

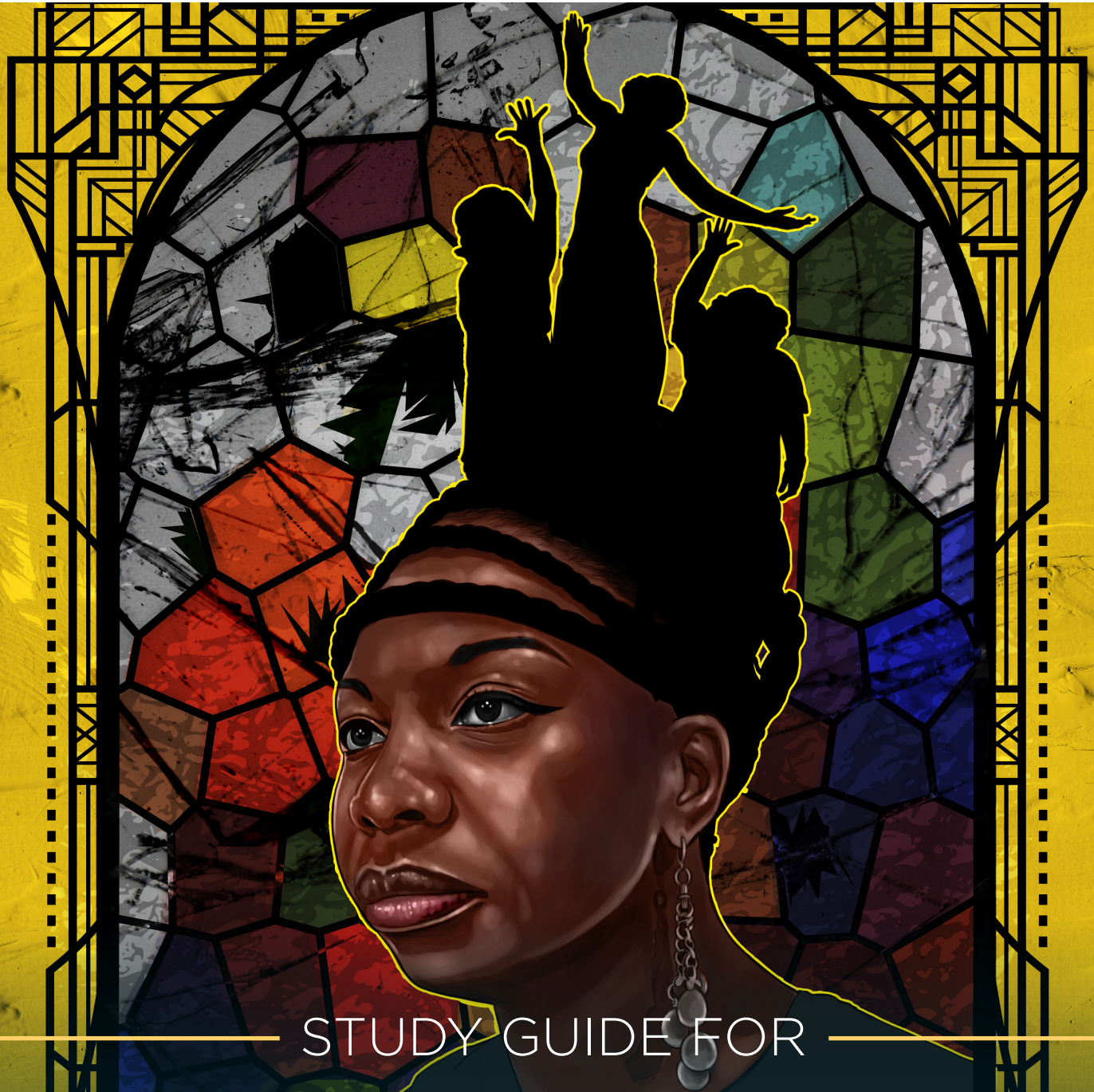


INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

**CHRISTEL DEHAAN**

STUDENT MATINEE PROGRAM

at the Indiana Repertory Theatre



STUDY GUIDE FOR  
**NINA SIMONE: FOUR WOMEN**

BY CHRISTINA HAM

February 4 - March 2 | OneAmerica Financial Stage

Original artwork by Tasha Beckwith. Photos by Zach Rosing.





# NINA SIMONE: FOUR WOMEN

BY CHRISTINA HAM



## Content Spotlight

### Nina Simone: Four Women

Contains songs and dialogue that infer sexual violence; sounds and imagery of 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing; antiquated and racially charged language; profanity and blasphemy; gun, switchblade, fighting, and alcohol consumption on stage; references to Christian theology; images of blood; descriptions of violence at protests.

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## a revolution in song

The High Priestess of Soul shook the world with her powerful music. In the depths of the Civil Rights struggle, Nina Simone used song as a means of expressing the nation’s anguish—and resilience. This deeply personal play with music imagines a conversation among Simone and three other Black women, showing how the iconic chanteuse forged her true calling—and gave voice to a movement.

**Recommended for students in grades 9-12**

*The performance will last approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes with no intermission.*

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## PLANNING YOUR VISIT



**You, the audience, are one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make each theatre experience enjoyable for everyone:**

Leave mobile phones, cameras, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home or turned off in your bag.

You may think texting is private, but the light and the motion are very annoying to those around you and on stage. Do not text during the performance.

The house lights dimming and going out signal the audience to get quiet and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.

Don’t talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage. Even if you think they can’t hear you, they can.

Never throw anything onto the stage. People could be injured.

Remain in your seat during the play. Use the restroom before or after the show.

Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue and sound effects, and look at the scenery, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.

Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp—whatever the story draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.

Remain at your seat and applaud during the curtain call; this is part of the performance too. It gives you a chance to recognize a job well done and the actors a moment to thank you for your attention.

# STUDENT MATINEE ARRIVAL & PARKING INFORMATION

## ARRIVAL & DISMISSAL

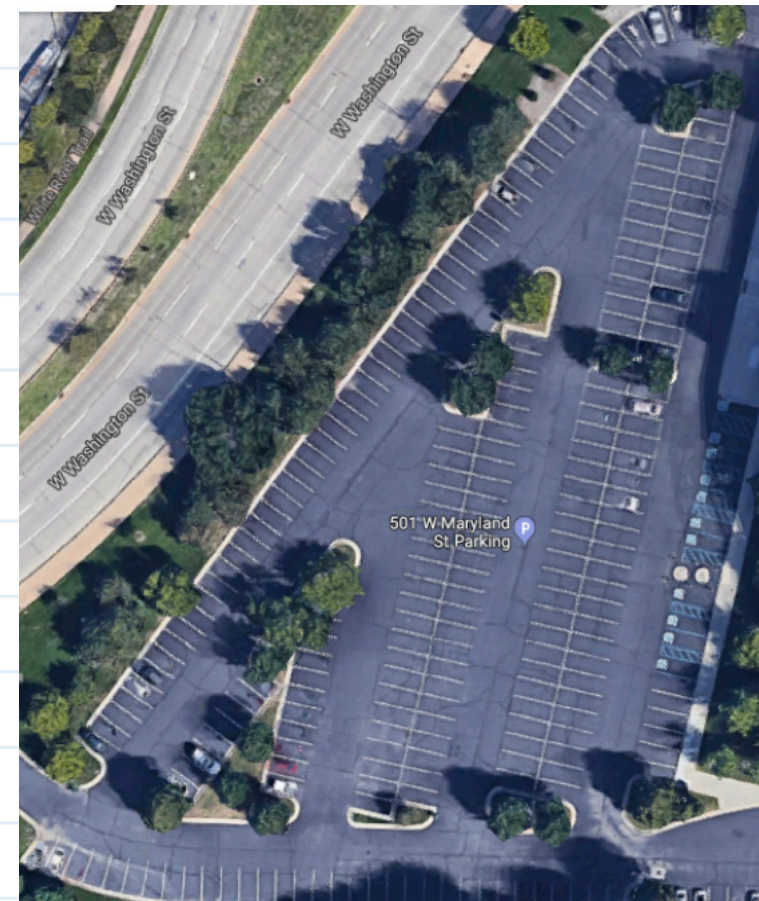
- IRT is located one-half block west of Circle Centre Mall on Washington St., between north bound Illinois St. and southbound Capitol Ave.
- The physical address of IRT is 140 W. Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204.
- Buses should unload and load directly in front of the theatre. (Do not block the entrance to Embassy Suites garage.) Please plan to arrive 20-30 minutes before your performance is scheduled to begin.
- You will be greeted at the curb by an IRT Staff Member and directed to the correct entrance.
- For shows on the Janet Allen Stage, students and teachers will take the stairs to the 4th floor.
- The teacher named on the reservation should check in with the IRT Education staff member stationed in the lobby.
- Your group will be ushered to your assigned seats.
- Students and chaperones should follow instructions of all IRT Staff for your safety.

