



TO BE FREE: THE REVOLUTIONARY MUSIC OF NINA SIMONE

**A One Night Only Concert Experience
at USC's Bovard Auditorium**

Monday, January 26, 2026 • 7:30 pm PT
Doors open at 6:45 pm

Bovard Auditorium, University of Southern California
3551 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089

Carl St.Clair, Conductor
Todd Simon, Musical Director, Trumpet

Produced by Jason King and Bronson Foster
Curated by Lara Downes, Jayson Jackson, and Jason King

In collaboration with **USC Visions & Voices** and
the **Recording Academy's Black Music Collective**

Part of the **USC Thornton School of Music Series**
Nina Simone: Beyond Category

ABOUT THE CONCERT

Performed by USC Thornton School of Music students, faculty, alumni, and special guests, this one-night-only concert celebrates Nina Simone's classical training and its profound influence on her expansive, genre-defying musical vision. From her early grounding in composers such as Bach and Czerny to her fearless fusion of blues, jazz, gospel, and classical traditions, Simone forged a singular musical voice that transcended genre to speak truth to power. Her artistry unfolded through original compositions and transformative re-imaginings of others' work, revealing a creative genius committed to freedom—personal, artistic, and collective.

At a moment when questions of artistic freedom and the role of culture in public life feel more urgent than ever, Nina Simone’s work resonates with renewed force. She confronted structural barriers throughout her career with uncompromising clarity, addressing civil and human rights struggles head-on and offering searing reflections on the complexities of Black life. Her insistence on artistic autonomy continues to challenge and inspire artists of all kinds navigating today’s turbulent landscape.

Co-curated and hosted by acclaimed pianist and curator Lara Downes, Oscar-nominated co-producer of *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Jayson Jackson, and USC Thornton School of Music Dean Jason King, this concert offers a powerful reimagining of Simone’s catalog—an artistic offering in the spirit of her liberation, transformation, and life lived “beyond category.” Simone simultaneously stands as an important artistic muse for Lara Downes’ national initiative, *The Declaration Project*.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Alice Smith (Vocalist)

Derrick Lawrence (Vocalist)

Gabby Samone (Vocalist)

Georgia Anne Muldrow (Vocalist)

Jimetta Rose (Vocalist)

Lara Downes (Piano)

Mykal Kilgore (Vocalist)

Nikka Costa (Vocalist)

Ron McCurdy (Trumpet, Vocalist)

Rufus Wainwright (Vocalist)

Sara Williams (Vocalist)

V.C.R (Vocalist)

THE TO BE FREE BAND

Jeff Parker (Guitar)

Nedra Wheeler (Bass)

Nikki Campbell (Percussion)

Qur'an Shaheed (Piano/Keyboards)

Ruby Simon (Baritone and Tenor Saxophone)

Sly5thAve (Tenor Saxophone, Bass Clarinet, Flute)

Tony Austin (Drums)

Kazeem Elebute (Trombone)

BACKGROUND VOCALISTS

Claudia Cunningham

Lydia Scott

Sara Williams

MEMBERS OF THE USC THORNTON SYMPHONY

Violin I

Anna Renton, Concertmaster

Yifei Mo

Dahae Shin

Ayman Amerin

Abigail Park

Isaiah Iny-Woods

Nathan Nguyen

Sara Yamada

Violin II

Maya Masaoka, Principal
Ariana O'Connell
Hyojeong Kim
Maya Lambright
Chloe Hong
Dominic Guevara
Ashlee Sung
Diana Dawydchak

Viola

John Czekanski, Principal
Solomon Leonard
Gloria Choi
Poppy Yu
Matthew Pakola

Cello

Madelynn Bolin, Principal
Miles Reed
Amy Jong
Nathan Choe
William Harris
Ernie Carbajal
Cheyoon Lee
Samuel Guevara

Bass

Julien Henry, Principal
Abigail Koehler
Micah Sommons

Harp

Zoe O'Shaughnessy

Flute

Luke Blancas
Seungbeom Oh
Aarushi Kumar

Oboe

Karen Hernandez

Clarinet

Alex Varvne
Andrei Bancos

Bassoon

Callahan Lieungh

Saxophone

Collin Juniper
Cameron Matutina
Joshua Hebert
Julianna Townley
Ezequiel Castaneda

Horn

Daniel Halstead
Grace Kim
Joe Oberholzer
Jean Smith

Trumpet

EJ Miranda
Derek Gong
Alex Drozd
Remy Ohara

Trombone

Avery Robinson
Terry Cowley
Sean Cooney
Harrison Chiang

Tuba

Steph Magera

Timpani

Xavier Zwick

Percussion

Preston Spisak
Cash Langhi
Chanhui Lim
Xavier Zwick

PROGRAM / SET LIST

(in alphabetical order, not show order)

