

# **Nina Simone's Role and Ambivalent Relationship in Civil Right Movement through 'Mississippi Goddam' and 'Four Women'**

## **Introduction**

Eunice Kathleen Waymon was born in Tryon, North Carolina in 1933. She showed musical talents from a young age of three. Early in her life, she aimed at pursuing her career as a classical pianist. She spent a summer in 1950 at Julliard School in preparation for her entrance audition at Curtis Institute of Music. When she heard back news of rejection from Curtis Institute of Music, she reached the turning point of her life. She started performing at bars and nightclubs adopting the stage name "Nina Simone" to keep the secret away from her parents. Her genre gradually expands to jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, signified by sensual voice and virtuosic pianism.

As a sought-after performer throughout late 1950s to 1980s, she went from reinterpreting "I love you Porgy" (1958), "You can have him" (1959), "African Mailman" (1959) to becoming a protest song leader with "Mississippi Goddam" (1963), "Four. Women" (1966), "Ain't Got No, I Got Life" (1968). Looking through the span of her albums, there is an unforeseeable connection between the songs and her personal life. Love songs had been her focus in the 1950s as she was deeply entangled in her first marriage. Whilst the Civil Right Movement got heated in the 1960s, she showed interests in gathering attention for gender and racial inequality, Black Nationalism.

In this research, Nina Simone's role and her relationship with key personnel in Civil Right Movement would be examined. It aims to provide an insight to Simone's compositional style and interpretation for "Mississippi Goddam", "Four Women", also impact of the two productions affected her musical career and life then on. Simone has always been an advocate for

Black Activism, by analyzing the two songs on various performance and her interviews, we have a more in depth understanding of Nina Simone's musical path and certain decisions she made.

### **Background of Civil Right Movement**

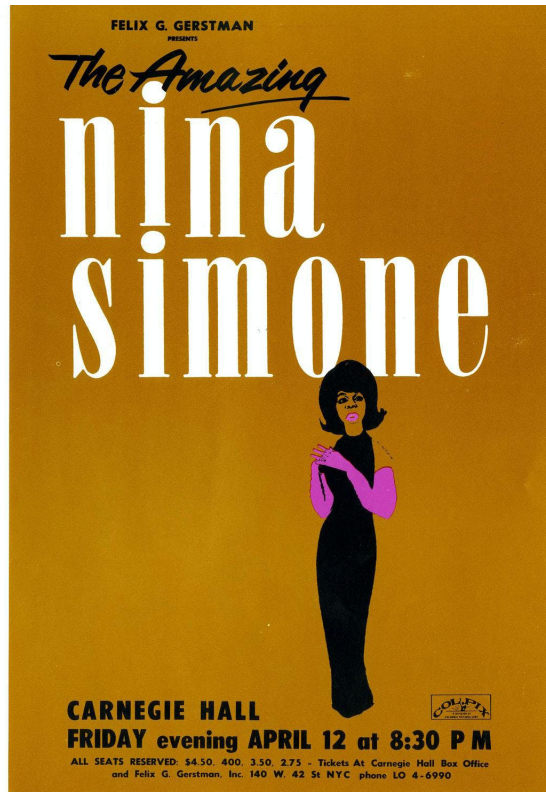
Popularization of Civil Right Movement can be dated back to Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 when racial segregation was prominent in Southern states of America. In the midst of the movement, Martin Luther King Jr. rose up and was elected as president of Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He supported racial equality, desegregation of black people, voting rights through non-violent sit-ins and protests. Simone was a good friend of Martin Luther King, upon learning the assassination of King, she composed "The King of Love is Dead" to commemorate his effort in the movement. She quoted "It killed my inspiration of the Civil Right Movement in US, I moved away."<sup>1</sup>

The birth of *Mississippi Goddam* was an outburst of rage from murder of Medgar Evers, Mississippi's field secretary for National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in June 1963. Three months later September 1963, four young black girls are bombed at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, Birmingham Alabama by the Ku Klux Klan. She performed *Mississippi Goddam* at various occasions, it became one of the protest anthems for Civil Right Movement. A notable performance of the piece was on March 22, 1964 at Carnegie Hall, a year after she made her debut at Carnegie Hall: the same day Martin Luther King was arrested for

