Rhythm, Rage, and Restraint: The Music of Nina Simone and John Coltrane on the Birmingham Bombing

An Honors Paper for the Department of Africana Studies
By Rami Toubia Stucky

Bowdoin College, 2013
© Rami Toubia Stucky
Chapter One: The Birmingham Bombing

1963 was a volatile year in United States history. On November 22nd, Lee Harvey Oswald tragically shot down president John F. Kennedy. On June 12th, White supremacist Byron De La Beckwith assassinated NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi. Birmingham, Alabama specifically suffered from violent acts. Beginning in April, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began their Birmingham campaign, which ultimately motivated City Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor to use fire hoses and German shepherds to quell the protestors. And perhaps the most egregious act of violence occurred on September 15th when four members of the United Klans of America, one of the largest Ku Klux Klan organizations, planted a bomb in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama killing four young girls.¹

While all these events shocked the nation’s citizens, the Birmingham bombing particularly struck jazz musicians Nina Simone and John Coltrane. Each consequently wrote their own political song in response to the bombing. Yet, their activism as jazz artists in 1963 is not new. Scholars such as Ingrid Monson, Saul Scott, Eric Porter, and Robin D.G. Kelley have all convincingly demonstrated the link between jazz and Civil Rights activism. The post-WWII era specifically gave rise to saxophonist Sonny Rollins’ 1958 album *Freedom Suite*, pianist Randy Weston’s 1960 album *Uhuru Africa*, and drummer Max Roach and vocalist Abbey Lincoln’s 1960 album *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*.²
Rather, scholars should look at the Birmingham bombing because it was the first event to my knowledge that generated two jazz musical responses. Previous events in the Civil Rights Movement only influenced a few singular songs. For instance Bassist Charles Mingus wrote “Fables of Faubus” shortly after Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus prevented nine Black students from attending Little Rock Central High School in 1957. He later wrote “Prayer for Passive Resistance” after the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960. Yet in 1963, Birmingham was the first event that produced John Coltrane’s “Alabama” as well as Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam.” I decided to analyze these two songs because they uniquely evoke two different and opposing responses to the bombing.

The paper’s project then sets out to accomplish two tasks. Firstly, in this chapter I demonstrate how non-violence and armed self defense arose as two tactical possibilities after Birmingham. I don’t mean to argue that the bombing shifted Civil Rights tactics from non-violence to armed self-defense. Rather, the bombing brought these two differing tactics to the forefront of Civil Rights discussion in 1963. Secondly, in chapters Two and Three I examine how John Coltrane, Nina Simone, and their two songs fit into this discussion. Their music then illuminates the two tactics Americans could choose to proceed with after the bombing. Such musical analysis is important for two reasons. First, looking at these two jazz pieces not only places it within the larger historiography discussed earlier, but it also helps contribute to Civil Rights musical history dominated by folk and religious genres. Secondly, these two pieces bring out the complexities of these two tactics.

Most histories about the Civil Rights Movement that include discussions of music primarily focus on two genres: religious spirituals and folk music. In Portia K.
Maultsby’s anthology, *African American Music: An Introduction*, Bernice Johnson Reagon touches on the importance of both folk and spirituals yet makes no mention of jazz music in her article “The Civil Rights Movement.” In the same anthology, Travis A. Jackson points out in his article “Interpreting Jazz” how Ken Burns’ popular and influential documentary *Jazz* concludes around 1960. This premature conclusion is another way that scholars overlook jazz music in Civil Rights Movement history. Yet as I argue, these two songs can contribute enormously to Civil Rights history. My musical analyses illuminate the complexities and difficulties that occurred during stark discussions between passive resistance and armed self-defense.

* 

As a *Chicago Defender* headline read on September 23, 1963, “Birmingham Negroes [Were] Divided On Tactics.” On one end, Faith Rich, a CORE spokeswoman said after the bombing, “Negroes and [W]hites have to take action instead of being so passive. As long as they sit back, these people [White racists] won’t be restrained. I don’t see why they put up with this nonsense all this while.” At the same time, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller applauded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for his “appeal to the Negro community of Birmingham – and its response to that appeal – for forbearance and restraint in the face of so horrendous an act of violence.” While Americans chose to support either armed self-defense or non-violence for many reasons, those supporting non-violence supported pacifism because: (1) its viability as a political tactic in the Civil Rights struggle and (2) its affiliation with Christian morals.
Supporters of non-violence believed that non-violence would achieve results. Historian Adam Fairclough notes that King’s non-violent approach aimed at enticing Southern Whites’ support as well as coercing the federal government to intervene when non-violent action met Southern violence. King’s eulogy for the Birmingham victims on September 18th exemplifies how he wished to persuade and appeal to Southern emotions. He hoped “the spilt blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future.” He added, “indeed, this tragic event may cause the [W]hite south to come to terms with its conscience.” The four young “martyrs” - as King called the girls – would become a persuasive tool for Southerners conflicted about their role in the Civil Rights Movement. However, in King’s eyes, any attempt to meet violence with violence would guarantee that the girls died in vain. Apart from its tactical possibilities, non-violence appealed to Americans who endorsed it for religious reasons.

Many local clergy members for instance decided to remain peaceful in the bombing’s aftermath. During fourteen year-old Carole Robertson’s funeral at St. John AME Church on September 17th, Reverend Cross asked the two thousand members crammed into the church not to “seek revenge against those who are guilty, but find our refuge in love and the words of Paul.” Cross then quoted the apostle who said, “all things work together for good for those who love God.” The church’s pastor, Reverend C.E. Thomas followed. He told the gathering, “keep cool heads. We cannot win freedom with violence.” The next day, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the service in the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church for the other three victims: fourteen year-old Cynthia Wesley, fourteen year-old Addie Mae Collins, and eleven year-old Carol Denise McNair. During
the service, he told another two thousand mourners “we must not harbor the desire to retaliate with violence.” King, SCLC, and the clergy’s religiosity helped lead Christian ministers to endorse non-violence. They felt their work coincided with Christian moral teachings.

At the same time Saxophonist John Coltrane and his pianist McCoy Tyner found pacifism in a religion other than Christianity, something I will discuss in Chapter Three.

