

A true original:  
Nina Simone, 1967





# NINA SIMONE

THE PIANO PRODIGY'S GROUNDBREAKING  
COMPOSITIONS AND SINGULAR VOICE CREATED WORK  
THAT WAS A VITAL FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.


BY ALAN LIGHT




**'N**ina could sing anything, period," Mary J. Blige told *Rolling Stone* when the magazine named Nina Simone one of the 100 Greatest Singers of All Time. And in some ways, that astonishing, unclassifiable range has made it especially difficult to assess Simone's legacy — she was often considered a jazz singer (particularly because of her masterful piano playing), but it was a label she deeply resented, seeing it only as a racial classification. She was classically trained, yet her nickname was "The High Priestess of Soul."

If anything, she claimed that she was a folk singer, and her dazzling repertoire — Israeli folk tunes; compositions by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill; songs by the Bee Gees, Leonard Cohen, and George Harrison; traditional ballads; spirituals; children's songs — remains unparalleled. "She didn't copy anybody, she was an original artist," said George Wein, promoter of the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals, "and there are very few that are original artists."

"She is loved or feared, adored or disliked, but few who have met her music or glimpsed her soul react with moderation. She is an extremist, extremely realized." This was Maya Angelou's description of Nine Simone in a 1970 profile for *Redbook* magazine. If it feels a bit overstated now, it seems to be an accurate representation of Simone's standing at the height of her powers. Her commercial success may have been slight next to that of the pop giants who emerged during the same era ("I've only got four very famous songs," she would later say), but her impact was profound.



“ANGER HAS ITS PLACE,  
AND FIRE MOVES  
THINGS. BUT I SING  
FROM INTELLIGENCE.”





Simone's groundbreaking compositions like "Mississippi Goddam" and "Four Women" defined a songwriting voice that was proudly, defiantly black and female. Her radical rearrangements of others' songs have been covered by everyone from George Michael to the Animals, Whitney Houston to Jeff Buckley. An icon whose tortured life was the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary, Nina Simone was a unique creative force. "She was an overwhelming artist, piano player, and singer," said Bob Dylan. "Very outspoken and dynamite to see perform . . . the kind of artist that I loved and admired."

Her work extended far beyond casual listening; it was truly a force for social change. Andrew Young — later a congressman, the mayor of Atlanta, and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations — said that during his days as a ground-level organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Simone's music was the soundtrack of a movement. "Every home I went to had Nina Simone — I mean, every one," he said. "For all of the people in the civil rights movement, it was an identity. Her music was just sort of what you heard." Her inspiration as an artist and an activist has been celebrated by Lauryn Hill, Kanye West (who has frequently sampled her work), John Legend, Common, and Alicia Keys, who once wrote that "she made me want to live life, learn and experience it earnestly and use my voice to say SOMETHING!"

Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina. The sixth of eight children in a poor family, she was a piano prodigy who began playing at the age of 3. She made her concert debut, a classical recital, when she was 10 — but during this performance, her parents, who had taken seats in the front row, were forced to move to the back of the hall to make way for white people. She refused to play until they were allowed to return to their seats. This moment would haunt her forever.

She became a *cause célèbre* in her own small town, as her music teacher helped establish a special fund to pay for her education and allow her to get out. But Waymon's ambition of becoming the world's first prominent black female classical pianist was crushed when her application to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia was denied; she spent the rest of her life convinced that she was rejected because of racial prejudice.

Looking to pick up some extra money, she took a summer gig in an Atlantic City bar under the name Nina Simone. On the first night, after she played an all-instrumental opening set, the owner told her that she either

The voice of  
her generation





needed to start singing or get off the bandstand. She discovered that her piano training allowed her to accompany herself with more elaborate lines than the usual comping; later, the likes of Miles Davis would marvel at Simone's ability to play and sing different melodic lines simultaneously.

Her first album, *Little Girl Blue* (1958) contained her defining, biggest-ever hit, an unsentimental version of "I Loves You Porgy" from George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. After moving to New York, she was em-

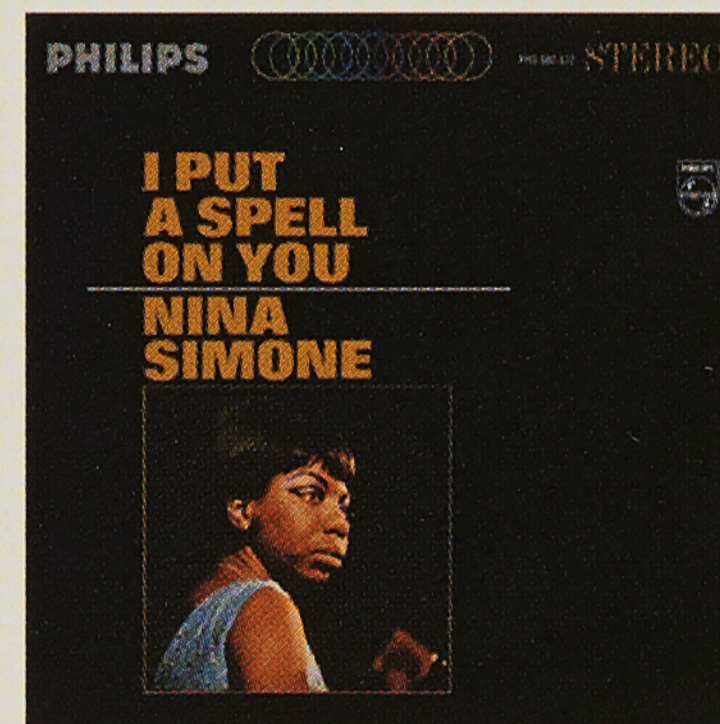
## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**Little Girl Blue**  
1958 (Bethlehem)