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Simone, "Nina Simone on BBC HARDtalk, 1999" Interview by Tim Sebastian. *Hardtalk*, BBC, 1999. Video, 8:10. Updated April 24, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT\\_io](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT_io)

protesting for desegregation in 1963. Comparing the two concerts, it is observed Simone grew involved in her role of promoting civil rights especially to mostly white audience in 1964.<sup>2</sup>



Poster for Simone's premier at Carnegie Hall in 1963<sup>3</sup>

*Four Women* on the other hand, explored untouched issues in black nationalist movement. Racial discrimination towards black community was often discussed, however black women were still confined by limited terms, such described in Simone's *Four Women*: skin color, hair texture and behavior. Simone was the first to compose activism songs about gender

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<sup>2</sup> Carnegie Hall Rose Archives. *Nina Simone at Carnegie Hall*. Last modified April 13, 2020. Accessed November 25, 2020.

<https://www.carnegiehall.org/Explore/Articles/2020/04/13/Nina-Simone-at-Carnegie-Hall>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

inequality. Towards the end of Civil Right Movement in 1966, this specific composition was a bold act protesting for black women who were struggling with stigmatization of behavioral expectations. *Four Women* was highly controversial even among black community, many black radio stations refused to play the record claiming the song as insult to black women.<sup>4</sup>

With mass participation of black community for civil disobedience, Voting Rights Act of 1965, Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed for federal laws to be implemented to protect minority voting rights and eliminate discrimination in sale or renting of property. It ended more than a decade long Civil Right Movement with substantial improvement.

### **Simone's stance in linking politics with popular music**

Nina Simone never really liked the idea of tying politics with popular music. In fact, she stated “Nightclubs were dirty, making records was dirty, popular music was dirty and. To mix all that with politics seemed senseless and demeaning”.<sup>5</sup> This actually matched with the stage of her life, she had always aspired to become a classical concert pianist, even showed regrets of not being able to perform classical repertoire at Carnegie Hall. Furthermore, she has copyright issues with the record companies to the point she hired a lawyer to chase after her 60 pirated albums in England.<sup>6</sup>

As far as she wanted to purify her repertoire with classical repertoire, love songs, there came a period when she realized protest music is vital as a propaganda for Civil Right Movement

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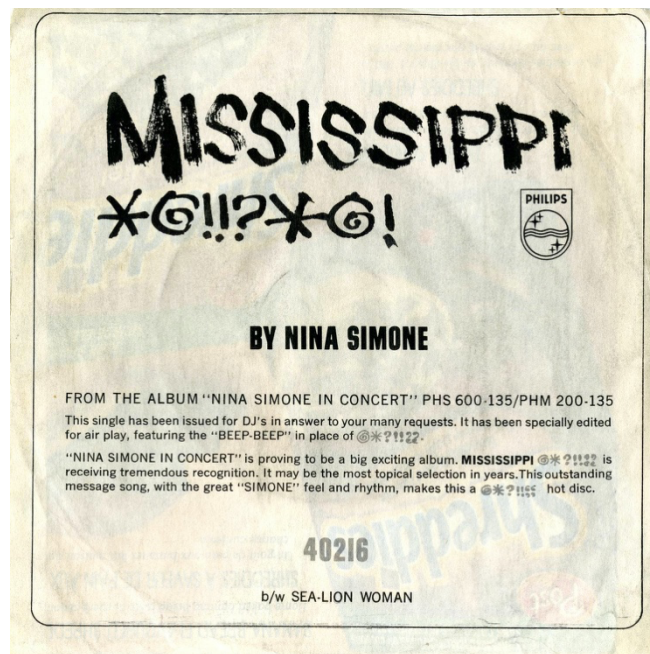
<sup>4</sup> Nina Simone, With Stephen Cleary. *I Put A Spell On You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Nina Simone, “Nina Simone on BBC HARDtalk, 1999” Interview by Tim Sebastian. Hardtalk, BBC, 1999. Video, 8:10. Updated April 24, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT\\_io](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT_io)

and dose of sanity to suppress violent acts. *Mississippi Goddam* was her outlet of expressing anger towards murder of Medgar Evers and longing for racial equality in US.

