

Indiana Repertory Theatre
Pre-Show Chat for
Nina Simone: Four Women
by Christina Ham.

For this production's chat we're going to look at how music became Nina Simone's chosen path.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina, in 1933. When she was a baby, she saw a magazine ad with some musical notes, and she began to sing. Somehow she knew that was music. Whenever she heard music, she would always turn her head towards it. Even as a baby, she sang and clapped along at church. When she was three, her parents acquired a piano, and everyone in the family played—"the piano was the center of the family."

"I didn't get interested in music," she said. "It was a gift from God."

Eunice's mother, who was a preacher, only allowed religious music in the home, but when her mother was out of the house, Eunice's father allowed her to play "worldly" music—boogie-woogie was her favorite—while he served as lookout. Her mother had her playing in church before

her feet could even reach the pedals. Having a child prodigy at the piano was a definite draw on Sunday mornings.

“They were some of the most exciting times that I’ve ever had,” Simone later said. “In many ways, what the kids are doing now when they dance for hours, listening to rock and roll music until their minds are blown and they’re in a trancelike state, this is what revival meetings were like. The music was so intense, the rhythms were so intense, that you just sort of went out of yourself. I would start to play a spiritual at precisely the moment in my mother’s preaching when it was needed, and this would spark everyone in the room. And then the rhythms would get more intense, and it’s just like anything that starts and gets more exciting, and everybody gets involved in it.”

But while Eunice loved the music and the joy, she did not fully embrace her mother’s faith: she feared the speaking in tongues and the silent trances. Still, she appreciated the musical discipline she learned.

When she was six years old, Eunice began formal piano lessons with Muriel Mazzanovich, an English lady who lived in her hometown. Miss Mazzy was the first white person Eunice really got to know in her life, and her elegance, sophistication, and British reserve had a deep

effect on how Nina Simone eventually presented herself to the world. Miss Mazzy was a strict teacher—she would say, “Eunice, you must do it this way. Bach would like it this way.” And Miss Mazzy had a quick temper and a short fuse that her pupil also inherited. But the two had a warm, loving relationship—one of the most positive relationships in Nina Simone’s life.

Miss Mazzy introduced Eunice to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, who became another great influence, not only on how she played the piano, but on how she would structure the songs she wrote later in life: “Bach is technically perfect,” Simone later said. “He’s a mathematician, and all the notes make sense mathematically. They add up to something, and they always add up to climaxes, like waves of the ocean gathering momentum as they get bigger and bigger and bigger. And then, after a while, after so many waves have gathered, you will see a tornado or you will see the ocean come up and destroy land.”

Eunice was studying in school—she would eventually be her high school valedictorian—as well as studying Bach, singing gospel in church, playing the blues for her father at home, living as both a preacher’s daughter and a classical pianist in training. She learned at a very early age to perform a balancing act that involved managing

complicated ideas about race, a variety of cultures, and shifting priorities. “I traversed two worlds, two cities, two customs, two states of mind, each week.”

At her first piano recital, 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. For her final piece on that program, five audience members were asked to each choose a note, and then Eunice took those five notes and improvised in the style of Bach—at the age of 12.

Eunice dreamed of becoming the first great Black American concert pianist. When she graduated from high school, the Tryon community raised a scholarship for her to spend the summer of 1950 studying the piano at the Juilliard School in New York City. She then auditioned for the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, but she was not accepted—a decision that she felt had been influenced by race. Nevertheless, she studied independently with a Curtis faculty member and continued to practice four hours a day. She took a job as a photographer’s assistant, was an accompanist for voice lessons, and started giving piano lessons.

When one of her students got a job playing piano at a supper club, she contacted his agent, who got her a summer job at a bar in Atlantic City. 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. She had never been in a bar before, and this was, in her own words, “a very crummy bar.” When they asked her what she wanted to drink, she asked for a glass of milk. Her repertoire ranged wide. “I played everything that I could think of: classical, spirituals, all kinds of things. It was very strange.”

Simone’s boss wanted a singer, too, so she began to sing while she played. She started with standards that she knew, like “My Funny Valentine.” She discovered a powerful voice she didn’t know she had. And an audience found her. The bar’s clientele expanded from boisterous drunks to include serious music lovers who sat quietly and listened raptly, from 9 pm to 4 am.

Simone was happy to have a job, but frankly, she had a low opinion of much of what she was performing. She wrote, “The popular world was nothing compared to the classical world. You didn’t have to work as hard, and it was easier to please an audience.... To play ‘Little Girl Blue’—that was just nothing. That’s why I infused it with ‘Good King Wenceslas,’ to give it some Bach in the background.”

When you listen to Simone's recordings, you can definitely hear the influence of Bach in the intricate 16th-note runs of her jazz improvisations.

After summer ended in Atlantic City, Simone returned to Philadelphia and began to play at supper clubs there. Her long-time guitarist Al Schackman said, "Nina had a way of taking a piece of music and not interpreting it but ... morphing it into her own experience." He marveled at how she wove the classical, pop, and jazz worlds together with her intense vocals. "I have no idea how anybody could isolate so many parts of music at one time."

Simone made some demo recordings, and eventually Bethlehem Records in New York City recorded 13 tracks for an album, mostly songs she had started singing five years ago back in Atlantic City. When it was released in 1959, the album was called *Little Girl Blue*, and it included her first (and most popular) single, "I Loves You Porgy" from *Porgy and Bess*.

She made her New York concert debut at Town Hall. *New York Times* music critic John Wilson called Simone "a gifted interpreter, a singer who makes each song her own.... By the time she has finished turning a song this way and that way, poking experimentally into unexpected crannies she finds in it, or suddenly leaping on it and

whaling the daylights out of it, the song has lost most of its original colorization and has become, one might say, ‘Simonized.’”

Over the next four years, up to the time when our play takes place, she released seven more albums. She became a regular fixture at downtown clubs such as the Village Gate. She also performed at the Newport Jazz Festival and at Carnegie Hall.

Our show features a number of songs from various points in her career. The characters are inspired by Simone’s song “Four Women.” The play is set in 1963 as Simone is writing the first of her Civil Rights protest songs. This marked a shift in her career, as she moved her musical focus more towards activism.

But no matter where her repertoire took her, Nina Simone never stopped thinking of herself first and foremost as a musician. “Music is a gift and a burden I’ve had since I can remember who I was. I was born into music. The decision was how to make the best of it.”