Even though most Christian clergy members approved of non-violence for religious and moral reasons, some Christian ministers did not. In Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, for example, a minister at the Concord Baptist Church commented on the Birmingham bombing. The Rev. Dr. Gardner Taylor said the bombing “forces a re-examination by serious Christians of the entire doctrine of non-violence except as a tactical approach in selected situations.” Twenty years ago, Taylor attended the Chicago University Divinity School where he learned that man behaved nobly and did not need sanctions. Rev. Taylor “did not accept” such teachings. Ultimately he agreed, “Negroes should [not] wage aggression or engage in warfare . . .” yet countered that with “the right of self-defense has been honored all through the ages.” While Rev. Taylor provides an example of a Christian clergy member in favor of armed self-defense, most religious support for armed self-defense came from the Islamic faith.

In Birmingham, James X, a local Nation of Islam leader asked Birmingham non-violence supporter Rev. Ennis Knight “what have you gained by non-violent methods?” James X then pointed out “nothing has been gained through the non-violent method in Birmingham” and “that the only result has been a campaign of terror against Negroes.” While this is a singular case, the Nation of Islam as a whole often criticized the non-
violence movement. Nina Simone herself recalls how her armed self-defense adherence arose from Black Muslim influence, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

The armed self-defense movement also attracted supporters without any religious affiliation. Similarly to the aforementioned examples, the movement critiqued King’s emphasis on non-violent “persuasion” and “coercion” as viable tactics. For many critics, the reliance on federal aid - such as what occurred during the Freedom Rides in 1961 - no longer seemed a viable option. In a letter Mr. Paul Ramos wrote to King after the bombing, Ramos quoted a September 28th editorial in the *Afro-American* entitled “The Birmingham Massacre.” In this edition, the editorial asked, "how much longer does he (King) counsel turning the other cheek --- 30 days, 60 days, 90 days? . . . let the people of Alabama stop appealing to Governor Wallace in Montgomery or to President Kennedy in Washington. Let them depend upon themselves. They can stop violence if they want to." In his letter, Mr. Ramos suggests that a specific armed response can help stop violence.

Several Blacks shared Ramos’ views and professed their desire to retaliate violently. After the bombing, a *Kansas City Times* article reported how several interviewed Blacks confessed “I wish I could get my hands on the ones that did it.” An interviewed Black youth in Birmingham said, “all we have is rocks, but we intend to use them. You saw what happened to us when we tried peaceful protest. We were attacked by police, bitten by dogs, and thrown into jail.” Finally a mother in Brooklyn demonstrates how her anger stemmed from White violence. In a note to the editor of *New York Amsterdam News* Mrs. Augustine Terrell of Brooklyn said: “When news came over the radio that children had been murdered in the church . . . I found myself wanting to kill
every [W]hite in that city! Not that it would have solved anything, but for the first time I knew what it is to hate, cold hate.”

While these examples only demonstrate their intent and not action, violent action did occur shortly after the bombing.

Black community members’ actions in Birmingham after the bombing demonstrates how a large group of people engaged in armed self-defense. In his history of the Birmingham criminal trials, Frank Sikora writes how:

In the moments following the explosion, scores of angry Blacks gathered at the intersection of Sixteenth Street and Seventh Avenue North. Police, wearing helmets and holding shotguns, kept the crowd away from the church, but some young men in the crowd threw rocks and bricks. Cars driven by [W]hites were pelted; some were overturned. Several vacant houses and a small shop were torched.

The police riot squad bolstered by Negro Civil Defense workers had to disperse angry crowds that boiled up immediately after the blast. Later, the police radio came alive with reports of fires and disturbances throughout the city. Rioters pelted police cruisers with stones. A shooting incident wounded a White man. The scream of sirens filled the air as ambulance after ambulance pulled up to the scene. The police riot squad moved in and a riot tank roamed the area as the angered people gathered. At least one White woman was injured, police said, when a stone crashed through the windshield of her car a few blocks from the blast scene. But compared to other riots in the 60s, no serious disorder occurred around the church. While obviously enraged, Dr. King’s presence in Birmingham probably helped keep the violence to a minimum and avoid a large-scale riot.

While no scholar has necessarily undertaken a project that shows the tactical discussions after the Birmingham bombing, such discussions are not new. King and
Robert F. Williams\textsuperscript{25} engaged in a highly publicized debate discussing their tactics in 1959. Nevertheless hopefully the reader retains three key points from this section. Firstly, activists debated over non-violence and armed self-defense as viable tactics after the bombing. Secondly, armed self-defense did not solely appeal to Muslims and nor did non-violence solely appeal to Christians. Rather occasionally Christians endorsed armed self-defense and Muslims endorsed non-violence. I will talk more about this nuance in Chapter Three. Thirdly, the armed self-defense movement contained violent rhetoric that did not yield a lot of violent action. These latter two points are some of the various nuances that I will explore when looking at “Mississippi Goddam” by Nina Simone and “Alabama” by the John Coltrane Quartet. While each aligns itself with a specific tactic in 1963, I hope to provide a unique musical way of listening to each song and demonstrate how the music can illuminate various contradictions and complexities within the Civil Rights Movement.

\section*{Chapter One Notes}

\footnote{For an overview on violence in 1963 see Herbert Shapiro, \textit{White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988), 445 – 460.}


\footnote{The only other event to my knowledge that impacted two jazz musicians in the same way occurred during the Attica Prison Riots in 1971. Shortly after saxophonist Archie Shepp wrote “Attica Blues” and Mingus wrote “Remember Rockefeller at Attica.”}


In his article, Fairclough argues that studies by scholars of Martin Luther King Jr. such as David J. Garrow and Elliot M. Zashin can mislead the reader. While they argue that King’s non-violent strategy fell into two phases (a pre-1963 persuasive strategy and a post-1963 coercive strategy), Fairclough argues that King used persuasion and coercion in tandem throughout his Civil Rights career. See Adam Fairclough, "Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Quest for Nonviolent Social Change,” *Phylon* 47.1 (1986).

Martin Luther King Jr., "Eulogy for the Martyred Children" (September 18, 1963), in *We Want Our Freedom*: *Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement* (Praeger: 2002), 164.

Ibid.


Ibid.


General, "Birmingham Negroes Divided On Tactics.”


General, "Birmingham Negroes Divided On Tactics."


"Blast Kills Negro Girls." *Kansas City Times*.

Most of the violence inflicted was by Whites towards Blacks. Sikora notes how before the day was over, racial violence had claimed the lives of two other Black youths. Sixteen-year-old James Robinson was shot in the back by police as he ran down an alley near the church, after a rock fight between Black and White teenagers. Police said Robinson had been part of a group of teenagers that threw rocks at police. In a suburb of
Birmingham about ten miles from the church, thirteen-year-old Virgil Ware was killed by a White teenager who had spent the afternoon at a segregationist rally. Ware was riding on the handlebars of a bicycle being pedaled by his brother when a red motorbike approached, decorated with Confederate insignia; witnesses reported no exchange of words or other provocation before a boy on the motorbike – a sixteen-year-old Eagle scout – pulled out a pistol and shot twice at Ware, killing him. Found in Frank Sikora, *The Birmingham Church Bombing Case*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1991), 14.

