

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

# The tumultuous life of the queen of the blues

Nina Simone sang the soundtrack to her country's most troubled times — a turbulence matched in her private life

BY JACKIE KAY  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Toni Morrison said: "Nina Simone saved our lives. She was several women." In her brilliant song *Four Women*, recorded in 1965, Simone sings about four very different black women, one who lives "Between two worlds", another who says: "I'm awfully bitter these days because my parents were slaves ..."

In his new biography of the great jazz diva, David Brun-Lambert asserts: "If you listen carefully to her music, you hear within it two opposite people, two beings with nothing in common, as though trapped together and forced to share the same means of expression. An artist leading a double artistic life, unable to find her own place anywhere."

Nina Simone was born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in 1933 into a family that was doing fine until the Great Depression came along. She grew up, poor, in a small town, Tryon, North Carolina, a few kilometers from the Mason-Dixon line.

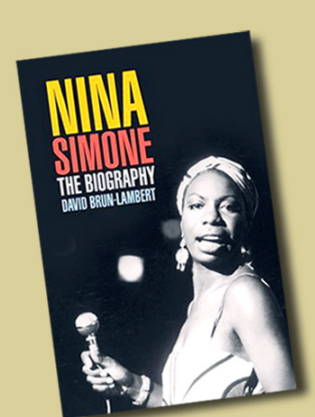
Some of her earliest memories were of her mother singing *Heaven Belongs to You*. It became the soundtrack to her life. It played underneath the Bach that she learned as a child prodigy who experienced the glory of a good piano teacher. "The first time I went to Mrs Massinovich's house, I almost fainted it was so beautiful," Simone wrote in her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*.

And it played over the blues and folk she later sang when she got turned down by the Curtis Institute, ending her hopes of becoming a classical pianist. "I never got over it. I still haven't got over it and I never will," Simone said. "Anyone in Tryon would have told you black children don't get to be concert pianists."

Aged two and a half, the small Eunice could play *God Be With You Till We Meet Again* on the organ. "Just a few people could do it, Callas, Rubinstein and me," Nina wrote. Nina Simone mixed humility with hubris and it was a deadly cocktail. Perhaps the modesty and the monstrosity were both needed to fuel the genius, to fuse the two worlds — classical music and jazz. Eunice Waymon became Nina Simone so that her mother wouldn't find out she was singing the devil's music. At 21, she got a job as a pianist in the Midtown Bar and Grill. "As soon as I got there, I was asked whether I could sing. I said no but they demanded that I sing ... so I sang and this is how my career in the business started."

Brun-Lambert charts the birth of Nina Simone the artist, her musical successes, her terrible marriage to Andy Stroud, her bad relationships, her fragile mental state, and her gigs. He is good at mapping

## Publication Notes



NINA SIMONE: THE BIOGRAPHY  
BY DAVID BRUN-LAMBERT  
228 PAGES  
AURUM

her political awakening and the rise of black power. Most of all, he charts her terrible loneliness. "I had no community at the back of me. I was a national star ... I was rich and famous but I wasn't free," she said in *I Put a Spell on You*.

The paranoid and volatile Simone is the woman who emerges most clearly from this biography, the one who audiences at Ronnie Scott's would recognize, the diva who arrived late, harangued her audience and screamed at them: "Nobody's going to sleep tonight." After a while, the biography depresses and almost demeans Simone as Brun-Lambert recounts tale after tale. The Simone prowling these pages is not so much four women as one: a drunken, abusive, selfish, bad mother who fell out with her beloved father, who treated her musicians badly, who was frightening, intimidating and who herself was frightened and intimidated.

Brun-Lambert depicts Simone, the tormented soul. Her family's way of dealing with racism was to turn away from prejudice and live your life as best you could, as if acknowledging the existence of racism was in itself a kind of defeat. Going from child prodigy to suddenly being exposed to the anomalies of racism was too much for Simone and seemed to bring about her frequent and terrible bouts of paranoia, depression and fear. It would have been interesting if Brun-Lambert had explored this in more depth. Fewer gigs and more analysis would have made for a better biography. Nina pronounced she would die at 70; anything after that would be too much pain. And she did. All of her selves together: the complicated woman that housed the one Nina Simone.



Arthur Blessitt poses for a portrait at Heritage Christian Center, with the cross he first carried in 1969 when he started his trek across the US on Christmas Day.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

# 'God's donkey'

While Jesus carried his cross from Jerusalem to Golgotha, Arthur Blessitt went one better and took his across every nation in the world

BY ELECTA DRAPER  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, DENVER

removal from the Plaza Major in Madrid.

