

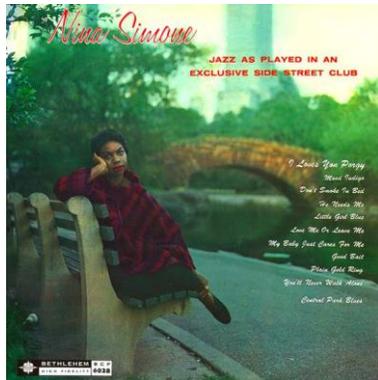
NINA SIMONE



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-1993</i>	<i>Vocal jazz / Soul</i>	<i>Wild Is The Wind (1966)</i>

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LITTLE GIRL BLUE

Album released:

February 1959

V A L U E
2 4 4 4 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Mood Indigo; 2) Don't Smoke In Bed; 3) He Needs Me; 4) Little Girl Blue; 5) Love Me Or Leave Me; 6) My Baby Just Cares For Me; 7) Good Bait; 8) Plain Gold Ring; 9) You'll Never Walk Alone; 10) I Loves You Porgy; 11) Central Park Blues; 12*) He's Got The Whole World In His Hands; 13*) For All We Know; 14*) African Mailman.

REVIEW

It is certainly an ominous coincidence that Nina Simone's first album was released in the very same year that Billie Holiday left us all for that great opium den they sometimes call Heaven. Strictly speaking, we cannot insist that her musical genius chose to relocate itself inside Ms. Eunice Waymon, given that Billie made her last recordings in March 1959, by which time **Little Girl Blue** had already been released (and before that, Nina had spent at least five years establishing her playing and singing style across Atlantic City and New York). Yet it would be hard to think of anybody else but Nina if we were to play the game of «passing the torch» — substantial and symbolic similarities between the two run much deeper than their covers of 'Strange Fruit' (which is usually the most obvious parallel mentioned in any comparisons between the two).



Some might find these parallels absurd, rightfully indicating that Billie was, first and foremost, an *entertainer* — in spite of all the intimacy and personal emotions which she so naturally injected into most of her performances, she had no qualms about her «diva» status and clearly enjoyed her commercial success — whereas Simone was a *mentor*, an uncompromising artist iron-bent on giving the people what (she thought) they *need* rather than what they *want*. But one must not forget that the very role of such a *mentor* in popular music did not even exist until the late Fifties, when people like Nina, profiting

from the slowly accumulating changes in social mores, began sculpting it out. The important thing about Billie Holiday is not that she was a warrior — she most certainly wasn't — but that she managed to sneak in a shade of something genuine and serious under the generic glitz of the entertainment world, in more or less the only way in which it was at all possible in the pre-WWII era. Nina Simone, following in her footsteps, was allowed by her own era to take it further and try to outright *replace* the generic glitz of the entertainment world with something genuine and serious. Like most people with similar ambitions, she failed — as far as popularity and commercial success are concerned — but hey, she did give us all a nice enough alternative to Diana Ross, didn't she?

In some ways, it was quite a good thing that she was rejected from the Curtis Institute of Music in 1951 after applying there to study as a classical pianist. Had she been accepted, she might have spent all her life as a solid second-rate musician, known at best to a small handful of classical fans, with barely a chance to become notorious on the level of, say, a Martha Argerich (to name just one mega-famous female classical pianist from her generation) — Simone's classical «inserts» into her performances, at least to my ears, do not expose her talent as a tremendous loss to the classical world. She herself has always insisted that her application was rejected because of you-know-what, a claim which many people understandably take for granted but which should probably be taken with a grain of salt, given that the Curtis Institute *was* known for at least occasionally accepting black students before Nina, and that she was apparently one of a whoppin' 75 applications for 3 positions in 1951. But in any case, think about it this way: first, how many people today fondly remember Nina Simone and still listen to her records? and how many people today fondly remember the recently deceased [Blanche Burton-Lyles](#), the first African-American woman pianist to graduate from Curtis (in 1954; she was already studying there at the time of Nina's application) and to actually play at Carnegie Hall? For better or worse, Simone got the better deal of the two.

Second, I suppose what is more important is not whether or not Eunice Waymon was rejected because of racism, but the fact that she *believed* it for her entire life — there may or there may not have been an injustice, but it was a serious scar that probably kept on aching for ever and ever, and without that scar there would have been no 'Strange Fruit', no 'Mississippi Goddam', and not even a **Little Girl Blue**, an album on which that scar manifests itself in much more subtle ways, never really jumping out at first listen, but it is there all right if you just keep your ear down to the ground. Nina Simone was tough, stubborn, uncompromising, emotionally unstable and maniacally depressed for most of her earthly existence (it is quite possible, by the way, that it was precisely all those qualities, rather than her skin color, that led to the Curtis rejection: after all, regular classical training, like sports, presumes the importance of self-discipline and obedience above all else), and all these qualities could never have made her as much of a major figure in the classical world as they served her in her pop

music career (well, we know that bipolar disorder worked wonders for Schumann, but in the late 20th century it is really more of a hassle than an advantage).

Anyway, let's finally get to business. **Little Girl Blue**, Nina Simone's first and last album for the small jazz indie label of Bethlehem Records, was, much like the Beatles' **Please Please Me**, recorded over a one-day session in New York at the end of 1957, and for much the same reason: Simone had already glossed most of those songs over three years of continuous live gigs in the various bars & grills of New England. Her partners for the recording were Jimmy Bond on double bass and Albert "Tootie" Heath on drums, both of them professional jazzmen from Philadelphia who had already developed plenty of synergy with Nina — yet their presence here is exclusively as loyal henchmen; despite the standard jazz trio format, neither of the two ever takes a solo turn, not even on the instrumental numbers. (Cue the question of who is actually the bigger «diva», Billie or Nina? there are very few Billie Holiday recordings in existence on which none of the musicians surrounding her are allowed to shine in their own ways).

The actual setlist does not yet reflect Nina's future expansive interest in the folk, R&B, or rock scenes — browsing through the titles as they are reveals nothing out of the ordinary for a typical vocal jazz album by somebody like Sarah Vaughan or Carmen McRae (Nina's then-current competitor on Bethlehem Records). We have ourselves some Gershwin ('I Loves You, Porgy' was Nina's second and only mildly «commercial» single, cracking the US top 20), some Rodgers and Hart (title track), some Rodgers and Hammerstein ('You'll Never Walk Alone'), some Duke ('Mood Indigo'), some Peggy Lee ('Don't Smoke In Bed'), and two whole numbers from the Donaldson-Kahn soundtrack for 1928's *Whoopee!* musical — compared to Simone's future recordings, the album is almost remarkably devoid of anything contemporary; the lone exceptions are 'Plain Gold Ring', an Earl Burroughs composition that had originally appeared in a hauntingly stripped down, percussion-driven version by Kitty White in 1956 ([the original](#) is still well worth getting to know), and Nina's own stab at composing, the stately mid-tempo instrumental 'Central Park Blues'.

