

Nina Hagen's Guide to Fascinating Womanhood

Creem, 3/81

Interview by Toby Goldstein

Nina Hagen sat in her brightly lit dressing room at the Ritz, wrapped in a floor-length black cloak, unsmiling as her silver green hair was coaxed into Medusa-like coils of dreadlocks. Various bright bits of tatty clothes and toys were scattered around the room, and Nina held a raygun in her hand, pointing it at the intruders and dispassionately firing. Tomorrow would be a much better time to engage in conversation with the frenzied fraulein, suggested management, and we withdrew to the sound of the toygun's rat-a tat.



That night, the show was what counted. The Ritz ballroom was crammed to its 1500 + capacity, no big deal on any weekend or for a big name band, but for Hagen, and on a Wednesday night? Except for a little-known date at the Mudd Club in summer, Nina Hagen had never performed in New York, and was not on a national tour. Except for two import-only albums, her recordings available to U.S. buyers amounted to one four-track EP, *The Nina Hagen Band*. And the radio hadn't exactly flipped over her Germanic interpretations of "Lucky Number" or "White Punks On Dope," alternately trilled, aria-fashion, and then foghorn-blown in basso, punctuated by enough vocal twitching to make Lene Lovich seem like a crooner. Whether out of

admiration or curiosity for a freak show, there was a sellout in this joint, completely through word of mouth.

Hagen entered the stage to a rock-reggae beat, wrapped in her black cape, arms aloft and hair pulled into a crown like the Statue of Liberty, intoning, "1968 is over, 1981 is here, FUTURE IS NOW!" She hop-stepped across the proscenium, wriggled her body, sent her hair flying. The outer covering was removed to reveal Hagen in a turquoise leotard and black leggings, a nurse's apron cutely placed over her tum, and in the rear, she sported some kind of tail. No, not exactly a tail, we observed, craned over the balcony rail: it was a foot-long black dildo, attached by an intricate looping of belts and hooks. Short motorcycle boots completed the portrait of delicacy.

Her hour-long performance was equally filled with the unexpected. Those who had come to gape got their fill of sideshow antics, staring at Hagen's riotous makeup and outrageous costume. They roared at her unique interpretation of Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust" and, appropriately, her version of that new declaration of independence, "My Way." But for anyone who was wondering if Nina Hagen had any true talent to equal her attention grabbing inclinations, the set was a gratifying, if unsettling experience.

Hagen may vamp and flutter around conventional vocalizing strictly for effect, but her

range extended over several octaves. She has built a reputation throughout Europe as a punk superstar, yet as evidenced by her performance of a dramatic aria called "Naturtraene," can sing opera with might and dignity. Waves of both young men, dressed in that day's lower East Side thrift-shop acquisitions, and gay women, many wearing T-shirts advertising their preference, swarmed around the stage, in obvious awe of Hagen, a powerful, unrelenting woman.

On the following afternoon, as she made ready to depart for one last Los Angeles gig before taking a badly needed vacation, Nina Hagen slumped in an armchair, pooped. She'd been on the road across Europe for three months without a break, and would holiday in the Caribbean, where she will then record her first album for the US. She spoke in little-girl whispers, the exact opposite of her booming stage delivery. When asked her thoughts about various topics, she moaned, "I don't think." I rephrased the questions.



Lene Lovich, no slouch in costumery herself, was the first person to tell me about Nina Hagen.

Lovich had just completed filming Cha Cha with Hagen and Dutch junk-rocker Herman Brood, at that time Nina's presumed spouse. Lene liked Nina, she said, but wondered why Hagen felt the need to distort her appearance so greatly. She was actually a beautiful girl. Lovich's judgement was correct. Minus makeup, her hair relatively settled, wearing a furry pink pullover and her black leggings, Hagen looked rosy enough to pass as a freaky farmgirl. Her smile was Madonna-like, her body, a robust change from the whippet-thin women who define the "chick singer" stereotype.

However, there was more creating Nina's Mona Lisa expression than mere relief at completing the tour. Nina, whose boyfriend, Ferdinand Karmelk, is the lead guitarist in her band, was pregnant. "We wondered why she kept throwing up in the morning," confided her management rep. She didn't mention Ferdie at all in our conversation, but frequently referred to "little Nina," who she plans to raise communally and take on the road. I was expecting anything except an afternoon of girl talk.

