

Nicki Richards (from Madonna's band) at The Canal Room – Friday June 5th



Mars ruled and first sign of the zodiac chart, Aries is the firestarter that brings new things with the coming of spring and the daunting spirit of the Greek warrior God that rules the season. Those who are cosmically endowed with its influence are noted for a capriciousness that breeds originality, a fierce demeanor and a commitment only to the certainty of the moment. Nicki Richards is one of those powerhouse vocalists in the realm of the Aries pantheon that includes Sarah Vaughn, Aretha Franklin, Mariah Carey, Chaka Khan, Marvin Gaye, Teddy Pendergrass, Diana Ross, Jill Scott, Stephanie Mills and Luther Vandross. Rational thinkers and religious believers who consider astrology to be a heathenish superstition might be open to the concept put forth in Malcolm Gladwell's survey in *Outliers* that observes the same month birthdays of the majority of junior hockey players in Canada. Richards's March 24th birthday puts her in that special group of leading singers but the difference is that she earned her status as one of the most venerated supporting singers of the past 20 years. Since the late '80s Richards has worked with everyone from Michael Jackson to Tina Turner and she just finished a run on [Madonna's Sweet And Sticky tour](#), which will resume in the summer months. She is a classic R&B singer, actress, songwriter and she even did work as one of [Frankie Knuckle's house music divas](#).

The self-described former geeky kid comes from a family of musicians that nourished her artistic yearnings with their practicum and Friday night house parties. Her mother sang with

Cannonball Adderley and can be heard on the new album along with her grandmother and brother. Longtime fans remember her singular performance on Star Search years ago when she sang Anita Baker's "You Bring Me Joy." Her chocolaty timbre delivered with the strength of a storm made her an unforgettable performer and attracted a deal with Atlantic Records. Her short stay on the label produced the critically acclaimed *Naked (To The World.)* She did a dance-oriented cover of "Summer Breeze" that produced remixes by Knuckles that collectors still scour crates and the internet in hopes of procuring that one last copy. The gift of blazing lungs also put her side by side with the marvelous vocal calisthenics of [Rachelle Ferrell](#) on the song "Paris." In a familiar story shared by too many great artists label politics stopped the project from getting the promotion and laurels it deserved but Richards never stopped singing and soon became a star behind the stars. Last year she independently released her second solo album *Nicki* replete with 17 songs which seems to be one song for every year since her last album. "Bring The Love" is the first single and her story repeats itself with another club tune that is having success on Billboard's Hot Dance Club Play and Global Dance Tracks charts. In this interview Nicki talks about her musical roots, working with people like Tina Turner and why it took so long for her to return on the scene as a solo artist.

How was the tour with Madonna?

The tour with Madonna it's been great it's been challenging always exciting.

I saw where you said that touring with others was great but you kind of lost your way as an artist?

It's great in constantly working and working on different kinds of music I guess yeah it's easy to kind of stick with the music situations that just kind of pop up and come along and I just get propelled into one situation after another and

the next instead of taking the bull by the horn and taking charge it was just time to take charge again and here I am moving around (laughs) juggling a million balls in the air from t-shirts and merchandise to rehearsals for the band you know dance rehearsals it's a lot of work you have to have some chutzpah, some gumption to take on everything that goes into being an artist and I love it I'd forgotten how much I love it.

I notice that your sound is a mix of computers and live instruments?

Yes I've been doing that forever I'm a big nerd I started out with my first music program on my computer probably when I was in high school messing with beats, and drum machines and it just became a part of my vocabulary. I started writing everything from dance music and things that I was hearing on the radio but also drawing from the music that I loved growing up with my parents. The New Orleans sound, the jazz that my dad would play the classical music that my mom would play stuff that I'd hear on AM radio from The Eagles to Roberta Flack and Joni Mitchell they were all on the radio and all that stuff seeped in. All of the funk stuff that you hear that was what my parents would play when they had a party on a Friday night or a Saturday night. And it just became the world to me so glamorous to hear that funky music coming from the living room when I was upstairs peeking down.

