

BLACK HISTORY: ACTIVIST SPOTLIGHT

“I CAN SING TO HELP MY PEOPLE”

Miss Nina Simone



Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon on February 21, 1933, in Tryon, North Carolina, Eunice took to

music at an early age, learning to play piano at the age of 4 and singing in her church's choir. She later won a scholarship to New York City's famed Juilliard School of Music to train as a classical pianist; however, her time there was cut short due to the high fee cost. She was later denied a scholarship to study at the prestigious Curtis Institution of Music in Philadelphia, despite a well-received audition. She became convinced her rejection was entirely due to her race.

To make a living, she took the stage name Nina Simone—"Nina" came from a nickname meaning "little one" and "Simone" after the actress Simone

Signoret and begin performing at a night club in Atlantic City, New Jersey where she was told to sing to own accompaniment, effectively launching her career as a jazz vocalist. She went on to record more than forty albums. As a talented and famous jazz artist, it wasn't until the mid-1960s that the world began to recognize who Miss Simone really was.

By the mid-1960s, Miss Simone became known as the voice of the civil rights movement. She wrote the song "Mississippi Goddam" in response to the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young African-American girls. After the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Miss Simone wrote "Why (The King of Love Is Dead)." She also wrote "Young, Gifted and Black," borrowing the title of a play by Hansberry, which became a popular anthem at the time.

Miss Simone was very vocal that her activism was



on the “by any means necessary” part of the scale. She went on to write many protest songs and used her voice to help her people. As the 1960s intensified, so did Simone’s militancy. She demanded that her audiences be serious about the music, typical of classically trained musicians, gave over to the activist’s demand that they be serious about Black Power and the Black Arts movement. She told one interviewer that her job was to get black listeners “more aware of themselves and where they came from...and I will do it by whatever means necessary”.

From then on, a civil rights message was standard in Miss Simone’s recording repertoire, becoming a part of her live performances. During the rise of her political activism, Miss Simone performed and spoke at many civil rights meetings, such as at the Selma to Montgomery marches. Miss Simone advocated violent revolution during the civil rights period and she hoped that African Americans could, by armed combat, form a separate state. Her message to the public signified the transition from the nonviolent approach to social change that was advocated by Martin Luther King into the more militant state that was implemented by Malcolm X and the associates of the Black Nationalist

Movement. Nevertheless, she wrote in her autobiography that she and her family regarded all races as equal.

Although her message may have been effective during the time, her career took a strong turn for the worst as the music industry began to exclude her. As the 1960s drew to a close, Miss Simone grew tired of the American music scene and the country’s deeply divided racial politics. She picked up and moved out of the United States. She lived in several different countries, including Liberia, Switzerland, England and Barbados before eventually settling down and years later died in 2003 in the South of France.

While her approach may have been different from other civil rights activist, Miss Simone wanted her black people to be proud of their heritage, features, and skin. She used her voice to speak to her people. She wanted her people to be free. **"I could sing to help my people and that became the mainstay of my life," says Miss Simone.**

ACTION STEPS: How can I continue the legacy?

- **Believe that what you can offer is enough to make an impact**
- **Use your talents and skills to make a difference within your community**
- **Make a conscious effort to use the platform that you have to promote equality**

