

A Diva's Spell

For many people, mention of the name Nina Simone evokes stories. Stories about which of her songs move them the most, of where they were when they first heard these songs, of who first exposed them to her music.

And then there are the stories of dramatic or unexpected behavior encountered firsthand or as part of an audience. I hadn't heard these stories when I was presented with the opportunity to become Nina Simone's North American booking agent in spring 1997. I owned one of her CDs, a live recording that I purchased secondhand, and had read her autobiography, *I Put A Spell On You*, in graduate school. Jazz pianist Don Pullen, a former client of mine, regaled me with tales of her curt coyness and sharp tongue, which he experienced as her accompanist. But I was far from steeped in the lore of her legend.

She became my client the way many such relationships are formed—an artist gets a booking for a show and wants to add more but has ineffective or nonexistent representation. So the artist puts the word out. But it rarely happens to an artist of Nina Simone's stature. Millions of record sales and worldwide notoriety usually bring with them a long line of business suitors. Numbed with excitement, I didn't think too hard about why she would consider being represented by someone like me, a one-man operation still working out of my bedroom.

Though not my major at Williams, music permeated my student life, from trumpet playing to disc jockeying to writing for classes and the *Record*. Reality met me at graduation and ushered me to the business side of the equation, and, apart from a short, brain-recharging detour to academia that earned me a master's in African American studies from Yale, I dived wholeheartedly into music booking.

Edgy, avant-garde jazz and international music were my favorites and dominated the artist rosters of the early incarnations of Steppin' in Artist Development, the agency I founded in 1989 and nurtured, at least part time, for the next 10 years. I targeted agencies that shared my limited tastes and nearly begged them for a position, always in vain. I was consciously hoping and searching for a mentor, not realizing that the musicians themselves would fill this need. But nothing could have prepared me for Nina Simone.

Or Dr. Simone, I should say. Shortly before my association with her, she received an honorary doctorate and henceforth insisted upon the title of "doctor." I remember a memo to this effect to backstage production personnel at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, in preparation for her upcoming performance. In time I would consider the demand modest compared to the exacting requirements conveyed to me for the normally straightforward process of booking live performances.

Dr. Simone's voice had become raspy and at times uncontrolled, but its underlying gracefulness and strength of character obscured its shortcomings. Attending many of the shows I booked for her, I recognized just a few of her songs but found that I was familiar with her onstage expression, her movements, her banter—her between-song pronouncements that bordered on ramblings, though every syllable commanded attention. I had seen them mimicked by countless other performers, heirs to her divadom. She had authored the diffident, glazed-over gaze, the alternating shows of appreciation and dismissal of fans' entreaties, the castigation of erring support musicians, the multiple reprises of a song based on whim.

During mid-performance breaks, she would ask her nattily dressed manager—waiting in the wings seemingly just for this purpose—to bring

her a cigarette. Presenting her profile to the crowd, she would tantalize them with a leisurely drag that combined elegance, sexuality and haughtiness, eliciting some of the audience's most ecstatic applause.

On several occasions, she told the crowd to "take a good look" at her, because, she guaranteed, she was "not coming back." This pronouncement wreaked havoc on my efforts to secure future bookings. But it was pure diva.

Her movement onstage could be described as teetering, but somehow she managed to teeter authoritatively. After ambling out to center stage to accept applause at her final Boston performance in 2000, she was urged by one of her band members to return quickly to her piano bench. She turned toward him like a tank rotating toward its target and admonished him in tones audible to the audience, "Don't rush me! Don't EVER rush me."

I never spoke with Dr. Simone on the phone, and I met her only once, in a surreal backstage moment at that Boston concert. Her manager's assistant, recently ascended to the role of manager, sheepishly introduced me to her as she gazed past me with faraway eyes. I was fine with the distance, which applied to all aspects of our association, figuring no contact was better than potentially negative contact.

Most of her fans were spared such lessons. Calling out incessantly to her at her concerts, they would risk public humiliation for the chance that she would hear their voices or maybe even grant their request of a song. Once someone shouted, "We love you, Nina!" to which she replied, "I need to hear that."

Eric Hanson '88 is a booking agent for Ted Kurland Associates in Boston. Nina Simone died in April 2003 at her home in southern France after an extended illness.