From listening to these songs, though, it is rarely clear if Simone actually had a fondness for them as they were, or if she merely treated them as inescapable vehicles to develop her own style and force-feed you her own personality. Already 'Mood Indigo', opening the record, takes more cues from the Thelonious Monk cover of the song than any of Ellington's numerous versions, and although Nina's piano playing is nowhere near as unpredictable and shocking as Monk's (well, whose is?), it is still bold, dashing, and manages to already reflect her classical background in the very first minute. And once that voice comes in... well, all it takes is the opening "you ain't never been blue, till you've had that mood indigo" to

realize that you are *not* in the presence of an eager-to-please entertainer — this is the stern, unobjectionable voice of your teacher which tells you, in so many words, that it has been scientifically verified that you have, in fact, never been blue until you have been exposed to mood indigo, and that you will be most severely punished if you ever try to assert that mood indigo may not be an *absolutely* necessary condition to being blue.

This iron grip will forever remain the trademark sign of Nina's vocals — even when she makes efforts to sound vulnerable and miserable, she will never allow herself to remain at the listener's mercy. Yet the iron grip of the vocals does form a fascinating contrast with the anything-goes approach of her piano playing, which, on 'Mood Indigo', seems to go from pseudo-Monk to a bit of Gershwin and then, at the end, get closer to the bombastic boogie of late-Fifties Ray Charles, all played with such energy and confidence that you never, not for one second, get to doubt about whether this or that particular phrase actually belongs in this particular spot. If the High Priestess of Soul says it belongs, then it belongs. End of story. Next position, please.

For all the intimidating qualities of Nina's voice, I hold the opinion that **Little Girl Blue** is still first and foremost the work of an inventive and imaginative pianist — we do know, after all, that she began to sing almost by accident (when the owner of the piano bar at which she worked demanded that she also sing for her supper), and there are as many as three fully instrumental numbers on the record as well; most importantly, I am not sure that some of her vocal performances on this record really add all that much to the original versions — for instance, 'Don't Smoke In Bed' largely follows the same vocal and emotional patterns that had already been laid down in Peggy Lee's seminal version from 1948, and the song in general is a more appropriate vehicle for Peggy's smoky-melancholy femme-fatale style. Likewise, I cannot insist that Nina does a better vocal turn on 'Plain Gold Ring' than Kitty White — she does free the tune from excessive melodrama, but somehow Kitty's exaggerated, over-the-top lilt of the line "I can't stop these teardrops of mine" still comes across as more natural than Nina's dark-ice delivery of the same line, as she is incapable of or, at least, unwilling to lower the emotional barriers in order to fully connect to the song's desperate lyrics. Still, far be it from me to claim that such an interpretation has no right to exist — it is quite possible that in some emotional contexts, it will come across as the stronger-hitting one.

In any case, on the whole it would be futile to deny that the primary focus of **Little Girl Blue** is on the piano. 'Love Me Or Leave Me', in particular, is famous for its insertion of a lengthy solo based on Bach's Inventions, probably the first such experiment within the context of a vocal standard — and one that works bloody well, considering how naturally the fugue merges with the general groove. 'My Baby Just Cares For Me' (which would unexpectedly become a belated hit for Simone

in 1987 in the UK after being used in a Chanel No. 5 commercial — capitalism always gets the last laugh, doesn't it?) sort of continues with the Monk-inspired piano logic of 'Mood Indigo', starting out with a deceptively simple kiddie music hall riff and then, in the instrumental break, heading off to improvisational territory (more Bud Powell than Monk, probably, but still, the transition between the opening riff and the scale travels in the instrumental is quite impressive). And then there is her purely instrumental reading of 'You'll Never Walk Alone', which she luxuriously rearranges as a dreamy Rachmaninoff-style ballad, giving the left hand almost free rein on the bass chords in what is probably the closest she ever comes to a downright virtuoso performance.

The other two instrumentals are somewhat more restrained. Count Basie's 'Good Bait', utterly unrecognizable in this slow, funky-bluesy version, actually comes across as a composition about, well, *baiting* — the first minute and a half is Nina setting the bait to the hook, then, when Bond and Heath come in with the support, begins the careful guiding of the fishing line across the water, then, at around 3:30, it bites, and after a brief, but tense struggle the poor fishie is triumphantly hauled to shore. Thus we actually get a five-and-a-half-minute long dynamic dramatization, and one can only hope that the whole "bait" thing is supposed to be symbolic, rather than some actual Proustian elevation of a mundane twist of events to transcendental status.

As for Nina's own 'Central Park Blues', well, as somebody who has actually been blessed with enjoying many a happy stroll through Central Park on a nice hot summer day, I can certainly confirm that this particular instrumental... has nothing to do with happily strolling through Central Park whatsoever. Actually, given how the mood of the tune is squarely inverted from carefree-happy to wary-paranoid around the 1:40 mark, I would not be surprised to learn that this is Nina's musical preview of something like Stevie Wonder's 'Living In The City' — one minute, you're happily enjoying the green lushness of your surroundings, the next one, you're arrested by the nearby cop for suspicious loitering. Am I reading too much into this? Well, go ahead and stop me if you can.

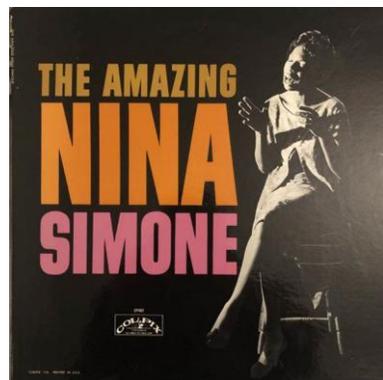
Rounding it all up, it is interesting that **Little Girl Blue** generally remains one of the highest rated and most beloved records in Nina's catalog — despite the fact that, this being her very first album, it is so heavily dependent on old standards and has almost no traces of her sociopolitical spirit. Personally, I have always thought that this was precisely the way it was supposed to be: every musician has a right to express his or her social and political stance in their output, but that right has to be *earned* — anybody who loves their politics more than they love their music is a political pundit first, musician second (here's looking at you Riot grrrl, ho hum). With an album like **Little Girl Blue** under her belt, who could ever deny the

immense musical talent and general artistic appeal of Nina Simone? These eleven tracks amply demonstrate that the lady had nothing to prove to anybody once she got involved with the Civil Rights movement — here is a firmly established, wilful, original musical personality, not afraid of going against the grain from within a relatively formulaic genre and, consequently, open for going against the grain in just about any other sphere of artistic and social existence.

