

by William Shea

**For hours and hours of excellent listening this holiday season, I recommend the following recordings:**

**The Complete Hank Williams  
Mercury 572:44**

In American popular music Hank Williams has reached the level of mythology which rivals Elvis Presley and The Beatles. Although other great and important country artists were around before Williams (e.g. Jimmy Rodgers, Roy Acuff), in the country field his music and persona hails from the highest of stages. Certainly after listening to Williams' musical output, from his first recording in December, 1946 until his death on January 1, 1953, one can clearly hear both the early markings of Elvis', Jerry Lee Lewis', Johnny Cash's brand of 1950s rock'n'roll (and I'll add even the Beatles early work), and the country conventions found in the music of Patsy Cline, early Willie Nelson, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard. One can even hear William's influence in the singing of some of today's purer country musicians—George Strait, Randy Travis, Alan Jackson, Dwight Yoakam—and in pretty damn near every artist who has ever sang a cry-in-your-beer, down-hearted ballad, including the likes of alt-country performers like Robbie Fulks and Joy Lynn White. From a musical-influence perspective, it comes as little surprise that Williams is a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame.

The new box set of Williams' music entitled "The Complete Hank Williams" is about the best box set one could give as a holiday gift. Produced by Colin Escott, Kira Floritia and the Country Music Foundation, and executive producer Luke Lewis, this collection on 10 cds brings together virtually every studio recording, radio and television show, every demo and recorded concert Williams ever performed. In 225 recordings, 53 previously unissued in the US, one will hear Williams like never before. Of course on the first four cds all the great standards are here: "Honky Tonkin'," "Move It On Over," "I Saw The Light", "Lovesick Blues", "Long Gone Lonesome Blues", "Hey Good Lookin'", "Jambalaya", "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry", "Your Cheatin' Heart," but more importantly on the final six cds one gets to hear most of them played live. This is where the power and presence of Williams comes out—his true influence.

For instance, in the Montgomery, Alabama demos recorded in 1947 we



hear a solo acoustic version of Williams' "Honky Tonk Blues" (boy oh boy, Dylan claims Woody Guthrie as his mentor; from this rendition, there is no doubt that he listened to Williams as well)—confidence yet restraint. By 1952, Williams plays a version at the Grand Ole Opry, replete with squealing women and raucous cheering, that is fast, powerful, loose and commanding. It is quickly apparent from the versions that Williams went from an artist who could write a very good song to a star who could rock with the best of them (and the connection to Elvis and rock'n'roll is obvious).

This excellent set adds two highlights: all the songs Williams sang with his wife Audrey—no other collection has ever included them; and two brilliant booklets that outline Williams' life and each recording session. Coupled with over 140 pictures (some very rare), The Complete Hank Williams is a great holiday gift.

**Nina Simone Anthology: The Colpix Years Rhino 150:45**

Born and raised in North Carolina, by the time Nina Simone started playing piano professionally in Atlantic City, NJ in the early fifties, she was already an accomplished pianist. Trained at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and Juilliard, her family's ambition was for Simone to be the first classical concert pianist. But, as she put it, her race stopped her from ever getting the chance. Instead she started playing in "joints" in Atlantic City, earning twice the money she had been making giving piano lessons. It was in Atlantic City where she first sang.

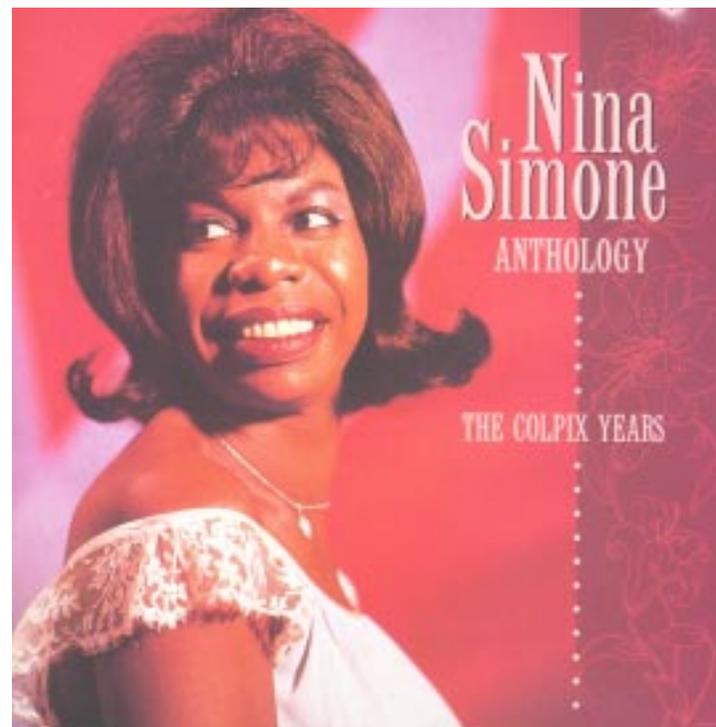
"It wasn't hard to [sing], to fit it to the improvisation because I used my voice as a third layer, complementing the other two layers, my right and left hands. ...I would simply sing the lyric and play around it, repeating single lines over

again, repeating verses, changing order of the words, It was fun." And her singing is very impressive, indeed!

Although Ms. Simone has been recording since the late 50's, now Rhino Records has released "Nina Simone Anthology, The Colpix Years," a cd collection of her music that admirably shows the power and brilliance of Simone—her jazz, soul, pop, classical-trained music. This anthology will make a wonderful gift for anyone who enjoys listening to first rate material, performed by an authentic voice of the time.

Taken from Simone's catalog between 1959 to 1964, the 40 songs clearly shows her extraordinary talent. During this period much of her record repertoire was taken from live concerts—Nina at Town Hall, Nina at Newport, Nina at the Village Gate, Nina Simone at Carnegie Hall. It is in these live recordings that we hear the inimitable style of Simone—her soul, musical power, and political stance. Although all the cuts have been technically upgraded for today's CD standards, there still are some technical glitches which were on the original recordings—sound fading in and out, sonic imbalance. But instead of interfering with the ambiance of the performances, they only add to the immediacy and vibrancy of Simone's work. One hears Nina Simone not re-dubbed and manipulated but undiluted as she played and sang before a reverent audience. And the result is often outstanding.

Billie Holiday was too tragic; Aretha Franklin too gospel; Diana Ross didn't get it; Odeta chose not to be overtly and aggressively political. But Nina Simone, she is the quintessential soul singer. The power in her deep alto, the power of the material she performed the perfectionist attitude she pushed on her audiences, the stage she used to promote her black feminism and black power, all made Simone the hallmark of Soul Music during the sixties. And the range of material on this anthology clearly shows Simone's prowess in this role. From standard saloon-music fare ("Willow Weep For Me," "The Other Woman," "Fine and Mellow"), through her folk repertoire ("Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," "Little Liza Jane," "Cotton Eyed Joe"), to her so-



cial material ("Work Song," Brown Baby"), this recording presents Simone at her best.

Although not recorded when she was with Colpix, I wish the producers could have found a way to include on this recording her magnificent "Mississippi Goddam" and "I Put a Spell on You". Even without them this is a must recording which will make a fine holiday gift. Pick both these worthy records up today. ☑