

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the year of Nina Simone's death, a version of her song 'Sinnerman', remixed by Felix da Housecat, was released on the second *Verve Remixed* album. *Verve Remixed* is a project that involves contemporary reworking of tracks from the label's extensive archive of jazz and blues recordings. Simone's work was a prominent feature of the early volumes in the series, with 'Sinnerman' being the most widely circulated via a range of club mixes. The track begins with a dance beat that gives no melodic clue as to the identity of the song until 45 seconds in, at which point clued-up jazz, soul or gospel fans will likely recognise the rolling piano riff that emerges as that which drives Simone's 1965 recording of 'Sinnerman'. Beat and riff continue as if locked together for another half a minute before the beat drops away to leave the piano to do its work. When the beat re-enters we start to hear fragments of Simone's voice, asking "Where you gonna run to?" repeatedly, then "Oh Sinnerman, where you gonna run to?" At nearly three minutes we escape the loop, Simone's deep, sensual voice emoting as she imagines some imminent day of reckoning. Then we are back into repetition again, the voice becoming a fetishized object amid the rolling piano and disco beats, riding the groove to the song's conclusion. 'Sinnerman', which Simone introduced to her audience as a song she learned at religious revival meetings during her North Carolina childhood, thus makes its long journey from one ritual space (the church) to another (the night club), from one congregation to another, and from a time before the artist was born to the posthumous moment in which she became "the late Nina Simone".

Another example of Simone's "lateness" can be found by going back to a moment when she was alive but, in many ways, invisible. It is the video for 'My Baby Just Cares for Me' directed by Peter Lord for Aardman Animations in 1987. The song, originally recorded in the late 1950s, had become a hit following its use in an advert for Chanel earlier in the year and it was clearly felt that a video was needed to accompany the track. Lord's video showed the song being sung by a Claymation "cat" standing at a microphone, while the famous descending piano figure that instantly earmarked the version as Simone's, was "played" by a different Claymation creature.

What was notable in both these moments was the absence of Nina Simone herself; only her voice seemed to remain, and even that was disembodied through the mediations of sampling and animation. It is common following the death of an

artist that we revisit their life through their work and our memories of prior encounters with that work. With the loss of recording artists this process is aided by the recorded artefacts themselves, which provide voices with an afterlife. But it is not only recordings that bring voices back from the dead; cover versions, remixes and new contexts promise to breathe new life into late voices. Felix's 'Sinnerman' sends its invitation to a new generation of potential Nina Simone fans, as do the Chanel advert and the Claymation video. The latter is my earliest memory of hearing Nina Simone and I recall the song being everywhere that year. But where was Nina Simone herself? Neither in the advert nor the video, where her role was further reduced by the suggestion that singer and pianist were separate "creatures", when in fact they were one and the same woman.

Nina Simone was, in 1987, at a late stage in a career many thought had ended years earlier. For those who wished to penetrate further there soon emerged the Nina Simone of the 1960s, of 'Mississippi Goddam', 'Four Women' and 'Young Gifted and Black'. These were her songs but she also made other people's songs her own, selecting from the established songbooks of Cole Porter and George Gershwin and the newly emerging songbooks of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and the Gibb Brothers. This was the Nina Simone of the civil rights era, her songs a vital soundtrack to that historic moment. Then came silence and exile, as Simone left a US she believed would never be cured of racism for successive exiles in Barbados, Liberia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. Though she continued to perform, record and sell records, her work fell off the critical radar.

Nina Simone was a performer who received a great deal of attention during her heyday in the 1960s but relatively little within the Anglophone world in the later stages of her career. She continued to be revered in France – the country in which she lived for the last years of her life – and had a brief boost to her career in the United Kingdom following the success of 'My Baby Just Cares For Me' in the 1980s. In her later years, when she was written about, it tended to be in terms that emphasised her successful past and difficult present. There is still a surprising absence of commentary on Simone and her work in general accounts of blues, jazz, soul and other forms of black music; this is also true of scholarly work on music and gender. However, Simone's later life was also a time of profound reflection for the artist and, for anyone involved in researching her life and work, her late period provides some invaluable documents. The early 1990s saw the publication of her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, the release of a documentary of her career, a French production entitled *La Légende* and a new studio album. While most of