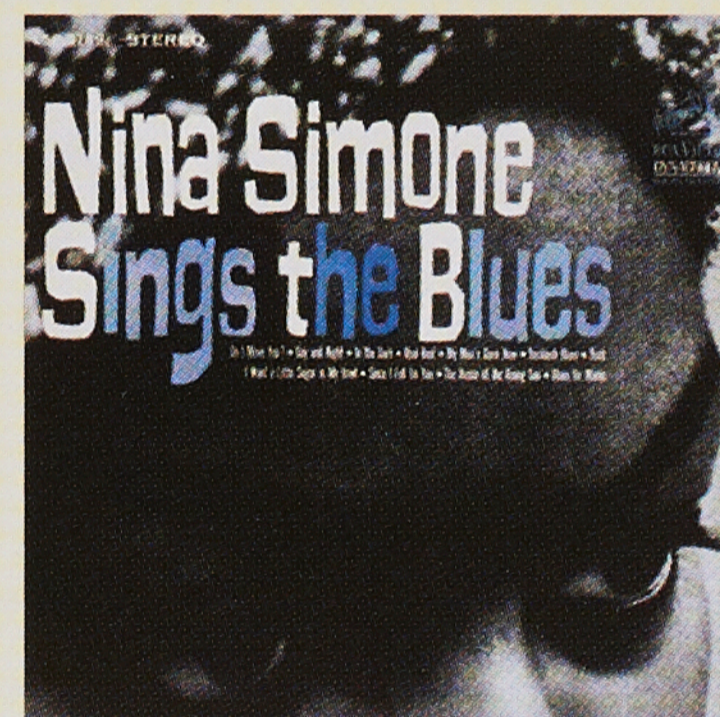
**Pastel Blues**  
1965 (Philips)



**I Put a Spell on You**  
1965 (Philips)



**Wild Is the Wind**  
1966 (Philips)



**Nina Simone Sings the Blues**  
1967 (RCA Victor)



**Silk & Soul**  
1967 (RCA)



**Black Gold**  
1970 (RCA)



**Baltimore**  
1978 (CTI)



**To Be Free:  
The Nina Simone Story**  
2008 (Legacy)



**Mood Indigo: The Complete  
Bethlehem Sessions**  
2018 (BMG)



braced by the new black intellectual scene that included such figures as James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Langston Hughes. Following the 1964 church bombing that killed four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama, she was inspired to write the landmark protest song “Mississippi Goddam,” articulating the kind of direct rage that folksingers like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez had expressed, but marking new territory for black music. “You can’t help it,” she later said. “An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned, is to reflect the times.” She played benefits and demonstrations, including the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, but she made her own sensibility clear — the first time she met Martin Luther King Jr., she immediately told him, “I’m not nonviolent.”

Simone recorded nearly forty albums between 1958 and 1973, exploring an incomparable variety of styles, and cutting unforgettable interpretations of “I Put a Spell on You,” “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood,” “Feeling Good,” and “Ain’t Got No/I Got Life,” along with writing classic examinations of African-American life including “Four Women” and “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.”

“Nina Simone’s music helped us to navigate the contradictions that propelled the black struggle forward,” said the activist and professor Angela Davis. “Her phenomenal voice beckoned us toward the battle to come.”

