard Smallwood, "Gospel and Blues Improvisation," *Music Educators Journal*. 66/5 (January, 1980), p. 100-104.

²⁵Horace Clarence Boyer, "Gospel Music," *Music Educators Journal*. 64/9 (May, 1978), p. 34-43.

technique that had nothing to do with all the classical training that was to come.²⁶

Simone listened to the choir she accompanied as a child and picked up on the syncopation of the music. It was a trait she would incorporate into much of her original works, especially “Mississippi Goddam.” The vocal technique of gospel singing is usually characterized by a heavy emphasis on the chest voice. The term chest voice refers to the lower range of the voice in singing or speaking. It is also known as the chest register.²⁷ Simone incorporated her chest voice into most of her pieces. In her autobiography, Simone discusses her limited range as a singer. Simone was an intelligent singer. She was able to pick out keys that highlighted her small range, and all of her songs stick to those keys. Simone often placed her pieces in the keys of A major or minor, G major, B minor, and C major. Gospel music emphasizes repeated phrases, learning by rote, and improvisation. These are all elements that were not only incorporated into Simone’s music, but were staples in much of her work. Simone explains in her autobiography that she would listen to a piece of music and immediately be able to perform what she had heard. When she started working at the Midtown Bar and Grill Simone didn’t know any popular tunes by heart, but she had heard them on the radio and while working with Arlene Smith. She could remember key phrases and how the song sounded, and from there she would repeat lines and improvise on selected motifs and themes in the music.²⁸

Another important influence was the voice teacher Simone spent time accompanying in Philadelphia, Arlene Smith. Simone was paid a dollar per lesson, which was barely minimum

²⁶Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 19.

²⁷“Chest register.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 07 May. 2010. <Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/chest_register>.

²⁸Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 51.

wage for the time. Simone also felt it was not nearly the compensation she deserved when forced to accompany mediocre musicians as they butchered popular “white” tunes of the day. However, the training she acquired would later prove to be priceless. Simone’s impeccable memory allowed her to absorb and retain every instruction that Mrs. Smith gave her students. After Simone had been working for Mrs. Smith for some time, Mrs. Smith asked Simone to instruct some the students on her own. If a student needed extra attention Simone would help them learn their pieces.²⁹

It was a struggle getting them to put any feeling into the lyrics, and I had to sing the words myself to show them how to do it. I never thought much of my voice, but I knew how to carry a song without any problem...and when they tried to copy me it usually sounded a little better than it had before.³⁰

Simone employed into her singing and performance practices the training she obtained through observing Arlene Smith.

There are many facets to Nina Simone’s voice. One can categorize her vocal range as that of a contralto voice. However, Simone’s limited range did not hinder her output or her abilities as a vocalist. Simone’s vocal technique greatly mirrored that of the gospel style she was immersed in as a child. Gospel vocalists often alter the vocal line while performing. Quartertones, melodic bending, scooping, and sliding are key elements of gospel singing, and Simone utilized them all in her songs.³¹ When discussing vocal technique as a gospel singer it is important to note that gospel music has a different interpretation of what is important vocally. Operatic singers focus on proper breathing technique and a clear vocal tone sung through pure

²⁹Ibid., p. 45

³⁰Reva Marin, *Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 25.

³¹Horace Clarence Boyer, “Gospel Music,” *Music Educators Journal*, p. 34-43.

vowels. According to *Music Educators Journal*, “operatic vocal production and timbre cannot authentically create the earthy quality necessary to gospel and blues. Sincere feeling and emotional expression are more important than breathing technique or a pretty sound.”³²

Although Simone was classically trained on the piano, it is clear that her vocal training came from a lifetime of church revivals and gospel music, as well as her time spent with Arlene Smith. In an interview with Phyllis Garland, author of *The Sound of Soul*, Simone explains where she received her initial musical training. Simone explained that most people believed her earliest influence was classical music, but that she was learning melodies by ear long before that. She also said that her first exposure to music were in gospel and jazz, years before classical piano. “I want to clear that up because some people think that I first studied classical music and switched to jazz. I played *revivals* and I was *colored* long before that!”³³ Simone was adamant about her roots. She never wanted to forget where she came from, or allow herself to be pigeonholed into one category.

Nina Simone’s singing encompassed all of the major qualities and traits of gospel vocalists. Simone’s voice was often described as “...a smoky, bittersweet contralto with a built in blue note and quavering vibrato.”³⁴ The word “smoky” is in reference to Simone’s rough tone. She does not sing with a pure, operatic quality like classical singers. Her music would not be interpreted properly if that were the tone she used. Blue notes are notes sung or played at a slightly lower pitch than that of the major scale for expressive purposes.³⁵ Typically the

³²Richard Smallwood, “Gospel and Blues: Improvisation,” *Music Educators Journal*, p. 100-104.