these documents concerned themselves with her past they were all narrated in what I call her "late voice". I will have more to say about the late voice further on, but for now we might think of it as a voice that attempts to connect "history as it really was" with "memory as it is now", often leading to "history as it should have been". Simone attempted her reconciliation with history as it really was by moving away from the site of her disappointment. She came to be seen as a performer who was unable, unwilling or – as she herself would see it – denied the opportunity to rescale the heights of her 1960s heyday. While pursuing her own memory work – her increasingly nostalgic songs, her autobiographical projects – she became subject to the memory work of her audience, who looked back to that same heyday.

A Recorded Life

While the biographical details of any artist whose work gathers a substantial audience are likely to be attached, in one form or another, to presentations and explanations of the work, there are some artists who seem to attract the conflation of art and life more than others. Nina Simone was one of these artists and there are few accounts of her music that omit some sort of reference to certain traumatic experiences in her early life, to her connection to the civil rights movement, or to her often troubled later years.

Despite the relative exclusion of Simone from general works on black music, the years since her death have witnessed a growing interest in her life and career. A number of biographies have appeared (Cohodas 2010; Hampton and Nathan 2004; Acker 2004; Brun-Lambert 2009), as have scholarly articles addressing her role in the civil rights movement (Berman 2004; Feldstein 2005; Kernodle 2008; Brooks 2011). This book draws upon all these sources, and on Simone's own account of her life (Simone and Cleary 2003), while placing greater emphasis on the interpretation of music from across the artist's entire career. My account of Simone's music offers a hermeneutics of her work that connects to parallel histories, concepts and theories. The book explicitly addresses the "problem" of reading Simone's work through reference to her life and its socio-historical context, as opposed to viewing the work primarily from an aesthetic perspective. Ultimately it argues that these factors should not be separated but that it is important that questions regarding their relationship be constantly raised, if only to maintain a focus on the quality of Simone's work as a musician. Too often she is regarded only as a "symptom of history", both a product of the cultural trauma

into which she was born and a slave to her own mental condition (Simone had been taking medication for bipolar disorder for much of her later career, a fact that only came to public attention following the artist's death and which may help to explain some of the "capricious" behaviour for which she was well known). Simone cannot be discussed without reference to these vital influences but she should not be reduced to them.

Another original element of this book is its proposal of a theory of the "late voice", a concept which refers both to biography and to aesthetics. The late voice, it is argued, is both something that can be discussed in terms of work carried out late in an artist's career and an aesthetic strategy which artists can deploy at any stage in their work and which, in fact, can often be detected in the early work of many. Nina Simone is hardly unique in this respect but she is an exemplary representative of the late voice in that her work is characterised by an emphasis on experience, loss, memory, disappointment, yearning and nostalgia. The concept of the late voice will be put forward as one way of navigating the "problem" of weighing up biographical, aesthetic and textual accounts of performers and their work.

It may seem to be stating the obvious to want to consider Simone as a black woman, yet very few books on music and race or music and gender have given more than passing reference to her. In the broader sphere of popular music studies, Simone is also under-represented, for a number of possible reasons. One of these is the often-cited difficulty in categorising her music; she should not feature in books on blues or jazz because, it is argued, she was not strictly speaking a blues or jazz singer; a similar line of reasoning applies to works on soul and folk music. And, while Simone is associated in the popular imagination with the civil rights movement, the more rarefied area of civil rights scholarship often ignores her, seeing her as someone whose "pop star" status prevented her from fully engaging with activism. This book will argue that it is important to prevent Simone's departure from the history of popular music and the wider culture.

The usefulness of connecting authorial biography and artistic output was the subject of much debate during the time period this book covers and, while there is not sufficient space here to discuss the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, these and other figures have influenced a number of the interpretations offered in this book. Should these figures be seen to be operating in, or reflecting on, a world and an experience that is quantitatively or qualitatively

different from that experienced by Simone (and such criticisms are not unusual: see, for example, Rose 1994, 198-924; for a refutation, see Middleton 2006, 282-108), I should also point out that my interpretations have also been influenced by theorists such as Farah Jasmine Griffin, Hortense Spillers and Alexander Weheliye, all of whom draw upon poststructuralist thought to elucidate black American art. Another criticism that could be levelled at the use of Simone's biography to "explain" her art is to be found in the ways in which identity is occasionally wielded as a potentially essentialist and universalizing discourse.

