

'All You See Is Glory': The Burden of Stardom and the Tragedy of Nina Simone

IASPM Australia New Zealand branch conference,
Australian National University, Canberra, 4-6 / 12 / 15

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The burden of stardom
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Simone

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A portrait of Nina Simone, looking upwards and to the right, with a contemplative expression. She is wearing a dark top and a necklace.

I want to use this paper to revisit the idea of Nina Simone as a star, a topic I've written about in my book on Simone (published a couple of years ago) but which I want to expand on in light of other work on celebrity and my own recent research into music, biography, life writing and what I call 'the late voice'. To do so, I am going to use the song 'Stars' as a case study and explore what it might tell us about Nina Simone and about the burden of stardom more generally. I'm interested in the song itself as a text, and will therefore first say something about its initial appearance as a song written by and about Janis Ian. I'm also interested in Simone's adoption of the song as something of a personal anthem in the later part of her career.

Stars and stardom

'Stardom' signals emphasis on process rather than people. This distinction is recognised in many of the extant studies of stars, stardom and celebrity. As Lee Marshall argues, thinking about a 'system of stardom' within which popular music artists operate is more stable than wondering who is a bigger, more famous or more longstanding star. Stardom, as Marshall notes, is qualitative, not quantitative. It is about 'cultural status'. Other scholars have also pointed to a distinction between subjectivist accounts of stars and more sociological accounts: Richard Dyer on film stars and Chris Rojek on celebrity are two prominent examples.

Stars and stardom

'a star is not just a person ... [but] the fact that the star is a person is the source of stardom's affective power'

Lee, Marshall, 'The Structural Functions of Stardom in the Recording Industry', *Popular Music & Society* 36/5 (2013), 580

'celebrities are significant nodal points of articulation between the social and the personal'

Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (Reaktion, 2001), 16

But if stardom as a structure or process provides a more stable source of analysis than individual stars, it is still worth remembering that stars are people, are individuals, and that they are people who enjoy or endure stardom. As Marshall writes,

'a star is not just a person ... [but] the fact that the star is a person is the source of stardom's affective power' (Marshall, PMS article, 580)

Chris Rojek: 'celebrities are significant nodal points of articulation between the social and the personal' (Rojek, *Celebrity*, 16)

(We might want later to make distinctions between stars and celebrities.)

Perhaps stars are not 'just people' but they operate in ways that help other people understand things about themselves and about their others.

In addition to the standard distinction between person and process, I want also to emphasise stardom as a particular kind of process, one that is endured as much as (if not more than) it is enjoyed. Hence, I am also focussing on this word 'burden', of stardom as something that is borne and perhaps unburdened too. This unburdening highlights once more the star's position as an 'individual' within the system, and Janis Ian's song 'Stars' seems a good example of this relationship.

'Stars' (the song)

Janis Ian




'Having a monumental hit at 14 leaves you feeling like a fake; you know your talent enabled you to write a few really good songs, but you don't know how you did it. You're completely dependent on talent and chance, and those are not enough to see you through a career. So I listened to every great songwriter I could find, from Dylan to Johnny Mercer. And I read, omnivorously, from Rimbaud to Ray Bradbury, trying to develop a sense of style.'

Janis Ian, liner notes to *Stars* reissue

Janis Ian found fleeting fame at an early age after recording the controversial 'Society's Child' in 1965 when she was 14. She followed her brush with success by recording four albums for Victor that, in her own words, "did nothing but waste vinyl". Not wishing to be a one-hit wonder, Ian spent several years working on sound engineering, vocal phrasing, honing her songwriting skills, and attempting to overcome the confusion of early success. Reflecting on the period three decades later, she wrote:


Having a monumental hit at 14 leaves you feeling like a fake; you know your talent enabled you to write a few really good songs, but you don't know how you did it. You're completely dependent on talent and chance, and those are not enough to see you through a career. So I listened to every great songwriter I could find, from Dylan to Johnny Mercer. And I read, omnivorously, from Rimbaud to Ray Bradbury, trying to develop a sense of style. (Ian, liner notes to *Stars & Aftertones* [CD, Edsel EDSO 2044, 2010, 4)

'Stars'



Janis Ian, *Stars* (1974)

Video: [YouTube](#)

Audio: [Spotify](#) 

That style had clearly been developed by the time Ian came to write and record 'Stars', a song which develops its narrative over several long and quite complex stanzas. Ian wrote and recorded 'Stars' in 1972 when she was 21, though the song and its accompanying album did not appear until 1974. (the song was instrumental in getting Ian signed to CBS - prior to that she had been temporarily without a record deal except in Australia, where she had a contract with Festival Records).

