

NIKKI JEAN: A Dossier

By Jerry Lazar

How did a 28-year-old singer-songwriter with virtually no musical credits come to collaborate with the greatest songwriters of the Sixties and Seventies for her debut solo album?

After a three-year journey, Nikki Jean succeeded in co-writing and recording a dozen lush, sparkling tunes, each one partnered with an iconic composer of classic hits, including Burt Bacharach, Jimmy Webb, Paul Williams, Lamont Dozier, Thom Bell, Cynthia Weil & Barry Mann, and even fellow singer-songwriters Bob Dylan, Carole King and Carly Simon.

The miracle is not only that this pantheon of giants individually agreed to participate, but that Nikki Jean's angelic vocal renditions comfortably embrace a spectacular blend of so many retro styles -- from Brill Building to Motown to Philly Soul -- and make them all sound fresh.

Her outwardly sunny disposition and dazzling smile belie the fact that she had her share of setbacks and disappointments as she pursued her fantasy goal, which culminated in the recent release of her richly melodic *Pennies in a Jar* tour-de-force album.

This dossier should provide clues as to how she accomplished the impossible:

NIKKIJEAN

PENNIES IN A JAR

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((STEREO))



She was born Nicholle Jean Leary in Minnesota. Like President Obama, her father is black and her mother is white. Neither parent is a musician.

When she was 5, she saw a TV special celebrating Irving Berlin's 100th birthday. Awed that one person wrote so many familiar songs (*White Christmas, God Bless America*), she knew instantly that she wanted to become a songwriter.

“I couldn’t tell the difference between Prince & Michael Jackson until I was 10,” she once wrote in her blog. “I don’t even love MUSIC per se. I love songs, and songwriters. “

Nearly every day in high school, she ate lunch alone in the stairwell.

In her high school yearbook, classmates indicated which friend each student was “most likely to be seen with.” For Nicholle Leary, the answer was “an oversized book bag.”

She attended Howard University and planned to be a physician. She never took music courses.

She loves baking cookies, and hosted “Cookie Socials” to attract audiences to coffeehouse performances, where she distributed her homemade confections.

She networked and performed with local musicians, but while her music career foundered, she trained with the Red Cross to help Hurricane Katrina victims. Before she was called to action, she was invited to join the hip-hop band Nouveau Riche in Philadelphia.

Rapper Lupe Fiasco recruited her to sing on his album *The Cool*, for which she also co-wrote *Hip Hop Saved My Life*.

In 2008, Nikki Jean toured with Kanye West and Rihanna.

That year she also hatched the plan, with Carole King producer Sam Hollander, to contact Hall of Fame songwriters from the Sixties and Seventies, and ask them to collaborate with her on one song each for her debut album. Her dream was to emulate King’s benchmark *Tapestry* album.

After considerable “harassing,” incredibly most agreed to participate in “The Nikki Jean Project,” which consumed the next three years of her life as she traveled throughout the U.S. to work with them. Columbia Records committed \$200,000 to the venture.

Nikki Jean co-wrote both lyrics and music to all the songs, except with Burt Bacharach, who presented her with a finished tune and insisted she write

only the lyrics (as he had done with his music partner Hal David).

Stymied by her inability to write a bridge that would match the quality of Bacharach's melody, she dodged his increasingly perturbed phone messages. Assured by him that even the top pros get blocked, she ultimately came through, and their co-creation became the album's title song, the lush *Pennies in a Jar*.

She makes no secret of the fact that she was repeatedly forced to set aside her awestruck adoration of her lifelong "heroes" to work with these elder statesmen of rock and R&B as artistic equals. Still, she deferentially refers to each as "Mr." or "Ms."

After she delivered a version of the album to Columbia, the record company didn't sense a Top Ten hit, and backed out of the project. Nikki Jean had to buy back the masters for \$50,000. She was forced to move out of her apartment, and was so despondent that her famous collaborators had to talk her out of going back to work at a coffee shop, or "jumping off a f@#ing bridge."

That's when Bob Dylan came through with an offer for Nikki Jean to write the verses for an unfinished melody and chorus originally intended for his 1981 *Shot of Love* album. Though she worked with all her other collaborators in person, to this day she has yet to meet "Mr. Dylan."

Indie label S-Curve picked up the project, and tapped the long-distance Dylan collaboration for the album's first single, "*Steel and Feathers (Don't Ever)*."

She shot and edited her own stop-motion YouTube music video for *My Love*, featuring the song's lyrics festively spelled out with Scrabble tiles, refrigerator magnets, needlepoint, and other clever letter configurations.

She played keyboard and sang *How to Unring a Bell* on Letterman. To the talk show host's delighted bemusement, she also brought along her own string section.

Her song *La Di Da Di Da* was used for a popular Best Buy commercial.

The Hollywood Reporter recently showcased Nikki Jean as one of the “Top 5 Pop Starlets on the Rise” in its feature on “the music industry’s most promising newcomers.”

“I have written in the past 3 years with the greatest living songwriters in America,” she blogged in self-amazement. “I’ve written with people whose songs have shaped American popular culture. People who collectively have sold over a BILLION records. ...

“The legends who I never could have DREAMED to work with, have become angels in my midst. They are the out-of-the-blue phone call at the right time, the text message that makes me laugh. They have become mentors and fellow travelers when I am weary. They are teachers and friends. They are my family.

“That’s a miracle. “

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