African Mailman / Sinnerman (Nina Simone) – Arr. Todd Simon
Backlash Blues (Langston Hughes, Nina Simone) – Arr. Todd Simon
Baltimore (Randy Newman) – Arr. Vladimir Nikolov
Feeling Good (Anthony Newley, Leslie Bricusse) – Arr. Jochen Neuffer
Flo Me La (Nina Simone) – Arr. Todd Simon
Four Women (Nina Simone) – Arr. Tim Davies
Funkier Than a Mosquito's Tweeter (Alline Bullock)
Go to Hell (Morris Bailey, Jr.) – Arr. Sly5thAve
Horn of Plenty – Excerpt from *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (Langston Hughes, Ron McCurdy, Eli Brueggemann)
I Loves You Porgy (George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin) – Arr. Nina Simone
I Put a Spell on You (Jay Hawkins, Herb Slotkin)
I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free (Billy Taylor) – Arr. Ilja Reijngoud
Meet Me at Congo Square (Ron McCurdy)
Mississippi Goddam (Nina Simone) – Arr. Vladimir Nikolov
Ne Me Quitte Pas (Jacques Brel) – Arr. Sebastiaan Koolhoven
Piano Concerto in One Movement (Florence Price)
Strange Fruit (Abel Meeropol) – Arr. Todd Simon

SELECT BIOS

Derrick Lawrence is full-time professor at USC Thornton School of Music and an internationally acclaimed baritone who has performed on major opera stages throughout Europe and North America, including Zurich Opera House, the Royal Danish Opera, La Monnaie, Opera Lyon, Santa Fe Opera, and Houston Grand Opera. His repertoire spans more than 80 roles, from Mozart and Verdi to Wagner and Puccini. Lawrence has appeared in leading concert halls

worldwide, including Carnegie Hall and Concertgebouw Amsterdam, and has performed with major orchestras such as the Cleveland Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He trained at the North Carolina School of the Arts, Juilliard School, and Curtis Institute of Music, and is a winner of numerous international vocal awards.

Gabby Samone

Gabby Samone is a Baltimore-born vocalist whose powerful voice and emotive delivery are rooted in gospel, R&B, and classic soul. She first gained widespread attention through viral reinterpretations of R&B classics, earning recognition from artists including Jennifer Hudson, Fantasia Barrino, and Mariah Carey. She has performed at the Apollo Theater, opened for Keke Wyatt and Kelly Price, and made her theatrical debut in *Dreamgirls*. Gabby was a finalist on Season 23 of *American Idol* and has since appeared on *The Jennifer Hudson Show* and *NFL Sunday Night Football*.

Georgia Anne Muldrow

Georgia Anne Muldrow is a second-generation electronic musician, vocalist, songwriter, and producer raised in Los Angeles' Leimert Park. She has collaborated with artists including Erykah Badu, Flying Lotus, Anderson .Paak, Yasiin Bey, Meshell Ndegeocello, and Robert Glasper. Her Grammy-nominated album *Overload* and expansive catalog of more than 20 releases reflect a fiercely independent and genre-defying creative vision rooted in Afrocentric art technologies and experimental traditions.

Jason King

Jason King is Dean of the USC Thornton School of Music and a multi-disciplinary scholar, journalist, producer, and curator. He previously served as Chair and founding faculty member of NYU's Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music. His work spans music journalism, film, radio, and live performance, with contributions to *The New York Times*, *Pitchfork*, and *NPR Music*. Recent projects include producing *A Concert Tribute to Sylvester* at Lincoln Center, co-curating *The Hip-Hop Mixtape* exhibition at the GRAMMY Museum, and consulting on Morgan Neville's feature film *Piece by Piece*.

Jayson Jackson

Jayson Jackson is a producer of Tony Award-winning theater, Emmy Award-winning film, and Grammy Award-winning music. He guided Lauryn Hill through her landmark album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* and produced the Oscar-nominated documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?* He is currently producing a documentary on Gil Scott-Heron.

Lara Downes

Lara Downes is an American pianist, curator, and radio host honored as Classical Woman of the Year by NPR's *Performance Today*. She is creator and host of NPR's *AMPLIFY with Lara Downes* and a Billboard chart-topping recording artist. She is the creator of *The Declaration Project*, a national initiative reflecting on American identity through music ahead of the country's 250th anniversary, and serves as Creative Partner with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

Mykal Kilgore

Mykal Kilgore is an award-winning actor and Grammy- and NAACP Image Award–nominated singer-songwriter. His debut album *A Man Born Black* blends American roots music with jazz, soul, gospel, and Broadway storytelling. His theater credits include *The Wiz*, *Motown the Musical*, and *Hair*, with television appearances including *Jesus Christ Superstar Live*.

Nedra Wheeler

Nedra Wheeler is a bassist, vocalist, composer, and educator who has performed internationally for more than 25 years. A recipient of the Charles Mingus Jazz Artist Award and Jazz Legend of Los Angeles Award, she has collaborated with artists including Stevie Wonder, Ella Fitzgerald, Patrice Rushen, and Alice Coltrane. Her work spans jazz, R&B, pop, film, and contemporary composition, with credits including *La La Land* and *Malcolm X*.

