"It was all downhill from there," says NIKKA COSTA, who follows this self-effacing, tongue-in-cheek, statement with a loud, raucous cackle. Witty, engaging and smart, she projects a vivacious personality that is without any hint of pretentiousness - evidenced by a combination of self-deprecation and frequent laughter, signs of someone totally at ease with themselves. She's laughing loudly because she's reminiscing about the time that she performed with one of the bona fide legends and icons of 20th century music - none other than Frank Sinatra. It was 1981 and Nikka, then just nine, sang a duet with the 66-year-old crooner. "It was crazy. We did a charity function that (then First Lady) Nancy Reagan was doing for grandparents being able to adopt and be like foster grandparents," explains Nikka. "We actually recorded a single for the charity, 'To Love A Child,' and then we performed it on the White House lawn."
But Nikka wasn't just some lucky local kid plucked from obscurity just for the day. While Sinatra's career was on the wane at the time, hers was rising. And fast. She was already a star in Europe, where her version of 'On My Own' from the musical, Fame, had topped the charts in three countries, while its parent album ('Nikka Costa') went Platinum in Spain. It helped, of course, that her dad was Sinatra's go-to arranger, Don Costa - who had worked with 'Ol' Blues Eyes' on several recording projects, including the classic album, 'My Way' - but it wasn't just a case of 'keep-it-in-the-family'-style nepotism: the truth was that young Domenica Costa actually possessed a prodigious musical talent and a pair of lungs beyond her tender years.

Fast forward thirty-six years and Nikka, now 44, has successfully made the difficult transition from precocious-talented child star to credible adult performer. She found her niche serving up funk and soul-infused platters in the early noughties but now releases an album that takes her back to the days of her youth and conjures up vivid memories of her father and Frank Sinatra. It's called 'Nikka & Strings - Underneath And Between' and its musical keystone is a vintage standard that has a strong Sinatra association. The song is Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer's 'Come Rain Or Come Shine' written in 1946 and significantly, adapts a string arrangement that Nikka's father originally wrote for the 'Chairman of the Board' many years ago. Combining elegant jazz sophistication with Nikka's powerful, soul-drenched voice results in a compelling musical drama that sets the tone for the rest of the LP, which includes striking renditions of both vintage and more recent material. Helmed by Nikka's husband, Justin Stanley, with noted rock producer Bob Clearmountain, the album's songs range from jazz standards ('Stormy Weather') and '60s soul sides (Solomon Burke's 'Cry To Me' and Marvin Gaye's 'Ain't That Peculiar') to tunes by Prince ('Nothing Compares 2 U') and Jeff Buckley ('Lover You Should Have Come Over'). Some of Nikka's own songs are also present, among them 'Love To Love You Less' - a bluesy ballad from her 2008 Stax album, 'Pebble To A Pearl' - along with 'Headfirst,' and 'Silver Tongue,'
the latter a song that she co-wrote with Prince that he released as a B-side in 2004.

A radical stylistic departure, 'Nikka & Strings' finds the big-voiced Japan-born singer ("my mum was nine months pregnant when she went to the Tokyo Music Festival with my dad," she reveals) morphing into a bluesy song siren with a jazzy side. Here, the chameleonic chanteuse talks in depth to SJF's Charles Waring about her latest studio venture and reflects on her life and music during a long career that remarkably stretches back almost forty years...

What's the story behind your new album?

It started out with some live shows. I got together with some friends who played strings and we started doing this residency in LA and then it just took off from there. Everybody was really loving it and people were coming back to see it again and bringing their kids and even bringing their mums. We were like, 'oh wow, this is so beautiful, people really love it, let's record it' and then it just snowballed from there. We did some crowd-funding (via Pledge Music) and that came together really fast. But sonically, it is very different from my stuff but for me it goes full circle, further back to my childhood and what I was doing when I was little, and what I grew up listening to.

How did the recording sessions take shape?
We recorded it in a day. We just pressed play and put them down as if we were doing a gig. And we did each song maybe two or three times. It was an epic day that we didn't really think about beforehand - if we had, we probably wouldn't have done it.

