



Mood singer and pianist Nina Simone will take over Carnegie Hall's stage for a concert Saturday night. "All my life I've wanted to shout out my feeling of being imprisoned"

Bob Greene

The Two Faces of Nina Simone

By JOHN S. WILSON

NINA SIMONE sat at the piano, peering into the darkness that surrounded her at the Village Gate a few weeks ago. With her hair piled in a high, round mound and encircled by a golden band, pendant shell disk earrings framing her strikingly full, firm features, she looked a classic Nubian beauty.

"You're not giving one thing tonight," she chided her dimly seen audience. Her voice had a dark, edgy quality that was both sensuous and commanding. "What bag are you in?"

A few appreciative murmurs and chuckles came back out of the darkness. But no answers.

"So," she went on, "I'll have to guess. I just want you to know that I know. All right," she turned back to the keyboard, "I'll take you down—down—down—down—"

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Her long fingers began to stroke the keys softly in a lazy, sinuous rhythm. She hummed along with the beat, vocalizing a low, keening sound. Rudy Stevenson, her guitarist, picked up the mood, drawing sitar-like accents from his strings. Drums

and bass fell into place as she gradually filled the room with a building, spreading sense of tension.

At a table far in the rear, Andy Stroud, her husband and manager, shook his head and glanced at a friend. "I never heard this arrangement before," he said with a wry grin. "In the seven years I've been with her, I've never heard it."

Because any performance by Nina Simone is essentially a battle of wills—hers against the audience's—whatever she plays or sings is apt to be adapted to the atmosphere in which she finds herself. Whether the audience she faces is in a night club or in Carnegie Hall, where she will give a concert on Saturday night, she is building a mood and drawing her audience into that mood.

"Sometimes the audience sparks the mood," she said recently. "Sometimes the guys"—the musicians in her group—"get the mood and take it away from me. If I know I've got to make it happen, I won't quit—unless the rapport is just not there and it's taking too long. This is what creativity is to me. There's no end to the varieties of depth of feeling when you're creating a mood. Even 'I Loves You, Porgy,' which I've been singing since 1953—I'm constantly surprised at how I feel when I sing it.

"Music gets me worked up," she went on. "I can't sing a song without meaning it. I used to hate music because every night I'd give, give, give and then I'd go to bed and hear a tune go on and on and on in my head. It's what kids do deliberately with electronic music. I was blowing my mind."

Since her marriage to Stroud six years ago, she has begun to find a release from such tensions. He has brought a sense of stability to both her emotional life and to her career. In the process, the shield that she invented and that she called "Nina Simone" is slowly melting, giving way to the girl behind that shield, Eunice Waymon.

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She was Eunice Waymon when she began life 34 years ago in Tryon, N. C. She grew up, the sixth in a family of eight children, under the domination of a fervently religious mother, in an atmosphere of extreme poverty that was complicated by the fact that she was, as she says, "the most outstandingly talented little girl in town—and I was colored."

She began playing the piano when she was 4. By the time she was 7, she had attracted the attention of a woman for whom her mother worked as a maid and who paid for her piano lessons with a local teacher, Mrs. Lawrence Mazzanovich. Her training with "Mis' Mazzie" led to recitals.

"I hated those recitals," Nina Simone recalled. "At the first one, in the white

library, there was a big hassle about where my mother and father sat. That hurt me. Mis' Mazzie never knew how tense I was and how scared those white people made me. I had to go across the tracks. I was split in half. I loved Bach but the music was never a joy, never a pleasure.

"Only years later, when I stopped studying and went back to improvising, I realized she had trained my fingers. When I think of what she did for me, I have to look past what I hated about the white people. She loved that music. That was all she was concerned about."

By then, Eunice was withdrawing behind her shield, although she had not yet named it Nina. With the help of a "Eunice Waymon Fund" started by Mrs. Mazzanovich, she went to a girls' boarding school in Asheville and had two years at Juilliard. Then the money ran out. She went home to her family, which had moved to Philadelphia; there she gave piano lessons and served as accompanist in a vocal studio.

