

ELLE



THE QUEEN RETURNS

After a four-year hiatus, Nicki Minaj is back with a banging album and a new outlook on life.

BY DEVIN GORDON, STYLED BY KATIE MOSSMAN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY KARL LAGERFELD

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Nicki Minaj sits in a dim recording studio beneath a red fluorescent light that reads "NICKI." But this is not her studio. It's a rental, a sprawling, Spanish-style compound in Burbank, located on one of those suburban L.A. streets that look so banal they must have a secret recording studio on them. There's nothing unusual about an artist making herself at home during the long hours finishing up a new album. The sagging red couch is cozy and sleepable. You could take a nap in here, then develop some photos. But in order for a glowing, red fluorescent light that reads "NICKI" to be on the wall, someone had to make it, then bring it here and install it. Someone had to ask for it. There had to be an invoice. A process was required.

So yes, Nicki Minaj is particular. That's why she asked me to meet her here. Her new single, "Chun-Li," as in the female Street Fighter character famed for breaking the street-fighter glass ceiling, is superlate, but something is still wrong, and that is unacceptable. She keeps hearing it, the wrong thing, and she can't figure out how to fix it, and she's already been in here for 24 (or 30? Or is it 36?) straight hours. And if you

think that's an exaggeration, if you think that's just some hardest-working-rapper hyperbole, note her handlers' vacant sighs when you ask them whether, come on, no BS—has it really been that long? Yes, it's really been that long.

It is 5 p.m. on a Tuesday, but Nicki has no idea what time it is, and only a vague sense of what day it is. "Chun-Li" is scheduled to drop the day after tomorrow, and that's kind of nonnegotiable at this point, seeing as how she just announced it on Instagram this afternoon. She's wearing her studio clothes: black leather chaps with fringe and a fishnet arch that runs up one leg, through her crotch region, and down the other leg; a busty black leather top with silver studs; and black leather stiletto-heel Balenciaga shoes with spikes so long they look like they're going to reach out and rake of my face.

Nicki's engineer, [Big Juice](#), who, bless him, has also been in here for 24 or 30 or 36 hours—and whose bulky earphones and chin-strap beard make him an absolute dead ringer for Tracy Jordan's browbeaten sidekick, Grizz, on *30 Rock*—couldn't even hear the wrong thing at first. But now he hears it, and he's trying to fix it, too. He makes every single infinitesimal adjustment she very politely, very wearily requests, because Big Juice knows that they are not leaving this room until they get it perfect, then second-guess it and re-perfect it.

"THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE DO COME SO EASY TO ME. I COULD DO IT IN MY SLEEP. BUT I'M SUCH A PERFECTIONIST THAT WHEN SOMETHING IS TOO EASY TO ME, I ACTUALLY FEEL GUILTY."

The slice of music at issue is a breathy "Chun-Li" at the tail end of the bridge. "You have to move the 'Chun-Li' to the left," she tells Juice. "It's ending too late." He turns back to his computer and clicks the thing and then the other thing. While we wait, Nicki explains to me why she's sweating so hard over something her professional engineer could barely hear.

"I feel like true icons shift music, uplift music, switch music, have the balls to take a chance," she says, her voice like sandpaper. "The things that people do come so easy to me. I could do it in my sleep. But I'm such a perfectionist that when something is too easy to me, I actually feel guilty. It would've been so easy to listen to all the trap music out there right now and say, 'Let me just copy this,'" she goes on. "But I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

She looks tired. Still striking—with apple cheeks that split into dimples when she smiles, and an orb of peroxide-blond hair that seems to float above her head like a small sun—but so tired that her eyes droop and stay drooped.

Juice is ready. Sound blasts from the speakers, and Nicki rubs her temples. "Too short now. You're fading it too soon. Go back to where you had it." The speakers erupt again, and this time Nicki just closes her eyes and shakes her head.

Not counting some appearances here and there, Nicki Minaj has been gone for nearly four years. And rap years are like dog years, only faster. *The Pinkprint*, the album that

cemented her a place in the rap hall of fame, came out in 2014. But even by then, Nicki's dearest New York ("meet me at the Rucker, take the Bruckner") had long since surrendered its title as rap's epicenter to Atlanta and its woozy, insidious tritone trap sound.

