



What Happened, Miss Simone? Discussion Guide

Director: Liz Garbus

Year: 2015

Time: 101 min

You might know this director from:

Love, Marilyn (2012)

Bobby Fischer Against the World (2011)

Shouting Fire: Stories from the Edge
of Free Speech (2009)

Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo sepas! (2006)

Girlhood (2003)

The Nazi Officer's Wife (2003)

The Execution of Wanda Jean (2002)

FILM SUMMARY

Many a soul has waxed lyrical on the impact and artistry of Nina Simone, her “coffee and cream” voice, her poignant lyrics, her political engagement, her womanhood. In an effort to reveal the whole human picture of this wonderfully real woman, WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE? devotes itself to both the dark and the light in her 70-year-long life journey.

As the director of Netflix’s first original commissioned documentary, Liz Garbus searched for every piece of evidence connected to Nina Simone. Collecting audio material, video footage, diary entries, and sitting down with those who knew Simone in her most intimate guises - including her daughter Lisa Simone Kelly, her long-time guitarist Al Schackman, and Malcolm X’s daughter Ambassador Shabazz - Garbus pieces together an emotionally raw, musically diverse, and psychologically intense perspective on the effervescent Nina Simone.

Whether a long-time lover of Simone or someone to have stumbled across this documentary in Netflix’s offerings, WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE? appeals to sensibilities and sensitivities across a wide range of interests. From her involvement in the civil rights movement of 1960’s U.S.A. to her battle with manic depression and physical abuse - both received and delivered - Simone lived life to the fullest. “She had this love affair with fire,” explained Lisa. After viewing the footage and hearing the recollections of those who loved her, one can’t help but feel the heat and burn of that very fire.

Touching upon a variety of people, places, and events in the erratic and prolific life of Nina, WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE? questions the fervor, the devotion, and the madness of one woman, but also of the world in which she found herself.

FILM THEMES

By delving into the darker side of Nina's life, *WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?* unearths the struggles of an artist grappling with the world in which she lived and the uncertainty of her place in that world.

THE STRUGGLES OF SIMONE

Born into a poor family in the segregated South, Simone's life started out tough. Feeling the bitter sting of racism from an early age, the injustices of the world did not find a quiet home within her. Simone struggled with personal demons and with the battle between motherhood and career, between politics and riches, between fragility and vitality. Life was not an easy affair for Nina, who often felt isolated. "I have to live with Nina. That is very difficult," she explained. The depth and soul of her music reflect her challenged existence.

THE STEADY DEVOTION OF MADNESS

"People seem to think that when she went out on stage, that was when she became Nina Simone. My mother was Nina Simone 24/7. That's where it became a problem," stated Lisa Kelly, Simone's daughter. The stage granted the enigmatic and impassioned performer a place to be free and the world craved and was drawn to Simone the artist. Yet the demons, the rage, the passion and genius of Nina accompanied her off stage, into the dressing room, out into the world and into her daily life. Simone's depression, darkness, and bipolar disorder was with her always, often making her life a toil to endure.

PARTNER VS. MANAGER

When Simone first met her Andrew Stroud, she fell madly in love with him, and their affair was quickly sealed with marriage. Abandoning his job as a police detective in order to manage Simone's rapidly burgeoning musical career, Stroud soon took the driving role in their relationship. Having Simone by the heartstrings, he was able to manipulate and manage both her emotional state and professional status. When she felt overwhelmed by the professional expectations, she found there was no partner to confide in, as the demands were originating from the man who had vowed to love and respect her. As respect diminished, abuse - both physical and emotional - was soon to follow.

POLITICAL PRIORITIES

"How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?" stated Simone. Utilizing her music as a weapon, a tool for change, and to bring meaning at a time when her personal life was in shambles, Simone connected with the heated politics of the time. "I was needed. I could sing to help my people," she recalled. But not everyone agreed with her decision to put racism and inequality at the top of her agenda. Both her record label and manager-husband found her overt statements and forthright views to be working against her career, threatening the platform of fame upon which she was perched. They may have been right, but in Simone's heart and soul, the plight of her people - and her lending her voice to their cause - was far more important than fame and riches.

"I was interested in conveying an emotional message, using everything you've got inside you to barely make a note or if you have to strain to sing, you sing. So sometimes I sound like gravel and sometimes I sound like coffee and cream."

Nina Simone

"Nina Simone was a free spirit in an era that didn't really appreciate a woman's genius."

Ambassador Shabazz

FILM FACTS:

- **WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?** is the first original documentary to have been commissioned by Netflix. Following the film's premiere at Harlem's Apollo Theater in June 2015 - which members of Simone's old band including Al Schackman, Lisle Atkinson, and Leopoldo Fleming attended - Lauryn Hill covered a number of Simone's songs with a 19-piece band.
- "Nina Revisited... A Tribute to Nina Simone" - a collection of 16 covers of Simone songs featuring Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige, Usher, and Simone's daughter Lisa, among others - was released shortly after the film. The final track on the album is sung by Nina Simone herself.
- When setting out to create **WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?**, director Garbus was determined to unearth everything she could find related to Simone's work and life. In the end she had around 100 hours of audio material to work from, including recorded interviews with the author of Simone's autobiography.
- Nina Simone's only child was born Lisa Celeste Stroud, and now goes by Lisa Simone Kelly. Kelly is a singer and actress, and both performs on Broadway and tours as a solo musician. In 2008 she released an album entitled "Simone on Simone," a big band tribute to her mother.
- Simone wrote her autobiography - "I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography" - with Stephen Cleary. It was first published in 1991.
- Many books have been written about Simone, including "Break Down & Let It All Out" (2004), "Black is the Color" (2005 - a picture book containing Simone quotes, compiled by Simone's former husband Stroud), "Nina Simone: Une Vie" (2005 - originally in French), "Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone" (2010).
- In the Hollywood biopic on Nina Simone, simply entitled "Nina," casting of actress Zoe Saldana in the role of Simone has been highly criticized, as her skin is much lighter than Simone's, raising the issue of racism and discrimination in Hollywood.
- Throughout the course of her career, Simone released 34 albums. Her first studio album - "Little Girl Blue" - was released in 1958, while her final studio album - "A Single Woman" - was released in 1993, 10 years before her death, and went to number 3 on the Billboard charts.
- "The Amazing Nina Simone," an independent film by Jeff Lieberman containing over 50 interviews with Simone's family and associates, was released in 2015. The film especially features Sam Waymon, Nina's brother, who performed and recorded with her for over 10 years, working as the band's musical director at the time.
- From the late 1960s on, Simone lived in a number of countries, including Barbados, Liberia, Switzerland, Trinidad, Belgium, the U.K., the Netherlands, and France, where she died.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to be inspired and moved by Nina Simone's story.
2. **Learn** about [The Eunice Waymon-Nina Simone Memorial Project](#), an organization based out of North Carolina, that aims to keep Simone's memory alive through varying projects.
3. **Join** the UN's [Let's Fight Racism!](#) campaign. Civil rights have come a long way, but there is still plenty of work to be done to establish and guarantee equal rights for all.
4. **Learn** more about the High Priestess of Soul. Read one of the many books written on her life and influence, and listen to the songs in her extensive back catalogue.
5. **Support** [the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#) that offers help and support to individuals suffering from depression and bipolar disorder, as well as providing assistance to families and loved ones.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.