It could, perhaps, be argued that on her subsequent albums she would gradually lean toward more and more theatricality, neglecting actual musical development in favor of more and more social provocation — even that something like ‘My Baby Just Cares For Me’ is musically superior to the likes of ‘Mississippi Goddam’; would that, however, mean that everybody would be better off if she’d just continued to mine the territory of ‘My Baby’ for the rest of her life? Probably not. That said, I cannot deny that I, too, have a very special place in my heart reserved exclusively for Nina’s piano work (and *some*, not all, of Nina’s singing) on **Little Girl Blue**, and that I do not think she ever made an album richer and more inventive than this little collection with her faithful trio. It is probably wiser to compare it not to **Please Please Me**, but to Elvis’ **Sun Sessions** — another example of an early, fresh, inspired minimalistic triumph that was followed by others, but whose original spirit has never been properly replicated or «officially surpassed».

Technical note: although the album was very recently remastered and reissued on CD and vinyl, it makes sense to look for an earlier version which appends three bonus tracks from the same session — the gospel number ‘He’s Got The Whole World In His Hands’, the pop song ‘For All We Know’, and, most importantly, another of Nina’s early originals, the lively and ever so slightly «tribal-sounding» instrumental ‘African Mailman’, with Heath going wilder than usual on percussion and Nina going *much* wilder than usual on the ivories in her first straightforward ode to African roots. All three of these were originally released on Bethlehem Records in late 1959 together with a selection of outtakes by Carmen McRae and Chris Connor as **Nina Simone And Her Friends**, already after Nina and all her «friends» had left the label, presumably in a desperate last attempt to make an extra bit of money from their former stars (the label itself would be sold to King Records three years later — serves them right, as they essentially cheated Simone out of royalties for **Little Girl Blue**).





THE AMAZING NINA SIMONE

Album released:

July 1959

V A L U E
2 3 4 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Blue Prelude*; 2) *Children Go Where I Send You*; 3) *Tomorrow (We Will Meet Once More)*; 4) *Stompin' At The Savoy*; 5) *It Might As Well Be Spring*; 6) *You've Been Gone Too Long*; 7) *That's Him Over There*; 8) *Chilly Winds Don't Blow*; 9) *Theme From "Middle Of The Night"*; 10) *Can't Get Out Of This Mood*; 11) *Willow Weep For Me*; 12) *Solitaire*.

REVIEW

With an album title like that, you begin to realize just how deep the roots of cheapening and trivializing the word «amazing» go back in time. Granted, the practice was in its infancy back then (looking through my collection, I can only add **The Amazing James Brown** to this list of titles from the pre-British Invasion era, though I'm sure there must have been far more second- and third-rate artists to get slapped with the same moniker) — yet even so, it confirms the general rule that whenever you hear the word «amazing», you have to mentally prepare yourself for something decidedly mediocre.

Not that Nina Simone ain't «amazing», of course — when she is at her best, few performers can match her triple punch of intensity, honesty, and professionalism, which is indeed a situation that we typically describe with superlative semantics. Unfortunately, precisely this second studio LP of hers, put out by Colpix just half a year after **Little Girl Blue**, hardly stands up to the original power of the word, before it began to apply to everything, from getting new shoelaces to the most recent album by Imagine Dragons. Apparently, Colpix (one of Columbia's sub-labels) were so happy about getting their hands on Nina that they decided to market her as the greatest jazz vocalist of her generation or something, the one who



might be able to pick up Billie Holiday's crown (especially since Billie had just so conveniently died the same month that **The Amazing Nina Simone** was released). They even gave Nina creative control in the studio — not that they had much choice in the matter, since just one look at Nina's face will tell you this gal was pathologically unable to take orders from anyone, not even back in 1959.

The problem is that Nina was relatively rarely interested in having full creative control in the studio; according to some sources, she usually treated her recording contracts as merely a means to make a living. The rule of thumb — which does know its exceptions, but is most certainly a real thing — is that if you want to hear Nina at her best, you have to search out her concert performances, where she exercised her power over the audience without any mediation. In the studio, the usual attitude was professionalism with, at best, a slight whiff of inspiration. **Little Girl Blue** was a bit different from the rest, since it had to serve as Simone's visit card for the musical establishment; but on her subsequent studio LPs, the «amazing» Nina Simone had nothing left to prove to said establishment, and could easily allow herself not to stay on top of her game whenever she didn't feel like it... which was quite often.

Take this sophomore effort, for instance. Unlike **Little Girl Blue** with its largely unpredictable selection of material, extended song durations (whenever necessary), piano improvisations, instrumental musings, and (every once in a while) the clear, tragic emergence of that repressed African-American spirit, **The Amazing Nina Simone** is largely restricted to relatively formulaic three-minute renditions of selections from the Songbook, seriously downplaying Nina's skills as a pianist (in favor of fairly generic string arrangements) and featuring very, very few truly distinctive vocal passages that could leave you in awe of «Nina Simone's enigma», chained to all the little subtleties of her intonation swings. It is not a *bad* record by any means, but much, if not most of it, is simply giving you Nina Simone as just another entry into the talent contest of contemporary vocal jazz ladies, from Sarah Vaughan to Blossom Dearie and the like — where the overall tendency is that if you like the voice, you'll like the record, if you hate the voice, you'll hate the record.

And it didn't really have to be that way, not if you judge by the quality of the exceptionally outstanding opening number, the old standard 'Blue Prelude' — which already in 1959 you could hear performed by everybody from Bing Crosby to Peggy Lee, but I don't really know of any version that could match the howl-at-the-moon intensity of Simone's, not when she draws out each syllable of "let me sigh, let me cry, when I'm blue" in her deep, low, forworn voice. The nighttime jazz arrangement, all thundery bass and faraway echoey trumpets, complements the vocals perfectly, and the old lyrics really click with the vocal and instrumental mood: her "won't be long 'fore my song will be through / 'cause I know I'm on my last

go-round" will make you empathize so much that I wouldn't advise listening to this song in headphones while walking past a local hobo with a thousand dollars in cash in your pocket.

There is hardly one number among the remaining eleven tunes, though, that would dare compete in intensity with this opening blast. It's mainly a hodge-podge of rather random standards, most of which, as I already said, depend only on the amount of love for Nina's voice — for instance, the Rodgers & Hammerstein number 'It Might As Well Be Spring', or Jerry Silverman's 'Tomorrow (We Will Meet Once More)'. The light orchestral arrangements are neither here nor there, and the vocal interpretation of the songs is predictably tender and melancholic, not really enough to begin thinking about these old chestnuts in any eye-opening brand new ways.

