

Nina Simone in Liberia

by

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Nina Simone, left, at Wilhelmina "Coo Coo" Tubman's birthday party in Monrovia, 1974 (photo courtesy of the Parker family collection, Monrovia, Liberia).

Someone who knew Nina Simone well—a Liberian friend of hers, I suppose a mutual friend now—told me a story. Liberia’s past is in pieces, he said, and here’s one of them. Maybe it’s the one you’re looking for.

On a September night in 1974, the wet season was closing down and an encore of rain washed the streets of Monrovia, Liberia; a torrent of sky and trash—discarded slippers, supine roaches, maybe a lost crab. The rain stopped as abruptly as it started, as if a conductor had pressed his fingers together and cut the thundering chords, and then a film of humidity stretched over the city, steaming the downtown party strip that ran from Carey Street to Broad and Gurley. That night, The Maze—a small discotheque on Mechlin Street—was cramped. Some fifty people, a cut of high society, had gathered despite the weather; women in draped dresses, men in suits with pocket squares and bow ties. Nina Simone arrived at midnight, giddy on champagne and in the arms of a Liberian date. By then the umbrellas in the corner had long dried and a mirror ball was sending out spots of light, bleaching the red velour curtains over and over. The speakers rang with imported soul and disco: James Brown, The Temptations, twelve-inch records from labels like Motown’s Gordy and Stax. *Living for the City*. *Don’t You Worry ’Bout a Thing*. Not long after Simone walked in, something got to her—the place or the drink, surely—and throwing her head back in laughter, she unfastened the button at her nape, peeled off her dress, and, as the men at the bar clapped and hollered, she danced until sun up, only putting her dress back on to leave. I found another piece, a videotape.

At the Montreux jazz festival, in 1990, Nina Simone sat at a white baby grand. Her hair was cornrowed into a bun, her cheeks brushed red; double drop earrings grazed her neckline. Leaning into the mic, she introduced the mostly white, transfixed crowd to a jaunty, go-go song: “Liberian Calypso.” “This is a song we learned from when we were in Liberia, for the three years we lived there; I guess most of you know about that,” she said. “In the middle of it I want you to sing with me: ‘Run, Nina.’” As the audience warmed up to the chorus, Simone slammed on the spruce, singing the story of that night at The Maze.

I pressed the pieces together—two at first, then more, linking shards of story with pins and rivets as though imperfectly mending a ceramic pot.

I listened to “Liberian Calypso” again and again. A 1982 release from Simone’s penultimate album, *Fodder on My Wings*, it isn’t her most striking composition, yet there is something remarkable about it: the story of an erotic dance, told through small and sweet lyrics (“My joy it was so complete, you know. My friend was happy, he said, ‘Go! Go!’”). With its colorful chords and childlike verse (“I danced for hours, hours on end. I said, ‘Dear Lord, you are my friend’”), almost all sensuality has been scraped away, exposing the muscle below (“You brought me home to Liberia, and all other places are inferior”). That night at The Maze, Nina Simone stripped right down to her bones. And the song she wrote about it is—rare for Simone—a love song without longing, a ballad to a land that set her free.



In 1974, when Simone moved to Monrovia, it was among the most decadent places to party in Africa. More than a century after the American Colonization Society planted the Liberian flag, in 1847, Liberia was enjoying one last dance before the civil-war years to come; politicians and the educated elite had more dollar power than ever before. President William R. Tolbert Jr., a Baptist preacher and descendent of the original settlers, had been in power for three years, having succeeded William V.S. Tubman upon his death in 1971. Tolbert was more liberal and progressive than his predecessor, announcing a social-reform agenda—“Total Involvement for Higher Heights,” designed to narrow the gap between native Liberians and the educated elite—and encouraging freedom of expression. His movement met the black-consciousness movement on its journey northwest from South Africa, merging too with the post-independence projects of Liberia’s neighbors: Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal. As the spotlight swung from the old guard of conservative status-quoists to a new wave of progressive politicians, Liberia drew students, activists, political leaders, and musicians from Africa and black America—among them James Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Miriam Makeba, Nelson Mandela, Hugh Masekela, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

“It was a time when Liberia was discovering itself,” said Dr. Elwood Dunn, a Liberian historian and Tolbert’s former minister of state for presidential affairs. “Until that time, we had been living in splendid isolation. Suddenly, all these international students from other African countries were here. They were speaking the language of liberation, of freedom.”