Simone's multiple rendition and compositions for Civil Right Movement and Black Nationalism includes *To be Young, Gifted and Black*, *Ain't got No- I Got Life*, *I wish I knew How it would feel to be free* and *Backlash Blues*. Amongst them, *Mississippi Goddam* and *Four Women* stood out as the most controversial and received backlash from the music industry. In an interview with "Ebony/Jet Showcase" TV program, she admitted *Mississippi Goddam* was the song that did the most damage to her career, where record companies would boycott her albums either beeping out her lyrics or sending back the records to her.<sup>7</sup>



Censored Title of Simone's record Mississippi Goddam by Philips Records<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Johnson Publishing Company. "Nina Simone Reveals: 'Mississippi Goddam' Song 'Hurt My Career'". *Jet* (March 24, 1986): 54-55. Accessed November 25, 2020.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=C7EDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=C7EDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>8</sup> Carnegie Hall Rose Archives. *Nina Simone at Carnegie Hall*. Last modified April 13, 2020. Accessed November 25, 2020.

<https://www.carnegiehall.org/Explore/Articles/2020/04/13/Nina-Simone-at-Carnegie-Hall>

Attempt of bring gender inequality topics to the table was also unsuccessful commercially, *Four Women* was charged with insulting Black Women, the record was banned from New York and Philadelphia radio stations.<sup>9</sup> Though the song was less associated with civil disobedience, the lyrics came across as blunt and hurtful depicting the struggles of black women experience from not just white race but also within the black community. Simone accomplished milestones of composing gender related protest songs, performing countless interpretation of both *Mississippi Goddam* and *Four Women*. She put actions forward and did what she deemed necessary for creating resonance of Black community in 1960s.

### **Mississippi Goddam**

In the first wave of protest music, they were unrehearsed congregational singing. Starting from 1955 Montgomery bus boycott event, new protest songs were written to better fit the message of communal unity.<sup>10</sup> Simone found a leading role in participating her first ever protest song, as she was performing the piece across North America, Europe in 1960s-70s. During an interview with Tim Sebastian on BBCHardtalk in 1999, she claimed her stage presence and attitude towards each performance “My first piano teacher taught me ‘you do not touch the piano until you are ready, and they are ready to listen to you’.”<sup>11</sup> This explained Simone’s variable approaches to *Mississippi Goddam* at various occasions. In the session below, Simone’s alteration to the piece for performance in Holland, 1965 and Antibes France, 1969 are

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<sup>9</sup>Claudia Roth Pierpont, “A Raised Voice: How Nina Simone Turned the Movement into Music.” *The New Yorker* 90, no. 23 (August 11, 2014): 44–51. Accessed November 22, 2020.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.libraries.uc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ram&AN=A839815&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

<sup>10</sup> Portia K. Maultsby, Mellonee V. Burnim ed. *Issues in African American Music*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 344.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315472096>

<sup>11</sup> Nina Simone, “Nina Simone on BBC HARDtalk, 1999” Interview by Tim Sebastian. *Hardtalk*, BBC, 1999. Video, 20:40. Updated April 24, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2020.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT\\_io](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT_io)

used to demonstrate flexibility in her impromptu according to recent events and location. A general textural and melodic outline in reference to Tammy Kernodle's analysis are taken into account.<sup>12</sup>

#### Refrain (G major)

- (A) Alabama's got me so upset. Tennessee made me lose my rest and everybody knows about Mississippi goddam! (2x)
- (B) Can't you see it? Can't you feel it? It's all in the air. I can't stand the pressure much longer somebody say a prayer.
- (A) Alabama's got me so upset. Tennessee made me lose my rest and everybody knows about Mississippi goddam.