## LATE ARRIVAL

- If you believe that you are going to be late, please contact the IRT House Manager, Katy Thompson at 317.916.4803. Provide them with a phone number and the name of the school so that Education staff may be in contact with you.
- You can contact IRT Education ([education@irtlive.com](mailto:education@irtlive.com)) with non-emergency information on the day of the show.

## PARKING

- Buses may park for free at Victory Field unless they are having an event - we will inform you if that is the case. The House Manager will give you a parking pass for each bus when you arrive at the theatre. It should be displayed in the windshield.
- Continue east on Washington St. past the JW Marriott and turn left across Maryland St. into the Victory Field lot.
- **PLEASE NOTE that Victory Field no longer has public restroom spaces available. We apologize for any inconvenience.**
- See the map on the next page for full details.
- Additional parking options are located on the next page.
- **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking information in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**



## VICTORY FIELD PARKING MAP

Victory Field parking lot is located on the West side of the stadium. From IRT, continue west on Washington Street past the JW Marriott. Turn left on Schumacher Way, and cross Maryland Street into the Victory Field lot.

Some buses may need to double park in the lot. The image is of the Victory Field parking lot.

**PLEASE NOTE that Victory Field no longer has public restrooms available to drivers. This is a change from years past. We apologize for any inconvenience.**

Thank you,  
Indianapolis Indians and  
Indiana Repertory Theatre

## ADDITIONAL PARKING OPTIONS

In the event that Victory Field is unavailable for free parking, here are some other potential options. **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking info in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**

**White River State Park:** Paid surface parking is located on Washington Street, across from Victory Field. May require advance notice; event rates may apply. (Approximately .6 mi from IRT.)



**Indianapolis Zoo:** Paid parking is available on Washington Street, west of White River State Park. First come, first served. (Approximately 1.2 mi from IRT.)



**Downtown Indy:** Explore all available parking options at the Downtown Indy website. Buses are welcome to utilize street parking if all used spaces are paid.

## CAR AND VAN PARKING OPTIONS

### COURT STREET GARAGE

Ask a Theatre employee for a voucher that will reduce your parking fee to \$10. This voucher is available at the Court Street Garage when attending an IRT show. This is only valid during the IRT's season.

### Address for the Court Street Garage

110 West Washington Street

## PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

IndyGo's Red Line, the city's rapid bus transit system, connects Broad Ripple and Fountain Square to the heart of downtown and other neighborhoods in Indianapolis. With buses running every 10-20 minutes and a stop directly next to the IRT on Capitol Avenue, the Red Line provides another convenient option for your transportation to the Theatre.

**To plan your trip or for more information about the Red Line and other nearby routes, visit [IndyGo.net](http://IndyGo.net) or call IndyGo Customer Service at 317-635-3344.**



# INDIANA STATE STANDARDS

Seeing a performance at Indiana Repertory Theatre is a great way to help make connections for students and facilitate their understanding of a text. Some key education standards to consider on your trip can be found by scanning this QR Code:



## THE STORY OF **NINA SIMONE: FOUR WOMEN**

Christina Ham's play *Nina Simone: Four Women* takes its title and its characters from one of Simone's most iconic songs, "Four Women," released on her 1966 album *Wild Is the Wind*. The song critiques some of the stereotypical ways in which society often views Black women.

As the play begins, Nina Simone sings "Trouble in Mind." She hears other women's voices in her head. Suddenly, her world is rocked by an explosion.

Next we see Nina hard at work at her piano, trying to write a new song. To her great surprise, a woman named Sarah enters. Nina does not recognize her, yet the woman seems to know Nina already. Sarah, often referred to as "Auntie," is an older woman. She has worked for many years as a domestic—a maid, a housekeeper, a cook, a laundress—in the homes of white families to whom she is almost invisible. The playwright notes, "Her dark skin has determined how she will be treated by the outside world. Her life has been defined by Black and its volatile relationship to white." Both Sarah and Nina are still reeling from the recent bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 16, 1963, in which four young Black girls were killed. While Sarah works on her sewing, Nina explains that she is trying to write an anthem in response to the murders of the four girls and to that of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers. Memories of Nina's own childhood flicker between images of the explosion.

As Nina continues to work on her anthem, the two women feel themselves transported to the bombed church. They are joined by Sephronia, a younger woman who was raised in a comfortable home and has defied her parents to become an activist. The playwright says, "She's not light enough to be white nor dark enough to be Black, leading to an inescapable purgatory. She's joined the Civil Rights Movement hoping this will make her Black enough and create an acceptance." Like Sarah, she seems to know Nina. Sephronia is an ardent supporter of the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., while Nina disagrees with his nonviolent approach. And Sephronia and Sarah, with widely different viewpoints, clash over almost every topic.

Sweet Thing enters. Her provocative clothing and the switchblade she carries seem to contradict her name. The playwright says, "She's enticing whether

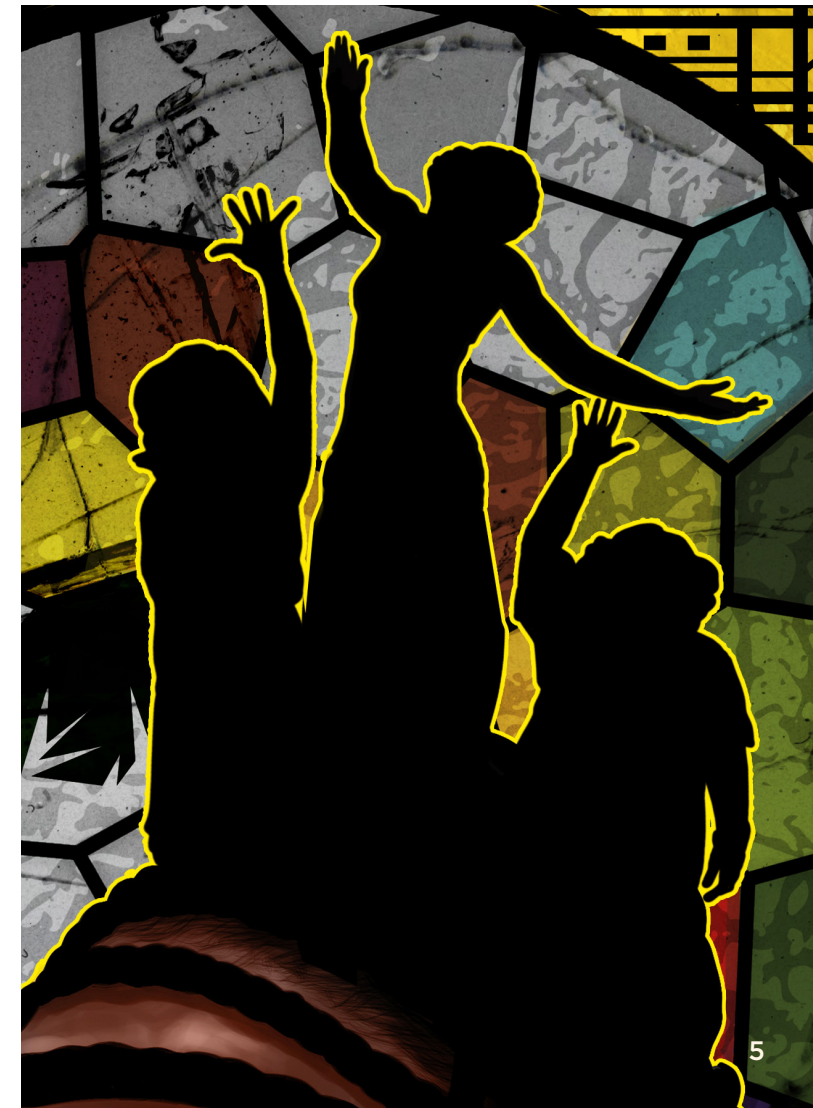
she wants to be or whether she's paid to be. She's been tossed to and fro by life and the blows that it has delivered by the men who have come and gone from her life." The four women seem unable to escape each other, nor the uneasy presence of the four girls killed in the explosion.