Some things are just weird, like the well-ridden warhorse of 'Stompin' At The Savoy', which just begs the question *why*? Hearing such a song performed by Nina Simone, set to an upbeat tempo and decorated with a flashy, glitzy brass section, is comparable to the likes of Nick Drake trying to adapt himself to performing 'Rock And Roll All Night' with a full-scale rock band at his heels; at best, it's a historical curiosity, at worst, a pointless embarrassment. Neither it nor the other fast-tempo songs on this album, e.g. 'Can't Get Out Of This Mood', work well for Nina at all, and I get a feeling that she was probably just running a lottery at this point, pulling out random musical titles out of a hat to fill up the empty spaces. At least thank Heaven she did not pull out the likes of 'Cheek To Cheek' or something like that.

Even some of the songs that *could* have worked, such as 'Willow Weep For Me', end up spoiled by uninspired and overdone arrangements — here, the recording is so cluttered with brass, woodwinds, and vibes, that Nina's piano ends up buried and shunned from sight, while the singing part feels at least a couple keys higher than would be appropriate for Nina to bring in a properly tragic flavor. In the end, it's just another case of a piece of «nice work if you can get it», certainly not something I'm looking for if I want to astound my friends with a convincing slice of Nina's personality.

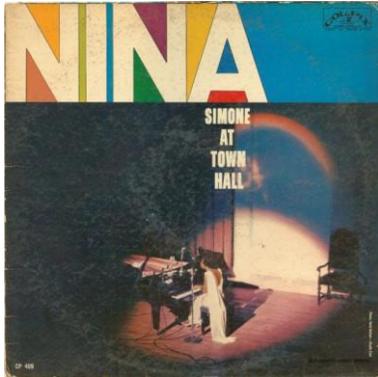
In the end, there are only two tracks in addition to 'Blue Prelude' which I would find above-average-interesting. One is more for novelty reasons than anything else: 'Chilly Winds Don't Blow', a song that takes a single line out of the traditional 'Going Down The Road Feeling Bad' and integrates it into a different tune (albeit with more or less the same basic melody), with a fast-paced, percussion-and-brass-heavy R&B arrangement that could be mistaken for a Little Richard romp for the first few bars. Judging by the credits, this was an experiment coming from Nina's producer, Hecky Krasnow, and she adds quite a bit of «mooring power» to the overall energy level of the tune. Throw in a weirdly epic high-pitched string solo, echoed by pastoral recorders, and you get a bona fide theme for some epic Western here, *How The West Was Won* or something like

that. It's sort of a ridiculous experience, but at this point I'll certainly take a ridiculous experience from Nina Simone than a flat-out boring one.

The other really nice inclusion is 'Children Go Where I Send You', arguably the only song here whose emphasis on the piano and overall «deceptive lightheadedness» could make it a worthy contender for **Little Girl Blue**. Nina does not do «gospel» too often, and whenever she does, you always sense that she means much more by it than just gospel, even if you can never prove it; at the very least, there is always a sense of irony and bitterness mixed with depth of feeling, and it is precisely what makes this little counting-out rhyme so attractive on this record. Her strained vocals somehow make it feel more like a covert protest song than a Christmas carol — an effect that, unfortunately, is unreachable for most of the standards she covers on the rest of the LP.

This underwhelming reaction, even if I am not implying that it should be counted as universal, is still a factor that one has to take into consideration when thinking about Simone's notorious lack of chart success — something that could never be remedied by the word «amazing», either. While a part of it does have to do with Nina's «anti-star» positioning and the discomfort experienced by too many people at the sight of a militant African-American female protester, an equally large part of it has to do with Nina simply not working enough for it — which is a statement of fact rather than an accusation, of course; but the fact remains that Nina never really expected her records to be bought, and invested about as much care into making them as any person with such lack of expectations could be supposed to invest. Which means, in turn, that you have to spend some time carefully scrutinizing this precious stone in order to properly discern its genius.





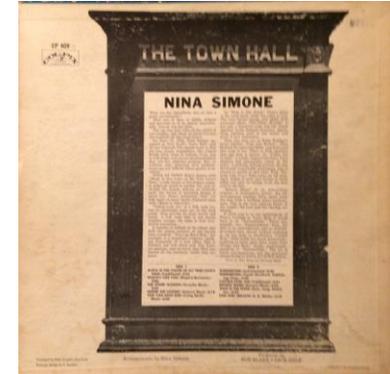
AT TOWN HALL

Album released:

December 1959

V A L U E
3 4 4 4 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Black Is The Color Of My True Love's Hair; 2) Exactly Like You; 3) The Other Woman; 4) Under The Lowest; 5) You Can Have Him; 6) Summertime (Instrumental); 7) Summertime (Vocal); 8) Cotton Eyed Joe; 9) Return Home; 10) Wild Is The Wind; 11) Fine And Mellow.

REVIEW

Now *this* is more like it. The first in a long string of Simone's live albums, **At Town Hall** achieved everything that **The Amazing Nina Simone** failed to achieve, and more. Recorded in New York on September 12, 1959 (although it is said that several of the tracks were later re-recorded live in the studio), the album features Nina firmly planted at the piano, supported only by the small rhythm section of Jimmy Bond on bass and Tootie Heath on drums — the same guys who stuck behind her throughout **Little Girl Blue**. Thus, we are back to the most natural and comfortable setting for Nina, and in more ways than one, *this*, rather than her sophomore effort, is the true sequel and «expansion pack» for the spirit, form, and technique of Simone's debut.



Even the proportions are just about right — there's plenty of vocal standards, but interspersed with a little dark folk ('Black Is The Color...'), a little urban blues ('Fine And Mellow'), and a couple of jazz instrumentals to unleash the Demon of Piano Improvisation. Besides, in this setting she is the master of those vocal standards, bending them to her own rules and whims, rather than having to compromise with the laws of orchestration; under these conditions, even some of the cutesy old

standards may occasionally come out as quite disturbing, darker than the darkest folk when she really puts her heart and mind to it. Some of the performances may be more memorable than others, but there isn't a truly weak spot anywhere on the album; it all makes perfect sense — of rebellious appropriation, that is.

If Web sources can be trusted, the track that opens the album was not the first one in the actual setlist, but its positioning here immediately gives the record a sense of grandioseness — Nina's rendition of 'Black Is The Color Of My True Love's Hair' turns it into a grim, suicidally romantic extravaganza, with more of those quasi-Rachmaninoff piano stylizations and dark — let's actually say *black*, not necessarily in the racial sense of the word — vocals that strongly bring on the idea of *death* rather than just unfortunate separation of two lovers kept apart by fate, as the ballad's lyrics suggest. Even more important is how she makes the song, which is supposed to be relatively «static» like most folk ballads, into a veritable tempest of emotions, contrasting the highly expressive, dynamic, romantic, powerhouse piano playing with a remarkably icy, cold, strictly controlled vocal — that intro feels like an onslaught of ocean waves, racing each other towards a sandy beach... and breaking up on the ironclad iceberg of the opening vocal line. No matter where that vocal goes, up or down, no matter how much it stretches, bends, or wobbles, the icy chill is always there. No humanity, just chill. If you still have not accustomed yourself to the idea that Nina Simone has agreed to carry all our suffering for us in exchange for a ticket to the Town Hall, you'd better start accustoming yourself *now*.