#### Modulation to E minor

- (A') Hound dogs on my trail, school children sittin' in jail. Black cat crossed my path.  
I think everyday's going to be my last.
- (A'') God have mercy on this land of mine, we all gonna get it in due time. I don't belong here,  
I don't belong there. I even stopped believeing in prayer.
- (B) Don't tell me. I'll tell you. Me and my people are just about due. I've been there so I know.  
They keep on saying- Go slow.

#### Bridge section – transition back to G major

But that's just trouble (do it slow). Washing the windows (do it slow)  
Picking the cotton (do it slow). You're just plain rotten (do it slow)  
You're too damn lazy (do it slow). Thinking crazy (do it slow)  
Where am I going? What am I doing? I don't know, I don't know.

#### (A'')- returning to G major

Just try to do my very best. Stand up, be counted with all the rest because everybody knows about Mississippi goddam.

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<sup>12</sup> Tammy L. Kernodle, "'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free': Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 3 (2008): 302-303.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196308080097>

## E minor section

Picket lines, school boycotts, they try and say it's a communist plot. All I want is equality, my  
sista, my brother, my people and me.  
You lied to me all these years. You told me to wash and clean my ears. Talk real fine just like a  
lady and you'd stop calling me Sista Sadie.  
This whole country is full of lies. We are going to die and die like flies. I don't trust nobody  
anymore. You keep on saying go slow. Go slow.

## Bridge section

But that's just the trouble (do it slow)  
Deep Segregation (do it slow)  
Mass participation (do it slow)  
Beautification (do it slow)  
Do things gradually will bring more tragedy. Why don't you see it? Why don't you feel it?  
I don't know. I don't know.

## Modulation back to G major

You don't have to live next to me. Just give me my equality. Everybody knows about Mississippi,  
everybody knows about Alabama, everybody knows about Mississippi goddam.

The song is based on a 32-bar AABA form, in the refrain guitar and piano play off a I-V progression, given the static harmonic progression, Simone's lyric and voice became the center of the protest song. Both live performances in Holland and Antibes had common call-and-response "do it slow" line from the band members and final cry from Simone's Mississippi goddam in last stanza. What differs is the concert in Holland 1965 had snare drums play a suspension rhythm for introduction while Simone was saying "Going Home Now". The prolongation of I-V harmonic progression along with the snare drum act as a reinforcement of showtune, an irony to the blunt and unsettling lyrics to foreign listeners. The performance in Antibes Juan-Les-Pins 1969 altered "Tennessee" in the refrain to "Governor Wallace" in response to George Wallace Jr's support of segregation and Jim Crow laws during Civil Right Movement. It was obvious Simone's sensitivity to the development of movement enabled her to become successful activist in the 1960s.



## Four Women

*Four Women* is Simone's first attempt to draw public attention on gender and racial inequality within white and black community. It explored black women in four different shades of skin and silent treatment they experienced due to age, occupation and enslavement. Diverging from *Mississippi Goddam* written in 1963, Simone turned the protest song *Four Women* into a slow ballad in A minor, accompanied by background drumming and ostinato pattern from bass (A-C-E-G-F#-D) along with piano. The band accompaniment stays constant until it reaches fourth stanza where flautist enters in response of Simone's vocals. It bridged the suppressed rage into an outburst till Simone reveals the enslaved woman's name as Peaches.

My skin is black. My arms are long. My hair is wooly. My back is strong.  
Strong enough to take the pain inflicted again and again.  
What do they call me? My name is Aunt Sarah. My name is Aunt Sarah.

My skin is yellow. My hair is long. Between two worlds, I do belong.  
My father was rich and white. He forced my mother late one night.  
What do they call me? My name is Saffronia. My name is Saffronia.

My skin is tan. My hair is fine. My hips invite you. My mouth like wine.  
Whose little girl am I? Anyone who has money to buy. What do they call me?  
My name is Sweet Thing. My name is Sweet Thing.

My skin is brown. And my manner is tough. I'll kill the first mother I see.  
'Cause my life has been too rough. I'm awfully bitter these days because my parents were slaves. What do they call me? My name is Peaches.