The song circles around a refrain: "Stars, they come and go / they come fast they come slow / they go like the last light of the sun all in a blaze". The "stars" theme, the multiple internal rhymes and the solo acoustic guitar accompaniment bear certain resemblances to Don McLean's 'Vincent', a song Ian had been obsessively listening to prior to writing 'Stars'.

[VIDEO EXAMPLE: Janis Ian performing 'Stars' on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, 1974 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5Ocl2Z-Vk8>]

The verses of 'Stars' describe those who "live their lives in sad cafes and music halls", dealing with issues of age, appearance and public attention. A verse about those who become famous when young and are then told that they have "had their day" is easy to read as having autobiographical content for Ian and while the sadness of "living with a name you never owned" could apply to anyone whose public fame relies on the culture industry, it also works as autobiographical confession.

The main points I want to pick up on here from Ian's performance are:

- the slow unfolding of the song over seven and a quarter minutes
- the point that, while the length and pace could be criticised as over-indulgent, to my mind they emphasise the fickle and tragic aspects of stardom, the coming and going, the swift blaze and the slowly dying trail

- vulnerability (even more notable in the televised live performances)
- the different rhythms of stardom and of life: a mind darting around from one thought to another while also sinking slowly into ever deeper melancholy
- first person experience (whether factual or not, the song exudes the sense of authority, of having 'seen it all')
- Ian writes, 'There was something incantatory about the melody, something that felt older than I'd ever be.' (Ian, *Society's Child*, 125)

Covers of 'Stars'



Cher, *Stars* (1975)

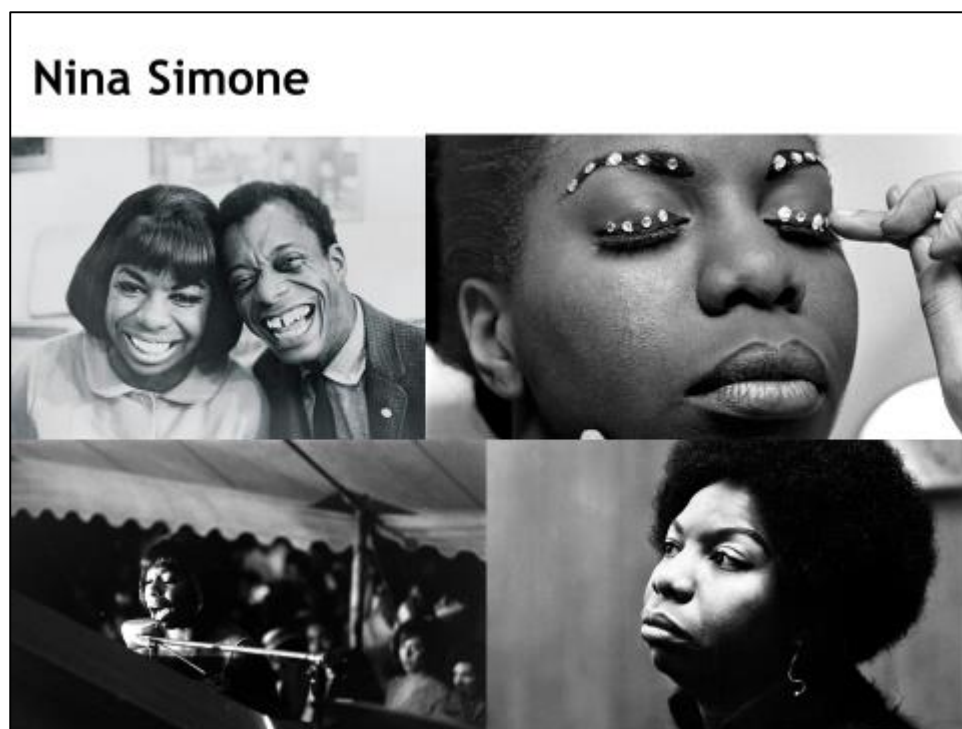


Mel Tormé, *Tormé: A New Album* (1980)

The song has been covered by various people, including Cher and Mel Tormé. However, I'm not aware of any performers, apart from Ian, who personalise the song to the extent that Nina Simone would. While she included the song in a number of her live sets, the most well-known version is no doubt the one she performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976.