Chapter Two: “Mississippi Goddam” – Nina Simone

The Birmingham bombing dramatically influenced Simone’s career. For instance, before the Birmingham bombing, Nina Simone endorsed non-violence. As she writes: “like SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], I felt non-violence was the way forward in the early sixties because it seemed to get results, but I wasn’t committed to non-violence for ideological reasons like Dr. King’s organization, the SCLC.”¹ Not only did the Birmingham bombing dramatically alter Simone’s tactical orientation but influenced her music as well. Also before 1963, Nina Simone dedicated her musical career to folk and Broadway show-tunes songs as well as perfecting her classical piano repertoire. Yet in 1963 she admits “I stopped singing love songs because protest songs were needed.”² When Simone heard the news on September 15th she admitted in her biography that “the bombing of the little girls in Alabama and the murder of Medgar Evers were like the final pieces of a jigsaw that made no sense until you fitted the whole thing together.”³ Consequently, Simone went down to her garage to gather a load of tools and scrap to take back to her apartment. When her husband came home he saw Simone attempting to make a home-made pistol. Simone admits that “I had it in my mind to go out and kill someone, I didn’t know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years.” She adds that “the idea of fighting for the rights of my people, killing for them if it came to that, didn’t disturb me too much.” Yet, her husband stopped her and convinced her she only knew how to write music, not how to kill. An hour later, Simone came out of her apartment with the sheet music for “Mississippi Goddam,” her first “Civil Rights song.”⁴ Simone would ultimately premiere the song in 1964 at Carnegie Hall where Phillips
Records recorded the performance and subsequently released an album entitled *Nina Simone in Concert*.\(^5\)

“Mississippi Goddam,” which harbors much self-defense rhetoric, arose as a response to White violence in Black communities. Simone realized that “the Ku Klux Klan weren’t non-violent, and neither were the police, nor the government if they felt threatened.”\(^6\) She told her biographer Sylvia Hampton “down there they don’t need a reason to kill a nigger. They just do it. It doesn’t matter if you’re minding your own business. If the [W]hite man wants to have him some fun, hanging’s a sport for him. I know Martin [Luther King] says we need to be non-violent, but there’s times I just want to get a gun and shoot somebody, just to get it out of me, you know.”\(^7\) Later on in life she explains, “if I had the choice, I would have been a killer, without doubt! I would have taken up arms, I’d have gone down to the South, and I would have fought violence with violence. Blow by blow if I’d had the choice . . . I would have used arms. I am not non-violent.”\(^8\) Nina Simone’s inclinations toward armed self-defense also stemmed from her support for Islam in America. She writes:

I loved Dr. King for his goodness and compassion and – like everyone else – marveled at his speech during the March on Washington. But those words, in August 1963, came just eighteen days before the four young girls were blown to pieces in their church in Birmingham. Much as I liked the idea of the world being as one and wanted it to be true, the more I looked around, the more I learned, and the less I thought it would ever happen. It was the [B]lack Moslems, led by Malcolm X, whose talk of self-reliance and self-defense seemed to echo the distrust of [W]hite America that I was feeling.\(^9\)

In “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone’s lyrics express her rage and her desire to retaliate violently after the Birmingham bombing. Yet analyzing her music provides more interesting conclusions. Simone’s combination of playful and innocuous music with
serious lyrics disrupted a tradition of double meaning in African-American musical
tradition. Even more, this combination shocked the audience who attended “Mississippi
Goddam”’s premiere. Such shock demonstrates a specific evocation of Civil Rights
politics while foreshadowing a Black Power rhetoric to come.

Black music and theatre has made extensive use of double meaning as a
rhetorical device. In one sense, “double meaning” refers to how Black arts provide one
meaning for a Black audience while providing a different meaning for a White audience.
Edgar Clark notes how such double meaning existed mostly in Negro spirituals during
the antebellum period. He writes that “while the [W]hite hymn makers sang about
bursting the bonds and crossing over Jordan to freedom, which meant ‘the bonds of sin’
and ‘freedom from temptation,’ to the Negro they were interpreted as the real thing – real
bonds and real freedom.” Such double meaning in music continued into the 1960s.
Protest musicians and artists continued to use the Negro spirituals of antebellum and
reconstruction because “the texts and melodies were so ingrained in the [B]lack
American culture.” Groups such as the Freedom Singers then became “able to create new
metaphorical meanings and symbolic lyrics within familiar musical contexts.” For
example, “Go Tell it on the Mountain,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “Lift Every Voice
and Sing,” all have a religious meaning as well as a meaning that Civil Rights advocates
appropriated for contemporary use. Specifically “Go Down Moses”’s historical and
religious meaning celebrates Moses’s exodus from Egypt. Yet in the Civil Rights context,
protest singers interpreted the lyric “let my people go” not as freedom from the Israelites,
but as freedom from Jim Crow.
Black musical theatre used double meanings in the same way. As David Krasner discusses in his analysis of Bob Cole’s production of *A Trip To Coontown*, the music in the musical comedy utilizes double meaning as a musical trope. His analysis of the song, “No Coons Allowed,” demonstrates how double meaning works. In the song, the protagonist, a Black male, wants to show his girlfriend around town. However, each place he tries to patronize displays a sign that says “No Coons Allowed.” Krasner claims that “on the one hand, [W]hite audiences probably received the text of ‘No Coons Allowed!’ as a particular joke on a foolish African-American who momentarily lost sight of his subordinate status; on the other hand, the parody of American racism was probably not lost on [B]lack audiences.”13 While such double meaning existed in Black musical theatre Simone abandoned this tradition while writing “Mississippi Goddam.” Her combination of music and lyrics show how she breaks away from double meaning rhetoric to advance social change. Simone fills her lyrics full of rage while her music sounds playful and innocent.