I read that your mother is musician and your dad was a military officer.

There were extremes in my house to put it mildly (laughs) mom was a free-spirit and very musical dad loved music but he was more strict and that's where I got my work ethic and life lessons from so I just kind of came together in the end. In the way they both struggled I still struggle within myself I wanna be free and loose but at the same time I'm good at beating myself up and disciplining myself to keep things

going.

What influence did your family have on your musical life?

I'm a bit of a mutt my dad's family is Roman-Catholic and from that there was a lot of classical music I learned that way. Mom is a jazz singer she comes out of a strong Baptist family my grandmother still plays piano and organ at three churches where she lives in Florida all of my aunts sing in those choirs there's a lot of music there's a lot of music there all different kinds and because I was military my friends were from all over the globe so I got to hear a little bit of everything. There is this church background but married with classical and jazz and then pop thrown on the top.

What made you decide to do another solo album?

I'm always writing I have always written every year by the end of the year I've got a hundred songs I'm constantly writing and it's like "Why is this stuff just sitting around?" in my quote "vault" time to get the stuff out. Daily I've always got some melody in my head I like to say I'm prolific so it was just time a good time in my life. The great thing about artists like Madonna and Tina Turner is that I'm in good shape I'm probably in the best shape of my life I'm singing all the time I'm strong I'm just learning from powerful people how to be even more powerful myself why not give it a spin and try it out on myself. And so far so good it's working.

What was it like being on tour with Tina Turner?

Tina Turner it was a good month or so with her it was in the summer of '07. She's actually one of the hardest working women in show business what an amazing woman I have never seen anyone work as hard as she does except for Madonna. The two of them are just if you want to learn something about work ethics these are the people to study they are just firecrackers Tina

Turner sheâ€™s just impeccable. Sheâ€™s kind sheâ€™s strong sheâ€™s beautiful in every way and she runs a tight ship her business runs well what a great model to learn from.

Letâ€™s go back to the beginning of your solo career in â€™91 when you were signed to Atlantic Records how did all that come about?

There is a lot to that actually I had won on a show called Star Search and got a bidding war going with different record companies which was really great there was a good buzz going on about me Ahmet Ertegun came into the mix he was the head of Atlantic at that time and he recognized something that he liked in me and signed me however Ahmet was a very busy man. He was not the guy who does the day to day stuff he signed people and ran an incredible empire but I had to have an A& R person so I was signed to Sylvia Rhone at Atlantic and it took a while for her to kind of warm up to me I sat around on the label for about a year before I could even get a meeting. Meanwhile Iâ€™m just continuing to be super-nerd and writing a song a day ready to go. Anyway finally with a fight I got this record done but I had all these creative ideas I was talking to Trevor Horn and Daniel Lanois to work with these incredible eclectic producers but Atlantic saw me as a one-trick pony and wanted to keep me in a very small R&B kind of groove but meanwhile you know a decade later there is Seal I couldâ€™ve done that. It was a lot but Iâ€™m still proud of the record that I made I had a lot to prove and I had to struggle to get my voice and sound heard.

What did you do between the time of the last album and this new project?

I did a record on Atlantic I tried to do a little living Iâ€™m so focused on making music day to day that sometimes I forget about relationships and life so I took a little time I got married moved away for a while just kind of inject some other parts of life into my life. I checked out theater for a while

I did all kinds of things and I was getting calls word of mouth to go on tour and recording sessions and lead vocal sections based on my musical background I was able to do music and pull those sessions together. I did four years with Mariah Carey, on and off for years with Whitney Houston, a lot of interesting powerful musicians Iâ€™ve been able to work with.

It seems that this CD is your time of renewal?