³³Phyllis Garland, *The Sound of Soul*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company), p. 185.

³⁴Randall Grass, “Great Spirits: Portraits of Life-Changing World Music Artists.” (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2009), p. 5.

³⁵Bruce Benward and Marilyn Saker, “Blue Notes.” *Music in Theory and in Practice*, Seventh Ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), p. 359.

alteration is a semitone or less, and mostly based on flattened thirds, fifths, or sevenths. This style is akin to relative pitches found in traditional African work songs.³⁶ Simone spent many vacations in Africa with her close friend Miriam Makeba. Makeba was a South African singer and prominent civil rights activist with whom Simone formed a deep friendship. Simone picked up several African techniques with which she would incorporate in her music while on these trips. The stylistic traits Simone employed include those previously discussed in this chapter. In the book *Great Spirits*, Randall Grass describes Simone's technique. Grass says that Simone "hits the notes sideways, with exotic tonality... something that flows in and around the demarcations of the Western scale."³⁷ Nina Simone was a master interpreter. Her repertoire rarely consisted of original works, but her interpretations of pieces allowed them to become fresh and new to every audience. Simone used her voice as another component for her interpretation of the music. The piano was one element, her voice the other. As Simone stated in her autobiography, "I used my voice as a third layer, complementing the other two layers, my right and left hands."³⁸ Simone used different layers of her voice depending on which piece she was singing and how she wanted to interpret the song. "Simone's texture is at times raspy and harsh, and at other times velvety and smooth."³⁹ Her texture directly reflected the phrase she was singing.

³⁶Andy Ellis and David Hamburger. *How to Play Blues Guitar: The Basics and Beyond*. Second Ed. (New York City, New York: Backbeat Books, 2007), 120p.

³⁷Randall Grass, *Great Spirits: Portraits of Life-Changing World Music Artists*, p. 5.

³⁸Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 51.

³⁹Melanie E. Bratcher, *I'm African when I'm singing, I'm black and blue when I'm not: an aesthetic analysis of selected songs by Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Nina Simone*, 2005.

“Be My Husband”

Gospel, classical, and jazz were obvious influences in Simone’s life, both as a pianist and vocalist. However, another important influence was that of her African roots. Simone made several trips over the course of her career to Africa where she visited her friend Miriam Makeba. There she immersed herself in strong African musical traditions, which are represented in her music. The song “Be My Husband” is one example of Simone’s incorporation of African musical styles. Simone’s husband Andy Stroud composed “Be My Husband” in 1964 for Simone’s album *Pastel Blues*. Simone sings the piece a capella with handclapping and a hi-hat as her only accompaniment.⁴⁰ Simone had visited Africa for the first time in 1961 while traveling with the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). They headed to Lagos in Nigeria, and were greeted with “drums going and the songs of welcome starting up.”⁴¹ Nigeria is known as the heart of African music because of its role in the development of West African highlife and palm-wine music.⁴² The strong percussive pulse of “Be My Husband” is the first indication of the Nigerian musical influence. The piece is stripped of the thrills and flash that Simone’s other songs boast. The simple accompaniment and a capella style allows for Simone’s voice to become the driving force behind the text. The text of “Be My Husband” reads:

Be my husband man I be your wife
Be my husband man I be your wife

⁴⁰Nina Simone, “Be My Husband,” *Pastel Blues*. (New York: Philips, 1965).

⁴¹ Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: the Autobiography of Nina Simone*, p. 80.

⁴²In “The Origins of High Life in Ghana,”

www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/audio/article.php?=22, Highlife is a musical genre that originated in Ghana in the 1900s and spread to Sierra Leone, Nigeria and other West African countries by 1920. Jazzy horns and multiple guitars that lead the band characterize this genre. Palm-wine music is a West African musical genre that evolved among the Kru people of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Palm-wine music fuses native rhythms with techniques imported from the Congo.