"I think my child will be much better than me because it don't have to learn the sick situations I had when I was young, in school and stuff. I gonna tell my child everything," said Nina in almost fluent English, taking occasional pauses to ponder a tricky translation. "Tell her what's wrong and what's right, so he or she will know already. My mother didn't know. She was very confused, too."

Katherina Hagen was born 25 years ago in East Berlin, to an actress and a writer. When she was two, her parents were divorced, and her mother became involved with radical leader Wolf Biermann. Her adaptation to school and its attendant youth organizations was traumatic, and by age 17, she already had begun performing, first with blues groups, then as a rock 'n' roller. At 21, when Biermann was expatriated to the West, Hagen secured her own exit by stating she was the politico's daughter and threatening to continue his

crusades if she wasn't let go.



Having no great love for West Germany either, "they are so hard-hearted," she says, Hagen preferred to live in transition frequently visiting London to spend time with her friends Arianna (Ari Up) and the Slits, with whom she sometimes performed. But Nina's German releases, *Unbehagen* ("Ill at Ease") and *The Nina Hagen Band*, combined with her unbound nature, made her a hero among German youth. "When I was in Austria I felt this fascistic thing in everybody," she says, as explanation for her following, omitting mention of a television appearance on a young people's program in which she answered the question, "What's wrong with the young generation" by mock-masturbating on camera.

Hagen's name was dropped on America's doorstep by Herman Brood, during his unsuccessful US fame-seeking expedition. Nina and Herman were touted as central-Europe's dream couple, only slightly less destructive than Sid and Nancy. Nina carefully reads CREEM's Rock A Rama reviews of her EP and Brood's second oeuvre, gleefully noting the writer's comments that her recording was the ballsier of the two.

That was the shortest relationship in my life," she sniffed. "No, I learned a lot about heavy drugs when I met Herman Brood; I learned that you don't have to touch it. I thought, what is he sniffing all the time, this brown stuff. And people who take it, they are so stupid and in bad moods all the time and sick all the time, have headaches all the time." Hagen is said to have helped get Karmelk off junk, and has written a song, which she uses to end her set, called "Smart Jack," "about a junkie who's running against the devil's clock." It didn't seem to bother her that just plain folks, in shock over her appearance and behavior, might assume her euphoria was artificially induced.

"When they see our films, they gonna know what we believe," she said, referring to a work-in-progress documenting the Hagen tribal approach to living. It will be continued on the island of her dreams, where she will go to find peace. "Where we can cut our film in peace and in pieces," she giggles.

"I think there are not many like me. There are just a few. People who want to go home again."

Is she political?

"No, I'm a religious person."

In what way?

"In a wonderful way," she answered, resembling an icon. "I think about finding home to God every day, nearly every



minute. I come back to it thinking and meditating about it, again and again, that this is what makes me strong and happy, really.

"Happiness-you can't reach it in this life because humans, they have an illness, and this is the materialistic illness. They don't accept that the antimaterialistic universe is bigger and forever. They've lost their beliefs. Because many people believe in God, but they don't try to find it, really. And this is what I try. I try to find a way out forever. This is much fun. You feel God in every little animal, and you can see how poor the beings are who don't believe and who don't know God. That is so important, you know.

"We must learn to see money as paper. Because what can you buy with money-materialistic things? I don't care about money. It's shit. I don't need money to take care of my kid. I did it without, and I'm rich somewhere else."

Every day brings added proof that the 60's are over, and the name of the game is survival. But with her haphazard life and choice of action over agita, Nina Hagen seems to be one painted reminder of the chrome-coated beauty that we thought we'd buried with the peace and love philosophy. She acts like that old Kristofferson refrain, "freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose," and somehow it doesn't seem corny or dated when I'm told she had spent another interview casting the I-Ching for the writer. "I stop performing now, too," said Nina Hagen, throwing the hotel windows open to breathe deeply of New York's brisk autumn air. In a good little girl voice she plans, "I go to the island and start looking for mussels and cooking nice food and writing nice film scripts and doing many, many nice things." I thought of her, big bellied by late winter, sunning herself away from smoke-filled rooms and artificial ingredients. Nice work if you can get it.