

"On the Road" with Nina Hagen (the extended version)

A conversation with the legendary musician until 3 a.m. about her fans-slash-friends, plans for a talk show, and UFOs. And that's just the tip of the Ricola lozenge. Seriously.

by Charlotte Robinson

It's difficult to describe the insanity that surrounds Nina Hagen on the night of her first appearance in Chicago in many years. Equal parts diva, punk rocker, outrageous comedienne, devoted spiritualist, activist, and nurturing mother (to Cosma Shiva, 22, and Otis, 13), Hagen arouses near-religious fervor in her "friends" (she refuses to call them fans).

On this night (in the summer of 2003), she plays to a capacity crowd at the Double Door, belting out three decades' worth of material ranging from punk originals to Indian chants to her versions of "Ave Maria" and "My Way." Now 48, Hagen can still shock and frighten with her multi-octave voice, which sounds like an angel one minute and the devil the next.

After a two-hour show, I head backstage where a number of people are waiting in front of Hagen's closed dressing room door. One is the editor of a Goth magazine who tries to convince Nina's manager that she should play his annual holiday festival ("It's called AlcoHoliday. All my friends have different beliefs, but the one thing they have in common is drinking."). Another is an 11-year-old girl named Christina, dressed a little like a prostitute and overzealously bragging about the demo she's just recorded with The Matrix. After we are herded into the small room, Nina insists we all take a Ricola lozenge. A pudgy older guy who had seen Hagen perform in 1985 bombards her with questions: "Do you remember when someone threw something on the stage? And then after the show, I gave you a book about UFOs? Do you remember that?" Hagen admits that, no, she does not remember that night nearly 20 years ago. Watching her interact with these strangers, all of whom want something, I marvel at her good spirits.

Eventually, it is my turn. Nina talks to me for a half-hour about everything from her plans to stage a benefit for the women of Afghanistan in the Kabul soccer stadium to a theory that HIV and AIDS are unconnected to her theory that the world will ultimately destroy itself and UFOs will come to pick up the survivors "like Noah's ark." She speaks passionately and with a thick German accent, her voice hitting all the childish highs and guttural lows that it does in her songs, as if she is assuming different characters as she speaks. When we wrap up the interview at 3:15 a.m., there is still a long line of admirers waiting to pay their respects, and I have no doubt that she will indulge them all.



**What are your plans for the next year?
Are you going to do more touring?**

I don't know about when we're going to tour. Right now I'm finishing one album which is a big band. It's an album with lots of wonderful Gershwin songs and also songs from different musicals and films, which were always my all-time favorites and I just love Ella Fitzgerald and always wanted to do such a thing. I might end up in Las Vegas one day, who knows? Then I'm also working for two years on my new rock album with different producers and with different duet partners. I do a duet with Bob Geldof and with my boyfriend. And the "United Women of the World" project I do with lots of other women, which will be a project for UNICEF and I'm going to a big annual meeting of UNICEF in Berlin now. So when we do this

song with lots of different women, we are presenting that to UNICEF and we have Vivienne Westwood who is hopefully going to design a fantastic diamond ring because we have some people who are selling diamonds. They also want to be involved in this project, so Vivienne is going to design a beautiful "United Women of the World" diamond. So we want to just raise money to help certain women's projects all over the place.

This is the song you did tonight?

That's just my guitar version. The studio version is much different than that, yeah.

You've got so many projects, I can't believe it.

Yeah, my TV talk show, which I'm doing since two years in front of a live audience in Berlin. I'm doing this now also in New York and it's called *The Nina Hagen Talk Schau*, S-C-H-A-U, because it's German for "show." I love doing this so much because when you do a concert, of course I try to speak in between and share information, but in a talk show, it is so interesting, you can invite guests from all ways of life, musical guests and artists but also Greenpeace activists. Yesterday I saw the Oprah show about diabetes, which is very important, to educate each other about what is good nutrition-wise and what is not so good. I have a very good friend who lives on Coca-Cola and he even drinks the Coca-Cola in the night, so we're trying to inspire him and to tell him what can happen. It's already kind of happening, you know, his skin is bad, he gets pimples all over and strange things. Too much sugar can never be good like that.