Be my husband man I be your wife
Loving all of you the rest of your life yeah

If you promise me you'll be my man
If you promise me you'll be my man
If you promise me you'll be my man
I will love you the best I can yeah

Stick to the promise man you made me
Stick to the promise man that you made me
Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah
Stick to the promise man you made me
That you stay away from Rosalie yeah

Oh daddy love me good
Oh daddy now love me good
Oh daddy love me good
Oh daddy now love me good

If you want me to cook and sew
If you want me to cook and sew
If you want me to cook and sew yeah
Outside of you there is no place to go

Please don't treat me so doggone mean
Please don't treat me so doggone mean
Please don't treat me so now doggone mean yeah
You're the meanest man I ever see

Oh daddy now love me good
Oh daddy love me good yeah
Oh daddy love me good yeah
Oh daddy now love me good⁴³

Simone incorporates a more nasal tone in this piece. Her words are very clear, but the delivery is run together. Simone uses her vibrato more frequently in this piece than some of her other interpretations, such as “Strange Fruit” and “I Loves You, Porgy.” She often ends a four-line phrase with vibrato. Simone also incorporates large intervallic leaps into her melodic lines. After the phrase “stick to the promise man you made me,” Simone leaps an interval of a major

⁴³Nina Simone, “Be My Husband,” *Pastel Blues/Let it All Out*. (New York: Philips, 1964).

sixth to give a vocal punctuation to the line. She does this several times throughout the piece. This piece was one that demanded the voice to become the main force behind the emotion and vulnerability found in the text, and Simone highlighted those elements impeccably.

Chapter 3

“I Loves You, Porgy”

There are over sixty albums today that comprise the works of Nina Simone. These albums span almost four decades, from 1958 until 1997. Many are compilation or re-released albums, several of which released posthumous. The majority of pieces on these albums were songs either written or arranged by Simone or for Simone. Simone’s original compositions were often overshadowed by the tunes she covered. Simone had a unique ability to transform the work of another artist or composer into something that sounded as though it were a Simone original. The impact that covers such as “I Loves You, Porgy” and “Strange Fruit” had on her audience and her career can be seen in records sales, recording contracts, performance demands, and the musicians who followed in her footsteps in the decades to come. Interpretations were among the strongest component of her career as a musician and activist. “I Loves You, Porgy” is a piece from *Porgy and Bess*, an opera composed by George Gershwin with lyrics by his DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin. The opera premiered in New York in the fall of 1935.⁴⁴ *Porgy and Bess* is the story of Bess, a dissolute yet beautiful woman, whose lover is Crown, a horrible drunk. When Crown kills a man over a craps game, he flees, leaving Bess to fend for herself. Porgy takes Bess in and soon falls in love with her. When Crown returns for Bess at a picnic, Bess is once again unable to resist his charm and leaves with him. After spending the night with Crown, Bess returns to Porgy in a state of delirium. Porgy knows she has been with Crown, but decides to take care of her until her fever breaks. When Bess realizes what has happened, she sings the song “I Loves You, Porgy,” explaining to Porgy that Crown will return for her, but she is now in love with Porgy. Porgy tells her to go with Crown if she wants, but when Crown

⁴⁴Richard Crawford, “Porgy and Bess,” *The New Grove Book of Operas*. 2nd ed., Stanley Sadie. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 491.

comes to reclaim Bess, Porgy kills him in a brief confrontation. Porgy is taken in for questioning, but when he is released, Bess is gone. Porgy finds out she has headed to New York, and the opera ends as Porgy leaves for New York to find her.⁴⁵ Multiple artists have covered the song “I Loves You, Porgy” since its operatic debut, including Billie Holiday, to whom Nina Simone was often compared. “Porgy” was Simone’s first big hit as a recording artist. Simone’s inimitable interpretation of this song made her an immediate success, and it would remain a staple in her repertoire for the remainder of her career. Nina Simone first encountered “Porgy” while playing at the Midtown Bar and Grill. A man by the name of Ted Axelrod introduced Simone to the piece and told her he would love to hear her add it to her set at the bar. Axelrod owned the Billie Holiday cover, so that was the version from which Simone would learn. The unique interpretation by Simone outshines all other covers of the piece, as well as the original.

For the purposes of this study, the comparison of Simone’s “I Loves You Porgy” will be to Billie Holiday’s cover, since Simone was basing her interpretation off of Holiday’s. There are several specific differences between the two interpretations. Neither Holiday nor Simone sang the song in its original key. It was an operatic piece, and they were both low alto singers. However, Simone placed the song in an even lower register than Holiday. Simone’s range could often reach the baritone level because it naturally sat very low. Although her interpretation of the melody does not vary greatly from the original tune, she moves the key down to a range more appropriate for her voice. Simone takes her time with the song. Each line is drawn out significantly longer than the way it was sung by Holiday. The tempo is much slower than that of Holiday’s cover. In Holiday’s version, she slows the song down at the verse “Someday I know he’s coming back to call me/He’s going to handle me and hold me so/It’s going to be like dying

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 491.

