
Life of a Song

Lilac Wine – Nina Simone put her stamp on an intoxicating ballad

The singer was one of a handful who successfully navigated the song's wayward emotions



Nina Simone on a BBC TV show in 1966 © Redferns



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If you were to mix lilac flowers, sugar and yeast with a blend of nectar and acidic preservatives, you would have the syrupy beverage known as lilac wine. Often home-made, it sounds like a mythical libation, the fresh blossom of springtime distilled into a glass. Most, though, will associate it with the potent ballad that has been covered many times since the 1950s.

Whether it's the grand orchestral rendition performed by Eartha Kitt and Henri René or the more recent version released by Miley Cyrus, the song has shifted

through various moods. But none of the figures widely associated with the song actually wrote it.

“Lilac Wine” was composed by American stage actor, composer and writer James Shelton in 1950 for the Broadway musical *Dance Me a Song*, where it was sung by American folk singer Hope Foye. The show was a miniature revue which ran briefly to mild acclaim. Shelton is said to have been inspired by the little-known 1924 novel *Sorrow in Sunlight*, written by Ronald Firbank, in which the protagonist Miami Mouth circles her way through a room of guests offering lilac wine, described — as in the song — as “sweet and heady”.

In 1952 Eartha Kitt took the song off the stage and into the studio. In a rendition that features on her album *That Bad Eartha*, Kitt sings in a typically brooding, slinky tone over an orchestral backing arranged by composer Henri René.

The song was adopted by a string of singers at the tail-end of the jazz age.

Helen Merrill’s version is hushed as she croons over a sliding string arrangement which glistens in the background. Judy Henske begins singing in a deep, sultry tone which builds as she reaches the chorus and bellows the climactic line, “Where’s my love?”

In the summer of 1966 it struck perhaps its most resonant chord. Nina Simone’s version features on her album *Wild Is the Wind*; an 11-song compilation of “leftovers” from previous recording sessions, the album is often noted as one her best.

It begins as she strikes a minor chord on her piano, the opening lines sung as if they’re being spoken. Her delivery is relaxed and direct as the lyrics break through the gaps of silence between each chord progression. But her quiet rage carries a sense of foreboding. As the chorus rolls in, Simone and her band slide into an even tempo. For a moment, she lures the listener into a sweet inebriation — the softly stroked string of a double bass lies underneath her repeating piano chords, an ostinato lapping like a wave. The spell is broken as she demands: “Listen to me, why is everything so hazy?”, a major chord reverberating like a startling realisation.

Simone left a mark on the song which was difficult to follow, but many tackled it. It received its biggest mainstream success when it was covered by Elkie Brooks in 1978, peaking at number 16 in the UK charts. Her grandiose arrangement appears midway through her 1981 album *Pearls*. Brooks's bluesy voice soars over an animated orchestra balanced by a steady drum beat.



Jeff Buckley in 1991; he covered 'Lilac Wine' on his album 'Grace'© Jack Vartoogian/Getty Images

In 1994, Jeff Buckley's cover featured on his first and only studio album, *Grace*. In the early 1990s, Buckley acquired a cult following for his songs of love and loss, making him a more than appropriate candidate to receive the baton from Simone.

In Buckley's version, the ambient buzz of the amp can be heard before the opening line is played, charging the track with electricity. Unlike the meatier cuts in Buckley's repertoire, his band take a back seat on "Lilac Wine". The snare drum is gently brushed, the bass is subdued, while the electric guitar is stark and abrasive with a hint of reverb. Buckley's voice ranges between a velvety vibrato and a coarse tone that crescendos in the final chorus, ending with a burst of pleading sincerity.

[Miley Cyrus](#) is one of the few contemporary pop musicians to tackle the classic. Her 2012 cover is acoustic and rootsy, coloured by her country vocal twang.

But it was Buckley, Simone and their predecessors who captured the song's wayward emotions. It is a tale of hedonism as a mirage for endless yearning. A longing for a love so intense that it's intoxicating.

Let us know your memories of 'Lilac Wine' in the comments section below

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