Nina finally finishes her anthem. It is "Mississippi Goddam," one of her most angry, powerful musical statements. The other women are shocked by it. Nina examines the struggle of being a Black woman who makes her career entertaining a largely white audience, and acknowledges the self-hatred she often feels. As the other women try to encourage her, they all join together in a Stick Dance, a rhythmic call-and-response that leads to feelings of exhilaration and freedom. As the dawn breaks, they sing "Four Women," each acknowledging how they individually present to the world while declaring their unique contradictions.

## PLAYWRIGHT CHRISTINA HAM



Christina Ham was recognized by *American Theatre* magazine as one of the 20 most-produced playwrights of the 2018-19 season. Her plays have been developed and produced by the Kennedy Center, Arena Stage, Center Theater Group, the Guthrie Theater, Ensemble Studio Theatre, the Goodman Theater, South Africa's Market Theatre, the Tokyo International Arts Festival, and many others. Her plays for young audiences include *Four Little Girls: Birmingham: 1963* and *Ruby!: The Story of Ruby Bridges*. She is a two-time recipient of a McKnight Fellowship in Playwriting as well as a Jerome Fellowship from the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, the Marianne Murphy Women & Philanthropy Award in Playwriting, and a MacDowell Colony Artist Residency. She is a graduate of the University of Southern California and holds an M.F.A. in Playwriting from the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television. She is an Affiliated Writer at the Playwrights' Center and a member of the WGAWest, the Dramatists Guild of America, the Kilroys, and the Playwrights Union. She was a Mellon Foundation Playwright in Residence at Pillsbury House Theatre. She has written for the TV series *Westworld*, *Brand New Cherry Flavor*, *Sweet Tooth*, *Them*, and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.





# NINA SIMONE: HIGH PRIESTESS OF SOUL



Nina Simone was a singer, pianist, songwriter, and activist. *Rolling Stone* magazine called her “one of the most affecting voices of the Civil Rights movement,” someone who could “belt barroom blues, croon cabaret, and explore jazz—sometimes all on a single record.”

She was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina, in 1933. Her father, John Divine Waymon, was a handyman, barber, and entertainer who at one point owned a dry-cleaning business. He was also a church deacon. Her mother, Mary Kate Irvin Waymon, kept the home and raised eight children while also serving as an ordained minister in the Methodist-Episcopal Church.

Eunice began playing piano by ear at three or four. At five she began taking piano lessons with Murial Mazzanovich, a British woman living in Tryon known as “Miss Mazzy.” The teacher instilled in her pupil a rigorous piano technique and a lifelong love for classical music, especially Bach. Miss Mazzy encouraged Eunice’s development by arranging

recitals to show off her protégé’s talents, leading to generous sponsors who paid for lessons that the Waymon family could not afford. At the first of these recitals, when Eunice was 12, her parents sat proudly in the front row, but then were forced to move to the back to make space for white people. Eunice refused to start the recital until her parents were returned to the front row.

When she graduated as valedictorian of her high school class, the Tryon community raised a scholarship for Eunice to spend the summer of 1950 studying the piano at the Juilliard School in New York City. She auditioned for the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, but was not accepted. She always felt that she was refused because of her color, but officials at Curtis have denied this allegation, noting that only 3 of 72 applicants were accepted that year. She took private lessons with Vladimir Sokoloff, a Curtis professor, while herself giving lessons to local students.

In 1954, Eunice was offered a job playing piano and singing in a bar in Atlantic City. Although she dreamed of becoming the first Black female concert pianist, she needed a job. Knowing that her mother would not want her playing “the devil’s music,” she created the stage name Nina Simone to hide the news from her family.

In 1958, Simone released a single, “I Loves You Porgy” from *Porgy and Bess*. It reached the *Billboard* Top 20 and was the biggest hit of her career. She released her first album, *Little Girl Blue*, in 1959. In need of cash, she sold her rights to the recording for \$3,000; ultimately, she lost more than \$1 million in royalties from that album over her lifetime.

Simone recorded 40 albums between 1958 and 1993. She became a popular concert and recording artist, performing around the world, including more than a dozen concerts at Carnegie Hall. In the early part of her career, she focused on the classic American songbook: Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart.

“Critics started to talk about what sort of music I was playing,” Simone wrote in her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, “and tried to find a neat slot to file it away in. It was difficult for them because I was playing popular songs in a classical style with a classical piano technique influenced by cocktail jazz. On top of that I included spirituals and children’s song in my performances, and those sorts of songs were automatically identified with the folk movement. So, saying what sort of music I played gave the critics problems because there was something from everything in there, but it also meant I was appreciated across the board—by jazz, folk, pop, and blues fans as well as admirers of classical music.”

In 1963, in response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, Simone wrote “Mississippi Goddam.” She later said that she wrote the song “in a rush of fury, hatred, and determination.” This song marked a change in her career: from that point forward, the Civil Rights message became an important part of her recordings and performances. Other songs from this era included “Old Jim Crow,” “Images,” “Four Women,” and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.” As her political activism increased, the number of albums she recorded decreased. She wrote in her 1992 autobiography, “I felt more alive than I feel now because I was needed, and I could sing something to help my people.”

Simone married twice; both marriages ended in divorce. Her daughter, Lisa Simone, is a singer and actress who has performed leading roles on Broadway in *Rent*, *The Lion King*, and *Aida*.

In 1970, claiming that the music industry was punishing her for her political activism, Nina Simone left the United States and began living and performing abroad. In 1983, her 1957 recording of “My Baby Just Cares for Me” was used in a Chanel commercial seen around the world. The song returned to the charts and brought her a new generation of fans. Around 1990, while living in the Netherlands, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She suffered from breast cancer for several years before she died in her sleep in France in 2003.

Jim Fusilli, music critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, has written of Simone’s music: “It didn’t adhere to ephemeral trends, it isn’t a relic of a bygone era; her vocal delivery and technical skills as a pianist still dazzle; and her emotional performances have a visceral impact.” The poet Maya Angelou wrote, “She is loved or feared, adored or disliked, but few who have met her music or glimpsed her soul react with moderation.”





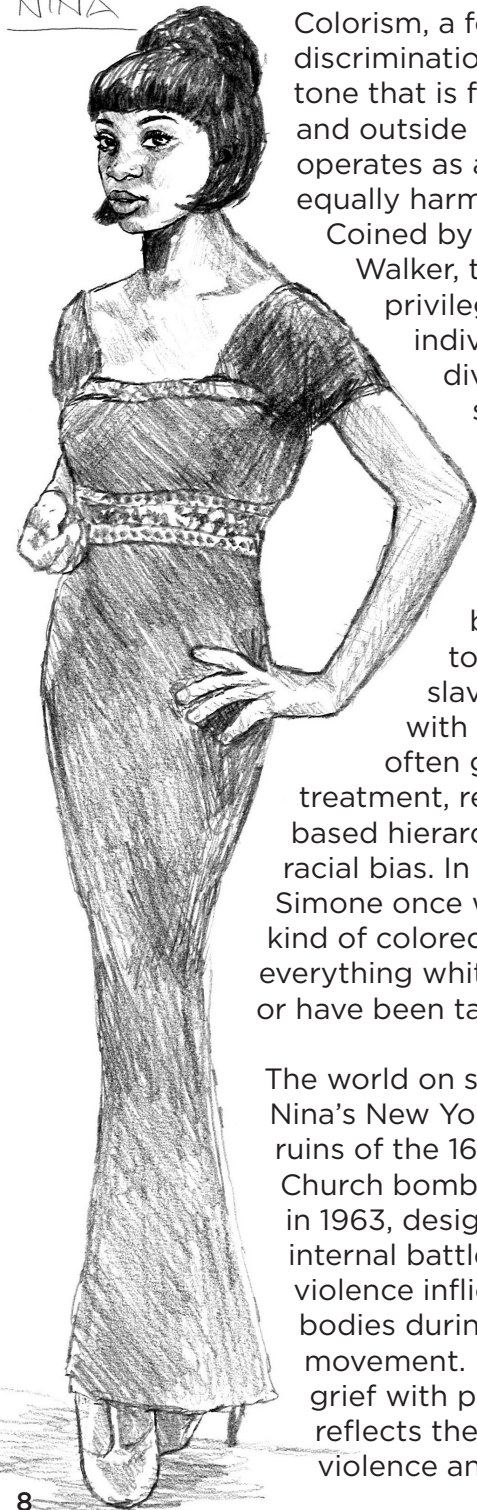
# MY SKIN IS BLACK

## Colorism Explored in *Nina Simone: Four Women*

by Devon Ginn, IRT Director of Inclusion & Community Partnerships

*Nina Simone: Four Women* is a meditation on the struggles of Black womanhood through the lens of colorism and systemic oppression. The four women—Aunt Sarah, Sephronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches—embody unique aspects of Black femininity. Each woman navigates a world built on the intersections of racism and sexism, influenced by their skin tone and social status.

