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How it Would Feel to be Free: Nina Simone and the American Music Industry

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Abstract

Nina Simone is an undeniably significant figure in the history of twentieth-century American music, with an influence that extends across boundaries of musical, racial, and gender identity. Her liminal approach to genre and volatile temper continue to polarize critics and make her difficult to pin to any musical category, but one common thread that can be traced through her life is a quest for freedom, especially from the economic and racial constraints of the American music market and recording industry. This paper examines Simone's attempts to free herself from those constraints through her eclectic musical style, emphasis on protest music, and imperious attitude toward audiences. While these characteristics did not prevent industry limitations from shaping her career, they allowed her to carve out space in the commercial market for greater stylistic synthesis and use of Black protest traditions, profoundly influencing the shape of later markets for jazz and rhythm & blues. The constraints of the industry prompted Simone's creative response and thus fueled some of the most significant musical work of the twentieth century, but they were also heavy burdens, and Simone's story demonstrates the market's role in fostering innovation as well as the costs of its injustices.

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Keywords: Nina Simone, Black American Music, American Recording Industry, Jazz, Rhythm & Blues

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"I wish I knew how it would feel to be free," Nina Simone sang in the opening line of one of her most iconic tunes. Simone defied categorization as a musician and as a person, but if one theme can be traced through her life, it is a quest for freedom, whether from economic insecurity, recording industry constraints, or American racism. "I never envy other people's careers or money, I envy their freedom," she wrote in her autobiography, and that desire to be free shaped her life.[1] Simone attempted to free herself from the limitations of the music market and recording industry through an eclectic musical style, an emphasis on protest music, and a notoriously imperious attitude toward her audiences. These characteristics did not stop industry constraints from shaping her career, but they did allow her to carve out a unique space in the commercial market and impact the shape of later markets for jazz and rhythm & blues.

By the 1950s, the American music industry was a turbulent place. During and after World War II, small independent recording labels began to enter the market, focusing on specialized genres like "race records," which were largely ignored by the major labels who controlled the industry. Indies established close connections with local radio disc jockeys, which proved lucrative as radio plays became an increasingly important driver of record sales.[2] Along with the postwar economic boom and growing consumer demand for records, this fueled a period of growth for indies, which meant a proliferation of new styles being recorded and

[1] Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You,* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 47.
[2] Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business: The First Four Hundred Years. Vol. 3, From 1900 to 1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 227.

distributed.[3] The majors did their best to reassert control, taking steps to consolidate, enter niche markets, and rethink sales strategies, but they never regained the dominance they enjoyed before the war.[4] These attempts to respond to market changes meant new styles, including those created and performed by Black Americans, began to enter mainstream public consciousness.

In the midst of this changing marketplace, one thing about the recording industry remained constant, and that was the routine exploitation of performers. American copyright law guaranteed royalties to songwriters only; performers were legally invisible. Most recording contracts promised performers a headline royalty rate from which the company deducted fees for promotion and packaging, making performers responsible for most of their costs and resulting in them receiving a far lower rate in practice.[5] In other cases, performers were promised royalties but payment was delayed or otherwise avoided, and many never received any money at all.[6] American copyright legislation also gave record companies intellectual property rights for recordings they produced and distributed, meaning musicians did not own their work. This was intended to avoid publisher monopolies but in practice created an asymmetric and exploitative relationship between performers and record labels. Performers had no rights to their recordings, and labels had the power to alter and release them without approval or permission.[7] Add to this the fact that radio stations did not have to pay royalties of

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[3] Lee Marshall, *The International Recording Industries* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 37.
[4] Richard James Burgess, *The History of Music Production* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2014), 60.
[5] Michael Talbot ed., *The Business of Music* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2002), 188.
[6] Randall Sandke, *Where the Dark and the Light Folks Meet* (Blue Ridge Summit: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 160.
[7] Talbot, *Business of Music,* 194 and 206.

any kind for broadcasting music, and it made for an industry in which performers created work that was lucrative for executives but were unable to reap its monetary benefits themselves.[8]

