



Simone-izing

Princess Noire:

The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone

By Nadine Cohodas

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Reviewed by Salamishah Tillet



S ometime in 1944, the white elite of Tryon, North Carolina, gathered at the local library to attend an unusual recital. Eunice Waymon, an eleven-year-old African American prodigy who dreamed of becoming a classical pianist was performing. Eunice walked gracefully to the piano, reassured by the thought that her parents, JD and Mary Kate Waymon, dressed in their Sunday best, would be sitting proudly in the front row. Before she began to play, she sneaked one last look at the audience and saw an usher moving her beaming parents to the back, to make room for a newly arrived white couple. Although her parents had not objected, Eunice refused to play unless they remain seated. The host, surprised by the unprecedented commotion, yielded, and the young Eunice Waymon, who later renamed herself Nina Simone, headlined her first racially integrated performance.

Such are the stories of music and rebellion that fill Nadine Cohodas's *Princess Noire*, the most comprehensive and thoughtfully researched biography on Simone to date. Eunice Waymon was the sixth of eight children. Her father was an entrepreneurial handyman and talented musician who played the harmonica, banjo, guitar, and Jew's harp. Her mother worked as a domestic in the home of Tryon's white residents during the day and served as a preacher at church revivals during the nights and weekends. Nurtured in this household of country blues and African American gospel, between the secular and sacred, Eunice was humming the Negro spiritual "Down By The Riverside" at eight months old, playing the church organ at two and a half, and serving as the regular Sunday pianist at St. Luke's Methodist Church at ten.

Eunice's talent was considered a "blessing" by St. Luke's parishioners; her parents, family, and later patrons understood her to be a prodigy. "We knew she was a genius by the time she was three," her brother Carrol declared to Cohodas. Likewise, her sister Dorothy recalled that Eunice was "preserved" and exempted from washing dishes because "her fingers were protected. She was always special in that way. Nobody was jealous. We adored her." At the prayer meetings, the preternatural Eunice not only picked out the complex chords of gospel music by ear but also kept tempo with the frenetic church atmosphere. Through this sonic baptism by fire, Eunice began to develop a sound that both matched and molded the congregants' emotions—a musical feat that would carry over to Nina Simone's live performances throughout her career.

Through painstaking research, which included poring over Tryon newspapers and town records, and interviewing Waymon family members, Cohodas draws a vivid sketch of how Tryon's blacks and whites, living in "an inchoate integration or imperfect segregation," worked

together to cultivate Eunice's musical brilliance. Discovered to have perfect pitch as a girl, Eunice earned her role as church pianist before ever receiving formal training. After watching the ten-year-old Eunice perform with her sisters Lucille and Dorothy at a local concert, Kate Waymon's white employer, Katherine Miller, was so impressed with Eunice's musical facility that she offered to pay for a year of piano lessons, promising that if Eunice's gift warranted more financial support, she would supplement her original commitment. For the next six years, under the tutelage of Muriel Mazzanovich, or Miss Mazzy as Eunice fondly called her, Eunice figuratively transcended the color bar and transported herself to the "larger world" of European classical composers such as Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin.

Eunice decided to become the first African American classical virtuoso—although she later claimed this was not her idea but rather her mother's and Miss Mazzy's. Whatever her motivation, her discipline was matchless. Tryon, black or white, had never seen anything like it. Eunice furthered her musical training at the Allen



School, a boarding school for African American girls in Asheville, North Carolina. After graduation, she took classes at New York City's prestigious Julliard School and spent several months preparing for an audition at the renowned conservatory, the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Unfortunately for Eunice as well as for her family, who had moved to Philadelphia to support her, this dream unraveled in 1951, when Curtis rejected her after a single audition. Bewildered, Eunice vowed to work twice as hard and to audition again the following year. Her plan flatlined, however, when her older brother Carrol informed her that Curtis had refused to admit her because she was black. Cohodas suggests that Eunice might have felt comforted by the fact that her rejection was due to "the immutable factor of skin color" rather than to lack of skill or talent, although she includes an interview with Vladimir Sokoloff, a Curtis faculty member who quickly dismisses the charge of racial discrimination and claims that Eunice simply was not proficient enough to gain admission. Nevertheless, Cohodas seems generally to support the Waymons' theory that institutional racism stifled Eunice's classical music career.

