

NE ME QUITTE PAS

MAYA ANGELA SMITH



A SONG BY JACQUES BREL AND INTERPRETED BY NINA SIMONE AND OTHERS

NE ME QUITTE PAS





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SINGLES ▶ A SERIES EDITED BY JOSHUA CLOVER AND EMILY J. LORDI

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MAYA ANGELA SMITH

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2025

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Lisa Lawley

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Bitter and Work Sans by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Maya Angela, author.

Title: Ne me quitte pas / Maya Angela Smith.

Other titles: Singles (Duke University Press)

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Series: Singles |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024028361 (print)

LCCN 2024028362 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478031468 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478028253 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060444 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Brel, Jacques. Ne me quitte pas. | Brel, Jacques—
Criticism and interpretation. | Popular music—Social aspects—
History—20th century. | Cover versions—History and criticism. |
Songs—Analysis, appreciation.

Classification: LCC ML410.B8433 S65 2025 (print) |

LCC ML410.B8433 (ebook) | DDC 782.42164—dc23/eng/20241118

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024028361>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024028362>

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Intro

“NE ME QUITTE PAS.” Those words meant nothing to sixteen-year-old me, and yet they meant everything. Staccato sounds, foreign and strange, enveloped in a voice that felt like home.

From the moment I discovered Nina Simone in my parents’ record collection, I knew no performer would ever move me more. It wasn’t just the richness of her unique voice or the emotion that hung on each note. It wasn’t just the majestic way she drew life from eighty-eight keys, her ardent commitment to civil rights, or her inspiring deeds interspersed throughout the stories my parents told of their upbringing in the American South. It was also the way she gave me permission to claim my own voice, which found freedom not in my native tongue, but in French.

I credit this song as one of the reasons I, a Black American woman from a monolingual, English-speaking family, studied French in college. And it was Nina who made sure I kept with it when the whitewashed curriculum of my textbooks suggested French was a language only for white people. Each time I experienced alienation or frustration in my studies—over the difficulty of pronouncing French and memorizing its complex rules, over

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being the only Black student in my courses—I would play Nina and become emboldened by the French that hovered on her lips. This sonic talisman saw me through my linguistic journey and led me to Paris, a much Blacker space than I had ever imagined. It even wielded the power to guide my educational and professional journey to become a French professor.

“Ne me quitte pas” (Don’t leave me) has traveled its own winding road, from its inception and original performances to its numerous covers, translations, and adaptations. In 1959, before he was a household name, Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel wrote and performed this visceral and haunting plea. I remember encountering Brel’s original in a college classroom and being instructed to use my burgeoning language abilities to analyze the lyrics. I was no longer relying solely on my body’s response to Nina’s voice and artistry to connect with the song. I could now also lose myself in the intricacies of the words and the poetic images they conveyed. Beginning to understand the lyrics and learning the conditions in which Brel wrote them changed my relationship to the song.

I spent the next couple of decades waffling about whether Simone’s or Brel’s version spoke to me more. Brel’s provides intrigue, supposedly the product of a failed extramarital affair. His over-the-top performance sells the song’s heartache, making me question where the line falls between the autobiographical lived experience of a person using art to cope with loss and the convincing portrayal of pain by an artist telling an invented story

through song. Meanwhile, I wonder how my deep respect and admiration for Nina colors how I engage with “Ne me quitte pas.” Now that I know her version is a cover, am I so quick to believe the song is hers? At the same time, I see myself in her Blackness, her womanness, her Americanness, which makes her version vibrate within me in ways Brel’s does not. It makes it mine.

Then there is Shirley Bassey’s performance of Rod McKuen’s English translation, “If You Go Away,” first introduced to me by a friend. I admit, my mother tongue sounds strange in a song I mainly associate with French. Many critics argue that the translation doesn’t do the original justice. Is it the questionable translation that severs the song’s hold over me, or does Bassey’s larger-than-life pageantry mute the heartfelt emotions Brel and Simone stir? At the same time, Bassey’s evocative vocals and regal stature entreat new feelings to the surface. Much is lost, much is gained.