Porgy/When he calls me/But when he comes, I know, I'll have to go.” The tempo resumes after that line. Simone used the tempo of that line for her entire version. Simone also incorporates several vocal slides in certain moments throughout the text. Melodic bending is a term used to describe this style. Simone uses melodic bending in the first phrase, which reads “I love you Porgy/Don't let him take me.” She bends the word “don't” which adds a dramatic emphasis to the desperation that Bess feels as another man is claiming her. “I Loves You, Porgy” is sung at the end of Act II, Scene III of the opera. Bess has been delirious with fever, and Porgy nurses her back to health. Once Bess has realized where she is, she explains to Porgy that Crown, her lover, will return for her, but that she wants to be with Porgy. Simone does an excellent job of showing Bess' pain. Whereas Billie simply touched certain phrases and allowed the text to trail away, Simone brings every word out. Her tone is straight until the end of each phrase, where her quavering vibrato seeps in. It is also noticeable in the phrase “he's going to handle me and hold me so,” as if to suggest a hesitation and shiver at the thought of being taken by him. Another unique quality in Simone's rendition is her interpretation of the lyrics. The title of the song is “I Loves You, Porgy.” However, Simone sings, “I love you, Porgy” each time the phrase presents itself in the song. This could simply be a stylistic choice, or it could be a subtle, conscious decision to clarify her background as an educated, classically trained musician, and her refusal to perpetuate the belief that African-Americans must be ignorant and uneducated.

“Strange Fruit”

Another one of Simone's great covers was her rendition of “Strange Fruit.” Written by a Jewish schoolteacher fed up with injustice, “Strange Fruit” was originally recorded by Billie

Holiday in 1939. There was great speculation behind the composer of this song. Although the song was written entirely by Abel Meeropol, many were skeptical that such a potent song could come from such a prosaic source. Some believed multiple collaborators wrote the piece. Others believed the story Holiday had concocted for her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. Holiday explained in her autobiography that Meeropol had shown her the poem of “Strange Fruit.” In her autobiography, Holiday quoted Meeropol as saying that he was “...of course interested in my singing. He suggested that Sonny White, who had been my accompanist, and I turn it into music.”⁴⁶ Abel would spend most of his life clearing this rumor up. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, Meeropol stated, “I wrote *Strange Fruit* because I hate lynching and I hate injustice and I hate the people who perpetuate it.”⁴⁷

When “Strange Fruit” was first recorded by Holiday, most Americans did not want to hear the gruesome message. Stations banned it, the middle-American white culture overlooked it, and even African-Americans were not sure how to react. Holiday’s interpretation was much more subtle than Simone’s. Holiday was not beating the message into anyone’s head. Although it was clear what the song represented, there were many ways in which the music concealed the story. In Holiday’s rendition of “Strange Fruit,” the piano accompaniment is very melodic. It has a beautiful line underneath Holiday’s words. However, this is not an accurate representation of the text. There is a certain hesitation in Holiday’s interpretation. The lyrics make a statement, but Holiday does not convey it. There is speculation surrounding Holiday’s understanding of the music. According to David Margolick, author of “Strange Fruit,” Holiday didn’t know what the song meant when it was first introduced to her. It wasn’t until several

⁴⁶David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song*. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), p. 11-17.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 11.

months later that she finally grasped the content. Jazz scholar Barry Ulanov offered another explanation. Ulanov suggested that Holiday understood the song, but was uncomfortable with the content and with all of the pressure to perform the song. Holiday had never sung a piece with political and social commentary. Holiday was known for her first-person ditties about love and romance. The content pushed Holiday outside of her comfort zone and traditional material.⁴⁸

When Simone took a hold of the piece, “Strange Fruit” would never be the same. Simone’s arrangement is entirely different from Holiday’s. In Simone’s arrangement, “Strange Fruit” is taken with a much slower tempo. Holiday’s rendition is approximately two minutes and fifteen seconds in length. Simone’s is approximately three minutes and thirty-one seconds. Typical to Simone’s style, the song is slowed down significantly to inspire the gravity of the text. The piano arrangement is reminiscent of a funeral march, or marching to the gallows. Where Holiday’s original instrumentation included saxophone, piano, and trap-set, among others, Simone’s arrangement utilizes only her voice and her piano playing. The hollow, empty accompaniment symbolizes the emptiness and despair that Simone and the African-American community felt for their loss and years of suffering. This song magnified Simone’s stance in the civil rights movement. Simone recorded it in 1965 on the album *Pastel Blues*. This, of course, was at the height of the civil rights campaign and several years after Simone had joined the fight. Her arrangement left little doubt in what she wanted to say to the American people, and, unlike Holiday, there was no sense of hesitation in the way she delivered this piece. Simone played with the text of the piece, but the original poem read:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 27-29.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁴⁹

In Simone's rendition, she substitutes the word "trees" with "leaves" in the line "For the sun to rot, for the leaves to drop." She then sings a slow, descending glissando on the word "leaves," finally landing on the word "drop." The impact of this phrase is incalculable. Although Holiday recorded it first, one could argue that Nina Simone is the true voice of "Strange Fruit."