The Curtis rejection may have ended the concert-hall aspirations of Eunice Waymon, but it birthed Nina Simone. Desperate to use her music to make money, Eunice left Philadelphia for the Atlantic City nightclub scene in 1954, where she took a stage name because she did not want to embarrass her Methodist mother by performing secular music. While Simone would claim in her 1991 memoir, *I Put a Spell on You*, that "Nina" was her childhood nickname and "Simone" was in honor of the French film actress Simone Signoret, Cohodas points out that in a 1960 interview with *Rogue* magazine, Simone claimed that a boyfriend had given her the pet-name of "Niña," and "I don't know where the hell I got Simone from." None of Simone's siblings remember ever calling Eunice, "Nina."

Despite the name's uncertain origins, Cohodas reminds us that "Nina Simone" became one of the most influential American musicians of the

twentieth century. In the smoky, rowdy Atlantic City bar scene, Simone's classical music repertoire seemed out of place, as distant as her dream of becoming a classical pianist. Modeling herself after the beautiful singer-pianist Hazel Scott, who was known for improvising on classical melodies as well as playing blues and jazz, Simone began singing popular tunes that she had picked up teaching music in Philadelphia and songs suggested to her by friends, including her formidable 1958 cover of George Gershwin's "I Love You, Porgy" (which he had titled, "I Loves You..."), her most commercially successful record and the only one to reach the Billboard Top Forty. On any given night she could be found playing a dizzying array of songs, including but not limited to show tunes from Broadway musicals and Ziegfeld comedies; jazz and blues standards; American and Irish folk songs; covers of Bessie Smith, Oscar Brown, and Duke Ellington; and an occasional Bach fugue. The genre-mixing was not limited to her live performances; a brief glance at Simone's first album, playfully titled *Little Girl Blue* (Bethlehem Records, 1958), attests to her broad repertoire, an essential component in her self-creation. As one critic later noted, she could "Simone-ize" anything by poking experimentally into "the unexpected crannies of a song." Even after her makeover, Simone always remained faithful to her compartment as a classical pianist and refused to perform for noisy audiences, enforcing a social contract better suited for Carnegie Hall than Atlantic City.

During the mid- to late-1960s, Simone developed a unique style of agitprop, which became a soundtrack for the civil rights movement. Just as the village of Tryon had nurtured Eunice Waymon's classical virtuosity, Greenwich Village and its cadre of African American writers, including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and most importantly the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, shaped Nina Simone's political consciousness. Initially, Simone was content with her rising stardom and reluctant to join the freedom movement. In the face of Simone's unwillingness, Hansberry insisted that because Simone was black,

she was part of the struggle. "It made no difference whether I admitted it or not," Simone realized, "the fact was still true." Hansberry called Simone after her much-lauded 1963 Carnegie Hall concert, but not to praise her performance. Rather, Hansberry wanted to know: "What was Nina doing for the movement while the reverend [King] and his colleagues were sitting in jail?"

Simone wrote her "first civil rights song" in 1963, after she learned of the murder of the NAACP leader Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, and following that, the death of four little girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. After the bombing, she was initially so distraught that she tried to make a pistol. Then, she turned to her pen. Introducing her new song, she said, "The name of this tune is 'Mississippi Goddamn,' and I mean every word of it." With its ironically upbeat melody and lyrics that rebuke Jim Crow laws, "Mississippi Goddamn" became an anthem for a generation of civil rights workers, along with the music of folk singers such as Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Odetta, and Bob Dylan; jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Archie Shepp; and the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] Freedom Singers, who adapted traditional spirituals for protest marches.

Whereas Simone's earlier genre-mixing symbolized integration in a racially polarized American culture, the songs she wrote between 1963 and 1972 both upset musical borders and called explicitly for the end of *de jure* racial boundaries. Her music uniquely anticipated the concerns of the second-wave feminist movement and the burgeoning black power movement. Her classics—"Four Women"; "Blacklash Blues" (cowritten with Langston Hughes); "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black"—and her covers—"Strange Fruit," the antilynching song made famous by Billie Holiday; "I Wish I Knew How It Feels to Be Free," by the bassist Billy Taylor; and "Revolution," by Beatles John Lennon and Paul McCartney—placed her at the intersection of several of the most important social movements in US history. Integrating the competing demands of feminism, civil rights, and black nationalism, Simone birthed a black feminist musical and sartorial aesthetic that, over the next decade, would mature into the music of Aretha Franklin and Labelle, and the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

Sadly, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Simone, like many civil rights movement artists, became disillusioned and embittered. James Baldwin retreated to Paris, and Simone withdrew to Bridgetown, Barbados, leaving her second husband and Svengali-like manager Andy Stroud and taking their young daughter, Lisa, with her. In 1976, at the suggestion of the famed South African vocalist Miriam Makeba, she and Lisa emigrated to Liberia. Lisa, burdened by her mother's emotional instability, left Liberia for a Swiss boarding school and eventually repudiated Simone and reunited with her estranged father in the United States.