Nikki Campbell

Nikki Campbell is a multicultural percussionist, teaching artist, and producer born in Colón, Panama and raised in Los Angeles. Her work centers Afro-Caribbean and African Diasporic traditions, emphasizing rhythm as a tool for healing and community connection. She has collaborated with artists including Stevie Wonder, Lila Downs, Aloe Blacc, and the Danilo Pérez Jazz Foundation.

Nikka Costa

Nikka Costa is a singer-songwriter known for her dynamic fusion of soul, funk, and rock. She emerged as a leading voice in the nu-soul movement with her debut album *Everybody Got Their Something*. She has toured and collaborated with artists including Prince, Lenny Kravitz, Coldplay, and D'Angelo and is renowned for her electrifying live performances.

Qur'an Shaheed

Qur'an Shaheed is an experimental pianist, poet, and composer based in Los Angeles. Trained in jazz, classical, and contemporary music, her work blends improvisation with neo-classical and neo-soul approaches. She composes for film and released her albums *Process* (2020) and *Pulse* (2025).

Ron McCurdy

Ron McCurdy is Associate Dean of Culture, Community, and Impact and Professor of Music at the USC Thornton School of Music. He is creator of *The Langston Hughes Project* and co-author of *The Artist Entrepreneur*. McCurdy is an active performer, educator, and interdisciplinary collaborator.

Ruby Simon

Ruby Simon is an 18-year-old baritone saxophonist who has worked with artists including Ziggy Marley and Cut Chemist and recorded on Lecrae's Grammy-winning album *Church Clothes 4*. She is a senior at Hamilton High School's Academy of Music & Performing Arts.

Rufus Wainwright

Rufus Wainwright is an acclaimed singer-songwriter and composer praised for his originality and vocal artistry. He has released ten studio albums and collaborated with artists including

Elton John, Joni Mitchell, and David Byrne. His recent works include the GRAMMY-nominated albums *Unfollow the Rules* and *Folkocracy* and the orchestral *Dream Requiem*.

Sly5thAve

Sly5thAve is a Grammy Award–winning composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist whose work bridges hip-hop, jazz, soul, and orchestral music. He has collaborated with artists including Prince, Stevie Wonder, and Questlove.

Todd Simon

Todd Simon is a trumpeter, arranger, producer, conductor, and educator whose collaborations span jazz, hip-hop, and orchestral music. He has worked with artists including Lauryn Hill, Kelis, Ziggy Marley, and Madlib. He is founder of Ethio Cali and the Angel City All-Star Brass Band.

V.C.R.

V.C.R. is a three-time Grammy-nominated Alt-R&B recording artist, composer, and violinist from Memphis, Tennessee. A USC Thornton alumna, she merges gospel roots, orchestral composition, and experimental rhythm into her signature “Cinematic Soul” sound. She has collaborated with artists including André 3000, Beyoncé, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

ABOUT USC THORNTON

Founded in 1884, the USC Thornton School of Music is the oldest continuously operating arts institution in Los Angeles and one of the premier music schools in the world. Combining the rigor of a top conservatory with the expansive opportunities of a leading research university, Thornton prepares students to excel as performers, composers, scholars, producers, educators, industry leaders, and innovators across classical, contemporary, popular, and screen-based music. The school has long been a pioneer in music education—launching some of the nation’s first programs in Recording Arts and Music Industry; building one of the world’s most comprehensive Screen Scoring programs; creating groundbreaking master’s degrees in Arts Leadership and Community Music; and reimagining classical training for 21st-century artists. Located in the global creative capital of Los Angeles, Thornton offers unmatched access to the entertainment industry, world-class artistic partnerships, and an ecosystem of cultural institutions that enable students to build professional careers before graduation. Ranked among the top music schools globally by outlets such as *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Billboard*, and a member of elite international networks including Seven Springs and PAMS, Thornton benefits from its place within the University of Southern California—one of the world’s leading research universities.

With more than 1,000 students across over twenty disciplines, Thornton is organized into three divisions—Classical Performance and Composition, Contemporary Music, and Research and Scholarly Studies—and offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees alongside artist diplomas, graduate certificates, and interdisciplinary minors. The school’s programs are supported by internationally renowned faculty, exceptional student ensembles, innovative

research centers, world-class facilities, and distinctive assets such as the Polish Music Center's globally significant collections. Graduates include Grammy, Emmy, Oscar, and BAFTA winners; leaders in performance, production, education, scholarship, and the music industry; and culture-defining artists across generations. Guided by its mission to cultivate "beyond category" musicians in the spirit of Duke Ellington, USC Thornton fosters a supportive, inclusive, and creatively liberated community where students develop multiple artistic identities and engage Los Angeles as both a laboratory and a launchpad. For 140 years, the school's blend of tradition, experimentation, collaboration, and excellence has shaped its reputation as a place where music is not only studied and mastered, but lived.

ARTWORK

Frank Gargiulio

THANK YOU

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