"Pirate Jenny"

Simone once again redefined a classic show tune when she arranged the song "Pirate Jenny" from *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. The musical is based on an eighteenth century English ballad opera, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. *The Beggar's Opera* was written in 1728, and *The Threepenny Opera* followed exactly two hundred years later in 1928. "Pirate Jenny" is sung in the first act of the show. Jenny is jealous because her old lover Mackie is now with a new woman, Polly Peachum. The police are after Mackie, and they are sure he will be unable to resist visiting his usual brothel where Jenny works. The police ask her to tip them off if he shows. Knowing that the police will hang Mackie if he is

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 2.

caught, Jenny can't help the pleasure she feels knowing the power she has over his fate. Jenny is scrubbing the floor of a crummy hotel as she sings her song. Jenny sings about a pirate ship entering the harbor. She visualizes that the ship's cannons destroy every building surrounding hers. Then the pirates come ashore, chain up the inhabitants, and present them to Jenny, asking, "Kill them now, or later?" She says "now."⁵⁰

Simone took this song and turned it into a strong campaign song with a grim civil rights undertone. The text is:

You people can watch while I'm scrubbin' these floors
And I'm scrubbin, the floors while you're gawkin'
Maybe once you tip me and it makes you feel swell
In a ratty waterfront
In a ratty old hotel
But you'll never guess to who you're talkin'.
No. You couldn't ever guess to who you're talkin'.

Suddenly one night there's a bang in the night
And you'll wonder: "what the hell could that have been?"
And you see me kinda grinnin' while I'm scrubbin'
And you say, "What the hell she got to grin?"
I'll tell ya

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
With a skull on its masthead
Will be comin' in

You gentleman can say, "Hey girl, finish them floors!
Get upstairs! Make your beds, earn your keep here!"
You toss me your tips
And look out to the ships
But I'm counting your heads
As I'm making the beds
Cuz there's nobody's gonna sleep here, tonight
None of you's gonna sleep here

⁵⁰Robert D. Hume, "The Beggar's Opera," *The Grove Book of Operas*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), p. 71-74.

Then one night there's a scream in the night
And you say, "Who's that kicking up a row?"
And ya see me kinda starin' out the winda
And you say, "What's she got to stare at now?"
I'll tell ya.

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
Turns around in the harbor
Shootin' guns from the bow

You gentleman can wipe off that smile off your face
Cause every building in town is a flat one
This whole stinkin' place will be down to the ground
Only this cheap hotel standing up safe and sound
And you yell, "Why the hell spare that one?"
Yes.
That's what you say.
"Why the hell spare that one?"

All the night through, through the noise and to-do
You wonder who is that person that lives up there?
And you see me stepping out in the morning
Looking nice with a ribbon in my hair

And the ship
The Black Freighter
Runs a flag up its masthead
And a cheer rings the air

By noontime the dock
Is-a-swarmin' with men
Comin' out from the ghostly freighter
They move in the shadows
Where no one can see
And they're chainin' up people
And they're bringin' em to me
Askin' me,
"Kill them now, or later?"
Askin' me!
"Kill them now, or later?"

Noon by the clock
And so still at the dock
You can hear a foghorn miles away
And in that quiet of death
I'll say, "Right now.

Then they pile up the bodies
And I'll say,
"That'll learn ya!"

And the ship
The Black Freighter
Disappears out to sea
And on it is me.⁵¹

Once again, Simone takes a few liberties with the text in order to pursue her own interpretation and convey the message she is trying to send. In the first verse, the original text states: "Suddenly one night there's a bang in the night/And you'll wonder: 'what the hell could that have been?'" Simone changes the word "bang" to "scream," and the line reads, "Then one night there's a scream in the night/And you wonder: 'who could that have been?'" It is one word, but that word changes the context of the sentence from an act of random violence to something much more personal. Although these word changes happen frequently in Simone's interpretations of various songs, it is impossible to conclude whether or not this was intentional, or perhaps a memory mishap during a live performance. Since often these recordings are live from various venues she performed in, it is quite possible that Simone simply forgot the lyric or sang a word similar to the original without realizing she had made the change. In "Pirate Jenny," Simone inserts a pause between the line "there's a ship" and the next line "the Black Freighter." The silence says as much or more than the line itself. She is drawing out the line "the Black

⁵¹Nina Simone, Four Women: The Nina Simone Philips Recordings, Verve, 2003.

