

# Simone autobiography details painful life

By Kam Williams  
Sentinel-Voice

*"I knew prejudice existed, but I never thought it could have such a direct effect on my future. Nobody told me that no matter what I did in life the color of my skin would always make a difference. I was playing popular songs with a classical piano technique influenced by cocktail jazz. People often compared me to Billie Holiday, which I hated. We were entirely different. What made me mad was that it meant people couldn't get past the fact that we were both Black; if I had happened to be White, nobody would have made the connection. Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background, because I didn't fit into White ideas of what a Black performer should be. It diminished me."* — Nina Simone on being pigeonholed

Nina Simone (1933-2003) may be best remembered for her haunting renditions of popular songs like "My Baby Just Cares for Me" and "Mr. Bojangles." But anyone who caught her in concert will remember her as the anguished soul who defiantly breathed life into such Civil Rights-era anthems as "Mississippi Goddam," "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," and "Why? The King of Love Is Dead."

She was uncompromising in her demand for respect, that she would pause to lecture her unruly hecklers and never returned to the Apollo again after being booed during her first and only appearance there.

How had this Black woman of such humble origins, hailing from the tiny



**Fiercely proud, songstress Nina Simone never returned to the Apollo Theater after being heckled during a show.**

town of Tryon, N.C., developed the self-assurance and self-worth to stand up not only to the notoriously tough Apollo crowd, but also to any audience, anywhere on the planet the least bit inclined to trample upon her dignity? To get a good idea, try reading "I Put A Spell on You," as honest an autobiography as anyone could hope for from such an important role model for African-American girls.

Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon, on Feb. 21, 1933, she credits her aristocratic bearing, to her upbringing and to her childhood piano teacher who offered a combination of music and finishing school lessons.

In fact, early in her career, Nina thought of herself as an aspiring classical artist who was merely performing her very personal interpretations of popular songs in seedy nightclubs to pay the bills.

And it was only after she saw how her politically tinged protest songs about racial injustice had resonated with her fans that she accepted commercial music as a meaningful alternative.

Vulnerable and victimized throughout her professional life, sadly, Nina Simone led an undeniably lonely existence as an adult. Brutalized, raped and/or otherwise exploited by most of the males, whom she trusted, she only found refuge from her demons by escaping into booze and into her music and stage performances.

Her first husband, Don, was an unemployed, drug-addicted, White beatnik who squandered so much of her money that she had to take a day job as a maid.

Next, she married Andy, a Black NYPD cop who beat her unconscious, tied her up, mismanaged her finances and

then cooperated with the IRS to set a trap that landed her in jail for tax fraud while he got off scot-free.

Another advisor sucker-punched her in a London hotel and left her for dead after emptying her pocketbook. Though unlucky at love, Nina never pulls any punches in telling her story. She admits that she was equally unsuccessful at seducing such polar opposites as the Nation of Islam's Minister Louis Farrakhan and the German owner of her record label, an apartheid apologist with substantial investments in South Africa.

Her busy schedule left little quality time for daughter, Lisa, a girl who ended up estranged from her mother and enlisting in the Army as soon as she graduated from a sleep-away prep school. Throughout the narrative, Nina complains bitterly of exhaustion and too little time for relaxation. But she usually managed to pull herself together for her shows, despite her very messy private life.

She had affairs with both bellhops and heads of state, such as a yearlong affair with the married Prime Minister of Barbados, Earl Barrow. The tragedy revealed by this unexpurgated bio is that the respect which Ms. Simone never failed to command on stage was only grudgingly granted by the trail of trusted confidantes, loved ones and hangers-on surrounding her.

Still, that unfortunate gap fact does not diminish one iota the magnitude of her enduring musical contributions that ought to strike an emotional chord in listeners for generations to come.

## Mfume

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to Bush in December inviting him to speak at any time during the five-day convention. Shelton says he is concerned that some people have raised the question of how Bush would be treated if he came to the NAACP?

"Well, if you look at every other president who has come before us, whether we overall disagree with their politics or agree with their politics, they have always been treated with the utmost respect and appreciation for being with us," Shelton says. "Our position has been when we invite people into our house, then indeed we will treat you with respect and care."

Mfume scoffs at the excuse that Bush could not fit the convention into his schedule. "My mother always told me you always make time to do what you want to do. Clearly, the President doesn't want to do this."