It's almost like public service in a way and tying in your political activism, and entertainment?

Well, you can call it many names. It's just Nina Hagen at the end of the day, you know?

It started out as an Internet show?

We did it for the Internet but we were not happy with it because the sound was so bad. I have found a fantastic television production company and we're doing now eight episodes and a pilot for Germany and hopefully for the American market and then we go shopping to different TV stations. It's gonna end up on television for sure because it's just so great. We did it the other day in New York in Joe's Pub and on the 16th of June we're doing it again. It's just so cool. We had John Cameron Mitchell, the maker and the guy from *Hedwig*, and I had Pam Ann, she's a comedian, she's like the "stewardess to the stars," a great act, some incredible people. I always like to bring people on from the solar world, people who build solar boats and solar cars and get maybe also somebody from Volkswagen Company and discuss with them when can we buy electro-Volkswagen or the current development with that.

What about the films? There's the *Punk + Glory* film about you, then *Om Gottes Willen*, your film about your experiences in India. Do you have plans to distribute these in America?

Yeah, for sure. Like right now my album, *Om Namah Shivay*, is out in America and I think you can buy it in regular record shops and the same will be happening with my documentary. It will be available maybe in certain maybe esoteric book shops as a DVD and video. That's what I've been working on.

Has that been frustrating for you? Because I know, as a fan, it's been hard to find your records over here sometimes. Are you working on getting better American distribution?

Well, that you have to ask my management. I have no clue about that. What I know for sure is that I'm working on my new album which will hopefully then be distributed nationwide in America, which will become an American product.

How have you been using your [Web site](#)? I heard you were using it to communicate with your fans.

For a while, but there was a lot of — it was an interesting experience for me also, but I realized that many fans — I don't like the word "fan" actually because a fan is a ventilator and ventilators we need in the summertime only and what does a human being really need is friends that are on an equal level. I realized that some friends were behaving very ugly, kind of. They were fighting with each other and calling each other names.

On your message board?

Yeah, in my guestbook. So I closed the guestbook down, I have no more guestbook. And they can meet in other forums and gossip if they have to gossip. When I want to write something from the heart, I go to my guru's web page, which is www.babaji.net. That's a cool guestbook where people don't — it's just not allowed to write harmful stuff there which might hurt somebody. So I go there now.

Has that experience altered your relationship with your ...

Friends.

With your friends?

No, not all but I know some of them very well now, ha ha ha. No, I know a couple of them, they have behaved very strangely and I know them. I know their faces, I know their names, I know where they live, so they must not be afraid of me. I don't hold any grudges. I'm like those monkeys, that certain race of monkeys. I read an article the other day that one of them was holed in a cage since early childhood and she grew and grew and grew and got so large she had to sit bended in that cage and then one day her liberator came and got her out of it and she embraced him. Any human being or any other animal would have eaten the guy who frees her, but that monkey is a forgiveness monkey and I'm just like that monkey. I don't know if it's the gorilla or if it's one of them big monkeys.

You were trying to plan a show at the Kabul soccer stadium. Is that still happening?

Uh-huh, we're still working on it with my friend who lives on a beautiful Spanish island called Ibiza and she's an Afghan German woman and her father is an Afghan German who lives in Hamburg and who's already bringing lots of monies from



charities to Kabul to women's and children's causes and who went to our defense minister and is already talking with the guys about logistic help because they're the only ones who are flying to Afghanistan, our army. And we're definitely very excited about that project. It will be very nice.

Who else is going to participate in that?

