

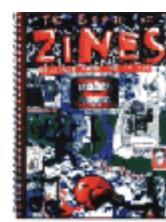
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MY OUTTA SITE DREAM DATE WITH NINA HAGEN

By Matt Maranian

In March of 1981 I saw a spread in *Creem Magazine* on an East German punk sensation named Nina Hagen. Her history was compelling enough, but it was her aesthetic that seduced me; she looked like Easter Sunday, Halloween, Valentine's and St. Patrick's Day, Christmas morning and New Years' Eve, all fused together with a deadening jolt of galvanic electricity. From a thorough beating of bleach, dyes and fixatives, her hair -- colored a flaming pink -- stood on end in sharp sprays, her face was lacquered with a frenzied cosmetic of glitter and greasepaint, and over a neon blue bodysuit and white apron she was fitted with a foot-long black dildo "tail" strapped to her backside -- all this from a woman who made a passionate escape from East Germany. The next day after school I rode my bike straight to Tower Records and purchased her only U.S. release to date; a four-song e.p. called The Nina Hagen Band. Later that afternoon, Nina Hagen tweaked my colorless teenage existence positively fluorescent.

She was everything my senses, my spirit and my soul were starving for. Somewhere between her grinding satanic

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bellow and her soul-piercing soprano I got whipped into a state of trance dancing delirium, she kicked in my doors of perception and struck me deeply in an intensely personal, nearly inexplicable way. The raw, unbridled life in her voice transcended any language barrier. She was pure fireworks, and the rest of my world paled hopelessly by comparison to her. I became absolutely spellbound by this exotic, otherworldly creature and spent a significant percentage of my teen years staring deeply into the pupils of her chestnut brown eyes in the glossy photos from the pages of Creem. My low S.A.T. scores and C-average in high school were testament to the many, many classroom hours I consumed fantasizing about the private, perfect moments we could share together. Dream date scenarios. I took German in high school for the sole reason that I might one day speak to her in her native tongue, and gave encomiastic oral reports on her both in my German and English classes. When I caught word of a rare U.S. concert date, I begged my parents to allow me to take two days off from school, and I took a Greyhound to Hollywood to catch a life-altering show at The Whisky.

Although I managed to graduate High School and lead a reasonably balanced and healthy adult life, I never did quite shake Nina off. I continued to carry my torch; I paid ridiculous prices for her import CDs, dutifully clipped photos from magazines, and never missed a rare Los Angeles performance.

Fast forward to a strange, flukey, fortuitous evening that unfolded in January of '95 during The American Music Awards at The Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. I'm occasionally given tickets to big, flashy music award shows, and while they're invariably forgettable and represent only the lowest common denominator of American music, I get the opportunity to wear all those impractical clothes I buy in anticipation of living a glamorous life. This evening's show was particularly mediocre -- even with Prince's pyrotechnics display, but I did sit just eight seats away from Linda Thompson, an ex-Hee Haw cast member -- my very favorite TV show -- which I must admit was really exciting.

As the show concluded, my friend Carol and I made our way from our seats up the jam-packed aisle and into the

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lobby headed for the party entrance, fraught with security. We stopped for a moment to peruse the crowd pouring through the theater and out onto the sidewalk; the usual sea of tuxedoes, bad beaded dresses, and discernably underdressed rap artists. Just as we began to move on, Carol fixed her gaze just over my shoulder. Her eyes widened. "Woah," she whispered, "Look at her..."

I turned around and there she was, not more than four feet in front of me. She stood nearly six feet tall in Vivienne Westwood black satin and rhinestone skyscraper platform heels, legs and waist wrapped skin tight in a floorlength black stretch-velvet dress, topped by a black vinyl bullet bra with a hot pink fun-fur chubby draped over her shoulders. Her real hair was concealed under a long, jet-black wig, and she carried a bright lime green backpack over one arm. She was a staggering sight. I nearly fell to the floor.

This was the last event on earth I'd expect to find Nina Hagen. Except for the occasional second look she'd generate from someone who undoubtedly figured she was a drag queen, the crowd moved past her without acknowledgment -- clearly unaware of who she was -- making their way to the Joey Lawrence worship circle or trying desperately to get a glimpse of Lori Morgan. Much to my delight Nina was absent of an entourage and instead was oddly paired with a nondescript middle-aged man in a business suit. They seemed to be making motions to leave.