Musically, “Mississippi Goddam” sounds like a classic show tune from a musical theatre production. Three separate musical devices help create this unique sound: the piano vamp at the song’s introduction; the up-tempo drum beat and syncopated rhythm in the piano and drums; and the delayed cadential resolution. If this weren’t enough to convey the song’s “show tune” credentials, indeed Simone herself declares to the audience at her Carnegie Hall premiere that “Mississippi Goddam” is a “show-tune.”14

The piano vamp and its function in “Mississippi Goddam”’s introduction resembles the function and sound of vamps in music theatre. Often in a musical production, the piano will vamp – or repeat – a short musical phrase while the actors on
stage engage in dialogue before a song. The repetition provides a musical backing for the actors while also allowing them to converse freely. For instance, in “Cop Song”- from Mark Hollman’s 2001 musical Urinetown - officers Lockstock and Barrel discuss the main character’s expulsion to Urinetown. While they converse, a piano vamp plays in the background. Once they finish their dialogue, they begin singing and the piano follows – no longer vamping but playing the song’s chords. Simone uses a similar effect. For instance, she vamps her piano while verbally introducing the audience to her song. She states, “the name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam . . . and I mean every word of it.” The piano vamp allows Simone to speak out of time with the music while still providing musical accompaniment. In this way, it sounds very similar to vamps in musical theatre, which achieve the same result.

The syncopated rhythm in the piano and drums also evokes the sound of ragtime – music that preceded jazz as well as modern musical theatre. Ragtime songs such as “Maple Leaf Rag” or the “Entertainer” made extensive use of stride piano: a piano technique that arose in the Ragtime era. Stride piano relies on the pianist playing low bass notes on beats 1 and 3 and jumping higher on the piano to play chords on beats 2 and 4. While Western music stresses beats 1 and 3, African musical influences in the States encouraged musicians to stress beats 2 and 4. The strong piano chords which sound on beats 2 and 4 then provide syncopation that rhythmically drives not only ragtime, but musical theatre and “Mississippi Goddam” as well. For instance “Mein Herr” from the 1966 musical Cabaret includes a piano vamp at the piece’s beginning as well as a fast, syncopated piano section whose accompaniment sounds very similar to the stride piano influence in “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone’s piano playing includes stride piano as
she plays bass notes on beats 1 and 3 and chords on beats 2 and 4. The drums also reinforce this rhythmic syncopation by playing the bass drum on beats 1 and 3 and the higher pitched snare drum on beats 2 and 4. Such syncopation is not explicitly unique to musical theatre. Yet the use of stride piano, which uses syncopation and the usually fast tempo synonymous with ragtime, suggest similarities between musical theatre and “Mississippi Goddam.”

![Mississippi Goddam Score](image)

**Figure 2: Simone's Syncopation**

Finally, Simone’s cadential delay provides tension and excitement typical of important songs in a musical. In simple terms, a musical cadence consists of two chords played in sequence that provide a sense of resolution or musical pause. The most easily recognizable example of a cadence occurs during church hymns: the “Amen” often sung to conclude a hymn. The vowel “A” occurs on the first of the tensitional musical chords in a cadence while “-men” occurs on the second, resolving one. In “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone toys with the listeners’ expectations and delays the cadential resolution. In all the
choruses except the last, Simone sings, “everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam.” In these instances, the lines “everybody knows about Mississippi” are all on the first of the two chords of the cadence; in this case a D-dominant. The second resolving chord, a G-major, sounds while Simone sings “Goddam.” In the song’s last chorus, however, Simone delays the cadence. She sings “everybody knows about Mississippi” and instead of finishing with Goddam, she repeats the phrase. She sings “everybody knows about Alabama.” She delays the cadence once more by singing “everybody knows about Mississippi” one more time. All these lines take place on the D chord which provides tension that desires the resolution of the G chord. Only after these additional two iterations of “everybody knows” does Simone sing “Goddam.” Extra iterations of the D to G cadential figure appear at the song’s end to solidify the ending and make it exciting. For example, the move from D to G (a falling 5th) provides the resolution that we expect in Western music. Secondly, the F-sharp in the D chord provides the leading tone to the tonic G. This section sounds very much like the finale “One” to the 1975 musical *A Chorus Line*. The song includes a very similar cadence delay as the chorus sings “she’s the…she’s the…she’s the...best!” Such a delay intensifies the cadence. Not only does this strong cadence resemble musical theatre but, as I argue later, it evokes certain armed self-defense political sentiments.
Figure 1: Simone's prolongation of D chord and delay to the resolving G

If these three musical examples do not convince the listener, Simone made

“Mississippi Goddam”'s resemblances to musical theatre overtly known. During the
song, she declares to her audience that the piece is a show-tune. I believe Simone highlights the show-tune aspect of her song in order to elicit a specific response from her White Carnegie Hall audience at the song’s debut in 1964.

A photograph Alfred Wertheimer took of Nina Simone in 1965 at Carnegie Hall sheds light on the attendees’ race. While two Black concertgoers sat in the front row, most of the audience appears White. Even though Alfred took the picture in 1965 and Nina Simone premiered “Mississippi Goddam” in 1964, it’s safe to assume the crowd’s racial make-up was similar in both years. I suggest the White audience attending Nina Simone’s concert in 1964 arrived with two notions. First, Black musical history and double meaning probably resided in their memory. Secondly, they were not expecting “Mississippi Goddam”’s message to emanate from a Black woman in that particular venue.

Thus, when they first hear “Mississippi Goddam”’s piano vamp and syncopation, the audience expects to hear an innocuous song similar to what an earlier White audience might have experienced with “No Coons Allowed.” When Simone first begins her song, she states, “the name of this song is ‘Mississippi Goddam,’ and I mean every word of it.” The audience laughs in return. The next time Simone addresses her audience, she declares, “this is a show tune, but the show hasn’t been written for it yet.” The audience responds with the same comfortable laughter.

However, her song makes an important modulation to the relative minor. No longer does Simone play the chorus in a cheerful G major. Instead she plays in E minor while singing her lyrics. The next time she addresses her audience she asks “I bet you thought I was kidding, didn’t you?” This time, the audience does not respond with
laughter. After hearing her verse, the audience no longer reacts in a playful way.

Simone’s lyrics help create such discomfort. While double meaning in Black music and theatre avert forthright displays of political and emotional thought, Simone makes her politics and emotions regarding Civil Rights explicitly known to her audience.

Simone takes direct aim with her lyrics. She does not use double meaning, but offers a single, piercing meaning sent straight to her listeners. Politically she critiques the integrationist and non-violent movement. In one way, she expresses her desire to maintain physical separation from White America. For example she shows how she does not belong in White America when she sings in the first verse “I don’t belong here. I don’t belong there.” In the final refrain she exclaims, “you don’t have to live next to me. Just give me my equality.” In a second way, she expresses her disgust at cultural integration - or as she sings in her song - “beautification.” For instance, she sings in the second verse “you lied to me all these years. You told me to wash and clean my ears. Talk real fine just like a lady and you’d stop calling me Sista Sadie.”