Just when I had started to make sense of the different emotional resonances of each version, a colleague told me to listen to Sasha Velour’s drag performance of “If I Go Away.” By lip-syncing Bassey, Velour takes her theatrics to a new level. While there’s a subtle disconnect between the French and English lyrics, it’s the violence of Velour’s performance that upends the song’s affective qualities, transforming a love song into a spectacle of horror. Encountering Velour led me down a rabbit hole of multiple adaptations of “Ne me quitte pas,” each serving different artistic purposes and evoking distinctive emotions.

For years I've sat with, sung with, and tapped into complex emotions with "Ne me quitte pas." It has been in the background as I write. It has been in the foreground as I dance. It has been a through line as I studied and worked toward my professional goals. And now, a song Nina gifted to my eager ears decades ago has become the central object of a book. I get to analyze this song as a text, as a piece of cultural production written in a specific context, and as a work of mass/popular art that travels, being reinterpreted and recontextualized in numerous ways. A meditation on translation in the most expansive meaning of the word, this book explores how "Ne me quitte pas" travels across languages, geographies, genres, and generations. How does this song make manifest the experience of translation, seen through the Latin *trans* + *latio*, or the idea of being carried across? How does it shift, refract, and change through the processes of covering, translating, and adaptating? What does it indicate about the choices translators of song make and how they differ from considerations in literary translation? What can an analysis of language, sound, emotion, culture, gender, and race tell us about the impact a song has on its audiences and on music scholarship? How do the ways we read this song shed light on various aesthetic, social, and political values, both historically and in the present day? What makes this song so translatable and therefore viral (something it achieved before being viral was even a thing)?

A song's power ultimately derives from its effect on the listener. Therefore, this book explores "Ne me quitte pas" by privileging

audience experiences, from contemporary music criticism to journalistic retrospectives to scholarly interventions to YouTube commentary. And since a song's impact is very much situated in the body, I also reflect on my own embodied experience and sense of self—a useful tool to think through issues of (auto)biography, authenticity, and emotional truthfulness. Finally, because “Ne me quitte pas” set me on the path to becoming a professor and has been an object of analysis in my courses on language, culture, and identity, I’ve also interspersed throughout these pages my students’ experiences with the song.

Nina Simone became my hero because of how she unapologetically moved through the world, refusing to accept the limitations others placed on her. She leveraged her classical music training to force audiences to reimagine what Black musicians could do. She used her songwriting skills and platform to implore audiences to question the inhumane treatment of Black people in the US and abroad. But it was her singing in French that had the most substantive effect on me because it showed me how to cross borders I once thought insurmountable. Her “Ne me quitte pas” pushed me to learn French with all its challenges and to encounter a new world that had seemed out of reach. I call on Nina again to guide me in this book’s meditative journey of crossing disciplinary boundaries as I rely on francophone studies, music studies, linguistics, translation theory, adaptation studies, affect theory, race and ethnicity studies, and gender studies to tell the story of “Ne me quitte pas,” how it travels, the

myriad ways humans interact with the song, and the artistic and cultural significance of the performances surrounding it.

The Singles series is about singles—discrete musical tracks of great personal or social significance that are distributed to and heard by millions. I have taken some liberty with this assignment by not focusing on one singular version. Instead, I am using a single as a jumping off point to delve into a song where each version (Brel's, Simone's, Bassey's) has long-lasting, mass appeal, often to completely separate audiences. I am therefore grateful to have been given this space to reflect on the ways these different singles make “Ne me quitte pas” into an exceptional work of art. Each single has a story to tell about the impact it has on millions of people, including the artists who perform and record it. As such, “Ne me quitte pas” and its various iterations exist for me not as discrete art objects, but as a constellation of cultural production that actively influences how I feel and who I am.