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THE PLAY

Light streams through the broken stained-glass windows. **Nina Simone** stands in the destroyed 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The church was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan, killing four innocent African-American girls and blinding a fifth. There are riots outside and rage and sorrow is the music that fills the air.

Nina ponders the tragedy and wants to write a song that expresses how she feels, how the whole community feels. She asks her piercing question "Is this what it means to be black in America?" Nina is joined by three other women and, perhaps, a few others.

Sarah enters, taking shelter from the riots happening outside. "Auntie" Sarah and Nina don't exactly see eye to eye.

Sephronia comes next. She is a light-skinned, civil rights activist, and grapples with the advantages and prejudice that comes with being multi-racial.

Finally, **Sweet Thing** arrives. She is a troubled woman, who has a past with Sephronia.

Though they are the same race, they have lived very different lives. As they sing, struggle and search for sisterhood, each has a different answer for what it means to be black in America.

NINA SIMONE: FOUR WOMEN

BY CHRISTINA HAM | DIRECTED BY TIMOTHY DOUGLAS
KREEGER THEATER | NOVEMBER 10 – DECEMBER 24, 2017



**"See, every day I must conjure myself into a queen
when no one else will give that to me."**

— Nina Simone, *Nina Simone: Four Women*

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



CHRISTINA HAM

“Nina’s shift from artist to activist is everything that Birmingham represented to me and my family.”

Christina Ham’s family attended the 16th Street Baptist Church. She states in an interview: “Thinking about this play and my mom’s family going to the 16th Street Baptist Church helped me to understand why this event would resonate for Nina, as well as the impact and pain it had on my mom’s community.”

Ham’s Theatre for Young Audiences play, *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963*, is also about the bombing, but from the point of view of the victims. Directed by Tony Award-winning actress Phylicia Rashad, it played in front of a sold-out audience at the Kennedy Center to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their deaths. It was simultaneously presented and/or produced in 47 states and streamed worldwide. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Attorney General Eric Holder conducted the post-show discussion in Birmingham.

Ham is a graduate of the University of Southern California and holds an M.F.A. in playwriting from the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television where she was a Graduate Opportunity Fellow.

Her plays have been developed and produced both nationally and internationally at Guthrie Theater, The Goodman Theater, Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Tokyo International Arts Festival among many others.

WHO IS NINA SIMONE?



Eunice Kathleen Waymon (later known as Nina Simone) was born in 1933, in Tryon, North Carolina. She was a musical **prodigy**, learning to play piano by ear at age 3. Her piano teacher started a fund in their community to support Waymon’s musical education. Waymon went to the elite arts school Juilliard, but her funds ran out. She had to move to Philadelphia with her family. She was then rejected from the Curtis Institute of Music because she was black. She hoped to become the first African-American female concert pianist, but now, without money, she started playing at nightclubs.

To hide this, Waymon changed her name to Nina Simone: “Nina” from the Spanish word *niña* meaning girl (a nickname her boyfriend had for her) and “Simone” after the famous French actress Simone Signoret. In 1957, she released her first album including her Top 20 hit “I Loves You Porgy.” Her classical training greatly influenced her musical sound.

On June 12, 1963, civil rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered by a **Ku Klux Klan** member in Mississippi. Among the many civil rights Evers fought for, he was involved in the effort to integrate schools. Then on September 15, 1963, four African-American girls were killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

This was a turning point for Simone. She began to write politically charged music. Her first such song was “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone became a voice of the Civil Rights Movement. Songs like “Young, Gifted and Black” became anthems for African Americans.

Simone suffered from depression, bipolar disorder and mild schizophrenia. She was abused by her second husband throughout their marriage. She left him, moved to Africa and took her daughter with her.

Simone made a final comeback in the 1980s, releasing new music and touring. She died of breast cancer at 70 at her home in France. Simone left an immense legacy, inspiring modern musicians like Kanye West, Beyoncé and countless others. She is undeniably an American icon, known as the High Priestess of Soul.

prodigy — a person, especially a young one, with exceptional abilities

Ku Klux Klan — a U.S. hate group which advocates white supremacy and aims to suppress the rights of African Americans, in addition to other minority groups. It is responsible for many acts of murder, violence and intimidation.



If someone was speaking during a performance, Nina Simone would stop playing, tell them to be quiet and wait to start playing again. Other times she would leave.

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

“The deeper I got into Nina’s music, and into emotionally intuiting her pain, her lyrics and artistry made much more sense to me. I think all of my work as a creative artist is in some way trying to address, heal and make sense of the world — specifically the world I grew up in.”