It was a language that Simone spoke fluently. She was forty-one when she first landed at Robertsfield International Airport, her twelve-year-old daughter Lisa in tow, their belongings—clothes, books, records—packed into the belly of a Pan Am jet. Six years had passed since Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination; nine since Simone had belted out protest songs during the Selma to Montgomery voting-rights march. Although black America still saw her as a talented political performer, a civil-rights revolutionary armed with loud and furious song—“Oh, but this whole country is full of lies, you’re all gonna die and die like flies,” she sang in “Mississippi Goddam,” berating the go-slow politics of the Johnson administration—she had seen little racial progress. Two of the big six were dead, as were her friends Langston Hughes and Malcom X; Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were in jail. The rhythm of the civil-rights movement had ebbed, and Simone wondered if her *cris de coeur* for a more just racial order had fallen short.

“The America I’d dreamed of through the sixties seemed a bad joke now, with Nixon in the White House and the black revolution replaced by disco,” she wrote in her memoir, *I Put a Spell on You*.

If the America of the sixties was a joke, the America that Simone had imagined in the fifties seemed downright impossible; she was still angered by her rejection from the Curtis School of Music in 1951. Having previously been accepted by a summer program at Juilliard, she felt the decision was based on the color of her skin. With it she'd begun to let go of her dream of becoming America's first black concert pianist, shedding her birth name (Eunice Waymon) and moving to Atlantic City, where she became Nina Simone, played cocktail jazz ("the devil's music," her mother called it), and sang in public for the first time.

But no matter the rousing depths of her voice and repertoire—"Four Women" ("My skin is black, my arms are long, my hair is woolly, and my back is strong"); "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" ("Your soul's intact"); a cover of Billy Taylor's "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" ("Jonathan Livingston Seagull ain't got nothin' on me," she once improvised); "I Shall Be Released" ("Any day now, any day now")—she still felt that white America wasn't listening. (She frequently admonished audiences for the same, glaring and employing long pauses to enforce Carnegie Hall rules at jazz festivals.) Simone's personal life wasn't much brighter. Her turbulent marriage to the Harlem police detective Andy Stroud had ended, and she was grieving her father's death. After a stint living in Barbados, where she dated the Prime Minister Errol Barrow, she and Lisa were back in the US, living in a Manhattan apartment; mounting financial troubles forced the sale of their Mount Vernon home. So when Miriam Makeba called in August 1974 and invited them to Liberia, Simone agreed. Makeba was due to meet Stephen Tolbert, the president's brother, there. He was funding Zaire '74, the Kinshasa music festival that would accompany the Rumble in the Jungle boxing fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman that fall; Makeba was on the lineup, along with James Brown, B.B. King, and Bill Withers.

"Africa, half a world away from New York," Simone wrote in her memoir. "Maybe I could find some peace there, or a husband. Maybe it would be like going home."

Home, which ran on the dollars and accents of America but not its black prejudice; home, where skin color was not an impediment but a ticket to the top tier of society (Liberia's constitution has long barred whites from becoming citizens); home, where black musicians and activists like Stokely Carmichael, Makeba, and Masekela had found freedom. Within days of touchdown, Simone had met President Tolbert and the educated elite of Monrovia's social scene—the Coopers, the Dennises, the Dunbars, the Parkers, and the Tubmans. In Africa's first republic nobody would have dared cut them down because they were black (although they, as Simone would later understand, separated themselves from other Liberians).

"I am keenly aware that I've entered a world that I had dreamed of all my life, and that it is a perfect world," Simone said in a radio interview recorded from Monrovia and included in *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, Liz Garbus's Oscar-nominated documentary. "[America became] a dream that I had and had worked myself out of because I toiled for so long in that place, in that prison. And now I'm home, now I'm free."

James Dennis, our mutual acquaintance, met Simone soon after she arrived in Monrovia. A retired journalist, at eighty-seven he is one of her last surviving Liberian friends.