Not about to let her slip through my fingers I bolted forward in an effort to make contact. Real time wound itself to hyperspeed. My body temperature dropped at least twenty degrees and everything but Nina evaporated from my field of vision -- my breathing was forced and labored in my best effort to maintain a heartbeat. I tried desperately to form intelligible sentences and managed to introduce myself and initiate uneasy and awkward conversation. To my relief, she was pleasingly approachable and unusually friendly.

"So are you going to the party?" I stammered.

"What party?" Nina replied in her lilting German accent.

"There's an after-show party in the building next door, don't you have tickets?"

"No, I don't," she said -- and continued with words that truly twisted my reality -- "can I go with you?"

The air around me was suddenly swimming with the little blue sparkley spots I see when I stay in the sunlight too long. She asked if she could go to the party with me. The man she came with said he'd rather skip it, and asked her if she could find a ride home.

"Will you take her home?" He was asking me. After what amounted to less than seven minutes of dialogue, this man, whose name I didn't even know, was asking me if I, Matt Maranian, could take Nina Hagen, my primary object of worship for the past fourteen years of my life, home. His question was not a difficult one for me to answer, and surprisingly, Nina wasn't even slightly averse to the idea of being pawned off on a total stranger.

"Trust me," I told him, "You couldn't put her in better care."

"Oh, Good." the man said, and he left. As simple as that.

So there we were. If the meteoric impact of simply bearing witness to her wasn't enough I was now thrown into this disorienting set of circumstances, and thrust not only with the responsibility of showing Nina Hagen a good time, but also seeing that she gets home safely. My knees were shaking so hard I had to steady my footing and lock them in place to keep from gyrating across the floor. We stood in pregnant silence. She's my ward, I kept thinking.

"Let's step outside for a cigarette," Nina said.

We moved out to the sidewalk. Tuxedos continued to move out of the theater in droves, valet parking attendants buzzed and jumped, cars passed, and I stood there with Nina Hagen feeling like the nucleus of the universe. We made small talk that I was too awe-struck to follow, and after she finished her cigarette -- the filter stained with black lipstick -- she tossed the butt to the ground and crushed it under one satin platform heel. I resisted my impulse to dive to the pavement, saving that butt to place under my pillow.

I was ready to explode. I couldn't let another moment pass

without communicating to her how she's rocked my world, that she hits me hard -- and I wanted desperately to reach her just as powerfully.

"Nina, may I speak to you privately for a moment?"

"Yes..." she said.

I pulled her over to an empty corner of the sidewalk. I turned to her, and with both hands I grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and looked as deep into the pupils of her eyes as I did into the pictures from the pages of Creem -- I think I even freaked her out a little.

"Nina," I spoke with great conviction, "I must tell you that your music has touched me as profoundly as music can possibly touch a person. Our meeting tonight is not accidental, our paths were meant to cross..." I slowly became aware that I was behaving like an absolute lunatic, but I considered who I was dealing with and threw caution to the wind -- I had two feet firmly planted in the moment.

"And you know what," she added without missing a beat, cracking a knowing smile and dropping the register of her voice at least twelve octaves to her signature, trans-channelingesque growl, "It's gonna get even better..."

This spirited reply to such maniacal gushing -- and especially her knowing smile -- was some indication that we were operating close to the same wavelength. She got it.

I had stepped into the evening anticipating nothing more than a cheesy show and a free buffet table but now I felt as though I had just come on to a handful of mushroom caps, and it wasn't until then that it hit me: this is it, this is the dream date, it's happening now.

As we made our way back into the lobby, some guy Nina knew named Irwin materialized, who wanted to join us. I didn't mind, he was very quiet and seemed like a nice person, plus he would give my friend Carol someone to talk to because I had all but ditched her. The party was filled to capacity and as Nina took my arm it hit me how perfectly we complimented each other; I too was wearing platform shoes and black vinyl; we were a handsome couple.