Nina Simone, Montreux and 'Stars'

This performance is rich in meaning even without knowledge of Simone's broader career, as evidenced in the comments that accompany the YouTube clip I'm going to play in a moment. But I believe the song takes on richer meaning when placed in the context of the rest of Simone's remarkable Montreux set and the rest of her career.



Nina Simone is most often remembered as a star of the 1960s and as an icon of the civil rights era. The vast bulk of commentary on her focuses on the 1960s, not surprisingly given how prolific and visible and audible she was then. During this time she showcased her skill and versatility as a singer and pianist, reinventing jazz, blues and gospel standards, covering folk songs, film and theatre songs, R&B and soul. During the decade she gradually moved from the established American Song Book to the emerging songbooks of writers like Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and the Gibb brothers (it's an often unremarked point that she was one of the great Bee Gees cover artists). At the same time she introduced her own original songs, often associated with issues of race and/or gender: 'Mississippi Goddam', 'Four Women', 'Young, Gifted and Black'. In many ways that last song's appearance towards the close of the Sixties marked a pinnacle in Simone's stardom and in her involvement with civil rights activism.

By the 1970s, however, Simone's star was waning and she had also become disillusioned with the struggle for civil rights. These factors, combined with a series of personal traumas, left her unbalanced and unsure of her place in the world. She fled the States, convinced the country would never be cured of racism, and lived for successive periods in the Caribbean, Africa and Europe.

Simone's performance in 1976 was presented as something of a comeback. It was the first time she'd played the festival since 1968 and she was given an enthusiastic reception. She gave a sometimes mesmerising and sometimes deeply unsettling performance, which has been preserved and circulates as a DVD and as a series of clips on video sharing websites, where new audiences are constantly drawn to record their wonder at this naked, confessional concert.



During the set, Simone shares intimacies with the audience, orders one unfortunate audience member to sit down, dances, rails against the music industry, and reflects on the careers of other singers and on the waning of her own stardom. She also provides stunning renditions of songs she had recorded during the previous two decades, including 'Little Girl Blue', 'Backlash Blues' and 'I Wish I knew How It Would Feel To Be Free'.

All the elements of the performance come together in her remarkable encore, which consists of a nearly twenty-minute medley of Janis Ian's 'Stars' and Morris Albert's 'Feelings', which had been a hit the previous year. As she stares intensely at the crowd and almost whispers the lyrics, she personalises both songs, adding further layers to what had already become less a live jazz set and more an emotional autobiography. I only have time to play a small sample of 'Stars'.

[VIDEO EXAMPLE: Nina Simone performing 'Stars' at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK0B9FXU72A> - 2 clips: 0:40-1:38 and 5:25-6:50]

The sense of involvement in a highly personal moment is palpable, and witnessing the recorded performance is an exhausting yet intensely moving experience. Throughout her 1976 Montreux set, and particularly during 'Stars / Feelings', Simone's embodiment of age, experience, and weary sincerity not only makes for a compelling performance, but also attests to a "lateness" that combines biography-as-confession with unresolved yearning. These are features that would become ever more prevalent in the work she subsequently produced.

Conclusion



Nina Simone suffered through an inability and/or unwillingness to be co-opted. It is not so much that she didn't do what other celebrities do some of the time, it is not that she didn't aspire to celebrity a lot of the time, but she didn't do a lot of the things celebrities are supposed to do if they want to stay in the game. Her unwillingness to play the game, or to play up to the image the industry created for her (the High Priestess of Soul) was doubtless a major reason her star began to fall and never really regained its ascendancy. The recent documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone* takes this as one of its main themes and also, interestingly uses the 1976 Montreux appearance as a framing mechanism. In the film, Andrew Stroud - Simone's former husband and manager - makes the point that Simone wanted the prime time attention that Aretha Franklin and Diana Ross got but couldn't get it because of her activism.

Perhaps one of the reasons Simone has become an icon again in recent years is that she is no longer able to scupper the image that others wish to create for her. And she's not around to spoil anyone's nostalgia either.