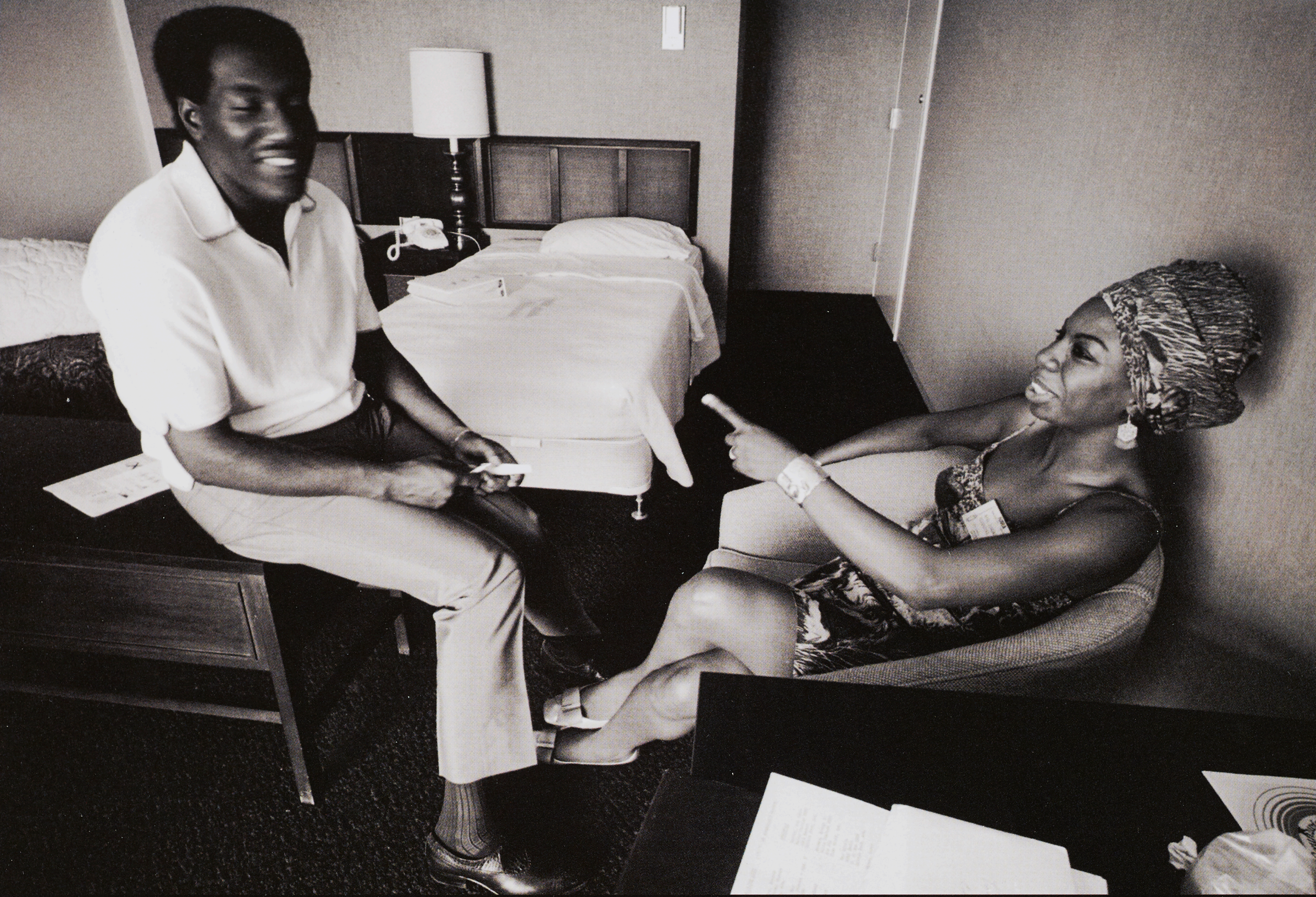
She was also championed by such artists as Elton John and David Bowie (who befriended her in the seventies and once told her, “Where you’re coming from, there are very few of us out there . . . your genius overshadows the money”). Though she never had a pop hit after “Porgy,” her music continued to find an audience. In 1987, the original 1958 recording of “My Baby Just Cares for Me” was used in

a commercial for Chanel No. 5 perfume in Britain, and the song climbed to Number Five on the U.K. singles chart. A recent resurgence of interest in her life and work has produced documentary and feature films, stage plays, and numerous musical tributes. Following the murder of Freddie Gray in 2015, her version of Randy Newman’s “Baltimore” (“Oh, Baltimore/Ain’t it hard just to live”) went viral.

From her earliest days onstage, Simone’s live performances offered their own kind of drama. She could never fully let go of her classical training, or her sense that her music required a certain level of respect — that she was an artist, not just an entertainer. She was always quick to cut a concert short or scold an audience if they were not giving her their full attention, and those tendencies were exacerbated as her career went on. Her shows could be scattershot, and she sometimes didn’t bother to show up. “White people had Judy Garland,” Richard Pryor once said. “We had Nina.”

Simone recorded only three albums between 1973 and her death in 2003, as she bounced between continents, expressed disappointment with the state of black protest, and struggled with emotional issues that today would likely be labeled as bipolar disorder. For decades, she believed that she was being ripped off and bootlegged by her record companies, and being targeted and harassed by the government.

But Simone would never allow her work to be reduced to a product of anger, a push-button reaction to white racism that could be dismissed without an acknowledgment of the music’s layers. “I sing from intelligence,” she said. “I sing from letting them know that I know who they are, and what they have done to my people around the world. That’s not anger — anger has its place, and fire moves things. But I sing from intelligence.”



**OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT**  
In performance with bassist Lisle Atkinson and guitarist Rudy Stevenson, 1966; in evening finery, 1967.  
**THIS PAGE, FROM TOP** Crossing paths with Otis Redding, Atlanta, 1967; staying strong, Paris, 1991.