Like becoming lucid in a dream, I wanted to test the waters. As we maneuvered through the noisy crowd I gently grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her to a stop. She turned to me. "Nina" I said, "Let's OHM!"

Without question or comment she took a deep inhalation. With our eyes slightly closed, together we chanted a loud, resonant "Oooooooooooooooooooooauu

uuuuuummmmmmmmmmm..." Party goers sipped champagne and nibbled hors d'oeuvres trying not to look our way.

"Oooooooooooooauuuuuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmm..." We chanted again-it was starting to kick in.

"Oooooooooooooauuuuuuuuummmmmmmmmmmmm..." A third and final time.

"Namaste," Nina said to me, putting her palms together and bowing her head. "Namaste," I said, and bowed back.

I got Nina a drink and we found an empty cocktail table just on the edge of the dance floor. I failed to impress her with my German and was having great difficulty just managing with English, but I did calm myself enough to engage in a lengthy chat. We got pleasantly toasted on vodka, and took drags off the same cigarette just like we were in junior high. (I don't smoke, but such an intimate act as the sharing of a single cigarette was an experience I couldn't possibly resist.)

There was a band on stage doing '50s and '60s covers fit for a wedding reception and no one was dancing. I asked Nina if she'd like to dance, and in a moment straight from the pages of Cinderella she gave me her hand and I led her to the center of what seemed like acres of empty space -- I was standing in the middle of an empty dance floor with Nina Hagen as hundreds looked on. Then something took us over. Nina and I started moving in a free-form, Isadora Duncanish sort of way, a style completely inappropriate for the doo-wop tunes being performed from the stage. Flailing our arms and squatting to the floor, we twisted and dipped -- looking square into each others eyes -- and, when I stopped to think about it, making absolute fools of

ourselves. But I didn't care who was staring and I didn't care what anyone thought, I was seizing this moment for all it was worth.

When the bandleader asked for couples to jump on stage and "shake their thang," Nina pulled me right up there with her and we watusied ourselves into another dimension. As the sax player started in on a wild solo, Nina spontaneously grabbed the mike and began wailing to a perplexed audience as band members looked curious and annoyed.

Unfortunately, as Nina quickly discovered, the mike was dead -- killing the drama of her impromptu performance. Red-faced, Nina and I jumped off the stage -- wobbling on our platform shoes -- and ran to our chairs giggling like teenagers. Being publicly humiliated on a stage before a crowd of hundreds somehow brings two people closer together.

We slow-danced too. And as my hands rested on the velvet wrapped around her tight, narrow waist, I looked to the ceiling, I closed my eyes -- stifling my screams -- and again and again in my head I repeated I'm slow dancing with Nina Hagen -- I can't believe this is happening...

Just as I was about to leave my body I was jerked back to earth by the instruction from the bandleader on stage.

"Now, I want everyone to hold your partner very close..." he said. Nina and I moved closer.

"...and I want you to pucker your lips..." I swallowed my heart. Nina lowered her eyelids and gently pouted her full mouth.

"...and kiss your partner on the cheek." I kissed her cheek, and she, mine -- and she kissed me again on the other side, unprompted.

After our last dance I escorted Nina to the ladies room and I reveled in the series of fantastical events that had taken place over the past few hours. I needed to splash my face with icewater. Nina returned, the party began to wind down, and it was now close to midnight. The slow dances, the drinks, the chit chat and the cigarettes all came to a close. Her friend Irwin ended up driving her home, and it was

imperative that I sit down in a quiet place. I had no idea how exhausting a dream date could be.

We hugged goodbye and kissed each other again on the cheek, and agreed that we'd stay in touch. Nina gave me the number of where she was staying, "Call me! Before noon is best!" And Carol and I headed for my car.

I did call. And we spoke once or twice. A couple of times I came home to the most thrilling messages I've ever received on my answering machine. But Nina is off and about and never stays in any one place for long. Soon after she left for Paris I think, or Spain, to finish her record. I, too, had a life to get back to and the whole experience all became very "Purple Rose of Cairo."

In spite of her knowing smile, I'm sure Nina had no idea what that night really meant to me. I replay the scenes over and over in my head, still slightly incredulous that fate delivered Nina Hagen into my life for a whole evening, all to myself. I got my dream date!