The advent of "race records" in the 1920s brought Black performers into the popular music market, where they faced racial discrimination in addition to the general exploitation of performers. Labels marketed the "race" genres of blues and jazz exclusively to the growing demographic of Black Americans with disposable income, so white America remained mostly unaware of these styles until they were appropriated by white performers.[9] Many middle-class Americans, Black and white, looked down on jazz, so recording companies who wanted to enter the market without alienating these middle-class consumers turned to symphonic jazz, a style usually fronted by white musicians and more amenable to culturally elite tastes.[10] These white artists, who were marketed more broadly, found success performing Black styles for mainstream mass consumption, which blocked Black advancement in the industry.[11] Black musicians were overshadowed by white ones in genres they had pioneered and were also excluded from recording mainstream pop or classical music.[12] Thus, they were not only relegated to jazz and blues; they were further pigeonholed into "hot" jazz (Dixieland styles) and marketed to a narrower demographic of consumers than their white counterparts, who attracted wider audiences and found more monetary success.[13]

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[8] Marshall, *International Recording Industries,* 41.
[9] John Shepherd, et. al eds. *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Vol.1 Media, Industry and Society* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 48.
[10] Mark Laver, *Jazz Sells* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43-45.
[11] Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17.
[12] Sandke, *Dark and the Light Folks*, 161.
[13] Damon J. Phillips, *Shaping Jazz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 103.

After World War II, consumer tastes shifted. Instrumental music shrank in popularity, and singers became star attractions.[14] Billboard's "race records" chart, renamed rhythm & blues (R&B) in 1949, adopted these trends, which eventually evolved into rock and roll, made popular by white musicians.[15] As Black styles were appropriated into mainstream culture and jazz became less commercially viable, jazz musicians created increasingly complex styles and demanded respect for jazz as art music.[16] However, they still worked in a popular music industry that categorized them based on race and disparaged the value of their work, creating resentment between Black artists and record companies.[17]

It was this exploitative and tense musical and economic atmosphere which a young woman named Eunice Waymon entered in the 1950s to earn money while she worked toward a career as a classical concert pianist. And it was this atmosphere, with its forces of economic opportunity and constraint, which would turn her into Nina Simone and which she would spend her life reckoning with. Waymon was born in Tryon, North Carolina, and exhibited musical talent from an early age. She began to study classical piano, made possible by a white benefactor and later by a donation fund to which Tryon residents contributed to sponsor her musical education, a gift she repaid with public concerts in the community.[18] Encouraged by her piano teacher and her mother, who wanted to see her become the first Black concert pianist in America, Waymon studied at Juilliard for a summer and auditioned for the Curtis Institute of

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[14] Burgess, *History of Music Production,* 57.
[15] Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business,* 340.
[16] Richard Elliott, *Nina Simone* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2013), 67.
[17] Elliott, *Nina Simone*, 25.
[18] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 24.

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Music. Her family relocated to Philadelphia in anticipation of her matriculation, but things went awry when she was not accepted, something she later ascribed to racism.[19]

With classical conservatory study off the table, Waymon began accompanying and teaching at a singing school where she picked up popular tunes and jazz standards. It was there she heard about an opportunity to make more money by spending a summer playing in bars on the Atlantic City boardwalk. Waymon secured a job as a cocktail pianist in Atlantic City, and this started the chain of events that created Nina Simone, the stage name she adopted so her devout mother would not find out she was playing jazz in bars.[20] The necessities of the job dictated changes to her style. The newly christened Nina Simone became a singer because she had to if she wanted to keep her job, and she also started improvising at the piano, something which was new but necessary to make it through seven-hour sets.[21] In other ways, however, she remained uncompromising. Simone created unique versions of the standards she was expected to perform as a nightclub pianist, weaving them together with classical styles to create a unique synthesis. She also approached the venue with the attitude of a classical pianist; she expected patrons to pay attention and stopped playing if they talked over her.[22] This unique approach worked, and Simone developed a group of devoted fans in Atlantic City who regularly attended her shows.

Playing in clubs brought Simone economic success, and she realized that if she could continue to make money as a performer, she might be able to save enough to study at a

[19] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 42.
[20] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 49.
[21] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 51.
[22] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 52.

conservatory full time.[23] She attracted the attention of agents and found opportunities for better gigs, press coverage, and even a recording contract with Bethlehem Records. This was the beginning of her commercial career, but Simone still viewed it as a detour, an economic means to finance a classical career, so she was indifferent to the industry and her record deal, which she almost turned down unless she had control over her band and setlist.[24] She later signed her contract without reading it or giving it much thought. "I had no manager, no lawyer, no accountant. What would I need them for?" she later wrote. "I was a classical pianist, not some pop star. It was a mistake that, in the end, would cost me over a million dollars."[25]

From the beginning, Simone had a rocky relationship with the American recording industry. She felt Bethlehem did not adequately promote her debut album, *Little Girl Blue*, and it was only when a radio disc jockey popularized her single "I Loves You, Porgy" that she began to find commercial success. She quickly turned to another label, Colpix Records, but Bethlehem released a second record under her name without her consent, to which she had no rights.[26] She hated the industry but was beginning to recognize she needed it to make a living. Economic necessity pushed Simone into an industry that constrained her work and agency, and much of her life and music was an attempt to break free from those constraints through her eclectic musical style, emphasis on protest music, and attitude toward audiences. In so doing, she shaped the market around her.