NINA



Colorism, a form of discrimination based on skin tone that is found both within and outside of racial groups, operates as a subtler yet equally harmful form of racism.

Coined by author Alice Walker, the term colorism privileges lighter-skinned individuals, creating divisions that serve to weaken solidarity within communities of color.

The legacy of colorism can be traced back to colonialism and slavery, where people with lighter skin were often given preferential treatment, reinforcing race-based hierarchies and intra-racial bias. In a diary entry, Nina Simone once wrote, “I am the kind of colored girl who looks like everything white people despise or have been taught to despise.”

The world on stage is a blend of Nina’s New York home and the ruins of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Alabama in 1963, designed to mirror her internal battle with the rampant violence inflicted on Black bodies during the Civil Rights movement. Merging private grief with public trauma reflects the scars of racial violence and the burdens

these women carry. *Nina Simone: Four Women* highlights the many ways that Black women navigate personal and collective wounds through the experiences of four distinct Black women.

Aunt Sarah represents a quiet, enduring resilience shaped by a life of service and invisibility. As Simone’s song lyric laments, “my back is strong / strong enough to take the pain / inflicted again and again,” we are invited to lean into our empathy. Sarah’s physical strength is her defining feature and her imposed role within the dominant society. Her dark skin and worn hands, molded from years of labor in white households, have conditioned her to put others before herself, leaving her largely unnoticed by society. Sarah’s identity is bound to her role as a caregiver, shaped by the constant demands of a racist system that both exploits and ignores her. Aunt Sarah is a nod to the matriarchs of slavery, who were charged to care-take, yet treated as property.

Sephronia’s experience is marked by her light skin and mixed heritage, which places her in an ambiguous space between Black and white communities. Her “yellow” skin denotes the privilege and alienation that can come with lighter skin in social circles, as well as the trauma of being the product of sexual violence—“My father was rich and white / He forced my mother late one night.” This duality, born of racial violence, traps her in a painful limbo; she feels too Black to be accepted by white society, yet too light to be fully embraced by the Black community. In the play, Sephronia’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement reflects a longing for a place to belong, to affirm an identity splintered by rejection. Her complex relationship with her heritage and her mother’s resentment toward her mixed-race identity underscores the painful legacies of colorism.

Sweet Thing has a browned complexion and a striking allure, embodying a life marked by survival, broken dreams, and transactional relationships. Forced to use her physical attributes to navigate a world where Black women are objectified and hypersexualized, her beauty—a blessing and a curse—makes her a target of exploitation. Her “fine” hair and ambiguous racial features grant her access to both Black and white spaces as long as

she conforms to a narrow role. Sweet Thing has learned to use her looks as a means of survival but remains vulnerable to the harm that often accompanies this choice. Life on the streets has shaped her into a hardened figure who yearns for love and stability but is denied the security and acceptance she seeks.

Nina herself is the archetype for Peaches, a dark-skinned and emotionally intense woman who channels a complex mix of defiance and vulnerability. Her bitterness reflects a life scarred by systemic injustice, inherited trauma, and the psychological toll of constant resilience. Peaches voices the fury born from generations of suffering. The lyric, “I’m awfully bitter these days / because my parents were slaves” expresses a collective frustration that has become a powerful force for change, but also an emotional burden that Black people are expected to carry. Through Peaches, Nina captures the unfiltered rage that comes from confronting the weight of historical oppression.

Ultimately, the play challenges audiences to acknowledge the resilience, complexity, and humanity of Black women who continue to endure the violence of a prejudiced society and intra-racial harm. Through the experiences of these four women, the play reveals how colorism and oppression actively shapes the lives of Black women and girls. As a united front, Aunt Sarah, Sephronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches exemplify the enduring spirit of Black womanhood—unbowed, unbroken, and resolute.

SWEET THING



SARAH



SEPHRONIA



Costume renderings by Mathew LeFebvre for the IRT’s 2025 production of *Nina Simone: Four Women*.



# THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT



In 1963, when *Nina Simone: Four Women* takes place, the United States was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, a struggle to ensure basic human rights for all people, regardless of color. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” and after the Civil War the U.S. Constitution was amended to include African Americans as citizens; but people’s behavior does not always change when laws change. Discrimination against African Americans occurred throughout the nation, but it was particularly prevalent in the South. Southern states and cities enacted laws and regulations that created unfair practices in jobs, housing, and schools; that prohibited marriages between races; and that mandated segregation with “separate but equal” facilities that were anything but equal.

Throughout most of the South and in many parts of the United States including Indianapolis, African Americans were forbidden to attend the same schools as whites. They could not use the same parks and pools, playgrounds, public restrooms, or drinking fountains. Many hospitals, restaurants, hotels, and stores would not serve African Americans. White people sat in the front of buses and movie theatres, while Black people were required to sit in the back. White children attended

large, modern, well-equipped schools, while Black students attended one-room schoolhouses without enough books or teachers. Bogus regulations and “tests” prevented African Americans from voting.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People worked to end these practices. Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Medgar Evers, Ralph Abernathy, Rosa Parks, and many others provided leadership for the movement—often at great personal sacrifice. They focused on non-violent protests: sit-ins and boycotts of stores and public transportation to create economic pressures. Black students attempted to enroll in segregated schools. Protest marches raised public awareness. White supremacists fought back with guns, bombs, and other violence.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Bill; the next year he signed the Voting Rights Act. These were major steps forward, but they did not by any means solve the problems of racism in this nation. In recent years there has been a resurgence of white supremacists. In 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act. The struggle continues for equal opportunity and equal rights for all peoples.

# THE BOMBING OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

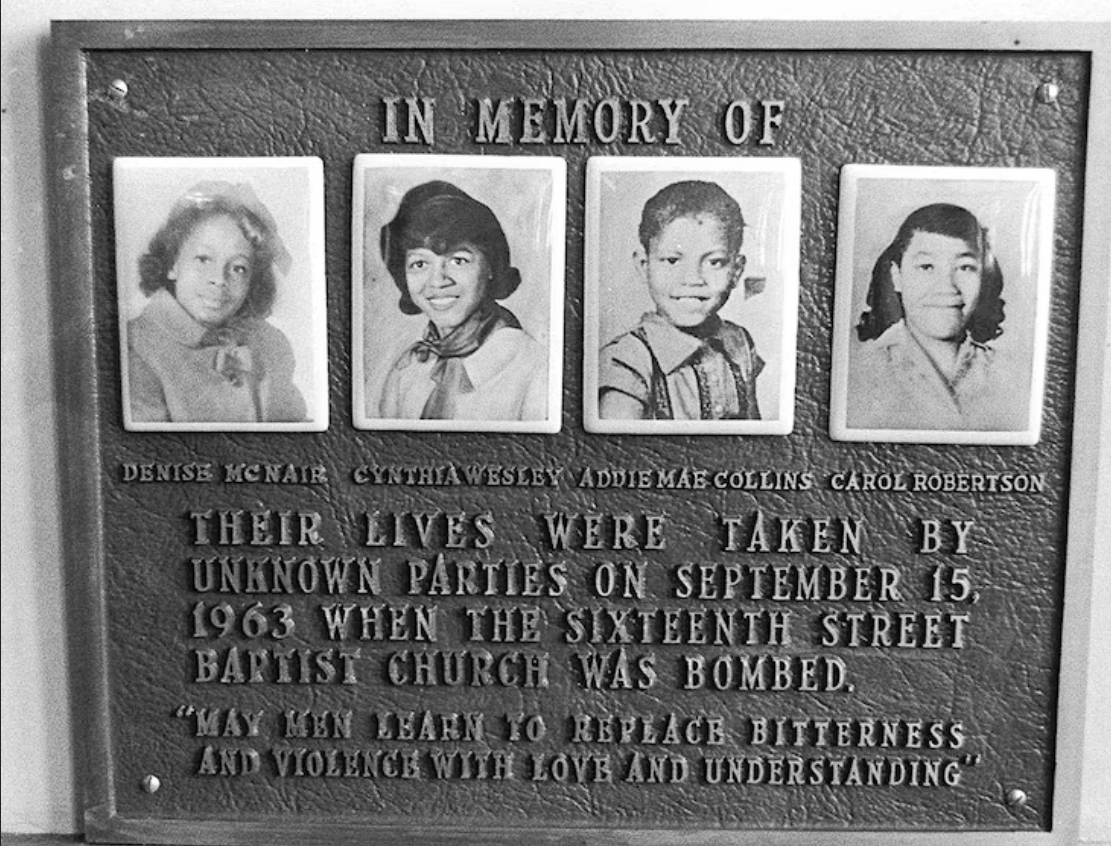
The 16th Street Baptist Church was organized in 1873, the first Black church in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, which had been founded just two years before. The current structure, built in 1911, was designed by a Black architect and built by a Black contractor. As one of the primary Black institutions in Birmingham, the 16th Street Baptist Church has hosted prominent visitors throughout its history. W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, and Ralph Bunche all spoke at the church during the first part of the 20th century. During the 1950s and 1960s, the church was a center for Civil Rights activism.