For sure Eric Burdon. And Annisette, the singer from Savage Rose, who is a really great rock band who refused to play for the soldiers in Vietnam and then they kind of got dropped from their record company and they're kind of politically very activistic. They want to play there, Savage Rose, great band, great singer, Annisette. We keep asking around, but first the thing has to be safe and secure and then we go and ask artists because you can't ask people and don't have the logistics organized yet.

You talked a lot during your show about the political things you're involved in: Greenpeace, PETA, alternatives to the current...

The one and only alternative AIDS organization, Alive and Well.

How did you get interested in your politics and your spirituality? I know you grew up in a Communist country [East Germany] and you were an activist and such a rebellious character.

Well, everybody said there was no God when I was little. I was going, like escaping, Sunday mornings when my parents were sleeping and I just went to the church on the corner and they were singing some good songs. My father was upset that I went there and that made me start questioning and they all said there is no God. All the people who said there is no God had bitter faces, they looked so ugly and they looked so stressed out. And I thought I want to search for God myself. Which I apparently did, and I found. This I try to show in my documentary film about my teacher in India.

And one day I went to a hospital because there was a friend of ours dying of AIDS. And I saw him hooked on all those things and he was filled up with morphine and I started questioning this kind of treatment. It's like when somebody is so ill, why do they give him some surgical, chemical product? My nutritionist, Bob Owen, who wrote the book *You Don't Have to Die Sick*, which is a great title, it's a great statement — it's kind of like a nutrition Bible — he also wrote the book *Roger's Recovery from AIDS*, which is a true story, all of this got me questioning it. [Digs in bag to find book.] Like Christina Maggiore, she put this book together, *What If Everything You Thought You Knew About AIDS Was Wrong?*, and then she was featured in *Mothering* magazine. *Mothering* magazine has a great article about "HIV Positive Moms Say No to AIDS Drugs" and it was so hard, overwhelming for me to hear that some women [were forced to take anti-AIDS drugs] — you know, my God, I don't know where to start.

I also made an interview with a wonderful scientist and professor at two different universities, his name is Dr. Peter Duisberg and he gave me an interview at the Alternative AIDS Conference in Amsterdam in 1993. He explained to me what AIDS is and what HIV is, and that HIV has apparently, in the long-term effect, nothing to do with AIDS. And HIV is a retrovirus and it is sleeping, dormant, in one out of a thousand cells and it doesn't do nothing. Christina herself, one month she is tested HIV positive, the other month she is tested HIV negative, so the test itself is a crazy thing to start with. And to give a healthy person who has no symptoms of any sickness at all, to suggest to a healthy person, a healthy and on top of everything pregnant person, that she should start taking drugs, drugs which cause cancer in rats — unbelievable stuff.

I say, my God, once I had a horrible pimple in the skin inside of my mouth and my doctor said, "You have to go on a healing fast. What are you eating, what are you drinking?" I said, "Well, I'm drinking like ten cups of coffee in the morning and ba ba ba ba ba." Then he said, "Now's the time for juice fasting, you do the enema." And you go power walking in the morning afterwards, you're sweating. No, first you dry brush, then you dress really warm, then you go power walking then you sweat so much, then you come and take your shower. Then you do your juice fasting, carrots, all the good stuff, extra wheat grass, and take all the good minerals and vitamins, and special teas. And I felt so amazing like I'd never thought would exist, that kind of healthy, happy, elated, energetic — and also dreams. Dreams from my past came up, which kind of were there clinging in my system. Like the father of my daughter, he was a

junkie, that was like about 20 years ago, and he died when Cosma was 9 years old. My daughter never has seen her father. I didn't want her to have a broken heart. I could not because it was just too sad to see him shooting up and stuff like that. So, like, those painful things came out in dreams during that cleansing time also. It was just amazing. And I do fasting every year in around March/April time, when I go to India. It's called Navaratri, it's a nine-day festival dedicated to the divine mother of creation and it's great. I'm fasting there and drinking healthy things and we're juicing, we're doing fire ceremonies, we're praying. Every year I come out like a brand new baby [with] fresh energy. So I try to tell my friends and everybody to do that. At least come to the home page, check out Babaji's message. It's just what our planet, what we need as human beings, some really good teachers who don't want to eat our souls -- who want us to be happy, to be ourselves and just make us become aware that we have to work together on this, not only for myself.