As Melanie E. Bratcher writes, Simone “believed that if she ‘cleaned [her] ears’ and ‘talked real fine just like a [W]hite lady,’ she would gain social privilege. The trick, however, was that no matter how well she assimilated White etiquette standards, her dreams of achieving social equality would still be deferred.” In “Mississippi Goddam,” some of Simone’s reasons for discontent stem from what she finds to be the integrationist movement’s unproductivity.

According to Simone, King and his movement had not achieved equality fast enough for her. In the song’s bridge, Simone and her band engage in a call and response section that discusses the integrationist movement’s ineffectiveness. Simone sings about
how her community has been “washing the windows” and “picking the cotton.” In the second bridge she mentions Black “mass participation” and “deep segregation” as well as “doing things slow” and “reunification.” After each of these lines that Simone sings, her band chants, “go slow.” This chant critiques the speed King’s movement takes in achieving social equality. Such gradualism probably helped to foster her armed-self defense and separatist beliefs; beliefs she thought would achieve Black equality quicker and more effectively.

While she makes her politics opposing integration known, she also makes known her politics on armed-self defense. Initially, in her first chorus she sings about how she has “stopped believing in prayer.” Such comments could relate to her rejection of Dr. King’s non-violent and Christian influenced movement. Instead of embracing Dr. King’s non-violent views, she demonstrates her violent reactions by saying “oh, but this whole country is full of lies. You're all gonna die and die like flies.” Emotionally, Simone uses profanity in order to distance herself from Dr. King’s non-violent movement. As Daphne A. Brooks writes “the profanity that serves as the central theme of ‘Mississippi Goddam’ distances Simone and her composition from conventional, faith-based protest music performed by activist peers—from the SNCC Freedom Singers to Fannie Lou Hamer.”

As Tammy L. Kernodle writes “the song was not a subtle reading of the struggle for freedom veiled in Christian-based lyrics of transcendence, such as the freedom songs popularized at mass meetings or by ensembles like the SNCC Freedom Singers, Selma Freedom Choir, Nashville Quartet, or other artistic factions that arose within the larger movement.” Such profanity, in addition to its straightforward rejection of double
meaning, distances her from other protest music. At the same time, her rejection of double meaning has a profound impact on the audience.

Simone critiqued the tradition that allowed White audiences at Black musical theatre to laugh at Black performers. Simone’s innocuous Broadway sound lulls the listeners to laughter while at the same time recalling a Broadway musical tradition. While listening to Simone’s piano vamps, the audience recalls the protagonist in “No Coons Allowed.” They expect Simone’s music to allow the same comfortable jokes that White attendees made towards Blacks on stage. Yet she did not allow such comfort. Instead she powerfully attacked them with single meaning lyrics. In this way she demonstrated to her audience that the Civil Rights in 1963 is no longer a “show.” In that year, the Civil Rights came under attack and “Mississippi Goddam” showed her White audience that Blacks were no longer going to act complacent. Rather than behaving like the silly and restrained protagonist in “No Coons Allowed,” Simone shows that she will be straight-forward and honest. Such straightforwardness, as Ruth Feldstein has argued, helped Nina Simone provide the rhetoric to the Black Power movement that would arise two years later. However, her single meaning lyrics did not exclusively shock the audience. The combination of Simone as a woman and her performance venue shocked her audience as well.

Onstage, Simone demanded a certain formality of herself, her band, and her audience. Such formality stemmed from her desire to become a classical pianist as a child and her embrace of classical music’s code of conduct. Perhaps the audience arrived to her concert expecting a certain level of female appropriateness typical of both Simone and Carnegie Hall performers. Yet in a way, she defied their expectations. The public did not
expect a woman to articulate “Mississippi Goddam”’s message. As Ruth Feldstein summarizes: “The principal objection raised by most critics to the ‘Mississippi Goddam’ song was apparently not so much its militant lyrics, but the fact that an entertainer, and a woman entertainer at that, had dared put them to music.” 29 For instance, an observer suggested that “Mississippi Goddam” was banned by radio stations because a woman “dared put her feelings into songs.” 30 Another critic suggested that what made “Mississippi Goddam” so powerful was that it “sounded as if they should have been written by “some [B]lack [P]ower disciple of the caliber of Leroi Jones or Stokely Carmichael,” while in fact they were the words of a “woman who has become one of the show world’s most popular and controversial entertainers.” 31 “Mississippi Goddam”’s message definitely audibly shocked the audience and the nation. Furthermore the location of the song’s premiere and the singer’s gender definitely jolted the listeners as well. A final shock arises from Simone’s musical cadence.

As discussed above, Simone delays her cadence. Yet when it arrives, it is clear, unambiguous and powerful. The F-sharp leading to the G as well as the dropping fifth (D to G in the bass) help create this strong cadence. I hear such power as a certain call to action. Perhaps the cadence suggests armed self-defense’s possible triumphs in the face of future violence. Or perhaps the cadence suggests a powerful ending to placid Black-White relations that I discussed previously in Black musical theatre. Yet if anything, the cadence represents the conviction with which Simone sings her lyrics. Such conviction certainly foreshadows the Civil Rights’ increased focus and reliance on the platform Simone advocates in her lyrics. 32 As I discuss in the next chapter, the John Coltrane
Quartet’s “Alabama” offers a much more ambiguous, open-ended sense of musical cadence.

Yet, as Simone’s autobiography shows, Simone did not actually resort to violence. Rather she wrote “Mississippi Goddam” which in various ways encouraged armed self-defense in the face of violence. This disconnect between physical action and rhetoric resembles the problems that faced the Nation of Islam. While both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X delivered animated speeches promoting self-defense in general, they rarely – if ever – advocated its use when applicable. This passivism received harsh criticism from Black Muslims who found such inaction unproductive. While self-defense advocates critiqued the non-violent movement’s passivism in the face of violence, Simone shows how sometimes self-defense rhetoric does not indicate actual violence. Rather Nina Simone, the Black Muslims, and other self-defense advocates who did not resort to violence demonstrate how despite their rage they consciously decided not to act violently.