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, white terrorists, members of the Ku Klux Klan, planted a bomb at the church, set to explode as people gathered for Sunday worship. The explosion blew large holes in the church’s walls, destroyed the rear steps to the church, and blew a passing motorist out of his car. Several other cars parked near the site of the blast were destroyed, and windows of properties located more than two blocks from the church were also damaged. All but one of the church’s stained-glass windows were destroyed in the explosion.

Dozens of people were seriously injured in the blast, and four girls were killed: Denise McNair, age 11; Carole Robertson, age 14; Addie Mae Collins, age 14; and Cynthia Wesley, age 14. Across the country, people were outraged by the loss of these young lives. Another 22 people were injured in the blast, including 12-year-old Sarah Jean Collins, sister of Addie Mae. Sarah, who lost an eye in the explosion, still says that “I really believe my life was spared to tell the story.”

Although four suspects were identified by the FBI within nine months of the bombing, there were no trials or convictions in the case until 1977, 2001, and 2002. A fourth suspect died of cancer in 1994 without ever coming to trial.

Today, many historians contend that the church bombing was among the pivotal events that helped the nation to focus on the need to protect the rights of all its citizens, leading to passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.



SCAN  
HERE



Interview with Sarah Collins, survivor of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church Bombing

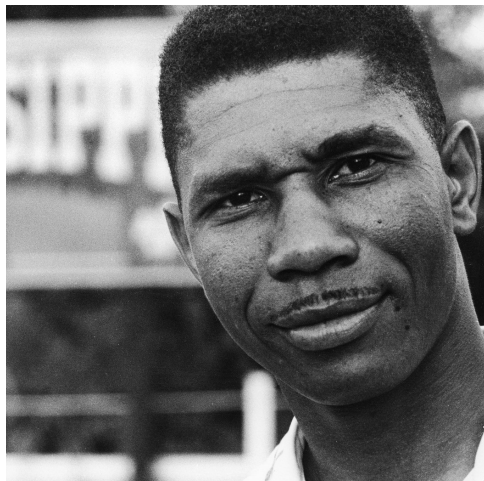


# PEOPLE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

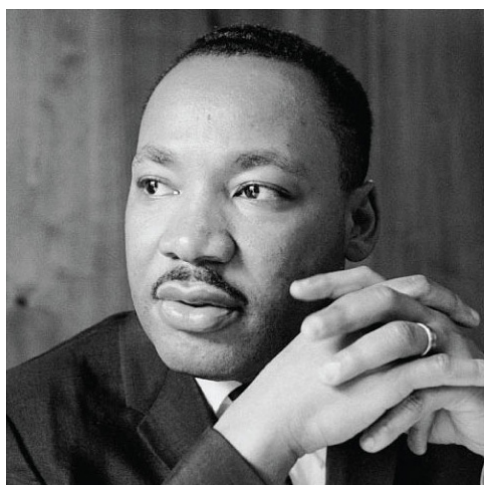
People mentioned in the play include:



**DAISY BATES** (1914-1999) was leader of the Arkansas NAACP during the Little Rock Integration Crisis (1957). In 1963, during the planning of the March on Washington, the male Civil Rights leadership at first declined to give women any speaking roles on the program. Eventually they agreed that one woman could speak: Myrlie Evers, widow of Medgar Evers. But on the day of the march, there was so much traffic that she could not get to the Lincoln Memorial. Daisy Bates stepped in. She promised that African American women “will kneel-in; we will sit-in until we can eat in any corner in the United States. We will walk until we are free, until we can walk to any school and take our children to any school in the United States. And we will sit-in and will kneel-in and we will lie-in if necessary until every Negro in America can vote. This we pledge.”



**MEDGAR EVERS** (1925-1963) was an African American Civil Rights activist from Mississippi. After returning from overseas military service in World War II and completing his secondary education, he became active in the Civil Rights movement, serving as a field secretary for the NAACP. In 1963 he was assassinated in his own driveway by a member of the White Citizens' Council. As a veteran, Evers was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. The murderer was not convicted of the murder until 1994. Medgar Evers's murder and the resulting trials inspired Civil Rights protests, as well as numerous works of art, music, and film.



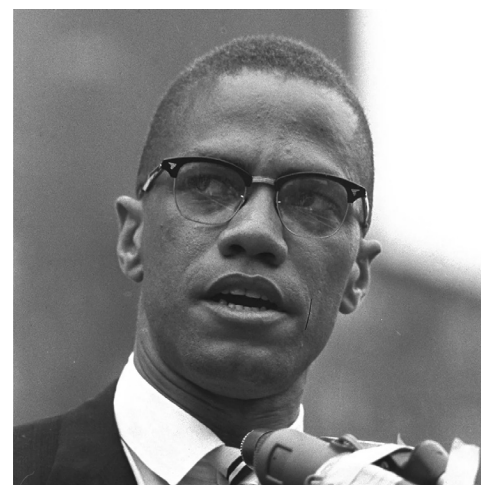
**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.** (1929-1968) was an African American clergyman and activist, a prominent leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He led the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, serving as its first president. King's efforts led to the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. There, he expanded American values to include the vision of a color-blind society, establishing his reputation as one of the greatest orators in American history. In 1964, King became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end racial segregation and racial discrimination through civil disobedience and other nonviolent means. Over the next few years, he refocused his efforts on ending poverty and stopping the Vietnam War. King was assassinated in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and Congressional Gold Medal in 2004. Martin Luther King Jr. Day was established as a federal holiday in 1986.



**ROSA PARKS** (1913-2005) was an African American Civil Rights activist, often referred to as “the first lady of Civil Rights” and “the mother of the freedom movement.” In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, she refused to obey a bus driver's order that she give up her seat in the “colored” section to a white passenger, after the white section was filled. This act of defiance led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, an important milestone in the Civil Rights Movement, and Parks became an international icon of resistance to racial segregation. Although widely honored in later years, she also suffered for her act; she was fired from her job as a seamstress in a local department store. Eventually, she moved to Detroit, Michigan, where she briefly found similar work. From 1965 to 1988 she served as secretary and receptionist to John Conyers, an African American U.S. Representative.



**EMMETT TILL** (1941-1955) was a 14-year-old African American boy from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1955. After speaking to a white woman in her family's grocery store, he was abducted, tortured, and lynched by the woman's husband and his half-brother. Till's mother insisted on a public funeral service with an open casket, and images of Till's mutilated body were published in magazines and newspapers, rallying Black support and white sympathy across the United States. Till's white killers were found not guilty, but under protection against double jeopardy, they later sold their story to *Look* magazine. Till's murder is considered one of the strongest catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement.



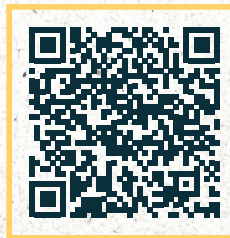
**MALCOLM X** (1925-1965), born Malcolm Little and also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was an African American Muslim minister, public speaker, and human rights activist. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, he spent his teens in a series of foster homes and became involved in criminal activities. In 1946, he was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison. There he became a member of the Nation of Islam, a religious movement founded to improve the spiritual, mental, social, and economic condition of African Americans. After his parole in 1952 he became one of the Nation's leaders and chief spokesmen. For nearly a dozen years he was the public face of the controversial group. Tension between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, head of the Nation of Islam, led to Malcolm X quitting the organization in 1964. He then became a Sunni Muslim and disavowed racism. Less than a year after he left the Nation of Islam, he was assassinated by three members of the group while giving a speech in New York.



