# “Mississippi Goddam”—Nina Simone (1964)

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**Essay by Nadine Cohodas (guest post)***


*Original single*

Nina Simone composed “Mississippi Goddam”--her biting song about racial injustice--in September 1963, immediately after four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama, died in a church bombing. It reflected her growing determination to be part of the Civil Rights movement, at the insistence, she conceded, of her friend, playwright and author Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry had told Nina that she was part of the movement because she was black. “It made no difference whether I admitted it or not,” Nina said, “The fact was still true.”

“Mississippi Goddam” was no minor-key lament and was more commentary than anthem, its insistent up-beat rhythm at odds with its bracing lyrics. They were at once a geography lesson (“Alabama’s got me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest/And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam”) and a catalogue of fears: “Hound dog on my tail/School children sitting in jail/Black cat across my path/I think every day’s gonna be my last” were in its opening stanza.

Nina was also defiant—“Don’t tell me--I’ll tell you/Me and my people are just about due.” And she employed the deft metaphor: “You lied to me all these years/ You told me to wash and clean my ears/And talk real fine just like a lady/And you’d stop calling me ‘sister Sadie’”--that name standing in for all the demeaning moments when condescending whites refused to address blacks with courtesy titles no matter their age or position.

Nina first performed “Mississippi Goddam” at a Los Angeles night club a week after she put it together and told the audience, “I mean every word of it.” Later she said she felt she had fired “ten bullets” back at the Birmingham bombers. The blunt anger powering her song couldn't have been more at odds with the tunes then atop the “Billboard” chart--The Angels’ “My Boyfriend's Back” and Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet.”

Perhaps taking account of her upscale--and mostly white--audience, Nina took some of the edge off the song a few months later when she played New York’s prestigious Town Hall, joking that it was “a show tune, only the show hasn’t been written yet.”

Of the many times in the years to come that Nina talked about “Mississippi Goddam,” her most expansive remarks came during her September 10, 1964 appearance on Steve Allen’s evening television talk show. She conceived the song “during the time when James Meredith was finally getting into the University of Mississippi,” she explained. “And I was beginning to get angry

then. First you get depressed," she went on, "and then you get mad. And when these kids got bombed, I sat down and wrote this song. And it's a very moving, violent song cause that's how I feel about the whole thing."

According to Nina, the single of "Mississippi Goddam," which Philips, her label, paired with "See-Line Woman," created a stir in some quarters. "We got several letters where they had actually broken up this recording and sent it back to the recording company, really, telling them it was in bad taste. How could I stoop to this," she told Allen. "They missed the whole point. What astounds me is if the song were written about a different state, they wouldn't care."

Nina's television appearance did more than illuminate "Mississippi Goddam's" origins. The moment also highlighted the state of the country's public discourse: television censors would not let her say "goddam," so the word was bleeped out every time it came up in the lyrics. Allen couldn't resist his own commentary: "If I may speak of this entirely without passion, the first word is God and the second word is damn, and I think everyone up this late at night who can afford to pay for a television set is adult enough to recognize that one not only hears that expression but most of you say it when you hit your thumb with a hammer." Nevertheless, Allen and Nina obeyed the rules. She simply mouthed "goddam."

During the height of the Civil Rights movement, Nina continued to use "Mississippi Goddam" to reflect current events. On Allen's show, she had changed the second line to "St. Augustine made me lose my rest," referring to a recent Civil Rights protest in that Florida city. When she flew to Montgomery, Alabama, in March 1965, to entertain activists who had finally made it from Selma to the state capital--after a violent confrontation on the town's Edmund Pettus bridge--she changed the second line to "Selma made me lose my rest" to appreciative cheers. A year later, at the Newport Jazz Festival, she referenced another trouble spot--"Watts made me lose my rest"--alluding to the riots in that tense Los Angeles neighborhood.

And in 1968--performing on Long Island shortly after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated--Nina made that second line "Memphis made me lose my rest." This time she stopped in the middle of the song, with her drummer, Buck Clarke, keeping up a marching beat behind her spoken commentary. She said, "If you've been moved at all and you know my songs at all, for God sakes join me! Don't sit back there!" she shouted. "The time is now. You know the king is dead. The king of love is dead. I ain't 'bout to be non-violent, honey." The audience roared its approval.

In later years, "Mississippi Goddam" became a barometer of Nina's moods--sometimes contented, other times troubled and angry, which was the case in Montreal at the end of 1980. She started "Mississippi Goddam" as originally written but mid-way through she improvised. "I can't stand the pressure much longer... The whole damn world's made me lose my rest./*C'est Vrai, Vraiment, Vraiment! C'est vrai,"* she said, slipping into French for "It's true--truly." At the end, she worked in the upcoming U.S. presidential election between incumbent Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan" "Everybody knows about Reagan/Everybody knows about Carter/Everybody knows about the whole thing Goddam!/Goddam!/GODDAM!"

Nina had composed "Mississippi Goddam in a moment of personal anger and anguish. Her trenchant lyrics resonate decades later, offering both a history lesson and a gauge of racial progress, and her prescription near the end with a timeless plea: "You don't have to live next to me/Just give me my equality."

*Nadine Cohodas is the author* of "*Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone"; "Queen: The Life and Music of Dinah Washington," and "Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records."*

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.