[23] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 53.
[24] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 59.
[25] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 60.
[26] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 65.

At the beginning of her career, Simone was still focused on classical music. Instead of accepting market conditions which she believed had denied her a classical career and "ghettoized" Black music, she created a unique synthesis of styles, including folk, blues, jazz, and gospel alongside classical technique and Bach-like elements.[27] Labels and critics alike noted this unique mixture and often discussed her classical training in dialogue with popular genres or attempted, as many of her album liner notes did, to establish her as a jazz artist rather than a pop star.[28] In all cases, her liminal approach made her difficult to categorize. Simone was linked to the jazz and R&B markets by default, but she took issue with this. "Because I was black I was a jazz singer, but in every other way I most definitely wasn't," she wrote.[29] Though categorized as a jazz musician because of her race, she did not allow that to define her work and in fact rebelled against it. Her unique style became a distinctive feature which attracted attention and enlarged her audience. In a market that relegated her to blues and jazz, she was able to carve out a niche that extended beyond those boundaries and became an important part of her success.

A second significant part of Simone's struggle for freedom was protest music. Simone became increasingly interested in the civil rights movement and Black Power during the 1960s, and almost all of her original compositions are protest songs. In the 1950s and 1960s, Black genres became increasingly oriented toward Black Power, alarming the white-dominated industry in which these musicians operated.[30] Jazz and blues were seen as universal, but that

[27] Elliott, *Nina Simone,* 13.
[28] Elliott, *Nina Simone*, 19.
[29] Simone and Cleary, *Spell,* 69.
[30] John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 253.

was challenged by growing Black nationalism in these genres, sparking heated debate among music critics throughout the 1960s as they attempted to reckon with what it meant for jazz as a genre. Critics shape music markets, and their wide-ranging attitudes, from Marxist support for Black Power to conservative anxiety, contributed to a tense and polarized market.[31]

Simone, though she existed on the periphery of the jazz world, was a Black artist creating jazz-inflected, if not jazz, Black Power music. She wrote and performed explicitly political songs with little regard for the reaction of critics or record companies. Political statements actually became a selling point for artists like Simone, creating market rewards which in turn pushed Black genres in an even more political direction. Simone's songs "Mississippi Goddam" and "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," for example, were full of racially charged content that made record companies skittish, and Southern radio stations even boycotted "Mississippi Goddam," ostensibly because of its use of profanity. Despite this, these were two of her most popular songs.[32] By performing protest music in the face of the industry's reservations, Simone sought personal freedom from the demands of the music industry and freedom for her fellow Black Americans from the oppressive constraints of American society.

While using protest music to free herself from the music industry, Simone also used the industry's distribution power to communicate those subversive messages to as broad an audience as possible. The mass commodification and sale of Black protest music, though it took place inside an exploitative industry, spread the ideas of Black Power to a far wider audience than would otherwise have been possible.[33] Songs like Simone's "Backlash Blues" packaged

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[31] Gennari, *Blowin'*, 258.
[32] Simone and Cleary, *Spell,* 6.
[33] Neal, *What the Music Said*, 62 and 74.

political messages in familiar forms like a twelve-bar blues, making them accessible to wide audiences.[34] On her albums for RCA Records, Simone recorded lighter pop fare alongside explicitly militant Black Power anthems. Recording these styles side-by-side meant the protest music could not be ignored in favor of the less controversial pop.[35] Simone used the market's tools to ensure her protest music reached an audience, even while she sought to escape its power.