In conclusion, Simone illuminated many armed self-defense sentiments in 1963. At the same time “Mississippi Goddam” provides a nuanced view of armed self-defense. It not only articulates the movement’s beliefs and aspirations, but also keenly foreshadows Black Power developments after 1963. Two musical characteristics help evoke such beliefs. First, the combination of her playful music with serious lyrics. Secondly, her strong and powerful cadence. To the listeners, both are forthright musical statements that reinforce Simone’s self-defense lyrics. At the same time she hints at the problems facing self-defense supporters. Primarily, she demonstrates the wide range of emotions civil rights activists may hold during the movement. During the same time,
John Coltrane dealt with similar conflicts. Yet “Alabama” conveys different emotions and tactical responses after the Birmingham bombing than “Mississippi Goddam.”

Chapter Two Notes

3 Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 89.
4 Ibid., 89 – 90.
11 Ibid.
14 Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” *Nina Simone In Concert*.
15 Original Cast Recording, "Cop Song," *Urinetown*.
16 Original Soundtrack Recording. “Mein Herr,” *Cabaret*.
17 Rami Stucky, "Nina Simone Syncopation."
18 These comparisons with musicals that postdate “Mississippi Goddam” do not mean to serve as musical inspirations to Simone, but rather show the reader how her song sounds similar to other well known musicals. Original Cast Recording, “One (Finale),” *A Chorus Line*.
19 Rami Stucky, “‘Mississippi Goddam’ Chorus Transcription.”
20 Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” *Nina Simone in Concert*.

Ibid.

Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” *Nina Simone in Concert*.

Ibid.


Ruth Feldstein. "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal Of American History* 91.4 (2005): 1368 – 1369

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

For more on the relationship between Nina Simone and Black Power rhetoric see Ruth Feldstein. "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal Of American History* 91.4 (2005).

Chapter Three: “Alabama” – John Coltrane Quartet

Before 1963 John Coltrane’s music did not really focus on politics. Rather primarily between 1960 and 1963, Coltrane focused on more avant-garde music, perfecting his Eastern scales, and participating in the burgeoning free jazz movement.¹ Yet, like Simone, the bombing profoundly caused Coltrane and his quartet to alter their musical sound. As bassist Art Davis relates, the violence profoundly upset Coltrane. Davis recalls, “[Coltrane] was very conscious of what was happening when those girls were murdered in the bombing in Alabama. He was incensed- we talked about that. And for this to happen in a House of God and people were there worshipping God and for people to bomb a church like that, he said, ‘that’s reprehensible. I’m livid with the hate that can happen in this country.’”² Similarly to Simone though, he channeled his anger towards music. On November 18, 1963, two months after the bombing in Birmingham, John Coltrane and his quartet recorded two songs at the Van Gelder Studio in Englewood Cliffs, NJ. In the studio, Coltrane dedicated one of these two songs, “Alabama,” to the bombing victims. Ultimately, Impulse! Records included one recorded take of “Alabama” on John Coltrane’s album, Live At Birdland, produced in 1963.³ While Coltrane confessed his lividness to Art Davis, his musical response seems anything but livid. In essence, Coltrane writes a eulogy for the victims and three musical devices help contribute to create such a requiem. The first arises from the song’s slow tempo. The second comes from Coltrane’s performance on the tenor saxophone and its specific timbre. Coltrane and pianist McCoy Tyner’s harmony is the third element that conveys a sense of open-ended sadness. While sadness does not overtly evoke a tactical response to
the bombing, I find that such sadness reflects the non-violence movement’s coercion and persuasion rhetoric.

“Alabama”’s slow tempo and sustained long notes help give the piece its eulogistic sound. Coltrane’s sustained notes dominate the melody and do not explicitly articulate a metric pulse. Tyner also sustains piano tremolos in the low octave. The rumbling produced by alternating on two notes quickly in the low register creates an ominous effect. Such an effect coupled with the already slow tempo give “Alabama” a funereal tone. Yet other musical characteristics such as timbre and harmony help achieve this effect as well.4

The tenor saxophone’s timbre helps to evoke the somberness surrounding the bombing. Especially at a time when Coltrane was developing his soprano saxophone technique, the switch to tenor sax sounds particularly notable. In fact, all tracks on Live at Birdland except “Alabama” include Coltrane’s soprano saxophone playing. Ben Ratliff writes how musicians suggested that Coltrane heard Bismillah Khan, the north Indiana virtuoso of the reed instrument called the shenai and took up the soprano saxophone to imitate the shenai’s sound.5 However, his switch to the tenor saxophone does not provide the listener with the shrill sound of either the shenai or the soprano saxophone. In fact, I think the soprano saxophone would fail to provide the sound Coltrane wanted for this specific circumstance. As he described to Frank Kofsky, the tenor’s timbre sounded more powerful than the soprano saxophone. In other interviews he described it as heavy compared to the “lightness of the soprano.”6 The listener can easily relate his choice in the tenor as a manifestation of his heavy-heartedness after the bombing. In addition to
slow tempo and choice in timbre, Coltrane and his pianist McCoy Tyner’s harmonic choices contribute to “Alabama”’s somberness.

Finally, the use of quartal harmony and the Dorian musical mode create harmonic ambiguity. In music theory quartal harmony consists of chords based on the intervals of fourths. Quartal harmony differs from more common tertian harmony that includes the third of the chord. Thirds establish the tonality of a piece (for instance whether or not the piece is in a major key or a minor key). Quartal harmony, on the other hand, does not achieve this effect. Thus, the omission of thirds and the increased presence of fourths do not ground a piece in any specific tonality. Instead, the music can seem to move through different tonalities. In “Alabama,” Tyner trills his first chord of fourths (G and C). He ends up sustaining this same chord for a while (around 32 measures) as Coltrane’s saxophone plays the melody.
Initially, Tyner’s harmony does not establish any specific tonality. Later (in measure 31), he plays descending parallel fifths. At the same time, Jimmy Garrison’s bass comes in for the first time and the whole band plays Coltrane’s melodic and rhythmic figure in unison. This coupled with Tyner’s parallel fifths create a particular notable effect since this section provides the one instance of clear harmonic motion. Measure 31 (and when it returns towards the piece’s conclusion) signals the final cadence.
and the song’s end. Yet, with Tyner’s quartal accompaniment, the piece does not seem to fully conclude thus creating a peculiar sound.

