What Happened, Miss Simone?: The life of African-American singer, pianist and civil rights activist Nina Simone

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What Happened, Miss Simone?, the documentary film on Nina Simone (1933-2003), directed by Liz Garbus and recently released on Netflix, is an informative and often fascinating examination of the life and times of the singer and civil rights activist.

Actually, to refer to Simone simply as a singer is inadequate. She was also a songwriter and a classically trained pianist. Her repertoire included jazz, folk and American musical standards, as well as original compositions on racial and social injustice.

Simone did not so much move between different genres as combine them into her own unique and powerful style. Her work blends blues, jazz, gospel and folk with the training she received in classical piano. This result is often difficult to classify, but as critic Stanley Crouch comments in the film, once you have heard Simone's voice you will not forget it.

This documentary includes numerous examples of Simone's compositions and renditions, including "Mississippi Goddam," "Backlash Blues," "Strange Fruit," "I Loves You Porgy," "Ain't Got No/I Got Life," "My Baby Just Cares for Me," and many others.

Nina Simone was an impassioned and unforgettable presence, one of the supreme musical talents of the mid-twentieth century. Her career was derailed, however, due to a combination of commercial pressures, official hostility to her oppositional views, her own political disorientation and longstanding psychological problems that were later diagnosed as bipolar disorder.

The new movie is the latest work of Academy Award-nominated documentarian Liz Garbus (*The Farm: Angola, USA* [on which she was a co-director]*; Bobby Fischer Against the World; Love, Marilyn*). Using archival photos and film, including performances by Simone over a period of more than three decades, excerpts from the singer's diaries, and interviews with family members, friends and musical colleagues, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* not only traces Simone's life and career, but also evokes the history that shaped her outlook and the course of her life.

Among those interviewed is Lisa Simone Kelly, Simone's only child, who worked closely on this account of her mother's life. We also hear at some length from Al Schackman, Simone's longtime guitarist and musical director, who provides some clear-sighted testimony on many of Simone's difficulties, while showing his devotion to her over a period of more than four decades.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Waymon in the segregated city of Tryon, North Carolina, in 1933. She showed musical talent very early and began playing the piano at age four, accompanying revival meetings in the church where her mother was a preacher. Before long, young Eunice was receiving piano lessons from Muriel Mazzanovich, an Englishwoman who had moved to Tryon with her husband Lawrence, a well-known painter.

In her autobiography, Simone speaks highly of the Mazzanoviches. Her teacher not only gave her lessons, but embraced her talent and provided warmth, kindness and respect. Every weekend, Eunice would cross the tracks to the white part of town to study the music of Bach, Beethoven and Liszt.

Even as a very young girl, Simone stood up against the routine slights of racism and discrimination in the Jim Crow South. At a piano recital, she insisted that she would not play unless her parents were brought to the front row, from which they had been removed to make place for whites.

Mrs. Mazzanovich set up the Eunice Waymon Fund to further the studies of her young pupil. The future Nina Simone left North Carolina at the age of 17, first to study in a summer program at New York's Juilliard School, and then for Philadelphia, where she expected to enroll in the famous Curtis Institute of Music.

The application to Curtis was rejected, and Eunice was devastated. She ascribed the decision to racial discrimination, although Curtis (which awarded Simone an honorary degree only weeks before her death in 2003) apparently has an admission rate of only 2 or 3 percent, and in 1951 admitted 3 out of 72 piano applicants. For some years, Simone continued to have hopes of resuming her classical education. Although this was not to be, throughout her life her earlier training infused much of her musical performance.

By 1954, the young performer was supporting herself by playing at a bar in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She began singing only because her employer made it a condition for keeping the job, which paid a much-needed $90 a week. "Nina Simone" was born because the singer wanted to keep her new profession a secret from her religious mother. She took her first name from the Spanish for "little girl," and the surname from well-known left-wing French actress Simone Signoret.

By the late 1950s, Nina Simone was beginning to attract notice. In 1958, her recording of "I Loves You, Porgy" became a best-selling single. The film includes footage of Simone singing "Little

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Liza Jane" at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1960. During these years, she began performing regularly at clubs in New York City's Greenwich Village.

The development of the mass civil rights movement in the early 1960s radicalized Simone and drove her into political activism. Simone herself explains, in interview footage included in the documentary, "I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself.… How can one be an artist and not reflect the times?"