He and his cross appear in photographs with smiling soldiers, some flashing peace signs, from Lebanon to Israel. "Sometimes you walk into a country and they put you in jail," Blessitt said. "Sometimes you meet the president."

He never arranged visits with famous people, he said, and yet, the famous flocked to him.

Blessitt has prayed with rock legends Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. He also has prayed with little known, remote tribesmen.

"I don't follow Christ because of anything I get from it," Blessitt said. "I love God and I love people."

He was nearly always accepted and often offered warm hospitality, wherever he went with his cross.

He was sometimes ignored. He also experienced ridicule and menace.

His closest call perhaps came in Nicaragua, where militants held guns to his head. He recalls frantically clawing at a box of Bibles so he could die with the Good Book in his hand. Then he decided to pass them out, but when he looked up, the soldiers were prostrate on the ground. Then they jumped up and ran

away, as if terrified, he said. "That was a miracle," Blessitt allowed. He doesn't know exactly what happened. "God chose to preserve me."

The logistics of marching across the world with a giant wood and metal cross are tedious and mind-boggling, from checking it, tucked into a ski bag, at countless airports, to hauling it in the two Land Rovers worn out by the Blessitt family.

Checkpoints and roadblocks in militarized zones were, of course, problematic — try doing the paperwork for a visit to North Korea or Saudi Arabia, when it was closed to tourists, and where activity by Christian churches is forbidden. He walked

the countries of the former Soviet Union in the weeks after its collapse.

If you ask Blessitt how he sees himself, he says, "All I've been is God's donkey." He is "obedient." Blessitt's journey started in the farm fields of Mississippi, where his father had him lug water to workers. He said he heard Jesus' voice guiding him in the fields, sometimes, it seemed, erratically, but always "teaching me to listen to him."

Later, after Blessitt started a ministry for hippies, runaways, hookers and addicts on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip, he heard the voice tell him to make a cross. "I built it in 1968 and did short walks along Sunset Strip in West Hollywood — 100 yards [91m], 200 yards," Blessitt said.

A BBC reporter who interviewed him there tossed out this comment: "You ought to try this in Northern Ireland."

So he did, ignoring threats on his life as he passed through the sectarian violence there.

"It wasn't until 1988 I felt ... I should give my life to carry the cross to every nation," Blessitt said. "I did not choose to carry the cross. I felt that Jesus called me."

His wife, Denise, has been to 290 countries with him and spent an anniversary in Siberia without complaint. His children

by an earlier marriage have walked alongside him, at times in grave danger, carrying their own smaller crosses.

"I just accepted it," said his son Joel, now a minister at Denver's Heritage Christian Center. "I thought everybody's dad carried a cross."

If his six children, now aged 29 to 45, ever felt abused, they don't say so. All but one, who is in Norway, have moved to the Denver area to be near their father, who came here in 2005. He and Denise also have adopted a daughter, Sophia, who is 5.

Blessitt said he accepted food and lodging in foreign countries, but not donations. He didn't hold special fundraisers, but supporters have helped finance his travels.

He has formed a nonprofit organization from which he takes an annual salary of about US\$48,000, and he accepts an occasional speaking engagement. His book, *The Cross*, came out last year.

And while Blessitt set foot last year on his last island group, Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean, the mission is not over.

An attempt to launch a piece of his cross into space with a satellite failed when the rocket blew up.

He will try again, attaching it to another satellite with a polar orbit, so the whole world can spin under a piece of his cross.

He's not yet through "wandering around the world with wood. People in Darfur, people in Beverly Hills or on Wall Street, they need hope."

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

# The US and North Korea: every which way but loose

Longtime CNN Asia correspondent Mike Chinoy's 'Meltdown' is a definitive account of relations between Pyongyang and Washington over the last 15 years

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The fear that lay behind North Korea's launch of a Taepodong-2 missile last weekend was that this was the test-firing of a vehicle capable of carrying a nuclear warhead to a foreign country. It was clearly only described for domestic consumption as carrying a satellite; The US military said no satellite was observed, and rather than the launch being a near-farical failure, it was probably a success if its intention was military, and essentially for foreign eyes.

This combination of the farcical and the unprecedented everywhere characterizes North Korea, certainly as illustrated in Mike Chinoy's magnificent *Meltdown*. It tells the tale of US-North Korean relations over the last 15 or so years, beginning with the Clinton administration and ending with the last days of George W. Bush's presidency.