“When Nina came here, she fit in right away,” he said. “She was a very affable lady: highly educated, an entertainer. Her daughter Lisa was just about the age of my only daughter, so they got along very nicely. And Nina loved Africa, she loved Liberia in particular. The country was glorious in those days. People from all over the continent came to Liberia to get a taste of America, just as they went to Cote d’Ivoire to see what France would be like.”

Wealthy Liberians and foreign dignitaries embraced the high life, eating carpaccio at Salvatore’s Italian restaurant, sipping cocktails in the swim-up bar at the iconic Ducor Palace Hotel, overnighing at Robertsfield Hotel in Marshall, where the kitchen was overseen by a Swiss chef. The Mesurado Group of Companies, founded by Tolbert’s brother Stephen, shipped its shrimp to the best restaurants in Tokyo and New York. Clinical care was equally sophisticated; the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital, which opened in 1971, was the finest in sub-Saharan Africa, with the most advanced operating theater on the continent and fountains dancing in its yard.

At nightclubs like Hibiscus, DJs spun records from Liberian-born trailblazers like Soulful Dynamics and Afro Super 7, and chased them with Conga jazz, rumba, and American soul. There were recording studios: first came ABC Studios at Waterside Market, where the Liberian artist Morris Dorley recorded his hit “Who Are You Baby?”, later taking it to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos in 1977. Hugh Masekela co-founded Studio One, where singers like Christine Clinton, Miatta Fahnbulleh, Daisy Moore, and the Sherman Sisters recorded, and Yatta Zoe, a native Liberian musician, shot to the top of the charts with numbers like “You Took My Lappa [cloth skirt]” and “Young Girls, Stop Drinking Lysol” (after the disinfectant was marketed as “a cure for disappointment,” suicide rates among pregnant teenagers began to soar).

“It was a golden era in Monrovia’s history,” said Eddie Dunn, who owned the club Hibiscus and often drank bourbon with Masekela. “There were four flights to New York on Pan Am every week, so I had the latest records two days after they came out. People would say, ‘How did you get this so fast?’”

James Dennis introduced Simone to his African American wife, Doris, who became a close confidant. And Simone took a hiatus from large public concerts and albums, choosing to perform mostly for friends—at private homes, birthday parties, or at clubs like The Maze. She also gave piano lessons. Among her piano students was Steve Tolbert, son of the finance minister and nephew of President Tolbert. Now in his fifties, he was about ten when he learned his first scales from Simone, cupping his fingers over hers so he could gauge the weight of the ebony sharps.

“Nina and I would share the piano stool at my father’s house, and she’d blow smoke all over the keys,” Tolbert said. “She loved Bach, Beethoven, jazz, but she also taught me to play some of her songs. She swore like the devil.” He added: “More than anything I remember her eyes. There was so much power in them, something furious and wild. They had some kind of spell.”

His younger brother, William A. Tolbert, was too small to remember Simone, but her voice burned into his brain. “In the nineties, I was watching the movie *Point of No Return*, and I heard Nina’s voice on the soundtrack,” he said. “It sounded so familiar, almost maternal to me. I felt that it could have been my mom, or someone that close to me.” He initially brushed it off, but a few years later he asked his mother if she’d heard of Nina Simone. “She looked at me like I was crazy and said, ‘Well, of course I’ve heard of Nina Simone! You used to sit on her lap at our house.’ At that moment, everything came together. I realized I had heard Nina’s voice before; that’s why it was so familiar, so centering.”



Simone rented a house on Congo Beach. There, she found what she had sought for decades: a sense of home, a feeling of belonging. She quickly decided that she would stay in Liberia “forever, if everything worked out.”

She wrote, “Within a few weeks I felt as if I had been living in my house on the beach all my life ... They said I was wild. I wore nothing but a bikini and boots all day long and danced about with the weight gone from around my shoulders.”

In Liberia, Simone shook off the shackles of fame, but kept its privileges. She was given a cook, a gardener, a driver; Lisa was enrolled in the American school. She spent much of her time at Congo Beach, where she loved the sea and the cotton trees, the way the soft evening light spread above the bay like butter, the fingers of the palm fronds that reached up to the gods. And when the rainy season came—bruised clouds, the beat of coconuts on sodden sand, the stripes of lightning that cut through the night—she loved that, too. The Liberian sky was Simone’s looking glass.