The final way Simone attempted to free herself from the music market was in her attitude toward audiences. This began with her classical upbringing. She expected her audiences to pay attention, from Atlantic City to Carnegie Hall, and would not play if people were being disruptive. For her, this was about respect for the music. "If they don't want to listen then I don't want to play," she wrote. "If they don't like my attitude then they don't have to come and see me. Others will."[36] As she became more outspoken about Black Power, Simone became known for throwing tantrums at her audiences, which was actually another point of popularity. She was never a great seller of records; the source of her fame was her reputation for emotionally captivating live performances that were impossible to turn away from. This behavior drew in audiences, despite record companies' fears that it would alienate them. In fact, some venues gave Simone raises after she excoriated her audiences from the stage.[37]

This attitude was not an arbitrary gimmick, though. Simone was angry with audiences and the industry because she felt her voice had been stolen and exploited throughout her

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[34] Elliott, *Nina Simone,* 60.
[35] Elliott, *Nina Simone*, 105.
[36] Simone and Cleary, *Spell,* 52.
[37] Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 117-8.

career. Expressing this onstage and demanding respect from audiences was one way she attempted to find agency and freedom. This made her a tumultuous and difficult performer, even culminating in her being dropped from a record label, but these attitudes were an important part of Simone's identity as a performer and a marker of her unique place in the music market.[38]

Simone sought freedom but was never able to escape industry constraints completely, and throughout her career she continued to feel commodified, unable to control her work and image, and disrespected. As early as her childhood in Tryon, Simone felt like a commodity as she performed public concerts for the community sponsoring her piano lessons.[39] This feeling only grew as she entered the popular music industry. The demands of constant performing and touring caused her great fatigue. She felt trapped, especially with the added pressures of responsibility for her band, who depended on her for their livelihoods, and the fact that she had a daughter to support.[40] This negatively impacted her mental health and strained her relationships, especially with her husband and manager, Andy Stroud. He pushed her to work so she could make enough money to retire and be free from the industry, but she found it increasingly difficult to keep up with this demand to constantly produce and perform. "I was rich and famous but I wasn't free," she wrote. "Most of the decisions I made were taken in consultation with my manager/husband, accountant, lawyer, and record company."[41] Later in

[38] Elliott, *Nina Simone*, 142.
[39] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 25.
[40] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 85.
[41] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 113.

life, she found herself performing to stay financially solvent, which she detested, and she never escaped this constant commodifying expectation or her lack of agency in that process.

Simone also spent her life fighting for control over her work. While she was still playing cocktail piano in Atlantic City, someone pirated and sold one of her live sets, which she took to court in 1965. "The first album I ever made was a pirate that I never got paid for and knew nothing about. It was an omen for how record companies were going to treat me," she wrote.[42] Bethlehem, Colpix, and RCA all released music under Simone's name without her consent, sometimes with her express disapproval. They repackaged compilations of previous work with poor-quality recordings, pushed her to record pop and rock, and labelled her as "soul," a cultural signifier meant to associate her with Blackness, all in an attempt to profit from her music.[43]

Even album covers demonstrated this lack of agency. After the 1960s, women who had been portrayed as matriarchs of Black protest music, such as Aretha Franklin, found themselves increasingly sexualized in album artwork, showing clear limits to Black female expression in the industry.[44] The cover of the album *Nina's Back*, a photo of Simone sitting with her naked back to the camera, is an example of this. Her music was widely circulated, but she had no control over its presentation. She could try to escape the industry all she wanted, but ultimately record companies retained partial control over how she was perceived by the public. She was never able to free herself from that.

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[42] Simone and Cleary, *Spell*, 57.
[43] Elliott, *Nina Simone,* 65-66.
[44] Neal, *What the Music Said*,. 76-77.

Simone felt record companies had stolen not only her voice, but had literally robbed her. Performer royalties were poorly regulated and unreliable, and artists often signed their rights away in their initial contracts, as Simone had when she started her career at Bethlehem. She did not receive royalties for much of the work that labels released without her consent, something she bitterly resented. "I made 35 albums, they bootlegged 70. Everybody took a chunk of me," she told audiences during her volatile set at the 1975 Montreux Jazz Festival.[45] She felt the industry had used her and hung her out to dry, especially given her financial woes.

In 1970 the IRS began investigating Simone, an ongoing saga which culminated in her home being foreclosed on and her record sales being garnished.[46] For all her fame and success, she found herself broke and alone, and she believed this was the result of industry exploitation. Simone was able to connect with organizations working to provide performers with legal assistance to obtain royalties, and she secured at least some money for pirated recordings of her music.[47] However, this did not stop her growing obsession with money and royalties. She gave exploitation and theft an increasingly prominent role in her life story and always worried that she was being taken advantage of. This coincided with her declining mental health as she suffered from bipolar and multiple personality disorders, which, while not public knowledge at the time, contributed to her growing paranoia and fear.[48] Simone's quest for freedom was multifaceted, but economic freedom was always an important aspect of it, one she was never able to achieve.

