

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY

Mississippi Goddam

Nina Simone's Reckoning

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Contribution Track • ERA VI • Tryon, North Carolina

Who She Is

Eunice Kathleen Waymon was born February 21, 1933, in Tryon, North Carolina, the sixth of eight children of a Methodist minister and a barber. She trained as a classical pianist, was rejected by the one institution that could have made her a concert artist, and built a nightclub career under a stage name chosen to hide it from her mother. Then, in the space of an afternoon in 1963, she turned that career into something else entirely.

Tryon

Eunice began classical piano at six; a Tryon teacher who recognized her talent helped arrange funding from local white benefactors for her lessons. At eleven she gave a recital at the town library, and when she saw her parents moved to the back row to make room for white attendees, she refused to play a note until they were seated back in front. She attended Allen High School for Girls in Asheville, then studied at Juilliard in the summer of 1950 to prepare for an audition at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Curtis rejected her. She believed racial prejudice was the reason; Curtis staff have disputed that account, and the entry treats it as a contested claim rather than settled fact. She never reapplied.

Curtis Institute and a New Name

Instead of a concert career, Simone took private lessons and turned to nightclub piano to support herself — adopting the stage name "Nina Simone" specifically to keep the work hidden from her minister mother. The nightclub work built into a recording career spanning jazz, pop, and classical crossover on the Philips and later RCA labels.

Mississippi Goddam

On June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers was assassinated in Mississippi. On September 15, 1963, a bomb killed four Black girls at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church. By Simone's own account she tried, in the aftermath, to build a gun, until her husband Andy Stroud stopped her: "Nina, you can't kill anyone. You are a musician. Do what you do." What she did was write "Mississippi Goddam" in under an hour.

"When I sat down the whole song happened. I never stopped writing until the thing was finished." — Nina Simone

She called it "like throwing ten bullets back," and later, simply, "my first civil rights song."

To Be Young, Gifted and Black

Simone performed "Mississippi Goddam" for marchers at the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march and met Dr. King afterward, telling him bluntly that she was not nonviolent. Her circle by then included Betty Shabazz, Stokely Carmichael, James Baldwin, and Langston Hughes — but the most formative relationship was with playwright Lorraine Hansberry, whom Simone described as her political mentor on "Marx, Lenin and revolution." Hansberry's death in 1965 devastated her; with Weldon Irvine, Simone later adapted the title of Hansberry's unfinished play into the 1969 anthem "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." "Four Women" (1966) dramatized four Black female archetypes shaped by slavery and colorism. By decade's end her radicalization had gone further than nonviolence — at the 1969 Harlem Cultural

Festival she asked the crowd if they were ready to "smash white things," and she said of the Black Panthers that "they scare the hell out of white folks."

Leaving America

Facing industry backlash and IRS tax debt, and calling what she saw in America a "cancer," Simone left the United States in 1970 — first Barbados, then Liberia at the urging of Miriam Makeba, later Switzerland and France, settling near Aix-en-Provence in 1993. She died April 21, 2003, in Carry-le-Rouet, France, of breast cancer. Two days before her death, the Curtis Institute — the school that had rejected her fifty-three years earlier — awarded her an honorary degree.

NC Local Lens

Simone was born in Tryon, Polk County — not Cumberland County, and no Fayetteville connection is documented or claimed here; this entry stands on a statewide North Carolina tie rather than a local one. No evidence surfaced that she ever returned to Tryon after leaving around 1950, and all of the town's recognition of her came late or after her death: a bronze statue by sculptor Zenos Frudakis was dedicated in Tryon's Nina Simone Plaza on February 21, 2010 — her 77th birthday — with a portion of her ashes welded into the statue's chest. She was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2009. Her childhood home faced demolition until four artists purchased it in 2016; the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund completed its rehabilitation in fall 2025, though it is not yet open to the public.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Financial contributions to the movement: no source documents a specific donation or dollar amount from Simone — her contribution is documented through benefit performances (e.g., *Selma*), not confirmed direct financing. Do not assert a figure.

Return to Tryon: neither confirmed nor denied by any source found — treat as unknown, not as a fact of estrangement.

Curtis Institute rejection cause: Simone attributed it to racism; Curtis has disputed this — present as contested, not settled.

Her ashes: one source describes a bronze chest cavity containing her ashes, another describes only a portion with the remainder scattered elsewhere — reconcile against a museum or estate source before stating specifics.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. NCpedia, "Simone, Nina," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/simone-nina>.
2. "The Story Behind Nina Simone's Protest Song 'Mississippi Goddam,'" American Masters, PBS, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/the-story-behind-nina-simones-protest-song-mississippi-goddam/16651>.
3. Adam Shatz, "The Fierce Courage of Nina Simone," New York Review of Books, March 10, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/03/10/fierce-courage-nina-simone/>.
4. "Nina Simone, Tryon," Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina, Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/monument/341>.
5. National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Nina Simone Childhood Home," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://savingplaces.org/places/ninasimone>.
6. "How Nina Simone Used Her Performances for Activism," Biography.com, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.biography.com/musicians/nina-simone-activism>.
7. Tom Maxwell, "Nina Simone: Constructing a Legacy," Medium, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://tommaxwell-32724.medium.com/nina-simone-constructing-a-legacy-564b9cd2dc7f>.

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