Comparing Simone's performance side by side ranging from 1965 to 1988, her interpretation always displayed gradual increase in emotional intensity and vividly explored four different personality of black women. The first one is an old black lady Aunt Sarah who worked as a housemaid in white family where people generalized her as "Aunt" for her elderly age. The second women Saffronia is a mixed race with white lineage as her father "forced my mother late one night", she struggled with self-identity and sense of belonging between two ethnic groups.

The third woman Sweet Thing was depicted as a sexual figure with the occupation of a prostitute “Anyone who has money to buy”. Her self-introduction: “My hips invite you. My mouth like wine” suggested stigmatization people imposed on her and she was confined by these definitions.<sup>13</sup> The last woman Peaches showed toughness as she described her life as bitter “because my parents were slaves”.

Out of all the performances, Simone shouted out with a hoarse voice “My name is Peaches” as opposed to the first three stanzas repeating their three women’s names. This gesture concludes the four black women had enough of suppression and were ready to promote black feminism. Despite the backlash Simone received for this particular composition, she was a pioneer in urging public to attend to gender inequality and free black women in 1960s.

### **Differentiation in Musical Styles of Nina Simone’s Non-protest Music**

Nina Simone first came to the scene covering love songs in 1950s including her commercial hits “I love you Porgy” (1958), “You can have him” (1959) and Afrocentricism piano piece “African Mailman” (1959), “Zungo” (1962). Known for her soulful and sensual singing accompanied by virtuosic piano passages, the piano solo compliments her melismatic singing style. These are earlier time in her career where she highlighted her pianism and ad libs. In the introduction for “You can have him”, there is a huge part in piano B major seventh arpeggiation figure. This is reminiscence of cadenza in second movement of George Gershwin’s Piano Concerto in F in which Simone made a rendition of “I love you Porgy” from his 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*.

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<sup>13</sup> Tammy L. Kernodle, “‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free’: Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 3 (2008): 312.

*Mississippi Goddam* and *Four Women* on the other hand are nothing like the love songs Simone covered. Going into 1960s, the protest songs are straightforward and harmonically simple with lyrics being the main focus. If *Mississippi Goddam* is written under the genre showtune with catchy melody for audience to better promote the message of lyrics, *Four Women* displays usage of old spiritual with simple pitches (C-B-G-A)<sup>14</sup>. Both protest songs share distinctive feature which is interchangeable lyrics. For the former, Simone has already demonstrated she could switch the state into other cities she was performing in. To help audience better understand the Afro culture as describe in the lyrics, she includes descriptive lines for each woman. In *Four Women*, there was a standardized measurement of black women, where she added “I am old and feeble now” to Aunt Sarah during a performance in Newport Jazz Festival in 1967.

### Conclusion

Nina Simone’s protest songs for Civil Right Movement was controversial, over the loss of her longtime friend and comrade Martin Luther King Jr, she was devastated in combination of her safety concerns in the States.<sup>15</sup> Spending her remaining time in London, Barbados and Bouches-du-Rhône, France, she occasionally traveled back to America to perform which she always compiles few of her protest songs into it.

Even though Simone directed herself into linking “dirty” politics with popular music, received boycotts from record companies for *Mississippi Goddam* and *Four Women*, she was

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Mvula, “Nina Simone and me with Laura Mvula” Aired in April 2016. BBC Documentary, Video, 35:52. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL1m7SvoICw>

<sup>15</sup> Nina Simone, “Nina Simone on BBC HARDtalk, 1999” Interview by Tim Sebastian. *Hardtalk*, BBC, 1999. Video, 8:10. Updated April 24, 2017. Accessed November 22, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT\\_io](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8olEruTT_io)

remembered as a revolutionary activist who put forward gender and racial inequality to the table through her influence. She fled the states in late 1960s and moved to Europe for disappointment of progress made in Civil Right Movement, but she never gave up on fighting for racial equality and break gender stereotypes. People will never forget Nina Simone, a truly passionate activist in Civil Right Movement whom the music industry owes an apology to.

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