“I have seen lightning in Africa,” Simone said in a radio interview later featured in Garbus’s documentary. “It electrifies you into complete speechlessness. I have seen it. I have seen God.”

Simone was herself like a thunderstorm, and did not apologize for her irascibility. It was a beast she wouldn’t tame; she fed on its energy.

Of a fight that Simone and Makeba got into at Steve Tolbert's father's home, Tolbert said: "It was a serious catfight. They were screaming at each other at the top of their lungs, pulling each other's hair. I think it was over a guy. It went on and on, and my father just stood there in the corner watching, laughing, and enjoying the show."

Despite their quarrels, Simone and Makeba were tight, and her friend set her up with Monrovia's most eligible bachelors; "Miriam didn't give me no riff-raff," Simone wrote. On her third night in town she stepped out with Philip Clarence Parker III, treasurer of the ruling True Whig Party. He owned a multimillion dollar emulsion company, Parker Paints, and he dressed in the colorful palettes he sold—a cobalt bow tie or a leopard-print cravat, always paired with a matching pocket square.

Clarence Parker, Nina Simone's first date in Liberia. Courtesy of the Parker family collection, Monrovia, Liberia.

"My uncle Clarence was a catch," said Lester R. Parker II, his nephew, who runs an events company in Monrovia. "He was Simone's first date in Liberia. They went out a few times."

Parker was an art collector. "Every picture showed people in different sexual positions," Simone wrote. "Up, down, around, you name it. . . . [He] poured me more champagne and asked me to choose my favorite." But Simone didn't do as he asked, because "these were early days, and I had five more men to check out before I got round to making these sorts of decisions."

For a spell Simone rented a villa at the Parker family compound near Congo Beach, adjacent to Sophie's Ice Cream, a parlor that helped spark the "Liberianization" law essentially banning non-Liberians from selling ice cream in the early 1970s (the law still exists today.) A Parker family photograph shows Simone attending the birthday party of Wilhelmina "Coo Coo" Tubman (the daughter of President Tubman) on the grounds, dressed in a halter robe that skimmed the small of her back and a pair of high Mary Janes.

Like the Tolberts, James and Doris Dennis also owned a piano, a white baby grand, and they would frequently host concerts and high-society parties at their home. Simone often spent the night there in a guest room, as she did on the Christmas Eve of 1974.

"That Christmas Eve we were up having a good time at the house," Dennis said. "Eventually Doris and I went to bed, but Nina stayed up. When the housekeeper came to work in the morning, she opened the door and she heard piano music. When she went further into the house she found Nina sitting at the piano in the nude, tickling the keys. Doris went down to scold her and I leant over the upstairs veranda to see what was going on. Nina went and put on a robe and came right out there and continued to serenade us with Christmas carols. I guess she was in the mood for that."

Although she became close to Doris Dennis and another Liberian woman, Millie Buchanan, Simone was more often in male company; one woman I interviewed referred to her as “that bitch who tried to seduce my husband.”

But Liberia also made her more tender; she fell in love with C.C. Dennis, a freemason master, father to James Dennis and the then foreign minister, Cecil Dennis. He was seventy when they met—thirty years her senior—and had amassed a modest fortune in business, including media (he owned a newspaper, *The Listener*). Simone described him as “a Liberian Rhett Butler.” When he was late to their first date, he left her a note: “Don’t move. I’ll be back in an hour. In Africa men are the boss. We will be married in six weeks.” Simone was transfixed. Dennis’s offer implied permanence—escape from America and a seat at Liberia’s top table.

“Nina was very fond of my father,” said James Dennis. “My mother had died and my father was not attached. [She] thought that my father was just a God sent for her.”

C.C. Dennis suggested an allowance of \$25,000 a year, and wanted to fly in Simone’s Steinway from Barbados. At his farm estate in Bong county (“the House in the Hills”), she was instructed to wear a lacy nightgown all weekend long. But it was all talk, mostly to elevate Dennis’s reputation among his farmhands. “I didn’t know what the hell to do in order to make him hard,” Simone wrote in her memoir. “I could marry this man, live in his crazy mansion and be happy doing it. . . . The notion of spending the rest of my life that way, never playing in public again, never going back to America, stretched out before me and it was a serious notion, it was a real possibility. I knew C.C. meant what he said; if only I could bring him to life and make him feel man enough to want to take on a new wife.”