It's not that Nicki dislikes trap. She guested on Georgia hip-hop trio Migos's latest hit, "MotorSport," closing out the track after a flow from Bronx-born Cardi B, whom many consider an evolutionary Nicki Minaj and many others consider de-evolutionary. The rap world's thirst for a Nicki-versus-Cardi catfight verges on sexist, but it has nothing to do with trap per se. Nicki's issue with trap is that she's bored to death of it.

"The truth of the matter is, trap has taken over so much that even our New York rappers are doing nothing but trap songs, because they feel that that's the way to make it," she says, and she could be talking about anybody, or maybe someone in particular. Who knows? "They're rapping like people from down south."

Nicki is a battler, by instinct and by artistic credo. She needs a foil, whether it's rap's boys' club (which she crashed in 2010 with her feature near the end of Kanye West's "Monster") or the media (she curtly [dismissed](#) a *New York Times Magazine* reporter who'd asked a question she didn't like by saying, "I don't care to speak to you anymore").



Minaj poses with Karl Lagerfeld. Credits: Glazed-canvas belted coat, Fendi, \$5,400, [fendi.com](https://www.fendi.com). Nylon tights, [Wolford](#), \$75. Suede pumps, [Stuart Weitzman](#), \$385.

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But after *Pinkprint* made her one of the most successful rappers of all time—a feat she mentions now and then—she'd run out of rivals. Her personal life began making more news than her music did. She'd been dating the Philly rapper Meek Mill for nearly two years when he unwisely picked a fight with Drake, putting Nicki between her boyfriend and her longtime label-mate (and, of course, rumored sidepiece, gossip that wasn't helped by Nicki's notorious video for "Anaconda," in which she gives Drake a

humdinger of a lap dance, even though the whole point of the video is that he can't have her, jeez).

The rest is now rap history: Drake clowned Meek ("Is that your world tour or your girl's tour?"), Nicki and Meek broke up, and then things got even worse for the poor guy when a judge made an unusual choice to send him to jail for a parole violation on a 10-year-old drug and gun possession charge.

Throughout all of this, as Migos released hit after hit and Cardi B started bloodying her shoes, Nicki was working on new songs and plotting her return. She hired a producer for the first time—J. Reid—and made up her mind to reclaim New York's throne, and her own.

"I REALLY THINK IT'S GONNA BE THE BEST ALBUM OF THE YEAR."

"It has to be '80s," she told J. Reid from the start. "It has to be boom BAP. I don't want to do no trap shit 'cause everybody's doing that shit." She wrote a few bars—"Let's be real, why you bitches wanna look like me/Wanna be in demand, get booked like me/Wanna run up in the lab and cook like me," what ultimately became the chorus to "Barbie Tingz," the other single she'll be dropping in two days—and told Juice the kind of beats she wanted. She slaps the table in front of us: boom BAP-BAP, boom BAP.

Once Nicki found her sound—and a fresh rival—the album poured out of her. She woke up with whole bars in her head. She wrote songs at Paris Fashion Week. She went dark on social media. "I really think it's gonna be the best album of the year," she says. As we sit here, it's only mid-April, and Beyoncé has yet to weigh in on the matter. But this much is already certain: *Queen* is Nicki's best work—spare, aggressive, boom-bappy as fuck. It's Nicki Minaj in beast mode.



Nicki Minaj's new album cover, shot by Mert and Marcus

INSTAGRAM

"I went through a moment where I got to know myself again, and then I went through a moment where I got to know myself as the rapper again. And then I locked [myself] in the studio"—see?—"and I didn't want to leave." She basically hasn't left since. "Spiritually, I've experienced more growth in the last six months of my life, of my career, than I have in the last eight years."

Why do you think that is?

"It's the first time in my life I've ever been [single](#)."

Nicki is now in her midthirties, and from the age of 15 until just last fall, she has always had a serious boyfriend. "Six years, twelve years, three, four," she says. Over time, this came to have consequences she didn't anticipate.