![Figure 5: McCoy Tyner's Perfect Fifths At The Cadence](image)

In addition to Tyner’s quartal harmonies, certain musical modes help create a somber sound. In particular, the Dorian mode in “Alabama” helps establish the lack of musical finality and lack of telos in the music. In music, modes are just scales with different melodic characteristics. For instance, the major (Ionian mode) and minor scales (Aeolian mode) that comprise a majority of Western music are each a different mode. The other five modes in Western music create entirely different sounds and feelings.
“Alabama” is in C Dorian mode. The Dorian mode creates a minor feel yet lacks a certain scalar member, called the leading tone. The leading tone in Western music importantly creates the tension and release that resolves at a cadence, creating a sense of finality. The modality of “Alabama” does not offer the tension and release that characterizes modern Western music. In “Alabama”’s case, the leading tone would be a B-natural which would resolve to the C a half-step above. However, because the C-Dorian scale utilizes B-flat, the movement from B-flat to C in the saxophone does not achieve the same sense of finality that B-natural to C would. This, coupled with the lack of a third in the final chord by Tyner (who uses instead intervals of a perfect fourth) does not give a sense of unambiguous direction and finality to the music.
This cadence has an unusual effect on the listener’s ears. For instance Coltrane scholar Lewis Porter writes “whereas triads have a certain earthy familiarity, fourth chords are abstract. Perhaps because they avoid the familiar ring of popular songs, which are based on triads, fourth chords seem to add to the spiritual quality of Coltrane’s music.” I agree with Porter that fourths sound spiritual, yet I add that such spirituality sounds somber as well. Musicologist Susan McClary provides some remarks in that regard. She writes that modal songs do not bring about “unambiguous triumph; triumph..."
would be easy to simulate, since this is what tonal pieces conventionally do."\textsuperscript{15} Rather, she writes, the conclusion represents “staying in motion for the sake of survival, resisting closure wherever it lies in wait.”\textsuperscript{16} In this way, “Alabama” does not seem to move in a specific musical trajectory. I argue this harmonic fluttering helps give the piece its somber tone.

While the song does not make political statements to the extent that “Mississippi Goddam” does, “Alabama” still affects the listener to make political or social choices. Firstly, I find the somberness almost synonymous with hopelessness. The bombing does not suggest closure or triumph in race relations. Rather it just signals a continuation of events in Alabama related to the Civil Rights Movement; events which include the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the Freedom Rides, Martin Luther King Jr.’s arrest in Birmingham, and finally the Birmingham bombing. In contrast, Simone makes a break with such history. She’s offering rhetoric and ideas that will hopefully insure these historical events never happen again. Perhaps Coltrane’s cadence which “stays in motion” is a brief reflection on past events and not necessarily a statement towards future possibilities.

Secondly, the open-ended cadence seems conciliatory. “Alabama” does not imply anger and bitterness towards Whites. In some way it invokes the comments of victim Denise McNair’s parents. The \textit{New York Amsterdam News} reported how “there was no bitterness in Denise’s parents” and “they sought no vengeance through arming of Negroes to take life for life taken.” Commenting on the possibility of armed self-defense, Denise’s father remarked “such an effort would be fruitless . . . I’m not for that, what good would Denise have done with a machine gun in her hands?”\textsuperscript{17} Such conciliation
after a bombing mimics the non-violence movement’s beliefs. As activist Anne Braden commented, “the aspect of nonviolence which provides the real hope in human affairs is the implicit faith of the one who practices nonviolent protest that there can and will be an ultimate reconciliation with people who now are opponents, or the enemy.” Perhaps Coltrane’s “open” cadence suggests literal future openness between Blacks and Whites.

Finally, the final cadence does not call for specific Black action as it does in “Mississippi Goddam.” Rather, I find such hopelessness and conciliation to invoke the listener’s sympathies. In this way, the song’s sadness operates in the same way King’s non-violence does. Both want to coerce or persuade the listener to intervene on the four girls’ behalf. Just as King’s insistence on pacifism ensured the girls didn’t die in vain, Coltrane hopes his peaceful and moderate cadence will arouse the listener’s sympathies. Yet while “Alabama” expresses all these non-violent and peaceful sentiments, as Art Davis recalled, Coltrane was livid after the bombing. How did such lividness transfer into such a conciliatory song as “Alabama?” As mentioned in Chapter One, Tyner and Coltrane expressed their pacifism through unique religious sect.

Specifically, Tyner and Coltrane’s participation in the Ahmadiyyah sect of Islam demonstrate their interest in pacifism. The religion’s founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, justified his pacifist views through his interaction with British rule in India where he believed that if he remained peaceful he would remain on good terms with the British. For example, Ahmadis expressed their pacifism through a “jihad of words.” Instead of defining jihad in militaristic and violent terms, Ahmadis interpreted jihad as a “spiritual war that involved prayer duels and arguments about faith.” McCoy Tyner practiced Islam devoutly and introduced Islam to Coltrane in Philadelphia probably around 1943.
However, Coltrane did not practice Islam exclusively like his pianist. He also participated in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Coltrane’s Christian beliefs stem from his North Carolinian childhood dominated by southern Methodist culture. Bill Cole, one of Coltrane’s biographers, notes how when he arrived in Coltrane’s hotel room one day, Coltrane had “three or four different Bibles, and [Coltrane] showed us a copy of the two-volume Negro Spirituals book which he said he read through numerous times.”

Such religiosity - Christian, Muslim, or otherwise - might contribute to his feelings on the Vietnam War when he answered, “I dislike war, period.” Coltrane’s drummer, Elvin Jones, also believed in non-violence. He makes known how his non-violence stemmed from his involvement in the church, which he believed a vessel for passive thought. He explains:

I was brought up in a climate of church music. I can still hear those tambourines ringing in those churches. That was sweet music. Music is not hateful – it’s loving, the opposite to what some people seem to think it should be. The only hateful music in history has been the sound of war drums – and, man, that wasn’t jazz. That was a military band.

Coltrane and Jones’s Christian upbringing and continued interest in Christianity probably linked pacifism and Christianity together. In this way, the link does not differ much from the Birmingham clergy after the bombing who linked pacifism and Christianity as well. Secondly, Coltrane and Tyner also practice a form of Islam that preached non-violence. This point is unique considering America’s conception of Black Islam at the time. In 1959 Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax produced a documentary entitled *The Hate That Hate Produced*. While Lomax and Wallace unfairly portray Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X’s, the American people who watched the documentary unequivocally linked understood Black Islam with violent tendencies. While the quartet did not address their
non-violent views specifically related to the Birmingham bombing like Simone, their beliefs demonstrate how they align themselves with such pacifist thought. Furthermore, the mixture between Coltrane’s lividness and the quartet’s pacifist beliefs and peaceful song demonstrate the range of emotions that effected Civil Rights activists.