Your husband Justin Stanley, and the legendary engineer/producer Bob Clearmountain, worked on it in the studio with you. What was it like working with those guys?

I've done many records with Justin so we have a well-established shorthand but it was wonderful having Bob. I met him at a party. We've gotten the money from the crowd-funding and we were about to figure out how to do the album. He came up to me and said, 'I'm such a fan, I'd like to work with you in any way.' We exchanged numbers and I called him and I told him 'I'm doing this string thing - would you be interested in working on it with us?' He was really into it and he is just the loveliest man and is so talented. He's crafted a million iconic, historic records so it was a real pleasure to have him along.

What influenced your choice of material this time around?

When we were doing the live shows, we thought what songs of mine would be cool to flip and do with strings. Also, in my funk shows, I don't get to do a lot of my ballads and this was a perfect opportunity to get my teeth into those things live and show that side. In a funk show, you can only really do one or two ballads because people go to the bar. So that helped steer our choice and then I wanted to do songs that I have always loved or songs I like singing in the shower. There was just really no rhyme or reason to it. They were just songs I've always wanted to do.
COMING FULL CIRCLE - NIKKA COSTA GOES BACK TO HER ROOTS

Written by Charles Waring
Sunday, 28 May 2017 09:25 - Last Updated Wednesday, 31 May 2017 11:40

The album kicks off with a wonderful version of Prince's 'Nothing Compares 2 U.' What persuaded you to record that song? Did it have a special meaning for you?

It's such a great song and I loved it when Sinead O'Connor came out with it. It's just such a simple message that I think that everybody can relate to and it's got a great blues element. I thought, 'how can we flip it so I can make it my own?' I thought with the strings that it could be really beautiful and it just came together really fast. We were doing it live at the shows to a really great response. Then, unfortunately, Prince passed away during our run of shows and then it took on a whole, other meaning for me, having been friends with him for years. So there was a personal emotion to it and then worldwide, all the audiences, they had another new connection to the song because they went through a mourning period when he passed away. He was such a big part of our lives, right? Then it became this whole other thing and I thought I have to record it, I have to honour him and also as an artist, you want to be truthful... you want to match the truth in the art, at least I do anyway because if you do, you come up with the most real and beautiful things. So we definitely decided to include it. I'm so happy because I think it turned out really beautiful.

There's another Prince connection with the song, 'Silver Tongue,' isn't there? What's the background to that one?

Years ago he emailed me and just said 'can you send me some lyrics or a poem' so I sent him these words and he sent me back him and piano, singing 'Silver Tongue.' It was very jazzy. He was in a jazz phase and I thought, 'oh my God, this is incredible.' I couldn't believe that he recorded my words and made it a song. At that point I thought I could never record it because stylistically it didn't fit with any records that I was doing at the time. He recorded it and became a B-side to one of his singles. We moved on and collaborated in other ways. And then this record came around and we were looking for some other tunes. I really listened to 'Silver Tongue' after he passed away and was reminiscing about it. I thought that the song really fitted with this record.

The album's keystone is 'Come Rain or Come Shine,' the Frank Sinatra-associated standard. What was your reasoning behind including it?

We were about to do the first live show and I was cleaning out my office for a guest and underneath, behind my shelves, I found this arrangement of the song for a 50-piece orchestra. I don't have very many things of my dad's and so finding this was very strange. I didn't even
remember that I had it. I was like, 'Oh my God, what is this?' It said 'Come Rain Or Come Shine,' Frank Sinatra, Reprise, and on the other side was written 'Don Costa' and the address where I grew up. I called my piano player, Jeff, and said you've got to come over. So we were reading through it and he was playing and he said 'this is a great arrangement, this is the one.' I asked him if he could squash it down and arrange it for a string quartet and a rhythm section. He gulped and then said I think I can. It was a daunting task but he did such a beautiful job. I know the arrangements so well because I've heard it many times growing up. Jeff managed to keep all the key elements in there and did an incredible job rearranging it for us. We started doing it at the live shows and it became a really special moment because it's going full circle for me. My first two records were with my dad arranging strings, so it's a very complete circle. It's like being with my dad for three minutes.
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Did you ever envisage yourself becoming a lounge singer in any way? (laughs) No, I didn’t, though I kind of knew that I would end up doing that kind of thing at some point and would dabble again with small bluesy, jazzy and stringy stuff because it’s my roots. But it’s taken a long time because I was always wanting to solidify my funk badass-ness and wasn’t ready to embrace my roots just yet. I always felt that it would look as if I was throwing in the towel on that if I finally mellowed and did jazzy stuff but now I’ve matured, I know that I can do it and it doesn’t feel that it’s the end of the road. I’m older but I feel confident enough now to know that I can do many things and it doesn’t mean that I’m done creatively. I’m certainly not laying on a piano in the lobby of the Hilton... It hasn’t come to that yet (laughs).