Freighter,” which, in her version, was a metaphor for the coming black revolution. At the end of the second verse the line reads, “Cuz there’s nobody’s gonna sleep here, tonight/None of you’s gonna sleep here.” Simone repeats the word “nobody” twice in succession. She reinforces the point that no one will be able to rest tonight. The revolution is coming, African-Americans are fighting and dying, and no one can sleep. Simone uses her voice as an orator would use theirs while narrating a story. She sings most of the song, but adds dramatic inflection to several key lines. Simone whispers lines such as “kill them now, or later,” “right now,” and “that’ll learn ya.” The dramatic tone Simone imparts on these phrases adds an undeniably intense effect to the text. Melodically and instrumentally the arrangement is surprisingly similar to the original. In this piece, Simone focused on the text and the delivery more than the music underneath.

Chapter 4

“Black is the Colour of My True Love’s Hair”

Folk songs and spirituals were another key component of Nina Simone’s output as an artist. Her distinctive interpretations of some of the most traditional African-American folk songs and spirituals were extremely innovative. “Black is the Colour of My True Love’s Hair” is one of these folk pieces that Simone made her own.⁵² “Black is the Colour of My True Love’s Hair” is a traditional folk song associated with the Appalachian Mountains region of the United States, but which probably originated in Scotland.⁵³ It is believed that the original song was addressed to a woman, with the male-addressed version made popular by Simone. Nina Simone rearranges the original text of this piece to bring out only the elements she deems significant.

Her version reads:

Black is the colour of my true love’s hair
His face so soft and wondrous fair
The bluest eyes, and the strongest hands
I love the ground on where he stands
I love the ground on where he stands

Black is the colour of my true love’s hair
Of my true love’s hair
Of my true love’s hair

Oh, I love my lover and well he knows
Yes, I love the ground on where he goes
And still I hope that the time will come
When he and I will be as one
When he and I will be as one

⁵²In *Webster’s Third International Dictionary, Unabridged*, third edition (Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 2002), p.24, Most words ending in *-or* are traditionally spelled *-our* in European countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and other English-speaking countries, as well as South Africa and Canada. The European spelling of “color” is traditionally used for this song because of its place of origin.

⁵³Lesley Nelson-Burns, *Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair*, 20 January 1999, 12 March 2010 <<http://www.contemplator.com/america/blackhair.html>>.

When he and I will be as one

So black is the colour of my true love's hair
Of my true love's hair
Of my true love's hair⁵⁴

The luxury of covering a traditional song is the ability to adapt and arrange it with more liberty. The artistic interpretation is left more to the performer than the original composer, most of whom are unknown. Simone left out multiple verses of the original folk song, as well as individual lines within the verses she did use in an effort to change the meaning behind the song. She wanted her version to focus on the race of the individual, bringing out their “black hair,” and also to describe her love and devotion for that person. The story in the original song is one of a lover lost and the individual who is left mourning that person. Simone focuses on describing the man she is infatuated with and her devotion to him, as well as her dream that they will be together some day. From the context of the poem it appears that she is anticipating a marriage or commitment of some sort. However, in the original poem, it is clear that the person is mourning the death of the individual's beloved and that they will be one again in the next life.

The winters passed and the leaves are green
The time is passed that we have seen
But still I hope the time will come
When you and I will be as one

I go to the Clyde to mourn and weep
But satisfied I never could sleep
I write you a letter
Just a few short lines
I'll suffer death ten thousand times⁵⁵

⁵⁴Nina Simone, *Four Women: The Nina Simone Philips Recordings*, Verve, 2003.

⁵⁵ Cecil Sharp, *Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair*, 20 April 2010
<<http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=665>>.

Other versions of the poem change the line to read “But I know the day it never will come/When he and I will be as one.” The words vary from version to version, but the story does not. Once again, Simone puts very little accompaniment to this piece. Her arrangement is very exposed with the piano and her voice as the only instruments. The piano accompaniment is sporadic chords throughout the verses, and then a little more ornamentation in between the refrain “Black is the color of my true love’s hair,” and the verse “I love my lover and well he knows.” As usual with these particular arrangements, Simone has to carry the piece entirely with her voice, as well as her intuition for what significant words and phrases should be emphasized and drawn out of the poem. In this case, “black” is a key word. Simone holds on to this word each time she sings it and employs the method of agogic accent with this line. An agogic accent is stress given to a note for a long duration.⁵⁶ This accent draws the line out as far as it will reach before moving on to “...is the color...” and so on. She also repeats the text “...of my true love’s hair,” “I love the ground on where he stands,” and “When he and I will be as one.” Simone keeps a straight tone when singing in the upper part of her register. The line “Black is the colour...” is performed in this manner. She holds out “black” for eight seconds, with no vibrato interfering with the pure tone. Her vibrato doesn’t enter until she hits the word “hair,” which is sung on a low E, a favorite note for Simone in many of her songs. The vibrato is loose but controlled. In order to sustain the vibrato she uses on the pitch she is singing, Simone would have to incorporate proper breathing technique.