In conclusion, I view Coltrane’s music to voice the many hardships already faced by the African-American population in general and the community of Birmingham in specific. While “Alabama” in various ways evokes such non-violence, it also demonstrates how conflicted Coltrane appeared after the bombing. While the violence angered both Simone and Coltrane, only Simone responded with furious lyrics set to sweet, innocuous sounds of a Broadway musical. Coltrane instead creates music with a much less confrontational sound. Other contrasts also appear between “Alabama” and “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone hopes to make a break with the past while offering new rhetoric, new techniques, and essentially a new future for Black activism that she does not see united with White America. Yet, I believe “Alabama” evokes contrary reconciliatory and non-violent sentiments. His tenor sax, slow tempo, and quartal and Dorian harmonies all evoke such somberness and consequently pacifist beliefs. Perhaps the open-ended cadence signals the possibility for literal openness: a unity that King and the non-violence movement aspired to achieve. If anything, “Alabama” serves as a beautiful testament to non-violence’s undeterred prevalence in a house of God.

Chapter Three Notes

1 For more on Coltrane’s various musical stages see Karlton E. Hester, The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane’s Spontaneous Composition in a Racist


6 Chris DeVito and John Coltrane, Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2010), 92.

7 Quartal harmony does not only have to include intervals of fourths. Since intervals of fifths are just the inverse of fourths, fifths can also comprise quartal harmony. For instance, the interval between a low “C” and the “F” above is a fourth. If the “F” becomes the low note, a fifth above the “F” would become a “C.”

8 For instance, Samuel Barrett describes modal music’s tonal ambiguity when he discusses Miles Davis’s composition “So What” from Davis’s album, Kind of Blue. In the song, pianist Bill Evans plays chords comprised of three perfect fourths and a major third which resemble the chords Tyner would later play with Coltrane. Barrett concludes that in “So What,” “rather than a simple Im7, what Evans plays could therefore again be described as a sus-chord, which can be heard as either Dmin3, or Emin9/D or G13/D. Such ambiguity leads to difficulties in describing Evans’ voicing in functional terms.” See Samuel Barrett, “‘Kind of Blue’ and the Economy of Modal Jazz,” Popular Music 25.2 (2006): 197.


10 Curtis Swift and Rami Stucky, "John Coltrane: Alabama."

11 Ibid.

12 Recall the chapter on Nina Simone. Her F-sharp to G leading tone functions the same way that B-natural to C would.

13 Curtis Swift and Rami Stucky, "John Coltrane: Alabama."


15 As McClary and musicologist Karol Berger note, linking musical finality with “triumph” arrives out of a European idea in the 17th and 18th century. Developments such as the French Revolution fueled a new sense of progress that disrupted the repeatability of European political systems. Eighteenth century separation of church and state also fueled the idea of teleology. No longer did Europeans depend on religion to alter to their lives, rather it became the agenda for humans to make and remake their world. Such thought translated to music the “goal-oriented tonality” of Mozart and sonata-allegro as a musical form in the 18th century provided “the illusion of narrative.” See Susan McClary Feminine Endings, (University of Minnesota: 1991); Karol Berger, Bach’s Cycle,
McClary’s analysis (160) focuses on pop singer Madonna’s modal song “Live to Tell” which discusses Madonna’s childhood problems and deceit.


For more on Coltrane and Tyner’s relationship with Islam see Chris DeVito, Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews, (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2010).


Porter, John Coltrane, 25.


Louis Lomax and Mike Wallace, The Hate That Hate Produced (WNTA-TV, 13 July 1959, Documentary).
Chapter Four: Conclusion

“Alabama” and “Mississippi Goddam” show the two paths for the Civil Rights Movement’s future after 1963: one non-violent and one that promotes armed self-defense. In “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone employed race, gender, and performance expectations to present her Civil Rights magnum opus. She articulated her message through the manipulation of cultural and aesthetic expectations the audience brought to the performance. As a Black woman on stage in the renowned Carnegie Hall her audience expected her properness and her concert pianist demeanor. At the same time, the audience heard her innocuous-sounding music and expected a playful show-tune that would comfort them. Yet Simone did not provide that to them. Her lyrics overtly shocked and scared them. Her entire performance in a sense became more than just a musical performance but rather a larger political statement to her audience. She stated to her White Carnegie Hall audience that in the aftermath of the Birmingham bombing Whites should no longer feel comfortable. Rather, she threatened their comfort and possible understanding of Black and White relations during the movement. According to Simone, post-1963 would no longer be a “show” that White America could ignore. Rather Simone hopes the violence in 1963 will bring about radical and proactive consequences. At the same time, “Mississippi Goddam” provides another nuance. Simone showed her conflicted feelings of rage and love. At once she proclaimed her violent desires yet at the same time she did not act on them. Rather she wrote music. Such conflicts and contradictions became notable in the armed self-defense movement.

Similarly to Nina Simone, John Coltrane demonstrated conflicted emotions. Coltrane proclaimed that the bombing made him livid, yet he wrote a very peaceful eulogy for the four young, female victims. His harmonies, instrumental timbre, and slow tempo all help create his somber tune. Yet such somberness can also express a sense of hope and hopelessness. Unlike
“Mississippi Goddam” which makes a strong and declaratory statement to change the future, Alabama’s somber tone seems to recall all the tragedies Alabama has suffered throughout its struggle against racism. At the same time, its attempt to persuade and coerce the listener to act on the girls’ behalf signals a sense of hope as well. Similarly to King’s non-violent tactics, Coltrane hopes that his peaceful music will invoke the listener’s sympathy and such sympathy will consequently quell future violence.

In conclusion, these two pieces reflect the multiple nuances, complexities, and contradictions inherent in these two difficult choices taken in response to an even more difficult circumstance: the persistent racism African Americans faced in mid-20th century America. As such, I hope that I have demonstrated the importance of examining the work of jazz musicians during the Civil Rights Era. As a rich and polysemous art form, jazz music offers a complex and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning and feelings that – when examined closely – can deepen our understanding of this era.
Appendix: Color Images in Black and White

Mississippi Goddam

Nina Simone
Rami Stucky

Figure 1: Simone's prolongation of D chord and delay to the resolving G
Mississippi Goddam

Nina Simone
Rami Stucky

Figure 2: Simone's Syncopation
Figure 4: McCoy Tyner's Perfect Fourths
Figure 5: McCoy Tyner's Perfect Fifths At The Cadence
Figure 2: John Coltrane's "Bb to C" Cadential Figure
Works Cited
Lomax, Louis and Mike Wallace. *The Hate That Hate Produced*. WNTA-TV, 13 July 1959, Documentary.