Cohodas does not situate Simone's global travels and cosmopolitan experiences in the growing internationalist political consciousness of the black power movement but rather sees them as symptoms of her psychological decline. During the late seventies and early eighties, severed

relationships such as that with her daughter became commonplace in Simone's life, as did onstage antics. She started concerts two to three hours late, shouted expletives onstage, and cancelled shows altogether. Nevertheless, mental illness is conspicuously absent from Simone's autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*. With no mention of her psychological challenges, Simone's account feels incomplete and leaves the reader feeling as though there must be a fuller explanation for her broken relationships and angry outbursts against fans and foes alike. Simone's memoir, like her voice, is marked by an unnamed haunting: a spell.

Only late in this book does Cohodas reveal that Simone's lifelong visits to therapists, two-week hospitalizations, and suicide attempts were probably due to schizophrenia. The diagnosis offers a way to read Simone's decline that both supplements and butts up against her self-construction—but the pronouncement comes so late in *Princess Noire* that readers may not know what to do with the information. Cohodas does not argue that Simone's mental illness enriched or inhibited her work, even though her "tumultuousness" is emphasized in the book's subtitle. Instead the brevity of Cohodas's discussion suggests that it was just one of many obstacles that Simone confronted in her life. This de-emphasis supports Cohodas's view that Simone's genius persisted even though she grew up in a society that far too often labels musical genius as white or male, and almost always associates it with madness.

Readers of jazz biographies are all too familiar with scenes of industry wrongdoing and black sacrifice, yet *Princess Noire* provides little historical context for Simone's claims of financial exploitation by Stroud, the federal government, and the recording industry, making Simone's rants against them sound paranoid. However, the financial

exploitation and social alienation were real. Despite the popularity of Simone's music, she never received much money for her recordings. The vast majority were sold without her permission: "I made 39 albums, and they've pirated 70," she said. "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," a song written for Simone, became a billboard hit only when it was covered by a white rock group, the Animals, in 1965. In the 1970s, the Internal Revenue Service issued a warrant for Simone's arrest because she owed millions in unpaid taxes. The tragic result was that she continued to tour well past her prime, because she desperately needed the money.

Cohodas tries to balance the chaotic concert performances and suspicious personal relationships that dominated the end of Simone's life with a brief description of her comeback. In the early eighties, her song "My Baby Just Cares for Me" livened up a Chanel No. 5 commercial, and Simone's blues songs and ballads formed the score for the action film *Point of No Return*, starring Bridget Fonda and Gabriel Byrne. In 1991, she toured Italy with Miriam Makeba and Odetta, and in 1993 she released her final album, *A Single Woman*. While her late, mercurial concert performances and commercial comeback set the stage for her present-day iconicity, Cohodas reminds us that it is Simone's idiosyncratic and singular blend of the blues, Bach, pop, and gospel, and her desegregation of song and space, that have earned her a place among the pantheon of America's great artists. She not only musically influenced contemporaries such as the Animals, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, and Janis Joplin but also provided a model of artistry and activism for generations of post-civil rights movement musicians, including the indie rocker Jeff Buckley, the hip-hop artists Lauryn Hill, Talib Kweli, and Kanye West, the dark cabaret group Antony and the Johnsons, and the soul singer John Legend.

Princess Noire closes with re-examination of Simone's legacy. Simone spent her last days living

in the seaside town of Carry-le-Rouet, France, alienated from old friends, surrounded by sketchy newcomers, and haunted by the fact that she never became a classical pianist. But, as so often in this compelling book, Cohodas paints Simone's late life with patience and empathy. Instead of summing up Simone's career as one of failure or with the theme of decline, Cohodas's biography inspires old Simone fans to listen to her music anew, while convincing the unconverted to dig through the crates for her classics. "When I die," Simone told *Melody Maker* in 1969, "I want to have left some particular mark of my own. I'm carving my own little niche in the world now." In *Princess Noire*, we realize that Simone misspoke, for a niche was always too small for her. Cohodas reminds us that Simone was always too daring, too imaginative, and too out-of-the-house to be contained by the racial, gender, and musical categories into which she was born.

Princess Noire closes with a vivid scene from Simone's funeral. And though she lives on in song and verse, her passing makes us nostalgic for a moment when socially consciousness music was in vogue. Part homage and part swansong, *Princess Noire* memorializes Simone as a once-in-a-life-time artist, a born rebel who valiantly fought to know what freedom felt like. 🎵

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