Her body knew what her mind did not; she couldn’t marry Dennis. Exhausted both physically and emotionally, her relationship with Lisa became strained. “[My mother] went from being my comfort to the monster in my life,” Lisa said in the documentary she produced.

Leaving Lisa in the care of James and Doris Dennis, Simone flew out of Liberia, arriving back in her childhood hometown of Tryon, North Carolina. She had planned to seek sex advice from her mother, a Methodist minister (on arrival she realized this was “an insane idea”). While Simone was away, Dennis proposed to a mutual friend, and when she returned, he ignored her at parties. She was devastated.

“It was only once he had died that I realized the height of my stupidity, the depth of my sorrow,” she later wrote.

According to James Dennis, the break-up hinged on much more than bad timing. “My father was reluctant to marry Nina, and not only because of the age difference,” he said. “He didn’t want to take on her lifestyle. She was an international musician and he was quite happy with life on his farm and occasional trips into town.”

Simone stayed in Liberia for two more years, becoming involved with an East African writer, Imojah, whom she described as “dark-skinned, with a voice like bells.” They dated until she and Lisa flew out of Monrovia for the final time in 1977.

What pushed her to leave, in the end? Ostensibly, it was her wish to enroll Lisa in a Swiss boarding school, but perhaps it was something more. Liberia had brought release, a lick of freedom, but it hadn’t nourished her work; during her three years there she had barely recorded or performed. “Everything I saw—the beach, the sun, the rain coming in from the sea, my friends—reminded me I was leaving it all behind, and it broke my heart,” she wrote. “When we finally flew out of Monrovia to Geneva I cried more than Lisa. I thought I was crying for Imojah but I realize now I was crying for Africa . . . for a different life.”



In the early hours of April 12, 1980, indigenous Liberian Army soldiers loyal to the twenty-eight-year-old Sergeant Samuel K. Doe stormed the Executive Mansion, disemboweling President Tolbert, who was in his pajamas and on his way to bed, and toppling the social structure that had held in Liberia for so long. When Doe took power he promised to freeze the price of rice and gasoline (a promise that was broken when he saw the national budget) and traded Tolbert’s limousine for a Honda Civic, winning support among the Krahn ethnic group in particular. Ten days later, his administration paraded thirteen former government ministers through the streets of Monrovia and tied them to poles on the beach behind the Barclay Training Center, where soldiers drunk on cane juice shot each man down. Among those killed were Philip Clarence Parker, Simone’s first date, and foreign minister Cecil Dennis, the son of C.C. and brother of James. Heartbroken, C.C. died two weeks later.

The Monrovia of the mid-1970s, the city that Simone had loved so hard, broke into pieces. The old center could not hold. Many members of the educated elite left for America. They’d believed they were breathing fresh political air into the country. But perhaps it had flowed no further than the confines of their own circle, which swelled like an overblown balloon and then burst.

Eddie Dunn, the nightclub owner, said the narrative was more complex than that offered by Doe and his illiterate soldiers. “I don’t want to say that the period of enjoyment in the 1970s caused what came after it, although perhaps some people might say it did,” he said. “There are extremes of wealth in every city in the world.”

His brother, Elwood Dunn, the minister who escaped execution only because he had fortuitously traveled to Nairobi, said that “Tolbert was permissive and liberal, and others were seeking to undercut what he was doing. They thought he was going to run the country into the ground. The opposition opposed with abandon. They said, ‘We can say whatever we want to say; the chips will fall where they will.’ And the chips did fall.”

As the country crumpled into civil war, Simone moved to Switzerland—the antonym of Liberia, with its white winters, symmetrical peaks, and carefully measured minutes (“I swear all ten million Swiss citizens go to bed at exactly nine o’clock each night,” she wrote). Her own downward spiral into mental illness would come, underpinned by grief for Liberia and her lovers there, for her father, and for herself, Eunice Waymon, the black concert pianist erased by an unjust racial order.