"I remember feeling like I could do anything at one time in my life," she says, "and somewhere along the line, I just started second guessing myself, for whatever reason." That all ended when she started learning how to sleep alone. "As soon as I realized that I could actually live and breathe, and eat and sleep, and walk and talk without having a boyfriend, something clicked in me."

"Becoming single," she goes on, "was one of the things that made me feel strong and powerful. The fact that I am a young woman who doesn't need a man for money. I don't need a man for a job. I've never had to fuck for beats. I've never had to fuck for a record deal. I don't have those pressures. I get up when I want, shop when I want."

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Nicki says you can hear it on the album when she raps about "abstaining from sex had to zen my body. I ain't giving, so don't ask, I don't lend my body. He gotta be king status to get in my body."

From the start of her career, Nicki has defined herself in opposition to the male-dominated rap industry with a mix of megatalent and boisterous sex appeal. In her verse on "Monster," she lobbies Kanye and his then-girlfriend Amber Rose for a threesome. ("Friday," she specifies, consulting her calendar.) At one point, she said she hated the name Minaj—she was born Onika Tanya Maraj; an old manager rechristened her—but she's evidently made her peace with it. Just last fall, she posed for [the cover of Paper's "Break the Internet" issue](#) having a "Minaj à Trois" with two other Nicki Minajs. In the image, Top Nicki fondles Middle Nicki's right breast, while Middle Nicki receives cunnilingus from Bottom Nicki. It actually did break the internet.



Minaj with hairstylist Kim Kimble. Credits: Goat cashmere fur coat, \$8,345, felted veil hat, \$1,290, both, Nina Ricci, ninaricci.com. Nylon tights, Wolford, \$75. Suede pumps, [Stuart Weitzman](http://StuartWeitzman), \$385.

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She says she will never apologize for her persona—"I love being sexy; I'm never gonna stop being an exhibitionist"—but it, too, has had consequences she didn't anticipate.

One of her messages on the new album, she says, is "it being okay to keep your legs closed." She's speaking slower than usual, as if she's searching for the way to preach self-respect without sounding like she's slut-shaming. "I don't really know how to say that without being offensive."

She tries anyway. "Maybe I was naïve, but I didn't realize how many girls were modern-day prostitutes," she begins. "Whether you're a stripper, or whether you're an Instagram girl—these girls are so beautiful and they have so much to offer. But I started finding out that you give them a couple thousand dollars, and you can have sex with them. I was like, Yikes. It's just sad that they don't know their worth. It makes me sad as a woman. And it makes me sad that maybe I've contributed to that in some way."

Are you reckoning with that now more than you have in the past?

"I've always felt like it. But in a lot of ways, I don't know if I'm doing the same thing they're doing, because I'm selling sex appeal. So I can't look down on these girls. I may not be having sex with people, but I'm still selling sex appeal."

Well, sex and sex appeal aren't the same thing.

"That's true. But I just don't know if girls who look up to me think that when I'm posting a sexy picture. I'm actually the antithesis of all of that. I'm more of, like, the snobby girl, like the 'Uh, what' type of girl. And I want girls to be like that. I'd rather you be called snobby or a bitch or conceited—I'd rather you be called that than easy, and a ho, and a slut."

"I'D RATHER YOU BE CALLED SNOBBY OR A BITCH OR CONCEITED."

In a couple of days, Nicki will drop an unofficial [video for "Chun Li"](#)—an extended selfie in which she films herself writhing on a couch. I'll recognize the couch, and the outfit, and the scary shoes, and the blond bun, and the "NICKI" sign. She made the whole thing in here, maybe just hours, or even minutes, before our conversation. What strikes me right away about the video, besides its standard dose of Barbie bravado, is her solitude. She's holding the camera and training it on herself, her much-discussed curves filling the screen's narrow frame. This isn't a seduction. It's autoeroticism. It's a queen on her throne, giving herself a lap dance.

How do you solve a problem like Cardi B?