Chinoy, longtime Asia correspondent for CNN, has made

North Korean affairs his specialty. He has visited the country many times, once as the sole journalist to accompany Jimmy Carter there in 1994. He lists 151 people he's interviewed, including South Korea's former premier Kim Dae-jung and the US's Colin Powell, Richard Boucher, Madeleine Albright, Richard Armitage, Warren Christopher, Richard Lawless and Christopher Hill; unfortunately no North Korean official agreed to an interview.

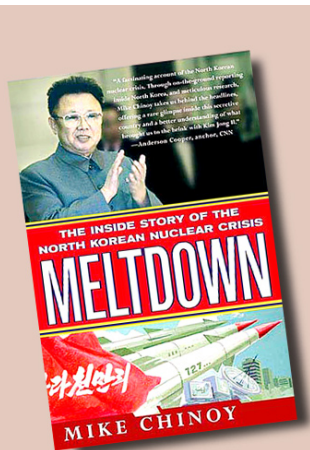
His essential thesis is that the Clinton administration very nearly brought about the closing down of all Pyongyang's military-related nuclear activity, with Clinton on the edge of visiting the country in the last days of his presidency. All this good work (in Chinoy's view) went up in smoke with President Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech, with this unpropitious beginning followed by eight years of vacillation and "internal factionalism," ending with the U-turn of December 2007 when Bush offered Pyongyang fully

normalized diplomatic relations in exchange for disclosure and abandonment of its nuclear program.

This analysis may not be to everyone's taste but, once accepted, it allows the reader to relish Chinoy's detailed account of the progress of events on a week-by-week basis, not only in Washington but also in Pyongyang, Tokyo and Seoul. He weaves together his own involvement as a reporter, in-depth research as the Edgerton Fellow on Korean Security at the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles, and what must be the widest range of high-level contacts in the business.

Everyone will want to know what Chinoy thinks of the North Koreans and their enigmatic leadership. His analysis appears to be this. What Pyongyang's leaders want most of all is regime security — they don't want to be toppled in the way the leaders of Iraq, the Soviet Union and Romania were. In order to achieve this they involve in diplomatic brinkmanship,

## Publication Notes



MELTDOWN: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS  
BY MIKE CHINOY  
432 PAGES  
ST MARTIN'S PRESS

ratcheting up their bargaining chips in the hope of gaining life-saving aid and recognition. Their essential mindset, he believes, is to meet hostility with hostility, but meet benign overtures with a benign response. They are also adept at holding back their trump card until the last possible moment.

As for the more bizarre aspects of this extraordinary country, details are legion. The relation with Macau's tiny Banco Delta Asia (allegedly used for money-laundering and the passing of counterfeit US dollars, plus the purchase of luxury items for the Pyongyang leadership), the "payment" for the 1997 US visit to the suspected nuclear site of Kunchangri with 100,000 tonnes of potatoes (not such a bad idea, North Korea suffering periodically from famine, and its climate being ideally suited to the cultivation of this food), the long-denied relationship with Syria, whose own nuclear facility was destroyed by Israeli jets in 2007, the Dear Leader's 24-day train journey

across Russia in 2001, and the now admitted abduction of Japanese nationals — all are there in this quite exceptional book.

Chinoy's view, nonetheless, is that North Korea is not to be mocked, let alone damned outright. Isolation is the beginning and end of its dilemma. Even Beijing, once its closest ally, apparently views it nowadays with distrust. Where else can it turn? So instead of seeking to please, it behaves like a hornet, more than ready to sting anyone who approaches with dubious intent, and determined to show that, despite its size, relative poverty and lack of international friends, it can return hostility with hostility any day of the week.

And so it was that this country became, on October 9, 2006, the world's eighth declared nuclear power. The device tested was very small, 50 times smaller than the bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. Even so, its detonation represented, Chinoy insists, the "utter failure" of the Bush administra-

tion's entire approach. Even China was "outraged." It's the purpose of *Meltdown* to demonstrate how such an extremely undesirable turn of events came about.

If you want insight, and from an Asian perspective, into how the Bush administration worked, this book will supply it. If you want to know how North Korea lives, from the Dear Leader's rumored collection of 20,000 Hollywood movies to the orange-sized tumor on the right side of the late Great Leader's neck (there's even a photo of Chinoy offering him his business card), then again this book is the place to find it.

This is a tragic tale in Chinoy's telling — how Washington turned its back on diplomacy, alienating its South Korean ally in the process, and in effect precipitated the nuclear crisis we now live with. Chinoy doesn't anywhere spotlight the current US president, but there can be no doubt whatever at the delight he must feel in the change of the man at the helm.