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[45] Quoted in Elliott, *Nina Simone,* 117.
[46] Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 282.
[47] Cohodas, *Princes Noire*, 321.
[48] Cohodas, *Princess Noire*, 330.

Finally, despite Simone's imperious attitude toward her audiences, which she adopted to demand respect and seek freedom from a constraining industry, she still perceived a constant undervaluation of her work by audiences, venue managers, and American society as a whole. Simone often found herself performing for white middle-class audiences, who she was uninterested in catering to. During a Carnegie Hall concert in 1964, later released as the album *Nina Simone in Concert*, she used her performance of "Mississippi Goddam" to intentionally make her predominantly white audience uncomfortable, which worked.[49] Their nervous laughter is audible on the track. Simone, of course, was uninterested in their response or perceptions, but she always felt that her civil rights and Black Power work remained unappreciated in an industry which was comfortable with the status quo.[50] She deeply distrusted venue managers, and often either refused to perform or criticized management from the stage for failing to pay her adequately or on time, whether it was true or not. In 1970, this behavior led jazz critic Stanley Crouch to write that Simone was playing into the hands of white backlash against the civil rights movement.[51]

This volatile behavior, which captivated attention even as it sparked criticism, was rooted in Simone's fear that she was undervalued and misunderstood. By the 1970s, she was angry and tired. She had been denied her dream of a career as a classical concert pianist, exploited by record labels, and stripped of agency by the industry. Her at times irrational and paranoid interactions with managers and audiences were shaped by the disappointment of continued constraint. "Where was Nina Simone?" she wrote. "Nina Simone was walking away

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[49] Daphne A. Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," *Callaloo* 34, no. 1 (2011):183.
[50] Brooks, "Triple Play," 187.
[51] Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 326.

from an industry with no place for her, an industry which had been happy to sell millions of her records through the sixties and then turned around and said they didn't think people wanted to listen to those kind of records anymore."[52] She found herself trapped and unable to find freedom, despite having fought so hard for it.

This is a bleak place to end the story, and it is important to note that Simone's struggle for freedom, while ultimately unsuccessful, was not a failure and certainly not futile. Through her attempts to make music on her terms, she carved out a unique space in the American music market and impacted its future, despite remaining constrained by it. Simone's categorization as a jazz musician is fraught with controversy, which is fitting, both because the definition of jazz itself is somewhat hazy and because Simone did not classify herself that way. However, she occupied both musical and commercial spaces which overlapped with jazz, and her impact on the jazz market has been profound.

Due to her stylistic liminality and rejection of the label, Simone has often been passed over in jazz history survey books, but she has recently been linked to the genre more closely, in part because so many contemporary jazz musicians cite her influence. As jazz has become more stylistically eclectic, in part because of Simone, she has been retroactively solidified in the genre as the gravity of her impact becomes clearer.[53] Her work carved out space in the market for this mixture of styles to continue. Similarly, Simone, along with artists like Aretha Franklin, drew on the lineage of Black female blues singers and the Black protest tradition, once again creating an aesthetic and commercial space expanded on by later Black performers.[54]

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[52] Simone and Cleary, *Spell,* 136.
[53] Elliott, *Nina Simone,* 134.
[54] Neal, *What the Music Said*, 74.

Simone's uncompromising attitude in the face of the industry and her impact on future performers were among her most important contributions to Black American music and part of what made her such a significant figure in its history. Paradoxically, however, Simone only played this role because she was forced to by the market. If classical music was a commercially viable path, she never would have taken on jazz and popular music. Her stylistic eclecticism, emphasis on protest music, and attitude toward audiences — all characteristics which make Simone such a fascinating and important figure — would have been outside her purview as a classical pianist. So while the music industry forced Simone into a genre she did not choose, and while she spent her life seeking to break free from its demands, its characteristic constraints also prompted her creative response. She was forced to create something new, which continues to influence musicians to this day.

These constraints may have contributed to Simone's musical innovation, but they were also heavy burdens she was forced to carry. It is no wonder she sought freedom, nor that she was unable to find it, and musicians who have drawn on Simone's influence face the same struggle. Despite this, her attempts to create art on her own terms, while incomplete in their success, have had far-reaching impacts on American music. "I wish I could be like a bird in the sky," she sang. "Then I'd sing cause I'd know how it feels to be free." She never knew completely, but she sang anyway, as part of her fight to achieve that freedom. Nina Simone created and expanded spaces within the music market for others to carry on that fight, and her legacy is the hope that one day they will find out.

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