A former U. S. representative from Maryland and former chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Mfume says he sees the Bush rejection as a pattern of behavior he has exhibited toward Black organizations.

"The fact of the matter is that the president has refused to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus, refused to meet with any real civil rights organizations, did a drive-by at the Urban League conference last year, where he whisked in for 15 minutes and whisked out, refusing to even meet at length with their delegates or their leadership," he says.

The rejection letter was dated June 21, less than two weeks before Bush's White House celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, attended by civil rights veteran Dorothy Height and Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League.

"Those things are insulting," Mfume says. "These are not the good ol' days where all you had to do is show up and take a picture with a Black person and be considered a friend or an ally. These are the days in which you have to do something. Well, Mr. Bush is, in my opinion, losing a huge opportunity to do something and for whatever reason believes that photo-ops will get it done and I don't think they will."

Given the fact that Bush received only 9 percent of the Black vote in the 2000 election, his rejection of the NAACP will have little political impact from his standpoint, says University of Maryland Political Scientist Ron Walters. But, it does make a statement, he says.

"It continues to confirm that Bush doesn't have a receptive posture towards African-Americans," Walters says. But, the even greater meaning to the NAACP is that "Access to the White House has always been the currency of the NAACP. For it not to have it says to both parties that you're out of favor."

Bush and his policies have consistently been out of favor during each of the past four NAACP conventions.

In his 2001 convention speech, NAACP Chairman Julian Bond likened the Bush administration to "the Taliban." In 2002, he characterized Bush's civil rights policies as "snake oil." Last year, he described Bush's Africa tour as an "exotic photo-op."

Mfume says he now wants to speak at the Republican National Convention in New York. He says he has been confirmed as a speaker at the Democratic convention, but has not received an answer yet from the Republicans.

"Our approach to both of them was pretty much to say, 'Hello. Here's what we are doing. Here's how we would like your party to participate and we'd like to participate in some sort of way by speaking or having the opportunity to speak at your respective conventions,'" Mfume says. "We asked four years ago and the Republicans said, 'No, we can't find any time on the agenda for you.' And the Democratic Party said, 'Yeah. You're free to speak and we welcome whatever message you would bring.'"

Despite his distance from Bush, Mfume says it's just the opposite with RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie.

"Ed Gillespie and I have a good working relationship. The fact that he's the head of the Republican Party and I was a Democratic congressman for 10 years really is secondary. I knew him from my days on the Hill," Mfume says. "I have a lot respect for him in his current role. He will do good things. But he can not make the president do something that he doesn't want to do."

## AIDS

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expectancy.

Those anti-HIV treatments can cost as much as \$15,000 a year, and the state-run AIDS Drug Assistance Programs have struggled to stay afloat paying for them. More than 1,500 people in 10 states are on waiting lists to get treatment, and another eight states have implemented cost-saving measures such as limiting what drugs are available to participants. Another 10 states have said they will have to take some sort of cost-control action before year's end.

"That seems like a problem we can deal with," Bush told the Greater Exodus Baptist Church in Philadelphia.

"There shouldn't be lines (for treatment) here. And we're going to deal with the lines."

But the emergency infusion of cash is just a one-time shot, and even the architects of the ADAP system have long acknowledged that the nation will need to come up with sweeping reforms in order to keep treating America's growing HIV-positive population.

On the international front, the U.S. delegation in Bangkok will be promoting the White House plan for getting AIDS drugs to poor countries.

Bush has slated 12 sub-Saharan African nations, two Caribbean nations (Haiti and Guyana), and Vietnam to re-

ceive direct U.S. funding for treatment and prevention programs, as well as to improve the health care infrastructure needed to deliver those services.

The administration has already dispersed \$350 million to those countries, and Bush announced in his Philadelphia address that another \$500 million will go out shortly.

The administration plans to dole out \$2.4 billion this year, hoping that it will support treatment for approximately 200,000 people.

Critics have complained that the plan will not allow the funds to be spent on generic alternatives to the brand name AIDS drugs, which

would significantly boost the number of people who could get treatment.

The White House counters that it is focused on safety, and only will fund drugs that have been approved for use in the U.S. as well.

"President Bush has led the fight to provide lifesaving anti-retroviral drugs—not just any drugs, but safe and effective drugs," wrote Randall Tobias, who is heading up the project, in a letter to the Philadelphia Inquirer earlier this month.

"African families in programs funded by the United States have the same assurances as American families that the drugs they use are safe and effective."