# INTERACTIVE CIVIL RIGHTS TIMELINE

When we hear the term Civil Rights, many of us often think exclusively of African Americans. But Civil Rights is a broad term that covers people of all races, genders, & sexualities.

Scan the QR code to learn more about each moment in history.



1688



**Germantown (now Philadelphia) Protest**  
first organized protest against slavery in the American colonies

1777

**Vermont becomes first state to abolish slavery.** It also gave Black men full voting rights

1787

**Northwest Ordinance** bans slavery in the territory that will become Indiana

1790

**Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery to the First Congress**  
first abolitionist society in the US, and first time anyone petitioned the US Government to end slavery

1817



**American Colonization Society** is formed

1820

**Missouri Compromise**

1833

**First meeting of the Antislavery Convention of American Women**  
first independent women's political organization; also inter-racial

1857

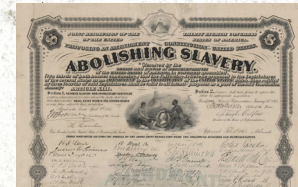


**Dred Scott decision**  
by the Supreme Court says no Blacks, whether free or not, have citizenship rights

1863

**Emancipation Proclamation**  
issued by President Abraham Lincoln

1865

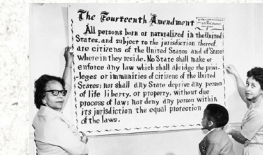


**13th Amendment ratified**  
slavery abolished

1865-1877

**Reconstruction begins**

1868



**14th Amendment ratified**  
equal protection under the law

1870

**15th Amendment ratified**  
Black men get the right to vote

1875



**Civil Rights Act of 1875**  
(ruled unconstitutional in 1883)

1876

**First Jim Crow laws**

1888

**First Black-owned banks**

1896

**Plessey v. Ferguson**  
separate but equal ruled constitutional

1909



**NAACP founded**

1910



**Madam C.J. Walker moves to Indianapolis**  
builds her hair care factory and training school becoming the first self-made female millionaire in the US

1916



**The Great Migration**

1920



**19th Amendment ratified**  
women get the right to vote

1936

**Blues legend Robert Johnson** makes his first recording

**Jesse Owens** wins at Berlin Olympics

1939

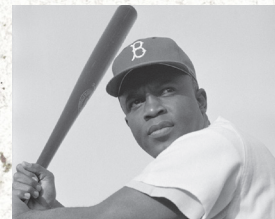


**Marian Anderson**  
sings at the Lincoln Memorial

1946

**The integration of the NFL**

1947



**Jackie Robinson**  
breaks the color line in Major League Baseball

1948

**President Harry Truman** desegregates the armed forces

1954



**Brown v. Board of Education**  
separate but equal ruled unconstitutional

1955

**Montgomery, Alabama** begins year-long bus boycott

**A. Phillip Randolph**, father of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters becomes a VP of the AFL-CIO's Executive Council

**Death of Emmett Till**

1957

**Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded;**  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. elected president

**Civil Rights Act of 1957**  
**Nine Black students integrate** Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas

1960



**Lunch counter sit-ins**  
Greensboro, Nashville, and elsewhere

1963

**Medgar Evers** killed on his front porch



**March on Washington**  
Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech

1964

**Civil Rights Act of 1964**

**Affirmative Action**



**Fannie Lou Hamer's** testimony at the Democratic National Convention

**16th St Baptist Church Bombing** in Birmingham, Alabama

1965

**Voting Rights Act** is signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson

1968

**Dr. King's Speech** "I Have Been to the Mountaintop"

**Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike**

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated**



**Shirley Chisholm** is the first African-American woman elected to Congress

1960-1970

**Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement**

**Gay Rights Movement**

**Latino Civil Rights Movement**

**The Women's Rights Movement**  
60s and 70s



# TERMS & EVENTS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A number of significant Civil rights terms are referenced in the play:

**The Civil Rights Act of 1964** outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. It is one of the most significant legislative achievements in American history.

**Jim Crow Laws** mandated strict segregation of the races in the South after slavery was abolished. (Jim Crow was the name of a stereotypical minstrel show character.)

**The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom** was a political rally that took place on August 28, 1963, during which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.



**“Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, and the white kids came down and saved the day.”**

Julian Bond (1940–2015) was a social activist, politician, professor, writer, and a leader of the Civil Rights movement. He made the above quip to describe the wide-spread reductive understanding of the Civil Rights movement, particularly the Freedom Summer campaign to register Black voters in Mississippi.

The **one-drop rule** was a legal principle of racial classification that was prominent in the 19th and 20th century United States. It asserted that any person with even one ancestor of African origin (“one drop” of “Black blood”) was considered Black. Before the rule was outlawed in 1967, it was used to deny rights and equal opportunities and to uphold white supremacy.

**The Birmingham Campaign** was organized in early 1963 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to pressure merchants in Birmingham, Alabama, to desegregate and adopt fair hiring practices. In a controversial move, the SCLC enlisted college, high school, and elementary school students to walk through the city in a peaceful demonstration. Police dogs and fire hoses were turned on this “children’s crusade,” and widely televised images of police brutality aroused national sympathy, forcing local business leaders to accept a negotiated desegregation settlement.

**The Voting Rights Act of 1965** was a landmark piece of federal legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in voting, seeking to secure the right to vote for racial minorities throughout the country, especially in the South. It is considered to be the most effective and one of the most far-reaching pieces of federal Civil Rights legislation ever enacted. Research shows that the Act successfully and massively increased voter turnout and voter registrations, in particular among Black people. The Act has also been linked to concrete outcomes, such as greater public goods provision (such as public education) for areas with higher shares of Black population, more members of Congress who vote for Civil Rights-related legislation, and greater Black representation in local offices. The Supreme Court substantially weakened the Act in 2013.

# CONTROVERSIAL WORDS

Since humans learned to speak, various words have been considered inappropriate in certain contexts. Ancient Roman documents discuss offensive language. In Ancient Egypt, legal documents were sealed with an obscene hieroglyph—a reminder that “to swear an oath” could mean either “to affirm a truth” or “to use profane language.” Shakespeare’s plays are considered the finest literature of the English language; perhaps their mixture of exquisite poetry and bawdy language—the sacred and the profane—is part of their eternal appeal.

It is interesting to note how language changes over time. With the rise of mass media in the twentieth century, rules and regulations were established to determine what words were inappropriate for use in radio, movies, and television. Over time, these rules have evolved in response to societal change, and sometimes such regulations can be confusing. On some television channels certain words are consistently bleeped or dubbed during one part of the day, yet acceptable at other times; on other channels, such words might always—or never—be acceptable. Over the last 50 years or so, language once considered obscene has become much more widespread and accepted. Other words, once commonplace, have been banished because they now are considered to be insensitive or inappropriate.

How are we, as a society or as individuals, to determine what language is appropriate in different situations? Drama, by definition, shows people in intense situations; and playwrights, in their attempt to show the truth of how people speak under such conditions, may use extreme language. Some audience members may find this language offensive, and prefer that such words not be used. Other audience members may be offended at the idea that freedom of expression might be curtailed. As language evolves, so, too, do our perceptions of language.

# PEJORATIVE TERMS

A number of insulting ethnic terms are mentioned in the play:

**COON** is a pejorative ethnic term. It is possible that the negative racial connotation of the word may have evolved from “Zip Coon,” a popular song in Blackface minstrel shows in the 1830s.

**CRACKER** is a pejorative racial epithet directed towards white people, especially poor rural whites in the Southern United States. The term dates back to the Elizabethan era.

**HIGH YELLOW** is a term used to describe a light-skinned person of mixed white and Black ancestry. The term was in common use in the United States at the end of the 19th century.

**JEMIMA** is a name that is often used as an ethnic slur. “Old Aunt Jemima” was a minstrel song written by Billy Kersands in 1875.

**JIGABOO** is an ethnic slur meaning a Black person with what are considered stereotypical Black features. The term is derived from the Bantu verb *tshikabo*.