⁵⁶Michael Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 10.

“Children Go Where I Send You”

One of the traditional African-American spirituals Simone recorded was “Children Go Where I Send You.” Other titles include the insertion of “The Holy Baby” and “Born in Bethlehem.” As with “Black is the Colour...,” “Children Go Where I Send You” has many versions both lyrically and musically. The American folk singer and songwriter Jean Ritchie, who is the best-known member of the Ritchie Family of Kentucky, popularized the song. The Ritchie family had been singing authentic folk songs for generations, and Jean made the tradition her livelihood. The spiritual had been discovered in Kentucky in a country school for African-American children, where it may have been sung for the past three centuries. The verses, which sound like a child’s counting game, actually tell the children of God how to go about preaching the gospel. Another version of this same spiritual exists. Cornishmen who worked in the copper mines along Lake Superior possibly brought that rendition to the United States.⁵⁷

“Children Go Where I Send Thee” is a cumulative song. Cumulative of course means to increase in size or effect. A cumulative song is a song in which each verse is built from the previous verses. This is accomplished by adding a new stanza to each verse and then returning to a common chorus each time.⁵⁸ In Simone’s arrangement of the piece much of the original song is left intact. She adds more rhythmic syncopation to the tune in both the accompaniment and vocal line. The instrumentation of the song is piano and trap set. In full, this song has a total of twelve verses, but Simone incorporates verses one, two, four,

⁵⁷Dorothy Horstman, William L. Simon, Dan Fox, Mary Kelleher, Elizabeth Mead, Natalie Moreda, and Karen Mastropietro. *The Reader’s Digest Merry Christmas Songbook*. (Pleasantville, New York: The Reader’s Digest Association, INC., 1981), p. 206.

⁵⁸Michael Agnes, *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2nd Ed., (Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2002) p. 151.

six and eight in her version.

Children go where I send you,
How shall I send you?
I'm gonna send you one by one,
One for the little biddy baby, was born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children go where I send you,
How shall I send you?
I'm gonna send you two by two,
Two for Paul and Silas,
One for the little biddy baby, was born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children go where I send you,
How shall I send you?
I'm gonna send you four by four,
Four for the poor that stood at the door,
Three for the Hebrew children,
Two for Paul and Silas,
One for the little biddy baby, was born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children go where I send you,
How shall I send you?
I'm gonna send you six by six,
Six for the six that couldn't get fixed,
Five for the gospel preacher,
Four for the poor that stood at the door,
Three for the Hebrew children,
Two for Paul and Silas,
One for the little biddy baby, was born, born, born in Bethlehem.

Children go where I send you,
How shall I send you?
I'm gonna send you eight by eight,
Eight for the eight that stood at the gate,
Seven for the seven came down from heaven,
Six for the six that couldn't get fixed,
Five for the gospel preacher,
Four for the poor that stood at the door,
Three for the Hebrew children,
Two for Paul and Silas,
One for the little biddy baby, one for the little biddy baby,
One for the little biddy baby. He was born, born,...
He was born in Bethlehem.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Nina Simone, The Amazing Nina Simone/Nina Simone At Town Hall, Collectables Records, 1998.

When she sings each verse back from last to first she incorporates the verses that she had skipped individually (three, five, etc.). The content of the verses she chose to bring out all correlate with the civil rights movement. Simone first recorded “Children Go...” in 1959 on her first album for the Colpix record label, *The Amazing Nina Simone*. Although Simone was not fully immersed in the movement yet her songs at this time were laying the foundation for where her career would soon be headed. The first verse is fairly clear, singing that “I’m gonna send you one by one/One for the little biddy baby.” Next Simone sings the second verse, singing that “I’m gonna send you two by two/Two for Paul and Silas.” Paul and Silas were devout followers of Jesus’ teachings. In Acts 16:22-24, Paul and Silas are imprisoned for their religion and loyalty to Jesus. In the reading, “...the magistrates had them stripped and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After inflicting many blows on them, they threw them into prison and instructed the jailer to guard them securely.”⁶⁰ The story of Paul and Silas mirrors the suffering and injustice that the African-American community was experiencing, and had been experiencing, for more than a century.