Then, just as you have finally found yourself a comfy position inside that coffin, *wham*, the mood shifts abruptly to... joyful? It would be natural, but boring to call the mood of 'Exactly Like You' joyful, because Nina Simone is unable to convey, let's say, *conventional* joy even if she wanted to. She can be a caretaker, or she can be a prosecutor, but she cannot be Tony Bennett. On 'Exactly Like You', she's being as possessive as always — even that insistent bassline from Jimmy sounds like the impatient ringing of a bell, with Nina's piano soon joining in as an impatient knocking on the door, because she's been waiting each day for someone exactly like you and she just can't take it anymore. Listen to how her voice trembles from overworked impatience on the "now I know why my mama / she taught me to be true" bit, or to how she completely smashes that piano solo while humming along to each note like a jazz paragon of Glenn Gould's. This is not so much a romantic performance as a psychotic one, even if, formally, she never allows herself to go hysteric — the wildness and violence in the voice and in the piano playing is subtle, bottled up and implied rather than obvious. It is this combination of hinted-at-emotionality and total self-control that really gets me every time.

To better understand the depth that Nina brings to Jessie Mae Robinson's 'The Other Woman', it would make sense to

compare [Nina's version](#) with the previously released original interpretation by [Sarah Vaughan](#). Vaughan's version, with its light orchestration and fluttery vocal vibratos, is almost cheerful, a sly and largely self-complacent rumination on the long-term ruinous effects of adultery. Simone turns the whole thing to mutual tragedy, a situation that has already emotionally destroyed the protagonist and will soon enough catch up with her "rival" as well. Had Billie Holiday ever sung the song, she would have shrouded it in her «feather-light ironic sadness» atmosphere; Simone's sadness goes much deeper and hardly has any humor or irony to it, but never once feels theatrically exaggerated.

The same theme continues with 'You Can Have Him', that one Irving Berlin song that seems like it has been specifically written with Nina in mind – or, rather, with the idea that Nina would eventually come along and transform it from a gay, casual assertion of female independence in Doris Day's or Ella Fitzgerald's versions into a *Lieder* of epic proportions. Put this song on an orchestrated album like **The Amazing Nina Simone** and you probably miss the boat; but with her piano, Nina manages to amplify the emotionality of the tune to just the right – occasionally gargantuan – proportions. Watch out for the classic Rachmaninoff «swell» toward the end of the final verse ("then I'd go out and buy the papers..."); beyond the point that it's technically impressive how she can play that constantly changing and evolving melody *and* sing at the same time, it is also one more fine example of putting all the emotional outburst baggage on the ivories, while remaining reserved and defiantly aloof on the vocals.

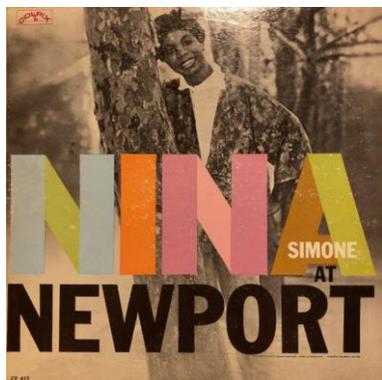
Most of these thoughts and impressions apply in equal proportions to the second side of the album, so I'll be brief about it: this is where you first meet Nina's interpretations of 'Summertime' (everything said about 'You Can Have Him' more or less works for this one, too) and 'Wild Is The Wind', which most people for the past half-century have probably associated with David Bowie's cover version – yet Bowie's version was in itself a loyal tribute to Simone, whereas Nina actually remade the song from the 1957 movie in her own image. The difference is, when [Johnny Mathis sings](#) "don't you know you're life itself", this is more or less what he means. When Nina sings the same lines, it is rather clear that you're... that's right, *death*, you guessed it. This is her own *Liebeshod*, and this is why Bowie, a great admirer of this vibe no matter if it came from Simone or Brel, latched on to it so tightly. She sensed the eerie, otherworldly potential of the song and was the first to realize it.

Next to all these vocal highlights, one might dismiss the two lengthy instrumental pieces, 'Under The Lowest' and 'Return Home', as passable filler – but I beg to differ. She may not have been a virtuoso player along the lines of Art Tatum, or a mind-blowing rule-breaker like Thelonious Monk, but she did take her inspiration from both of those *and* more, and hearing Nina jam on the piano for five minutes is nearly always *interesting*, at the very least, in almost the same manner as

it is interesting to hear a great psychedelic rock jam from Cream, for instance. 'Under The Lowest' is Nina's exercise in the blues — think of it as a jazzified rendition of something like 'Further On Up The Road' — and it's five minutes of a slow, but constant musical crescendo, during which she eventually turns the piano into a battleground, while the trusty rhythm section is churning those bass and drum generators for her. 'Return Home' is even better, with Jimmy and Tootie setting up a danceable, tempestuous rhumba rhythm while Nina is throwing out fast-and-furious piano ideas left and right and getting so wound up in the process that her humming eventually turns to scating, and the «dance» aura of the performance eventually evolves into «primal religious ritual». There's an almost childish delight in how she buzzes her way through the piece, slamming it close at the end with a satisfied exclamation of "*that's it!!*" Who knows, maybe she even smiled at the end. It's the only moment on the album I could associate with a proper smile, anyway.

I suppose the only thing that prevents **At Town Hall** from the status of the *definitive* live Nina Simone experience is the near-total lack of political content — 1959 was just a little too early for her to begin writing stuff like 'Mississippi Goddam' — but while her live shows did eventually become even more intense and even less predictable with her evolving abilities to convert social protest into musical expression, I'm not sure that there is anything in her later catalog that would properly surpass the depth and soulfulness of that expression as it is already conveyed in here. And, subtle as it is, there is actually a *lot* of social protest embedded in the words, sounds, and atmosphere of this performance — from the feminist overtones of 'You Can Have Him' and 'The Other Woman', to the probably non-incidental fact that the very first word sung (and drawn out) on the album is 'black', to, well, the general expression of near-complete artistic freedom for a black female musician, on levels quite unprecedented for the late 1950s. It is certainly a unique record for 1959, and echoes of its uniqueness are still easily felt today if you only give it the proper attention it deserves.