**MONKEY** (or its vernacular equivalent) is used in many different languages as a slur against dark-skinned people.

**TAR BABY** is an ethnic slur derived from the *Uncle Remus* stories of Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), a white American journalist who collected stories from the African American oral tradition.



# SONGS OF NINA SIMONE

The play features several songs performed by Nina Simone, some that she wrote, some that she did not.



## “Everything Must Change”

“Everything Must Change” is a song by Bernard Ighner, sung by Ighner on Quincy Jones’s 1974 album *Body Heat*. Nina Simone sang it on her 1978 album *Baltimore*.

## “Four Women”

Nina Simone wrote “Four Women” in 1965 and released it on her 1966 album *Wild Is the Wind*. The song presents four strong women of color: Aunt Sarah, Sephronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches, each describing themselves in the first person and conveying their personal suffering. Simone was dismayed that some critics accused her of racial stereotyping despite her stature as an activist. She said, “Black women didn’t know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn’t control. And until they had the confidence to define themselves, they’d be stuck in the same mess forever—that was the point the song made.”

## “I Loves You Porgy”

“I Loves You Porgy” was written by George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward for their 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*. Both were northern white men, writing about impoverished Black people in the slums of Charleston, South Carolina. It is one of the best known and most frequently performed of all operas. Nina Simone’s recording of “I Loves You Porgy,” from her first album *Little Girl Blue* in 1959, was the biggest hit single of her career. She often performed the song in concert.

## “If He Changed My Name”

“If He Changed My Name” by Robert MacGimsey appears on *Nina at the Village Gate* (1962). In some Christian beliefs, the idea of being given a new name by God symbolizes a radical change in life and a new identity.

## “Images”

“Images” is a song by Nina Simone, based on the 1926 poem “No Images” by Waring Cuney. The song portrays a Black woman’s internalization of European beauty standards. Nina Simone recorded the song for her 1964 live album *Let It Out*.

## “Mississippi Goddam”

“Mississippi Goddam” was written and performed by Nina Simone, who later called it her “first Civil Rights song.” It was released on her album *Nina Simone in Concert* in 1964. Simone claimed that she composed the song in less than an hour. One of her most famous protest songs, it was banned in several Southern states. Boxes of promotional singles sent to radio stations around the country were returned with each record broken in half. In 2021, it was listed at No. 172 on *Rolling Stone’s* “Top 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.”

## “Old Jim Crow”

Written with Jackie Alper and Ron Vander Groef, Simone’s song “Old Jim Crow” is featured on the album *Nina Simone in Concert*, recorded at Carnegie Hall in 1964. The term “Jim Crow” comes from the name of a stereotypical character in a nineteenth century minstrel show, where white people performed in Blackface. After the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in America, racial discrimination in the South became regulated by so-called Jim Crow laws, which mandated strict segregation of the races. This legalized segregation lasted up to the 1960s.

## “Sea Lion Woman”

“Sea Lion Woman” is a traditional African American folk song originally used as a children’s playground song. Odetta sang her version, featuring the repeated lyric “she lie,” on her 1964 album *Odetta Sings of Many Things*. Nina Simone sang her version, “See-Line Woman,” on her 1964 album *Broadway-Blues-Ballads*. Simone’s version focuses on a line of prostitutes waiting for sailors to come into port.

## “Shout: Oh, Mary”

An original song written for this play. A shout is a kind of fast-paced gospel music accompanied by ecstatic dancing (and sometimes actual shouting). It is a form of worship and/or praise most often seen in Black or Pentecostal churches, and can be celebratory, supplicatory, intercessory, or a combination thereof.

## “Sinnerman”

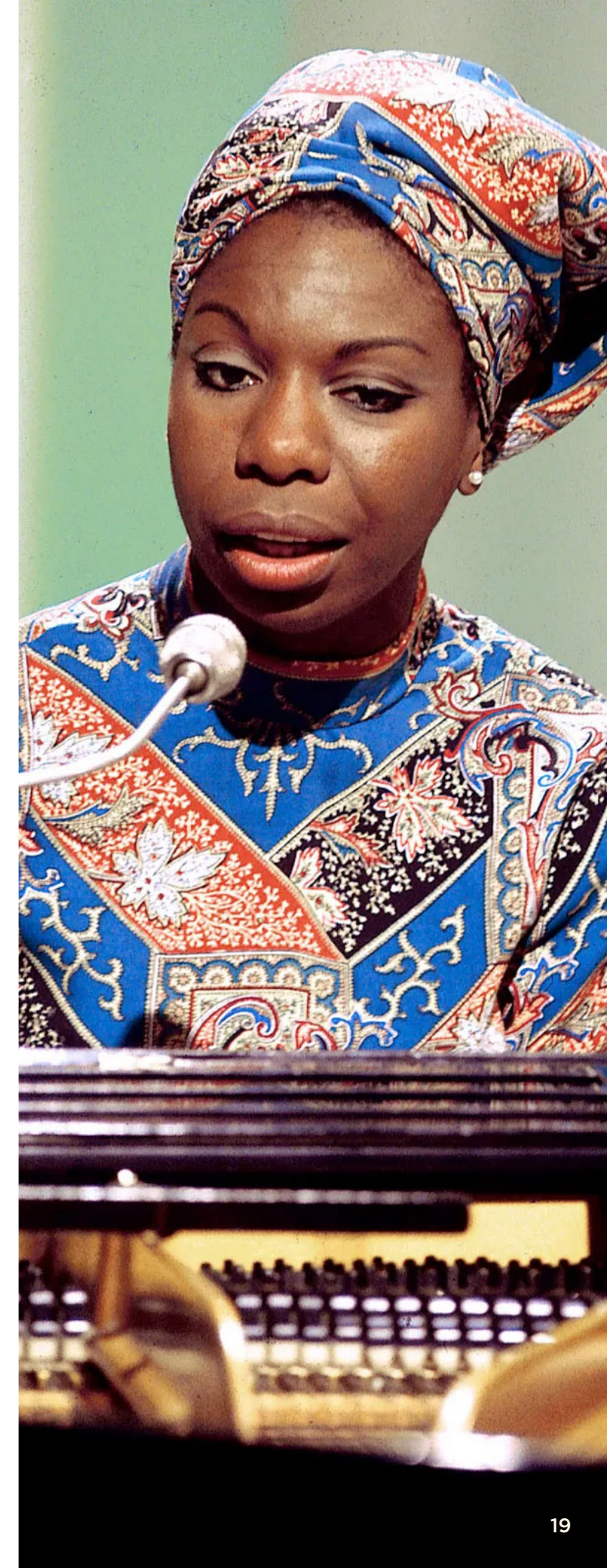
The origin of “Sinnerman” is ambiguous, with some claiming the traditional African American spiritual started life as a Scottish folk song. The earliest known recorded version is Les Baxter’s 1956 rendition, but Nina Simone might have learned it at church, where she was the pianist from an early age. Her version, recorded live in New York in 1965 for her *Pastel Blues* album, has become the defining version.

## “There Is a Balm in Gilead”

“There Is a Balm in Gilead” is a traditional African American spiritual dating back to at least the 19th century. (A balm is something that is comforting or soothing. Gilead is often used in the Bible to refer to the region east of the Jordan River.) The phrase “balm in Gilead” is a reference from the Old Testament (Jeremiah 8:22—“Is there no balm in Gilead?”), but the lyrics of the spiritual refer to the New Testament concept of salvation through Jesus Christ. Nina Simone recorded the song for her 1978 album *Baltimore*.

## “Trouble in Mind”

“Trouble in Mind” is a blues song written in 1924 by Richard M. Jones. The song deals with finding hope in the midst of despair. Blues historian William Barlow calls the song “the anthem of the classic blues genre,” and writer Steve Sullivan describes it as “one of the most indelible blues compositions of the 1920s.” It has been recorded by many artists. Nina Simone made several recordings of the song.





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Before Seeing the Play

1. What do you know about Nina Simone?
2. What Civil Rights leaders do you know about?
3. What are current events in the world that upset you?
4. What protest songs can you name?