Nicki seems to be still feeling her way through that one, and in conversation with her, it requires some close reading. No one in pop music is more gifted at throwing plausibly deniable shade. She can knife someone without even saying her, or his, name. She may have done it a couple of times today—that vague reference to "New York rappers" who "sound like people down south." Sure, the "New York rappers" could be a shot at Remy Ma, the Bronx rapper and Nicki nemesis. But Remy doesn't really do trap. There's only one person Nicki could be referring to, and Nicki knows I know this.

When people read that thing you said earlier about New York rappers—they're going to read it obliquely. You're not naming any names, but that's how things get read.

"I don't think there's any one person doing trap music right now. I think the whole industry is doing trap music."

But you said people from New York.

"Well, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe I should've said, 'Me as a New York artist.'"

One delightful thing about Nicki is that she doesn't expect me, or anyone, to believe this. She's playing her part in the pop circus—the imperious diva—and now it's the fans'

turn to do their part. What about that reference to strippers? Cardi is having a baby with Offset—was Nicki alluding to her with that thing about never having to “fuck for beats”? Let the great wheel spin.



Jersey dress, [Alexandre Vauthier](#), \$7,182, at Bergdorf Goodman, NYC. Suede pumps, [Stuart Weitzman](#), \$385.

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Nicki's heart, though, doesn't really seem in this one. Unlike her beef with Remy, which has had legitimate ups and downs, this Cardi thing feels somewhat manufactured. On Zane Lowe's Beats 1 radio program on Apple Music, she admitted to a minor dispute about having to change some lyrics on “MotorSport,” but even she called it “the only one thing” she'd had any gripe with Cardi about.

All the same, she had an open forum to discredit every hint of beef—and she didn't. In fact, she went the other way and took a shot, even if it was more like a love tap. At times, she can seem trapped between her rap DNA and her weariness with being badgered into a mud-wrestling match.

Nicki's feelings about Meek Mill and his plight are much more transparent. Whatever went down between them, her anger is still raw. He would be [released from prison](#) two weeks after our interview, but as we talk, he's still in jail, and his situation is looking as bleak as ever. A few days earlier, his request to be released on bail had been rejected yet again.

Meek's case was a strange one. According to local news reports, the Philadelphia assistant district attorney and his probation officer opposed his sentence to jail time. But it seemed that the only person whose opinion mattered was the judge on the case, Genece Brinkley, and she denied Meek's release for mysterious reasons.

As soon as I raise this subject, Nicki stiffens.

I need to ask about Meek.

“Meek what?”

I assume you saw his release got denied again by that judge?

For just a flash, she winces. “Again?” But then she hardens. “I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.” A long pause. “But I’m also not gonna bad-mouth a judge who...because anything I say stays on the record.”

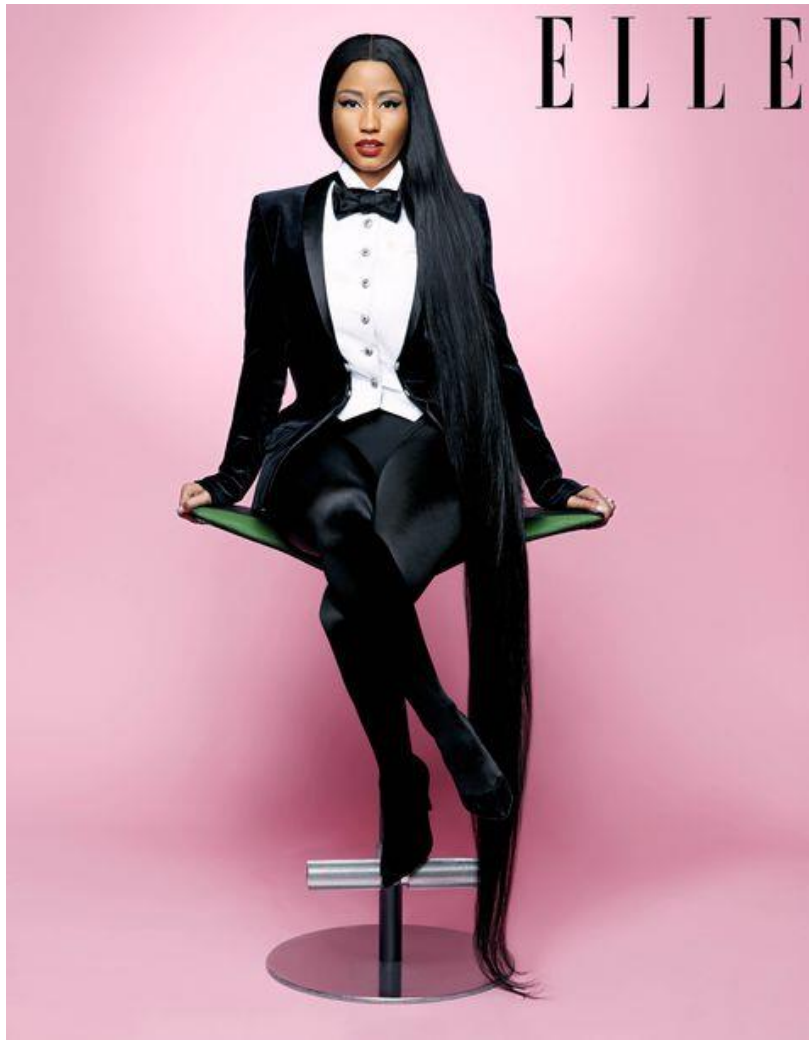
If she’d stopped right there, we’d all assume she was being scrupulous on Meek’s behalf, trying to avoid riling up his judge. But she didn’t stop, and what she says next catches me off guard, because she seems to side with Brinkley.