An example which Simone herself highlighted was the frequency with which she was compared to other black female singers – most obviously Billie Holiday – because of her sex and gender. In her autobiography, Simone suggests that this happened because of her early success with 'I Loves You, Porgy', a song previously associated with Holiday:

Calling me a jazz singer was a way of ignoring my musical background because I didn't fit into white ideas of what a black performer should be. It was a racist thing: "If she's black she must be a jazz singer." It diminished me, exactly like Langston Hughes was diminished when people called him a 'great black poet'. Langston was a great poet period and it was up to him and him alone to say what part the colour of his skin had to do with that.

(Simone and Cleary 2003, 69)

The last point Simone makes here is interesting in that it allows a certain amount of space for self-essentialization, or, as it has been defined in theories of identity politics, "strategic essentialization". Simone displays a strategic deployment of the word "jazz" when she writes, just prior to the passage quoted above, that "the black man in America was jazz in everything he did – in the way he walked, talked, thought and acted ... so in that sense because I was black I was a jazz singer" (68-9). A similar slipperiness about the use of the word "soul" will be considered later in this book, at which point debates concerning art, identity and essentialization will be considered (at least to an extent allowable in a short work on a specific artist) with reference to work by Griffin, Robin Kelley and others.

Whatever one's feelings about theory, aesthetics and biography, the fact remains that no one has yet produced a convincing account of Simone's work without recourse to her published autobiography, even those who dismiss it as "contrived" and "sterilized" (Brun-Lambert 2009, 329). Most commentators (including Brun-Lambert) would maintain that *I Put a Spell on You* remains a vital contribution to

her work, just as Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* or Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* do to theirs. It is undeniably performative and should perhaps be read as an open text, with readers allowed to make connections rather than taking what Simone says as "gospel". And if that word, used here to signify truth, takes on other resonances when applied to music, we should remain alive to the ways in which truth is discovered and performed in musical traditions. Gospel can be seen to highlight a distinction between "truth" (something fixed) and what we might call "truthing" (an ongoing process). By making such a distinction I am partly alluding to Christopher Small's (1998) concept of "musicking", wherein something that is generally thought of as a thing ("music") is recognised instead as a process ("musicking"). But just as music, despite Small's protestations, remains a thing, so we must think of truth as at least the perception of a thing, as truth "itself". Both truth, and the processes of fidelity or faith that follow from its recognition, find one of their more sophisticated philosophical interpretations in the work of Alain Badiou (2005), another "continental" reference point for this book. The epiphanic moment of "coming through" that is to be found in the religious tradition in which Simone was raised finds its philosophic analogue in Badiou's theory of "event". Just as the recognition of, and subsequent commitment to, religious truth is a subjectivizing process (a process, in other words, through which subjects learn to live in the world), so other "events" and "fidelity to events" promote particular responses and ways of being in the world.

At the same time we need to balance biographical, artist-centred accounts with reference to the social world in which such artists operate. As Ingrid Monson points out, the discographical and biographical work that has helped to establish and maintain the idea of jazz as a vital modern artform has also led, at times, to an over-emphasis on individual genius (2007, 5-6). An approach that takes account of socio-historical events and contexts can therefore help to explain the development of certain cultural practices, including music. To take one example, Monson notes how jazz emerged within the "structural condition" of Jim Crow racism in the USA (6). Monson's account of jazz connects to what Richard Peterson has called the "production of culture" model, in which greater emphasis is placed upon the factors which shape, determine and "routinize" the conditions under which cultural innovators can emerge than upon the lives and works of the innovators themselves. Peterson (1990) has made use of the production of culture perspective to explain the reasons for the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, pointing out that an understanding of this cultural "event" requires an understanding of the various structuring conditions (social, legal, occupational, technological, and so

on) that allowed innovators such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis to attain exposure and popularity. As I have suggested elsewhere, Peterson's account gives a sober and necessary alternative to a populist rock history that would explain the music's success solely via recourse to individual performers' biographies (Elliott 2008b). However, such an account risks losing something of the "evental" magic of more populist, or even mythical accounts. By adopting the work of Badiou, I have suggested that the "event" of rock 'n' roll be thought of as an occurrence that can be narrated as both veridical history and as myth. The mythology of the rock story is arguably as vital as anything in maintaining what Badiou refers to as "fidelity to the event", a faithfulness that rock's subjects (its fans and practitioners) prove again and again in our favouring of faith over fact.