So many stars on this planet just show, yeah they're doing good work entertaining or being in movies, and ba ba ba ba, and the community puts them on a pedestal and they're so alienated from the community kind of thing. Every magazine I buy, like *People* magazine or *US* magazine, is just all that gossip stuff. What does that have to do with anything which would benefit anybody? There I think we need more people to speak out and to help, like for example, in India there's a hundred fifty million children working in child labor, slavery. Unbelievable. I read it in the *Herald-Tribune* one day. I picked it up, by heavenly coincidence, picked up the *Herald-Tribune*. I never read that newspaper, not every day, and I was flying that day so I picked up one and there was the article in it. Now I can write a letter to our new ambassador for the Republic of India in Berlin, he just moved in, a new one. And they know me very well because I go and get my visas there all the time because I go to India every year. We also make demonstrations in front of the Indian embassy with PETA activists to enforce the laws against all the illegal slaughterhouses and the way those animals are being shuffled into one little truck and already die on the way. Just a little work to do. If I wouldn't be able to do this kind of causes then just be a normal pop star, I would not be happy. I couldn't be happy just being in the charts, and having number one hits don't do nothing for my neighborhood.

You were talking onstage tonight about your son being interested in political issues.

Yeah, children are very aware of how polluted the city is and why it is allowed, they are questioning this, why is there not a law that forbids all

the pollution? Why is there not a law that gives the homeless people a place to stay? Why is there no money for feeding the hungry children in Africa? They are questioning it and their hearts are bleeding for the truth and for making our world a loving and happy world. Many big people they just wanna gather some monies for themselves so they can build their little house and live their little American dream and they forget that we're all sitting in the same boat. When we don't fight for our Mother Earth, for our right to breathe, for the food to be organically grown, then — oh, God, it's gonna get worse and worse and worse. So we have to keep on being extremely busy and extremely happy being extremely busy, you know? Because otherwise the creation is gonna not graduate and not be able to continue living.

The sperm count, scientists did a sperm count, the sperm is getting worse and worse because of all the environmental things and all the radiation. God, how many times we went to the airport, we have to go and be exposed to radiation and not only that, it's also other ways. In the food, even in the stuff you know, the fabric softener which you put in the washing machine or the wash powder you put in the washing machine. I had people on my show from a company called Life Source, they are from Switzerland, just like the Ricola candy, and they have a thing called Life Source and it's like a little disc with water and some magnets inside and then a special enzymatic washing liquid and if you have really bad spots on your white linen stuff then you can take special enzymatic — what do you call it? — but anyway, you just use a tiny amount of that wash liquid and your wash comes out so soft and so clean and it doesn't give no dramatic illnesses or skin diseases to children. It doesn't give caulk to the washing machine. You never have to put de-caulk product in it. It's just a new way of — organic, ecologically, environmentally safe way to wash your clothes. There are so many [harmful products] — what we eat, what kind of stuff we're driving, our cars, what we put in our washing machines. It's an endless list, but we have to start somewhere.

Do you feel positive about the future?

To tell you the truth, no. Because nobody cares. And everybody cares about himself or herself and everybody just cares about glamour and gossip, and love and truth and simplicity has gone somewhere in the corner, like when I'm on tour, where I put the wet clothes when I come offstage, I put them in the corner in my bag. [sighs] But then in the hotel room I take it out and I wash it. That's why I've got to get my little TV show on TV, because it's just something like Oprah is already doing, really positive entertainment and we need more great documentaries on TV and

more information for people to join Green parties or environmental organizations like Greenpeace. There's so much to do, so much to learn also, to educate each other about.

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Nina Hagen photos taken at Chicago's Double Door by Julia Gillard