## After Seeing the Play

1. Read the lyrics to “Four Women” by Nina Simone. How are the four characters in the play similar to the people described in each stanza? How are they different? Why do you think Simone chose those names for each woman?
2. What do you think about Simone using her rage over the church bombing to create her song? How do you respond to injustice? What emotions does it bring up in you? What do you do with those feelings?
3. How did the lighting and projections enhance the storytelling?
4. The script has very detailed descriptions of each of the four women, including skin color. Why do you think the shade of the actor’s skin is important to each role specifically? How did the costumes inform you about the character?
5. What are some ways people protest injustice today?
6. What is magical realism, and how is it shown in this play?
7. How is Nina Simone’s own life and personality reflected in each of the other three characters?
8. How do the songs performed in the play enhance or detract from the storytelling?
9. This play features less of a traditional narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, and focuses more on the conversation and exchange of ideas between the four characters. How effectively did you feel that this choice conveyed a dramatic experience for the audience?
10. Throughout the play, Nina Simone works on her song “Mississippi Goddam,” which she sings near the end of the play. The song is variously described by the characters as an anthem, a dirge, and a battle cry. Do you think one or more of these terms is an apt description? How would you describe the song?



# ACTIVITIES

1. Make a playlist of protest songs.
2. Research ways to get involved with human rights. Present your findings to the class in a persuasive speech.

**3. Before “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone was primarily known for performing works of other artists. Listen to those recordings and discuss how artists like Gershwin, Carmichael, and Ellington influenced her work. You can find a list of all the songs she recorded with composer information by scanning the QR Code**



4. Create a pictorial timeline of the Civil Rights movement including Simone’s involvement. The timeline may extend beyond Simone’s lifetime.
5. The clothing for each of the four women in the play is very different. Design an outfit for yourself that gives a stranger an insight into who you are.

# WRITING PROMPTS

1. If you saw the IRT’s production of *Fannie: The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* last year, compare and contrast how Hamer and Simone reacted to the racial injustice that they witnessed or were a part of. If you are not familiar with Hamer, learn about her or choose another activist.
2. Write your own song or poem focused on something you feel very strongly about.
3. Research the Civil Rights workers mentioned in the play (see pages 12 and 13). Write a paper based on their lives and how they intersected with each other.
4. Write a scene in which you are responding to an event that is deeply upsetting to you.
5. Simone was worried that “Mississippi Goddam” would hurt her career. Research her life after the setting of the play and write a report that supports or refutes her concerns.
6. Research the signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder and write an informative report about the disorder and how those signs are demonstrated in the play.
7. Write a review of the play. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of the theatrical aspects—scenery, lights, costumes, sound, direction, acting—as well as your impressions of the script and the impact of the story and/or themes and the overall production. What moments made an impression? How do the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound work with the actors’ performances of the text to tell the story? What ideas or themes did the play make you think about? How did it make you feel? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not? To share your reviews with others, send to: [education@irtlive.com](mailto:education@irtlive.com)



# RESOURCES

## Websites

The Official Nina Simone website



National Women's History Museum



"The Burden of Brilliance: Nina Simone's Tortured Talent" by Hadley Hall Meares, *Vanity Fair*



## Video & Recordings

**Nina Simone - "Mississippi Goddam!" The Story Behind the Anthem - Vevo YouTube Video**



*Jazz: A History of America's Music* by Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns  
PBS TV series

*A Place of Rage*, 1991 NR

*Freedom Song*, 2000 NR

*500 Years Later*, 2005 NR

*Sing Your Song*, 2011 NR

*The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, 2015 NR

**Video recordings of Nina Simone's performances**



*What Happened, Miss Simone?* 2015 NR

*The Amazing Nina Simone*, 2015 NR

*Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could not be Televised)*, 2021 PG-13

*Nina Simone Live*, 2005 NR

*A Tribute to Billie Holiday*, 1979 NR

*How It Feels to Be Free, American Masters* 2021 TV-14

*The Essential Nina Simone* - musical collection

# RESOURCES

## Books

***I Put a Spell on You* by Nina Simone with Stephen Cleary**

*What Happened, Miss Simone?: A Biography* by Alan Light

*Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* by Nadine Cohodas

*Nina: A Story of Nina Simone* by Traci N. Todd (author) and Christian Robinson (illustrator)

*Nina Simone: Break Down & Let it All Out* by Sylvia Hampton with David Nathan

*Keeper of the Flame: A Biography of Nina Simone* by Jennifer Warner

*Nina Simone: The Biography* by David Brun-Lambert

*Women in the Arts: Nina Simone* by Kerry Acker

*Nina Simone: "Black is the Color"* by Andrew Stroud

*Icons of Pop Music: Nina Simone* by Richard Elliott

*Nina Simone's Gum* by Warren Ellis

*The Sound of Soul* by Phyl Garland

*The Soulful Divas* by David Nathan

*History of Jazz* by Ted Gioia

*Visions of Jazz* by Gary Giddens

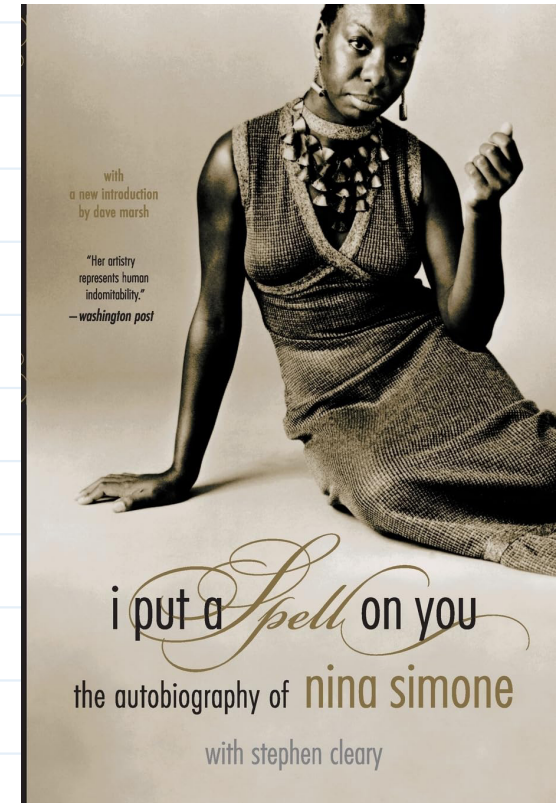
*Black Music* by Amiri Baraka

*Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews* by Arthur Taylor

*Jazz: A History of America's Music* by Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns

*Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* by Martha S. Jones

*We Are Not Yet Equal: Understanding our Racial Divide* by Carol Anderson





# GLOSSARY

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**Boulés** | Sigma Pi Phi, also known as the Boulé, is the oldest African American professional fraternity. It does not have collegiate chapters, but is designed for professionals in mid-career or older.

**Holy Roller** | a term that refers to dancing, shaking, or other boisterous movements by those who perceive themselves as being under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The term was originally used derisively, but today some denominations have reclaimed the term as a badge of honor.

**Jack and Jills** | Jack and Jill of America is a leadership organization formed by African American mothers in 1938 in order to bring children together in a social and cultural setting to improve their quality of life.

**The Links** | an invitation-only social and service organization of prominent Black women in the United States, founded in 1946. Admission is extremely competitive.

**Mary Magdalene** | a woman who traveled with Jesus Christ. Although the Bible makes no suggestion of her being a prostitute, she has often been thus identified since the Medieval era.

**Oiling the scalp** | Humans of all races produce a natural oil known as sebum from their scalps. Black hair, characterized by its tight curl patterns, tends to lift away from the scalp rather than lying flat. As a result, this hair type often requires oil to be applied to the scalp and strands to prevent breakage and dryness.

**Stick Dances** | developed on southern plantations during the slavery era. The stick was in fact a disguised weapon, and the “dance” was a way for enslaved persons to practice self-defense and combat skills without being detected by white observers.

**Support hose** | the predecessors of today’s compression stockings, often worn by women to combat varicose veins.

**Wet Set** | a method of styling hair immediately following a shampoo and conditioning session, while the hair is still wet, using rollers and air drying to create the effect of straight hair.

**The Women’s Liberation Movement** | was a predominantly white, middle-class protest movement prominent in the 1970s. Although the movement ostensibly sought equality for all women, women of color often saw little or no place for themselves in the concerns of movement. Women of color felt that evaluating all issues through the lens of sexism, without considering racism and classism, did little to serve them, and felt that the liberation of women without equality for men of color would neither improve humanity as a whole nor improve the plight experienced by their families.

**Zip guns** | crude homemade firearms. When Nina Simone first heard the news about the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, “all the truths that I had denied to myself for so long rose up and slapped my face.... I suddenly realized what it was to be Black in America in 1963, but it wasn’t an intellectual connection—it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination.... I tried to make a zip gun.” Instead of using that gun, she wrote “Mississippi Goddam.”