— Timothy Douglas



Timothy Douglas

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE BIRMINGHAM BOMBINGS



Say Their Names: Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley.

It was Sunday, September 15, 1963 at 10:22am at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Denise McNair, age 11, and Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley, age 14, were in the bathroom together when a homemade bomb exploded, killing them. Addie's sister, Sarah, was temporarily blinded.

The bomb was made by the Ku Klux Klan in the wake of a federal mandate to desegregate schools in Alabama. Bombings were so common in Birmingham at this time that it was nicknamed "Bombingham." The church bombing was the third bombing in 11 days; the others were people's homes.

Riots started and police attacked the protesters; this attracted greater national attention to violence and injustice towards African Americans. The national outrage helped increase support for the Civil Rights Movement. The movement resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. oversaw the funeral of three of the four girls and called them "the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity." Three bombers were convicted: one in 1977, and the others in 2001 and 2002.



The aftermath of the bombing. Ten shards of stained glass from the church's window are on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Read a firsthand account of the bombing from a survivor, Sarah Collins Rudolph: <http://tinyurl.com/fifthgirl>

LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during a speech in an undated photo. (AP Photo).

In April 1963, in response to civil rights demonstrations, the Alabama state court banned **parading without a permit**, and city officials refused to grant permits to civil rights activists. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. refused to obey this ruling and was arrested and put in the Birmingham jail. There, he wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It is an open letter in which he defends his nonviolent approach to protest. He writes that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct action rather than waiting, potentially forever, for justice to come through the courts. Read the excerpt from the letter below:

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

parading permit — permission granted by a government agency for a demonstration to be held in a venue at a particular time.



Read all of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." at <http://tinyurl.com/letfrombirmjail> What issues does it address that are still pressing today?

BLACK CLASSICAL MUSIC



Photo of Harriett D. Foy by C. Stanley Photography.

The history of African Americans in music goes back centuries. From the first drum beat in Africa to the smooth sounds of jazz, black people have been an integral part of the development of music. The banjo was created by slaves, and the music they played led to the development of what we know today as country and folk music.

The haunting and beautiful spirituals created by African-American slaves led to the development of gospel music, the blues and even operas like *Porgy and Bess* (referenced in the play).

The sounds of salsa and merengue, bossa, bachata are all black in origin, using African rhythms and mixing African dances with sound created by slaves in Latin America.

Rock-n-roll was pioneered by an African-American woman named Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and later Big Mama Thornton. One of Elvis Presley's major hits, "Hound Dog," was first recorded by Thornton.

Jazz emerged from a mix of blues, New Orleans big band and ragtime. It has been called soulful, wild and beautiful. Jazz is marked by improvisation and syncopation. At the time it was called "Negro Music" by the white population. Jazz was not only revolutionary in the development of music but also socially. It broke the race barrier with musicians of diverse backgrounds performing together. Jazz opened the gateway to genres like swing, R&B and hip hop.

Nina Simone was born later into the jazz era. She wanted to be a classical concert pianist, but instead became a world-renowned jazz singer. Simone, however, resisted being classified because of the number of styles she performed. Her music is heavily influenced by classical music, and she succeeded in combining it with the pop music of the time. In her jazz improv, you can hear counterpoint as dense as Bach and a passion as fiery as Beethoven.

She was revolutionary in her music and inspired many other artists to be proud of their black skin and to let it shine through their music and art. In the words she is known for singing: "Oh but the joy of today is that we can all be proud to say to be young, gifted and black is where it's at."

THE PLAYLIST

Below is a list of some of the songs in the play.

1. "I Loves You Porgy"
2. "Old Jim Crow"
3. "His Eye is on the Sparrow"
4. "Nobody"
5. "Sinnerman"
6. "Images"
7. "Brown Baby"
8. "To Be Young Gifted and Black"
9. "Mississippi Goddam"
10. "Four Women"



ACTIVITY

What is the soundtrack of our country in this moment? Make a playlist of 5-10 songs that express the issues and emotions in our country now.

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

What Happened to Miss Simone?
Netflix, RadicalMedia, 2015.
<https://tinyurl.com/yc6hmq6e>

"Nina Simone." Biography.com, 2016.
<https://tinyurl.com/yaby8jz4>

"Birmingham Bombing." History.com, 2010.
<https://tinyurl.com/p72cqms>

"Letter From Birmingham Jail"
by Martin Luther King, Jr.
<https://tinyurl.com/ovcktqb>

Three Big Questions
courtesy of Catherine Rosenberg



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Arena Stage productions
and educational opportunities.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

How do we confront
our political world
through art and
music?

2

How does one find
one's song?

3

What does it mean
for you to be an
American?