The studio job was her first real contact with pop music. It led to an offer of a summer job in a night club in Atlantic City. To spare her mother the embarrassment of having it known that her daughter was working in such a place, Eunice Waymon called herself Nina Simone.

Nina thought she had been hired as a pianist but she found that she was also expected to sing. She had

never sung before but the \$90 a week the club was offering made it worth trying. Everything was worth trying then.

"I'd just sit down at the piano and play any piece of pop music to death," she said. "I'd improvise, turn it around, sing an obbligato. In my first two years in show business, I was letting so much out—all the things I'd always held in. I'd feel better after playing. It was like having a good cry."

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Out of this came the Nina Simone style. At first, she sang pop songs—"Porgy," the record that brought her national attention in 1959, "Little Girl Blue," "I Don't Want Him, You Can Have Him." Then she began expressing more personal feelings. "All my life," she said, "I've wanted to shout out my feeling of being imprisoned. I've known about the silence that makes that prison, as any Negro does. But something happened to me that day those four little girls got killed in Birmingham—the four little girls in the Sunday School bombing."

That day she went up in her "Tree House," a small apartment over the garage at her home in Mount Vernon which she uses as a personal isolation ward. She spent three days there, brooding, fuming. Once she came down to ask her husband, who had been a sergeant of detectives before their marriage, to teach her how to make a zip gun.

When she finally returned

from the Tree House, she poured her feelings into her first protest song, "Mississippi Goddam." Although the song stemmed from Birmingham, James Meredith was shot in Mississippi while she was working on it and so its geography spread:

"Alabama's got me so upset; Tennessee made me lose my rest;

And everybody knows about Mississippi—Goddam!"

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Since then she has written "Four Women," biting vignettes in which the circumstances and outlooks of four women are related to gradations of skin color. She has set to music Langston Hughes' last poem, "Backlash Blues." There is even room for humor in the midst of her sense of outrage as evidenced in a song she wrote to Alex Comfort's lyrics called "Go Limp," in which a girl goes on a freedom march "with a brick in my handbag and a smile on my face/And barbed wire in my underwear to shut out disgrace."

One day in 1961 Stroud came to visit her in a Philadelphia hospital where she was thought to have meningitis (but did not) and told her that he was going to marry her (and did). Since then the pressures that buried Eunice Waymon and created Nina Simone have been diminishing.

"She was erratic and insecure," Stroud explained. "That's why her act changes so much. You ask her why she does something in the act and she'll tell you, 'I don't know. Do I do that?' When she's faced with decisions like getting married, buying a house, having a baby—they have a 5-year-old daughter, Lisa — "she could go through 'Do I? Don't I?' forever. So I said, 'All right, I'll call the shots.'" "I resent it," she put in, "but I'm glad about it. I've gotten so used to him telling me that we're going to do something that now I just start getting ready to do it. And I usually end up kind of happy about it."

"Andrew's just straight ahead," she says of her husband. "He doesn't take time to work things out." "My philosophy," he says, "is that there's always a solution to every problem." "We're not opposite—we're just different. If we're together five minutes, we have different opinions about everything. With my moods, I'm not the easiest thing to live with. But if I can't make it with him, I can't make it with anybody. At the deepest level, we love each other. When we're sitting together, just quietly, we know that everything's fine."

"Lately," she reflected, "Eunice Waymon has come alive in many more ways than I'd expected. Eunice is extremely soft and frightened to death of almost everything. She has to be handled extremely gently. Nina"—the mere mention of the name threw firmness into her voice, stiffened her shoulders, lit fires in her eyes—"Nina takes care of Eunice. Nina was always there but now I think she'll relax a little and not have to fight so hard."

"Andrew takes care of them both," she added. "He always brings me back to myself."