During this period, she associated with a number of prominent African-American artists and intellectuals, including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry (1931-1965), whose play *Raisin in the Sun* had become a Broadway hit and was nominated for several Tony Awards in 1959, was a particularly close friend. Simone later wrote, intriguingly, that when she and Hansberry got together, "It was always about Marx, Lenin and revolution—typical girl talk."

After the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham that killed four Alabama schoolgirls, Simone's performances and her music became angry and at times bitter. Soon after the Birmingham bombing, she wrote the well-known song " Mississippi Goddam."

This angry indictment of Southern racism ("Alabama's got me so upset, Tennessee made me lose my rest, and everybody knows about Mississippi, goddam!") was later sung by Simone at the conclusion of the March 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. To mark the occasion, she changed the lyric slightly, to "Selma made me lose my rest."

Most of Simone's recordings date from 1958 to 1974. She married a New York City police detective, Andrew Stroud, in 1961, and he soon retired to become her manager. The 1960s were a time of growing prominence for the singer, but early on she clashed with her husband about the direction of her career. Stroud, whose 2006 interview is excerpted in the film, was impatient with Simone's attention to civil rights and political questions, and warned her that it threatened her career. As *What Happened, Miss Simone?* also points out, their relationship also became at times a violent and abusive one. The marriage ended around 1970.

There was indeed a conflict between commercial demands and Simone's growing political commitment. This only widened as the modest achievements of the civil rights struggle were followed by deepening social and political crisis. The mass anti-Vietnam War movement grew, soon followed by a strike wave of the American working class. Meanwhile, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. and the ghetto rebellions of 1964-1968 were followed by the rapid collapse of the mass civil rights movement.

Simone increasingly rejected the reformism and pacifism of the official protests, but moved toward the embrace of cultural black nationalism and an increasingly sour and bleak outlook.

The second half of *What Happened, Miss Simone?* focuses on Simone's personal difficulties and mental illness, but misses something essential in the process. While the singer's psychological problems cannot be discounted, they also must be seen in the context of the enormous shifts in American political life at this time.

The old civil rights establishment was increasingly integrated into the Democratic Party, while "black power" and nationalist demagogues like former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader Stokely Carmichael emerged with a pseudo-revolutionary message that was openly hostile to the working class.

Simone was much influenced by Carmichael. Embracing the perspective of black separatism, she went into voluntary exile in the 1970s. Leaving the US in 1974, she lived successively in Liberia, Switzerland and finally France. In the next several decades, alongside frequent psychological breakdowns, her career declined. Her disorientation, along with emotional problems, had an inevitably injurious effect on her music.

Friends and colleagues eventually discovered Simone living in appalling conditions in Paris, playing in a small café for $300 a night. Schackman and others assisted the troubled singer in obtaining medical treatment. She was able for periods to continue performing both in Europe and occasionally in the US. After being treated for breast cancer for a number of years, she died at her home in Carry-le-Rouet, France, near Marseille, in April 2003.

There is an undeniably tragic aspect to Simone's later life, characterized by illness and a career tailspin that lasted for nearly the last three decades of her life.

The relationship between wider social life and the individual artistic personality is complex, and does not permit a formula. However, in the case of someone as engaged and as sensitive as Simone, it would surely be an error to view her emotional traumas as purely personal ones.

Given her level of intellectual and moral commitment, and the expectations aroused by the great struggles of the 1960s, how can one fully grasp Simone's ultimate disappointment, confusion and despair, which found a painful psychic expression, without taking into account the betrayals of those struggles? And those betrayals are directly attributable to the rotten role played by the entire layer of middle class antiwar and civil rights leaders, along with black nationalists, Stalinists and trade union bureaucrats.

When Simone said it was the responsibility of the artist to reflect the times, she was undoubtedly correct, but it is also necessary to *understand* one's times. For a variety of primarily historical and social reasons, she was unable to do that.

Notwithstanding this, Nina Simone deserves respect both as a musician and as an honest, courageous human being who sought to fight oppression and injustice. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* is a valuable examination of the work of this artist.

Some of the highlights of Simone's career are documented on a four-CD collection, *To Be Free: The Nina Simone Story*, with some 60 tracks, including many live performances spanning the period from 1957 to 1993.

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