The next verse Simone chose to highlight was verse four, “I’m gonna send you four by four/Four for the poor who stood at the door.” Again, this is mirrored in the black community and other minority groups who were given limited opportunities and resources, which then limited their social and economic gain. The term poor can be used to describe more than purely a financial situation. In this case, the poor could be those who are socio-economically poor, spiritually poor, emotionally poor, mentally and physically poor, etc. The African-American

⁶⁰Acts 16: 22-24, *The Catholic Bible Giant Print Edition*, Ed. Stephen J. Hartdegen. (Wichita, Kansas: Catholic Bible Publishers, 2006), p. 1923.

community was certainly burdened with many of these disadvantages throughout the 1950s and 60s in America. Verse six is the next verse Simone sings, and that is “Six for the six that couldn’t get fixed.” Research falls short with this verse. Most historians discuss the relationship of the number six to imperfection, man’s sin, and the serpent, which was created on the sixth day. The Sixth Commandment, murder, is the worst sin. These are all incredibly negative connotations. Metaphorically, it symbolizes all of the negativity surrounding the African-American community at that time.⁶¹

The final verse that Simone sings is “Eight for the eight that stood at the gate.” Eight is the biblical number for new beginnings.⁶² Although this verse could simply be referencing people waiting to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, it may also have another meaning in this context. Simone may have chosen to bring this verse out because she is referencing a hope for her people to have a second chance and new beginning. Melodically, Simone did very little to make her interpretation different from the original song. Textually, she chose to bring out exactly what she found to be pertinent to her recording of this song. It is one that is done so frequently by so many artists that there is not much that can make it unique. The rhythmic changes Simone made by adding syncopation and the verses that she drew out of the original twelve make it a unique interpretation from the traditional spiritual.

⁶¹Tony Warren, [The Numbers in the Scriptures!](http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/bible/numbers.html) 5 March 2010
<<http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/bible/numbers.html>>.

⁶²Diane L. Harris, [Eight for the Eight Who Stood at the Gate](http://www.steppingintothelight.net/the-blog/2009/4/7/eight-for-the-8-who-stood-at-the-gate.html), 7 April 2010.
<<http://www.steppingintothelight.net/the-blog/2009/4/7/eight-for-the-8-who-stood-at-the-gate.html>>.

Conclusion

With over five hundred songs recorded on over forty albums, Nina Simone established herself as a reputable artist. Simone was an undeniably talented musician. However, she was also the voice of an entire generation of African-Americans who desperately needed someone to speak up for them. Through songs such as “Old Jim Crow” and “Revolution Part 1 & 2” she became a notable composer. Simone put her own voice to such pieces as “Ain’t Got No-I Got Life,” “I Put a Spell on You,” and “Ne Me Quitte Pas,” which allowed a new audience to be touched by their words and message. Elton John proclaimed that she was “the greatest female artist of the twentieth century.”⁶³ Simone’s body of work spans over fifty years, covers an eclectic variety of musical styles, and has been the inspiration for countless artists over the decades. Prominent musicians who have cited Simone as a vital component to their musical development are, among others, Mos Def, Cat Stevens, Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill, and Alicia Keys. On The Fugees’ album *The Score*, Lauryn Hill compares herself to Simone in the song “Ready or Not.”⁶⁴ She raps that while others imitate Al Capone, she’ll be Nina Simone. Cat Stevens recorded Simone’s “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood” after converting to Islam and feeling misunderstood by fans and critics alike for his newfound religious affiliation.⁶⁵ John Lennon cited Simone’s version of “I Put a Spell on You” as his inspiration for the song “Michelle.” Nina Simone’s legacy as a musician and as an activist lives on in the pieces discussed in this paper. Her work as an accomplished songwriter and devoted activist can be seen in pieces such as “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” “Four Women,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “Go Limp.” In 1967, H. Rap Brown, the new chairman of SNCC, called Simone

⁶³David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: the Biography*, p. 346.

⁶⁴LaShonda K. Barnett, *I got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on their Craft*, p.153-54

⁶⁵Yusuf Islam, *An Other Cup*, Ya Records, 2006.

“the singer of the black revolution because there is no other singer who sings real protest songs about the race situation.”⁶⁶ Her ability as a master interpreter could not be denied with songs like “I Loves You, Porgy,” “Pirate Jenny,” and the unforgettable “Strange Fruit.”

⁶⁶Reva Marin, *Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 172.

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