AT NEWPORT

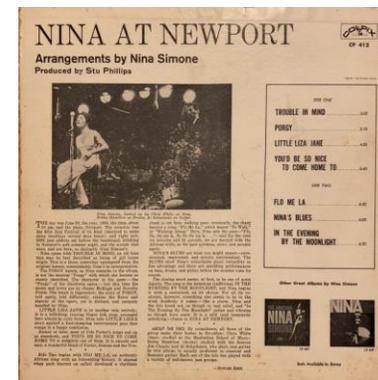
Album released:

August 1960

V A L U E

3 3 3 3 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) Trouble In Mind; 2) Porgy; 3) Little Liza Jane; 4) *You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To*; 5) Flo Me La; 6) Nina's Blues; 7) In The Evening By The Moonlight.

REVIEW

Except for two or three single A-sides, Nina made no studio recordings in 1960; however, the critical (if not commercial) success of **At Town Hall** opened Colpix' eyes to Nina's real strength, and for all of her remaining time on that label, she would have at least as many live albums as she would have studio ones — a tradition that, unfortunately, would later be throttled with her transition to Philips Records. Also, 1960 was the first year for Nina to be admitted to the Newport Jazz Festival — the exact same festival that yielded Muddy Waters' epochal **At Newport** album, and ended in riots, scandals, and a temporary suspension of the Festival due to its becoming far more popular than it could allow itself to be (for more details, refer to my Muddy Waters reviews). Naturally, with most of the Festival having been professionally recorded, it made perfect sense to make use of the tapes — and it didn't hurt, either, that by this time Nina had a whole new band under her command, and had assembled a completely new setlist that did not overlap at all with either **At Town Hall** or any of her first two studio albums.



The final product, on the whole, cannot properly compete with **At Town Hall**. The large open-air venue was much less suited to the technical limitations of recording equipment, especially when it came to artists like Nina, where subtlety and quiet were every bit as important as loudness and energy; there are times when her vocals barely come through the smoke-screen of the piano and the rhythm section, while the rhythm section muffles itself into a humming mess. There are also fewer songs, sacrificing some of Nina's diversity for the sake of extended improvisation — this is, after all, a jazz festival, where you are implicitly obliged not to lose face before the likes of Dave Brubeck and Cannonball Adderley (both of whom performed on the same day with Nina — June 30, 1960). And in terms of unforgettable stand-alone tracks, **At Newport**, I think, really only has one, but we'll get to that a little bit later.

From what I can tell with the aid of Web sources, the album reflects the original setlist and its sequencing quite faithfully, perhaps with one or two omissions due to the limitations of the LP format. The first three songs, taken together, form sort of a collective «legacy statement»: 'Trouble In Mind' is a classic Delta blues number, 'Porgy' (or 'Blues For Porgy') is an update on Gershwin's opera by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields, and 'Little Liza Jane' is an old folk song that is sometimes traced back to slavery-era African-American beginnings. (It's possible that it might have come to Nina's attention through the recent, and quite lively, Huey "Piano" Smith cover from 1956 — or Fats Domino's from 1959). We thus get sort of a triple perspective on the «black spirit» — through mid-tempo blues, slow pensive soulful opera, and fast playful dancing; this is the part of the album which is the least «Nina-centered», even if she does try to waltz away into some distant and unpredictable piano direction in the middle of 'Trouble In Mind'.

From a symbolic point of view, it's all cool, but not necessarily «jaw-dropping». 'Trouble In Mind' is better suited for the likes of Big Bill Broonzy — it works best when it is sung in a nonchalant, careless voice; Nina's is a little too agitated to properly use the contrast between the song's «sunny» melody and bleak lyrics. 'Porgy' is emotional, but not emotional enough to justify yet another revival of Gershwin's ubiquitous characters. 'Little Liza Jane' is fun, but the only striking thing about it is to hear ([and see](#)) such a somber and serious artist as Nina Simone give such a playful (but also quite somber and serious) rendition of such a lightweight trifle. (Perhaps it is supposed to show that Nina Simone has a sense of humor — she does not and never did — or perhaps it is supposed to remind us that slaves back in the 19th century had a sense of humor, which, even if they did, has since then been lost by the likes of Nina Simone, with all due respect and stuff).

Still, with the diverse atmospheres of all three tracks and Nina's deeply involved delivery of them all, it is not likely that you shall get properly bored before we get to the *real* highlight — Nina's interpretation of Cole Porter's 'You'd Be So Nice To

Come Home To', which really just takes the lyrics of the song and puts them in the context of something completely different, as far removed from the traditional light approach of Dinah Shore, Frank Sinatra, and / or Helen Merrill (to name just a few of the most popular versions) as possible. In fact, for the first three minutes of the song we barely get to understand what it is at all — a slow, moody, pensive shuffle, which Nina gradually develops into a Bach-like piano fugue, alternating between bass and treble runs and reaching full sonic awesomeness when Nina's new guitarist, Al Schackman, joins in the fun with his *own* fugue that echoes Nina's. By the time she finally begins to sing, a requiem-like mood has already congested upon the audience, and it is crystal clear that "*you'd be so nice to come home to, you'd be so nice by the fire*" can no longer refer to a living person — from a song of hopeful expectations it has been transformed into a chilling finale for a Gothic novel. Coming right after the giddiness of 'Little Liza Jane', this is like having a snowstorm in July — but an utterly mesmerizing snowstorm; the skill with which Nina and her band build up to a tempestuous crescendo is admirable for a mere four-piece unit.

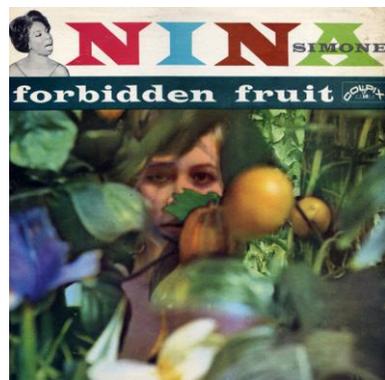
The second side of the album never quite lives up to the gripping culmination at the end of the first one, but at least it does not break the mood. 'Flo Me La' and 'Nina's Blues', both credited to Nina herself, are essentially instrumental numbers (the first one does have short moments of vocalise where Nina just chants the nonsensical title over and over) that continue the somber atmosphere. 'Flo Me La' subtly explores Nina's «tribal» side, with her piano operating as a punchy percussive instrument along with Bobby Hamilton's drums (in the middle of the song, Bobby takes an extended solo) — it's basically just a seven minute-long vampy groove that invites you to get high and bob your head along with the rhythm, and it will be either dreadfully boring or irresistibly hypnotic, depending on your DNA arrangements for the day. I am generally more pleased with 'Nina's Blues', which gives guitarist Al Schackman a second chance (after 'You'd Be So Nice') to show his talents — yet I could hardly insist that 'Nina's Blues' would be enough to blow all the bluesmen and jazzmen on the Newport stage away. It's just a decent six-minute «jazzy-blues» jam where everybody in the band gives their best in this genre, but, just like Ray Charles playing jazz, it's not really *the* genre for Nina Simone.