New versions of some of your older songs also appear on the album. ‘Love To Love You Less’ was on our record called ‘From A Pebble To A Pearl,’ one of my favourite records of mine. It’s not such a different version from the original in that it has strings, but it’s definitely got a bluesy, Ray Charles-type feel and I wanted to flip it lyrically. It’s so much fun to sing live because it’s so funny. So I love that kind of twist. And that’s Bob Cleamountain’s favourite. ‘Headfirst’ was on an EP that I did, the last thing that came out, which was more electronic and had all programmed drums. It was just very, very different. It was inspired by a beat that I made on my MPC (Midi Production Centre) and then I put my thing on it and then my producer tweaked it out with an electro vibe. But it had soul and I gave it to Jeff and I said ‘this could be really cool, if you can figure out how to put strings on it.’ He did and I think he did a really amazing job. When the string players play live, it’s so beautiful because of the arrangement, which is almost like Hitchcock film music, and kind of haunting.

You close the album with another standard, ‘Stormy Weather.’ What drew you to that particular song? You know what? I sing that song in the shower because I’ve always loved it (laughs). There are a million trillion versions of it but the one that really sticks out for me is on Judy Garland’s ‘Live At Carnegie Hall’ album. You can hear her vulnerability and she growls when emotion takes over. It’s not about how good a singer she is because her voice is cracking and pitchy but it’s so intense and incredible. So I always wondered if I could attempt it. Somebody said this record is kind of ballsy - and I didn’t think of it this way, it’s just that I’ve done Judy Garland, Ray Charles, Jeff Buckley and Frank Sinatra, all these epic vocalists. It wasn’t on purpose, it’s just what I listen to and what I love and then the challenge of trying to make the songs my own.
NIKKA COSTA'S NIKKA & STRINGS ALBUM IS OUT VIA METROPOLIS ON JUNE 5TH

I'm dying to come over there and play. We're just figuring out the logistics of it but it will definitely be on the cards, for sure. The album comes out in June so maybe the fall. But I've got two kids, so I'm like an Uber driver for my children (laughs). I'm constantly driving and decorating, so I enjoy that. I go hiking but I don't have time really now. I like to cook, too, somewhere.

Away from music do you have any hobbies or interests that your fans don't know about? (laughs). I love the Anderson Paak record. There's some really cool funk stuff out there that's kind of amazing stuff I think right now that I would love to get into, but I'd have to work on it. You know, if you're going to run a country album with fiddles and everything, and you'll go, 'that's not what we talked about!'

Is there anybody that you'd specifically like to work with, in terms of musicians, singers or producers? Yeah, I'm already kind of thinking about what the next one's going to be and I'll probably flip it all. I've got the pretty funky track, but I probably will definitely do a funk record again though. I feel like it's, like, it's just brewing in there somewhere. (Laughs). So I'm really just self-satisfying and trying to make music that some people will like if they can hear it. So my next album might just be like a dirty funk three-piece. I don't know. I'll see what happens. I can't help it. It's just my trajectory. I like all different kinds of music and I'm not making any special effort to stick in one place. I just follow where my heart is.

Understandably, your focus is on this album at the moment but what does the future hold for you? What do you see yourself doing or working on in the coming years? Yeah, I've got some really exciting projects that I'm working on. I've got some fun things coming up. I'm also excited to release my new album. I've got a lot of people really excited about it. I'm really looking forward to seeing how it goes. I think it's going to be a really fun one. I'm really excited to see how it all plays out.

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