Yeah I guess everybody has that moment where youâ€™re trudging along and youâ€™re sitting on the couch your life isnâ€™t the way you wished it was you know and you have that moment when youâ€™re like something has got to change I wanna break out of whatever rut Iâ€™m in for me there were relationship ruts I guess the record is evident of breaking out the of the rut I put my foot down one day and looked in the mirror and I said â€œYou know what you gotta do what you say you want to do.â€ I just kind of kicked my own butt end of story and here I am I canâ€™t believe it.

How did you come up with â€œSay What?â€

I gave myself license one day in my home studio in other words I try not to restrict myself when Iâ€™m in the writing stage of things I try to just have fun and let my mind play a little bit instead of thinking â€œoh that would be a great songâ€ I try not to think that way I try to think in terms of â€œwhat will float your boat musically today?â€ â€œWhat is gonna make my own little butt shake right now?â€ for some reason that groove popped in my mind and I started dancing around my studio and I said let me see if I can incorporate that into something thatâ€™s the groove that inspired me and the next thing I knew I started playing around with military beats I would hear at my dadâ€™s work and then I threw a little bit of inspiration from Miles Davis one of my heroes and the next thing I knew I was feeling very sassy and was talking about how sassy I am and thatâ€™s how the song came about so Iâ€™m doing my thing itâ€™s not about commercial success this is

what makes me happy right now and I hope it makes you happy is how I thought about it.

What do you like most about this album?

The thing I liked the most that I was uninhibited I didn't put any limitations on myself as far as what it was supposed to sound like. I kind of made a record that was just too too what I was feeling what I wanted to express at that time and that I think is very freeing it's a cool thing to do. I kind of love that about the way the music business is changing right now there is this freedom and I'm just running with it.

What's been your biggest challenge with your art so far?

I guess I am I spend a little too much time thinking about overcoming any limitations I don't want to be stuck I wanna be able to make great music and make some of my own rules about it. I'm definitely doing this the way I want to and it feels great.

What was the best part about doing this album?

Right now the best part is feeling so proud bringing this to completion and doing it on my own terms by myself that's a big thing as a woman look what I've done. I'm just so proud I was able to take an idea and see it through to where I can walk in a club and they'll play it. I can hold the CD in my hand I can see the mp3 files on my computer and feel good about what I've done.

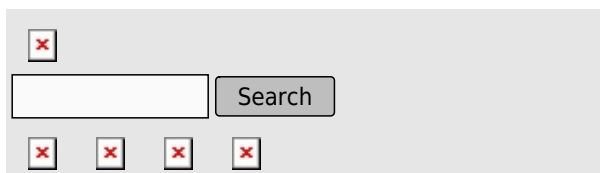
What would you tell any artist who wants to succeed in the music business?

A couple of things; one thing is I have people come up to me all the time and they want to be in the music business and I ask them "What do you know about music?" they just want to be superstars without having done any work. I think what I

would stress most is someone who has done their homework. When you hear songs on the radio and they use samples or throwbacks of things it's a good idea if you know where that stuff comes from because it will shape you your artistry. If you want to be an artist or a superstar first concentrate on being a great artist concentrate on figuring out what you love about music or get clear about where you want to go with it. If you like pop music then study great pop music figure out what's great about it try to find your own voice it takes a long time it's so much easier said than done but do your homework be really great at it figure out what's special in you that you can bring to the table and then do your homework. You're not gonna turn into a big star overnight fifteen minutes that's all well on TV but that's not gonna work on the long term if you want to stick around if you want respect know what you're doing.



[Lets Dance – Nicki Richards](#)



[Serenity Prayer \(Interlude\) – Nicki Richards](#)

Keep up with Nicki Richards on the web at www.nickirichards.com or www.myspace.com/nickirichards

Don't miss Nicki live if you are in the area:

Friday April 17th

@ Joe's Pub

<http://www.joespub.com>

425 Lafayette St (between East 4th and Astor Place)

New York, New York 10003

212-967-7555

\$15 Admission/All Ages/11:30 PM Showtime

**Nicki Richards Hot Off
Madonna's Sticky & Sweet Tour
Announces Brand New Release,
Two Huge NYC Shows**