Finally, lively excitement returns in the finale, with Nina really putting her foot on the gas for her rendition of 'In The Evening By The Moonlight', another old minstrel classic usually associated with James A. Bland and typically performed in a slow and solemn manner... which is also the way Nina starts it, before blowing out the brakes and launching into a fast, jubilant performance. It is telling how she injects a little change of her own into the lyrics of the song (which were already quite heavily expurgated from the antiquated 19th century lexicon over the previous fifty years of recording) — instead of "*how the old folks they would enjoy it*", she has "*how my mother she would enjoy it*", thus establishing a more direct and

personal link to the song — which she then proceeds to «slay» with an all-out attack on the ivories; eventually, it's the Bach-like fugue all over again, only played at thrice the speed of 'You'd Be So Nice'. For all the overall inferiority of this album to **Town Hall**, it sure has a much more rousing finale.

The overall impression is that **At Newport** is much more of a social statement than **At Town Hall**; in the open air of Newport, the music is becoming increasingly «physical», as befits the traditional African-American way of doing things, as opposed to the more «lyrical» and sentimental mood of the enclosed urban concert space. We are still quite a long ways away from 'Mississippi Goddam', but the only performance on this entire album that cannot be directly tied in to the plight of the black man is 'You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To' — and that one, in its turn, is a bit of a mockery of the aristocratic suaveness of the white man, so it all ties in in the end. This is by no means the main reason why **At Newport** is not Nina at her finest — of all 20th century artists, *she* is truly the one who knows how to turn politics into art, and how to use art as politics — but I generally prefer her ways of turning happy musical numbers into chilling anthems of death and depression to her shaking the tambourine to childrens' songs, and her jazzy fire-and-brimstone contemporary sermons to her relatively straightforward covers of old blues material. I'm pretty sure the performance worked wonders for all those young white kids on the green grass lawns of sunny Newport, though.





FORBIDDEN FRUIT

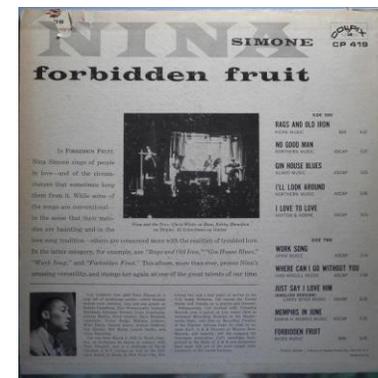
Album released:

May 9, 1961

V A L U E

3 3 3 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Rags And Old Iron*; 2) *No Good Man*; 3) *Gin House Blues*; 4) *I'll Look Around*; 5) *I Love To Love*; 6) *Work Song*; 7) *Where Can I Go Without You*; 8) *Just Say I Love Him*; 9) *Memphis In June*; 10) *Forbidden Fruit*; 11*) *Porgy I Is Your Woman Now*; 12*) *Baubles, Bangles And Beads*; 13*) *Gimme A Pigfoot*; 14*) *Ev'rytime We Say Goodbye*; 15*) *Spring Is Here*; 16*) *Lonesome Valley*; 17*) *Golden Earrings*; 18*) *My Ship*; 19*) *'Tain't Nobody's Biz-Ness If I Do*; 20*) *Try A Little Tenderness*; 21*) *Od Yesh Homa*.

REVIEW

Finally, after almost two years of nothing but concert recordings, Colpix puts out Nina's second studio album recorded for the label — and in doing so, reminds us once again that the studio is really not a natural habitat for Ms. Simone. It's a decent enough experience, but pretty much everything Nina did in her prime years is decent — her professionalism and good taste always ensure a «quality listen» — and so what we are looking for are signs of *outstanding* achievements, which are quite scarce on **Forbidden Fruit**. Recorded with her usual band (the very same that played at Newport), it consists, for the most part, of old standards, with special attention directed to the classic repertoire of Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith; not the best sign, perhaps, given how difficult it is even for Nina to «override» the massively distinctive personalities of those two — and it hardly helps that on many, if not most, of the tracks neither Nina, nor her band members seem like they're trying hard enough to put a fresh, unusual spin on the arrangements.

One thing that bugs me about Simone's covers of Billie's or Bessie's material is a certain disconnection between all three characters. They represent three different worlds in three different ages, after all, and Nina (who was, coincidentally, born in the very same year when Billie made her first recordings and then made *her* first recordings in the very same year when



Billie passed away!) got to interpret their old-fashioned classics at a time when the world was readying itself for some big changes — which is why songs like ‘No Good Man’ or ‘T’Ain’t Nobody’s Biz-Ness If I Do’, celebrating woman’s voluntary submission to her no-good man as an expression of her inner freedom, feel a bit odd when sung by a freedom fighter like Nina. Of course, we should be cautious about pigeonholing her into today’s liberal stereotypes — her personality was more complex than what we see in simplified algorithmic codes of moral conduct — but still, there is no denying that "*I ought to hate him but I still love him so*" is a line that sounds perfectly natural when Billie sings it, but takes quite a bit of getting used to when it’s delivered by the likes of Simone.

Even worse, ‘No Good Man’ is definitely *not* outstanding in any way. It just rolls along like any decent midnight vocal jazz number could be expected to roll along. A little relaxing bass, some nice atmospheric piano runs, Nina’s familiar soothing vocal tone — I can easily imagine just about everybody from Peggy Lee to Julie London landing with the same results. No imaginative reinventions of melody, no turning an old blues song into a Bach fugue or anything like that. The same goes for at least half of the other selections on here: stuff like ‘Where Can I Go Without You’ will always be enjoyable to those who simply love the sound of Nina’s voice, her deep «weeping» vibrato and the quirkiness of her phrasing, but I am personally craving for musical ecstasy, and I don’t find it on tracks like this.

Some of the covers are downright psychological mismatches where you have to work *really* hard to suspend the proverbial disbelief. ‘Gin House Blues’, for starters, is mistitled — this is a cover not of Bessie Smith’s original ‘Gin House Blues’ from 1926, but rather of her ‘Me And My Gin’ from two years later (this mistake would then be perpetuated for eternity, e.g. the Animals would also record the same song as ‘Gin House Blues’ in 1966, etc.). But this is not nearly as important as the fact that Nina simply does not sound convincing when singing "*Stay away from me everybody cos I’m in my sin / If this joint is raided somebody give me my gin*". While in her real life she was no stranger to booze, her performance is just too thin and even «whiny» to properly convey the image of somebody who is ready to «*fight the army and navy*» for her gin — which Bessie, right in the middle of Prohibition, was fully prepared to do, or, at least, this is precisely what *she* sounds like on the original recording: a fierce, tough mama willing to give her life for her right to be as totally depressed, wasted, and «drowning in sin» as she wants to.