About forty years have passed since Simone left Monrovia. For fourteen of them, the city was gripped by civil war; she never knew its end, dying at her home in Bouches-du-Rhône, France, on April 21, 2003, four months before the peace agreement was signed. (Her ashes were scattered over several African countries.) Now Monrovia is recovering from the Ebola outbreak, another kind of war.

Despite its slowly swelling population, Monrovia is a city that still acts like a village; a town of tight cliques and, for the elite and those with friends in high places, few fixed rules. It no longer has a downtown party strip, only a scattering of central Monrovia bars that serve *gana gana*, a sweet cane juice brew, and cold bottles of Club beer (on nights when the Liberia Electricity Company is functioning). The Maze, the discotheque where Simone danced nude, still stands, sandwiched between My Wife’s Business and Sunshine Jewelry Shop on the corner of Carey and Mechlin Streets. A steep staircase leads up to the original wraparound balcony, now sagging and stuffed with men’s clothing for sale—knock-off suits, overshined loafers, and art silk bow ties manufactured by a brand called Verie God.

These days, there’s nowhere as much fun to dance as that place, although upscale clubs and bars are opening in the expensive neighborhood of Sinkor. (The gap between privileged and ordinary Liberians is still the elephant in the room at every fancy bar or party.) New spots are coming to Mamba Point, a seaside community where the forest still clings to the cliffs and mossy braids of lianas brush against the hills. Eventually that foliage too will be stripped away; green yielding to gray as new concrete is poured.

The old stories are still in circulation, told over and over again, thinning a little with each exchange like the downy American dollars still used as currency. And every week or so, luminaries from the 1970s—former government officials, thought leaders, journalists—meet at a dumbjoy joint on the lip of the city. They share quarts of whisky and soupy, lime-washed stews.

Among them is James Dennis. As ninety nears he remains warm and principled, as sharp and elegant as a tie pin. After the 1980 coup he moved to Tennessee, returning home to Monrovia decades later to assess the damage. He lost friends, his two homes were stripped by looters, his bank account sucked dry by the cost of constructing another life—one that would never, could never, be as good as the first.

“Today, people are regretting that [the coup] ever happened, because everybody of any consequence left Liberia,” he said on a recent Saturday evening. “Those days were glorious. Now look, look what we have. I lost every single thing that I had developed in Liberia. The country was brain-drained and it never recovered. I didn’t accept it; I resented it. What could I do? What can I do?”

Dennis holds up the 1980 coup like a mirror, scrutinizing the events that prefaced it and their modern-day parallels: a staggering social gap and a distrust of government so sweeping that it fueled the Ebola outbreak.

“Had this current government used more older people, I don’t believe that we would have the problems we have today,” he said. “The younger people are grafted; they’ll do anything for money, whereas an older person has his character to defend.”

He has advice for the current Johnson-Sirleaf administration ahead of its October 2017 exit: Be honest to the people. Let them know the truth. Create no unnecessary fantasies. And go about your activities slowly but surely, for you cannot take on everything at once—choose one thing at a time, and do it well.



Much of the city that Simone and her friends loved has been wrested away, but everywhere now I find pieces of it. It’s in the way the light hits the old stained-glass window in the cadaverous E.J. Roye auditorium, the lingering crystals of rain on a wet-season windshield, or at the bottom of a well of pepper soup.

On a recent evening at The Capital Rooms, a luxury Mamba Point bar with a humidior and a dress code, a polished crowd filled the suspended deck. They were mostly repatriated Liberians in their twenties and thirties—repats, not expats—with American college degrees but nagging dreams of home.

Bartenders in plaid shirts served Moscow Mules and Mint Juleps stuffed with Liberian sugar cane and spearmint. It was a far cry from Hibiscus or The Maze—nobody stripped down to their bones, or even their boots, that night—but if Simone were still living, still here, perhaps she might have joined them, might have sat at the black baby grand in the corner and sang: “I wish I could know how it would feel to be free.” In Liberia, for a moment, she knew.

Editor’s note: The Adinkra break symbol is the Hwe mu dua, a symbol of examination and quality control produced via Ghana, originally created by the Akan of Ghana and the Gyaman of Cote d’Ivoire to represent concepts or original thoughts used on fabric, walls, in pottery, woodcarvings and logos.