It is also important to highlight the ways in which the structuring processes of social factors, as understood by theories of musicking or the production of culture, intersect with, and derive their power and meaning from, concrete individual cases. Many of the most convincing accounts of individual musical performances are the result of combining the social and the individual in hermeneutical procedures that do justice to both individual and collective, cause and effect, call and response. Samuel Floyd, for example, provides a useful way to read a range of musical performances via the concept of "cultural memory". For Floyd, cultural memory refers to "nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs that members of a culture seem, without direct knowledge or deliberate training to 'know' – that feel unequivocally 'true' and 'right' when encountered, experienced and executed" (1995, 8). The moment of execution or practice momentarily fixes the memory, but the memory is as much an action, or process, as it is an object or target being searched for. This emphasis on the moment and the process does not contradict other accounts such as Small's (far from it), but it does allow us to link the individual example with collective conditioning and to allow the notion of the object (in the form of the archive or repository) to retain its importance. For, as well as "live" process, cultural memory is also "a repository of meanings that comprise the subjective knowledge of a people, its immanent thoughts, its structures, and its practices; these thoughts, structures, and practices are transferred and understood unconsciously but become conscious and culturally objective in practice and perception" (Floyd 1995, 8).

We might think of cultural memory, then, as a form of awareness possessed by individuals within a society which encompasses the intuitive and the experienced,

the general and the specific, the known and the felt. Such awareness attaches itself to a signifying community and relies on both memory and politics for its continuation. Floyd's account of cultural memory can be usefully placed alongside the "social memory" described by James Fentress and Chris Wickham. For these authors, social memory functions as "a source of knowledge" and

does more than provide a set of categories through which, in an unselfconscious way, a group experiences its surroundings; it also provides the group with material for conscious reflection. This means that we must situate groups in relation to their own traditions, asking how they interpret their own "ghosts", and how they use them as a source of knowledge.

(1992, 26; see also Elliott 2011)

In what follows, I bring together the concepts of cultural memory (aligned with cultural trauma) and the event to consider the ways in which Nina Simone's life and work can be read as both response and contribution to the ongoing cultural memory of black experience in the United States. As for the ways in which the personal interacts with the public and cultural, I wish to take my lead from Simone herself. Throughout her public career, Simone referred to herself and her work via references to "my people". This assertion of belonging, and of shared trauma, was and remains central to any understanding of Simone's art, even (and perhaps especially) at those moments where she moved as far away from public engagement as she could. A product of, and contributor to, the second wave feminism that asserted itself during the 1960s, Simone remained a woman for whom the personal was always political.

For us as readers and auditors of Simone's life and work, there should not be too much guilt in drawing connections between her work and that of Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, or other black female precursors, contemporaries or successors. Nor should we flinch from connecting her to the troubles and traumas of her time, or considering the role her own split personality had on her work. It was arguably that split that enabled her to maintain seemingly opposing attitudes towards the role of identity politics in her career, one minute asserting herself as a representative of a black female subjectivity born of historical trauma, the next claiming that all there was to know about her could be found in her music alone. We do not experience Nina Simone in a vacuum any more than we experience any other person's life and work in a context-free manner. We create our Nina Simones from the tapestry of fact, confession, myth, art and critical (and non-critical)

discourse that has been made available for us and which we renew with each proclamation.