Roughly speaking, Bessie Smith is the kind of character who overwhelms and suppresses you with her sheer physicality and (figuratively) *mass*, a sort of living embodiment of Mother Earth herself, against which there is no defense or counteraction by definition. Billie Holiday’s weapon is her subtlety and vulnerability: she appeals to everything within you that is human

and responsive to the call of empathy. Next to them, Nina Simone is the voice of your conscience, the Attorney General of human decency and morality — *her* fierceness and toughness comes from the indomitable look in her eyes rather than from the «bigness» of Mama Bessie or the «smallness» of Lady Day. And this is why 'No Good Man' shall always belong to Billie and 'Me And My Gin' shall always belong to Bessie and *these* versions, enjoyable as they are in a background-ish kind of way, won't ever replace them or make me re-evaluate them in a new light.

That said, there are still quite a few really nice moments on **Forbidden Fruit** that all qualify for justified inclusion into the «golden canon» — and, interestingly enough, *all* of them have to do with Nina's discovery of the artistic talents of Oscar Brown Jr., formerly known as «the world's first black newscaster» and only recently having released his first LP of original material, **Sin & Soul**, on the Columbia label. Two of his compositions from that album make it here — and the third one, 'Forbidden Fruit' itself, lending its name to the title of the LP as a whole, would later appear on Brown's 1962 LP, **Between Heaven And Hell**. Unlike Bessie or Billie, Oscar Brown would seem to be a true soulmate for Nina — a fighter for the cause, *and* with genuine musical talent to burn — and so there is hardly anything surprising about the fact that not only is his material superior to everything else on here, but that it is also the only material on here where she is capable of improving upon the original sound.

'Rags And Old Iron' opens the album on a great note, so great, in fact, that most of the record feels like a sharp letdown in comparison. Folksy, bluesy, and soul-sy at the same time, this nicely metaphoric lament of a love betrayed was pretty good on Brown's [original album](#), but Nina's band adds extra suspense to the tune, and Nina sings directly into the mike instead of retaining Oscar's «cavernous» sound — putting her hurt right under your nose instead of acting all ghostly and *Wuthering Height*-ish about it. Her snarly and snarky overtones help immensely, too: the bitterness and contempt just sweep out of the speakers as she compares the remains of her love to "rags and old iron" over and over again. Now *this* is the kind of song that I'd have a pretty hard time imagining Billie Holiday ever being able to cover properly.

On the other hand, 'Rags And Old Iron', with its exploration of a failed relationship, does fit in thematically with most of those oldies. The second Brown cover, 'Work Song' — originally released as an instrumental on Nat Adderley's album of the same name, and later as a vocal number by Brown himself — is strictly a social statement, and I occasionally have fun playing it back-to-back with Sam Cooke's 'Chain Gang', released on the exact same subject around the same time. Naturally, Sam's sweet and catchy pop song is not at all devoid of empathy to its characters; but [Brown's take on the issue](#) is sung from the first, not third, person perspective, concentrating not on pity and empathy but on the pain — and then along comes

Nina, and *she* concentrates not on the pain, but on the suppressed fury and anger. In 1961, it was still a rarity for a prison-themed song to sound *angry* on a record — typically, a convict would be expected to feel sorry, or, at best, stay cold and emotionless in such a setting — but Nina does her best to let the feeling of the unjustness of the situation get through to the listener. The opening stop-and-start chords hit you the same way as John D. Loudermilk's 'Tobacco Road' (curiously, also written and recorded about the same time) — creating an atmosphere of desperate protest right away — and the song, short as it is, never loses its grip until the very end. (Nina would later re-record it with a big band arrangement for 1967's **High Priestess Of Soul** — a much softer and more compromising version, if you ask me).

Next to the acute bitterness of 'Rags' and the fuming fury of 'Work Song', the third of Brown's compositions chosen for the album — the title track, that is — might seem like a silly Sesame Street throwaway; but if so, why would Nina choose it to be the title track? Actually, the song is pretty naughty, taking up a «folk» interpretation of the Original Sin as fornication between the two culprits ("*See that apple over yonder if you'll take a bite / You and Adam both are bound to have some fun tonight*") and inviting us all to share in the consumption of the fruit in question. Well, given how many legends there are out there about Nina's own sexual appetites, you can be sure she sang the song with the utmost glee — and, in fact, given that it is the only number here that sounds relatively «happy», and that it also concludes the record, the moral lesson we are supposed to take home from it is probably quite simple: no matter what sort of stress you are under, no matter how much pain, injustice, and disillusionment you encounter — there is nothing that just a little piece of forbidden fruit can't really cure. Simplistic, crude, and... *efficient*.

To round things out, I should probably mention that 'Just Say I Love Him' (an English-language, female-perspective version of an old and quite popular Neapolitan song) is often extolled as a highlight here — perhaps because of an extended romantic guitar solo from Al Schackman, because in all other respects it feels just like most of the «generic» sentimental ballads on the album; next to the Brown covers, it is hard for me to treat it as something more than pleasant background music. Then again, it might just be my instinctive mistrust of Neapolitan songs speaking, but I think one can be excused for doubting that Nina Simone on her own is sufficient to expurgate all the legacy sins of Johnny Desmond, Frankie Avalon, Tony Bennett, Dean Martin, and all the other nightingales to leave their imprints on the song.

Also, for technical reasons, there is a special EMI CD edition of the album from 2005 which adds *eleven* (!) previously unreleased songs recorded during the same sessions — in slightly inferior quality, but worth a listen or two, if only to expand our understanding of Nina's repertoire at the time. There are two more Bessie Smith covers in there (with the same

criticisms that I apply to 'Gin House Blues' also applicable), a little Gershwin, a bit of Kurt Weill, a touch of Cole Porter, and even a Jewish dance ('Od Yesh Homa'), but behind all the diversity there are hardly any individual highlights worth gushing over. That Nina was keeping busy, there is no doubt of that; but the time, apparently, had not yet come for her to keep busy *only* with the kind of material that God had tailored specifically for her spirit. Yet even despite all the mismatches, one thing you could *never* say about **Forbidden Fruit** is that the artist is attempting to do something against her will — and there is even some perverse fascination in watching her trying on all those Bessie Smith numbers for size and failing, because you can clearly see the effort, understand why it fails, and still leave with a hella lot of respect for the artist.

