

TURNINGPOINT

BREAK DOWN AND LET IT ALL OUT

Singer Juliet Kelly on the album that changed her life, *Wild Is The Wind* by Nina Simone. INTERVIEW: BRIAN GLASSER



“ First of all I thought what albums do I like best? But it's a different question – it's an album that's had a particularly big impact. I first heard Nina Simone when I was a teenager. It was the track 'My Baby Just Cares For Me', which isn't on this album. At the time, I didn't even really know what jazz was – I don't think it was in my vocabulary! It just sounded different to me, I suppose because it had that jazz element in it, even though some people might not call it a jazz record. There was something about it that really appealed to me, especially the piano solo. I learned the song and used to sing it to myself. But after a while, I forgot about it. It wasn't until ten years later that I came back to her. At that stage, I was really interested in jazz, and was listening mainly to Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, Nancy Wilson, the classic singers. Someone said to me, "Don't you listen to Nina Simone?" and I thought oh, is that jazz?. In my mind, I really hadn't connected it. Anyway, I decided to check her out. I suppose now I'd have gone on Spotify or Amazon!

So I got this album – a friend who loved her lent it to me, having also said I ought to be listening to Nina Simone! And it was a real mixture – some of the songs I wouldn't choose myself, to be honest. But there were few standout tracks that really struck a chord with me: 'Lilac Wine', 'Wild Is The Wind', and 'Four Women'. I liked the others too, but those three really caught my attention. As I said, at that time I was mainly listening to the classic jazz singers, and I hadn't really thought about writing my own songs or incorporating different types of tunes into my repertoire. And that's what this album did for me. Nina Simone didn't really consider herself a jazz singer as such – she didn't like to categorise. There's a folk song in there, 'Black Is The Colour Of My True Love's Hair'; it's got pop songs of the day, and so on. It made me realise that jazz could encompass all sorts of music and still be jazz because what counts is the way that you deliver it – it's all about improvisation and interpretation. That was a revelation.

After the album, the same friend gave me her autobiography. From that, I found out more about her life and it helped me understand why she was the way that she was, which increased

her attraction for me. But the album made sense straight away. I suppose it was something that I was looking for, without realising that I was looking for it! It was a validation of an idea that I had, but was almost afraid to have – something I believed in but wasn't sure would be acceptable. I'd grown up listening to pop and soul; so when I got into singing jazz – I had never sung any other



Nina Simone
Wild Is The Wind

Phillips

PERSONNEL :: Nina Simone (vocals, piano); Rudy Stevenson (guitar, flute); Lisle Atkinson (bass); Bobby Hamilton (drums) and Horace Ott & His Orchestra

TRACKS :: 'I Love Your Lovin' Ways'; 'Four Women'; 'What More Can I Say'; 'Lilac Wine'; 'That's All I Ask'; 'Break Down And Let It All Out'; 'Why Keep On Breaking My Heart'; 'Wild Is The Wind'; 'Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair'; 'If I Should Lose You'; and 'Either Way I Lose'

music – I assumed I should just sing jazz songs.

What drew me into jazz was that feeling of being totally in the moment – that quote about jazz being the feeling of surprise. Every time you perform a song, even if it's a well-known pop song, you can always find something new, you can always surprise the audience by doing something they don't expect. Even if they've heard you perform the song many times. The music is constantly reinventing itself; and that's another reason why I think it's important not to

be too restrictive about 'What is jazz?'. Because jazz is about reinventing itself – it's not about preserving something in aspic, saying 'This is what the music is and it will never change'.

Nina Simone's limitations, her lack of certain things is what adds to her appeal for me. The thing I love about Sarah Vaughan is her vocal tone – her actual instrument is amazing. Nina Simone doesn't really have that quality of instrument. But for that very reason, when you listen to her there's an emotional intensity, a vulnerability that you sometimes don't get from more technical singers – I'm not including Sarah Vaughan in that of course, she was a master – but they can lack the emotional connection. Nina may not have had the purest instrument, but she has so much more because of the emotional connection, she painted pictures with her words, she touched people, their core, in a way that not many singers can. Another comparison would be with Ella who I adore: an amazing vocalist, so beautiful. Nina doesn't have the vocal acrobatics, the scat and so on. But again, what she lacks in that department she definitely makes up in her ability to paint pictures with her voice. She's a master storyteller. The tunes that I mentioned from the record have that quality.

It's amazing that someone could put a folk tune next to a pop tune next to a doo wop tune next to a classic jazz standard, next to a song that's an original – 'Four women' – which tackles the plight of African-American women at that time and is a social commentary with political overtones. And it's all mixed in together. I know the album is made up of things recorded at different times and then put together; but it's amazing that all those things were part of her, and there remains an essence that runs through that is true Nina Simone. She's got such a strong identity, she's so focused, that it doesn't matter which genre she works in, intensity comes through.

She remains the most influential person for me for that reason, although I don't sound anything like her and I'm not a pianist. It's about the underlying ethos, her ability to stay outside of any kind of classification, to push boundaries, to do the unexpected – and that's an ongoing inspiration.

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