In this book I weave in and out of that tapestry, hopefully adding some new threads and patterns of my own. The book is structured according to a general chronology and divided into five sections: Categories, Politics, Possession, Lateness and Legacy. While each section allows a focus on particular themes and issues in Simone's work, the mapping of each onto a particular chronology should be seen primarily as a pragmatic exercise, a framing device that hopefully allows for a coherent retelling of the Nina Simone story. Defiant as Simone may have been towards any attempt to pin her down or label her, we have to organise our memories of her life and legacy in some manner, though we should also be wary of over-simplification. Just as Simone was "political" in one form or another all of her working life, so she also remained uncategorizable. There are as many parallels between her earliest work and her latest as there are paradoxes. Many of the things that could be said for *The Amazing Nina Simone* (one of her first studio albums, from 1959) could be said for *A Single Woman* (her last, from 1993). That the categories I have chosen are overlapping and interdependent should be kept in mind.

In my discussion of Simone's recorded legacy, I start at the beginning (her first official recordings) and finish somewhere near the end. I say "somewhere near" because it is harder to ascertain the end than the beginning. If I am concentrating on recordings, should the end be her last recorded album? What of the fact that Simone continued to perform for more than a decade after that album and that many (most?) of these performances were recorded in some form or another via bootleg audio recordings, television broadcasts, videos, DVDs and, more recently, amateur video recordings posted to video-sharing websites? Or that previously unissued recordings are regularly unearthed in the process of producing compilation albums, box sets and reissues of studio albums (for example, the remastered version of *A Single Woman* that was released in 2008 with bonus cuts including Simone's take on Prince's 'Sign O' the Times' amidst other delights)? Or that her recorded legacy continues to inspire new recordings by contemporary artists, some of which sample, remix or otherwise include Simone's own voice (not only those remixes mentioned at the outset, but also Lisa "Simone" Stroud's inclusion of a duet performed by mother and daughter on the latter's *Simone on Simone* album)? As Michel Foucault (1979) noted, it is always difficult to decide on

what constitutes an artist's meaningful work when engaged in the posthumous work of analysis.

But if the end is hard to fix, the in-between of Simone's recorded work is even more so. It is not that we are unable to organise her work into chronologically ordered releases and even "eras" – a discography is provided at the end of the book to help with this – but rather that Simone's tendency to employ multiple styles, genres and voices, and to revisit and reinterpret material over the course of her career, means that any attempt to describe a particular performance inevitably leads one to think about another performance from earlier or later in the artist's career. For example, although I base my initial discussion of categorisation in Chapter One on Simone's recordings for the Colpix label, I also make reference to work released later in her career by Philips and RCA. To attempt to do otherwise, I found, is to make life unnecessarily difficult.

As to the choice of which recordings from Simone's large catalogue to discuss, I have selected examples that, in my opinion, represent the five perspectives, or "scapes", from which I am viewing Simone's work. For the first chapter, I have selected a number of performances that show how we might attempt to categorize that work generically and stylistically. At the same time, recognizing the difficulty of categorizing this particular artist, I provide discussions that problematize the easy division of songs into styles and genres, often by considering what Simone does with particular songs and what other artists have done with the same or similar source material. In discussing politics, I initially choose some of the most obviously "political" of Simone's songs, then proceed to open up the ways in which we might define and categorize political music. For the third chapter, I choose material that seems to me to exemplify the various types of possession I am discussing: songs which deal with embodiment and physicality; songs with religious or ritual connotations; songs by other artists which Simone convincingly takes ownership of; live performances that show the artist as servant and owner of her material. In considering lateness and the late voice, I select performances that deal with aspects of time, experience, memory and nostalgia. Fewer examples are discussed in the shorter chapter on Simone's legacy; that chapter, like this introduction, "zooms out" from specific analysis for the most part in order to place Simone in a wider context.

As will be clear from some of the qualifiers I have already employed, the choice of which material to discuss is, to a great extent, a subjective one. I have chosen

recordings which speak strongly to me and, because they speak strongly to me, I have often devoted a considerable amount of space to them. This reduces the amount of material which can be discussed but I hope it also gives the book a depth which a more list-like survey would lack. At the same time, I have expanded the scope of the repertoire routinely discussed by considering material from each decade of Simone's recording career. While subjectivity is undoubtedly operating in the choice of material, I have also included discussions of many tracks which would be expected from any Nina Simone book, obvious examples being the songs 'Mississippi Goddam' and 'Four Women'. There are also many tracks which I consider classic or important in some way but which, in the final cut, had to be left out for reasons of space or fit. Discussion of these, and of songs still emerging into the light from dusty archives, will have to wait for another day.