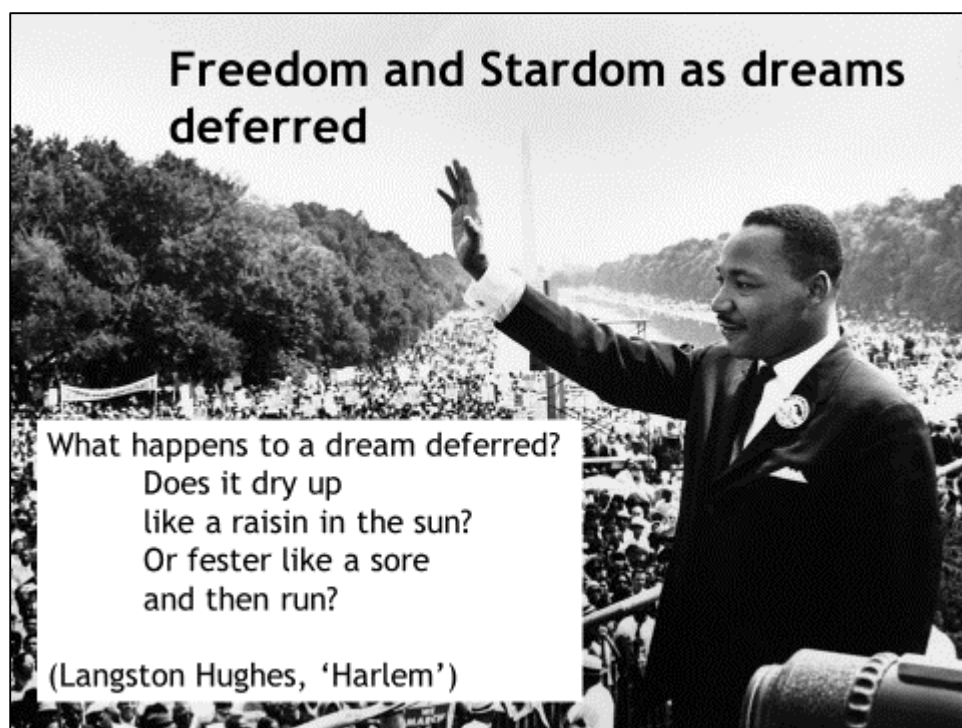
Chris Rojek writes:

'[D]eath is not an impediment to additional commodification. Once the public face of the celebrity has been elevated and internalized in popular culture, it indeed possesses an immortal quality that permits it to be recycled, even after the physical death of the celebrity has occurred.' (Rojek, *Celebrity*, 189)

I would change that 'even after' to 'especially after' for certain celebrities. Posthumous Nina is doing better business than live Nina had done for years prior to her death. But it seems that the image of Nina as star and icon is to always be that beacon of the 1960s. It is the moment returned to again and again in the biographies, scholarly articles and books, and documentaries. This is the point of

Nina's victory, the mountain peak reached, and not too many are interested, it seems, in the slow descent. Perhaps this is what fame is: a oneness with the world, the right time and place, the right person, the right constituency.

Simone's later work what might be termed a 'defiant melancholy' as she used her songs and live performances to navigate the burden of her past. As much as she had been a movement intellectual in the 1960s, Simone had been a star and the sense of loss of both political possibility (signalled by the 'failure' of the civil rights movement in the USA) and stardom (signalled by the decline in her popularity) flavoured much of the material she produced from the mid-1970s onwards.



This work reflects what Langston Hughes had termed 'a dream deferred'. Hughes was not necessarily thinking of stardom or celebrity when he wrote these words - indeed, when they are quoted it is usually in reference to the ideals of the civil rights movement and to the dream espoused by Martin Luther King and others.

But I think we can also speak of stardom as 'a dream deferred'. For Nina Simone, there were several dreams: her early dream of being a classical musician, the dreams she shared with others involved in the struggle for racial and gender equality, the dream of finding freedom, not only with and for her people, but also freedom from the demons that tormented her. Pulled between the mutually destructive forces of stardom, activism and artistry she perhaps found the longest and most lasting peace in the latter.

[Script of paper presented at the IASPM Australia New Zealand Conference, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, 5th December 2015.]