“I know that when I went there pleading for his freedom, I know that she”—Judge Brinkley—“spoke to me and was very sweet and maternal, and we both cried in her chambers, and she gave him another chance,” Nicki says. “So I don’t know what’s going on.”

According to Meek and his lawyer, while Nicki and Meek were still together, she witnessed a bizarre incident in Brinkley’s chambers in which Brinkley suggested Meek remake “On Bended Knee,” by Philly natives Boyz II Men. Meek demurred—he says Nicki actually laughed out loud. (Brinkley declined to comment for this story.)

Meek’s cause. But she doesn’t. She says legal a few more times, then goes quiet without confirming Meek’s account.

And then, almost as an afterthought, Nicki says: “She never asked me to sing.”



Stretch-cotton velvet jacket, \$5,150, cotton piqué vest, \$4,050, both, [Chanel](#), at select Chanel boutiques nationwide. Silk bow tie, [Charvet](#), \$235. White gold and diamond ring, De Beers. Nylon tights, Wolford, \$75.

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Juice tries again.

“You’re coming in one bar, one beat too early,” Nicki says. As grinding as this is, as exhausted as she is, she doesn’t seem stressed, or remotely sick of the work. For her, perfection is the fun part.

Juice goes back to work, and we go back to talking—about basketball, about social media, about influence versus theft and the difference between the two. Nicki has always been careful to name-check her elders; she’s like the mad offspring of a Lil’ Kim–Missy Elliott–Eminem ménage à rap gods. She suggests, though, that her own rap descendants have been less respectful.

"BUT RAP IS DIFFERENT NOW. YOU GOTTA PRETEND YOU LIKE PEOPLE AND STUFF. EVERYBODY'S GOTTA GET ON THE BANDWAGON. THEY GET ON THE LOVE BANDWAGON, AND THEY GET ON THE HATE BANDWAGON."

"I don't know how much of that I should talk about," she says, "because 'I'm the bad guy.'"

She sounds almost wistful, as if she's itching to cut loose and throw punches, but rap, she says, is in a "kumbaya and goody-goody" moment now. "That's what I'm just realizing," she says, winding up for one last subtweet. "That's not the kind of rap I grew up on. But rap is different now. You gotta pretend you like people and stuff. Everybody's gotta get on the bandwagon. They get on the love bandwagon, and they get on the hate bandwagon. They hate people they don't really hate, and they love people they don't really love."

Juice is ready. The clip plays for the billionth time, and this time Nicki sits up. "Play it again," she says. "Play it again." Juice obliges, and the clip plays for the billionth-and-first time.

Nicki says nothing. She just closes her eyes, and I watch as her apple cheeks split into dimples. It's time to go.



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The Story Behind the Shoot

When ELLE creative director Stephen Gan approached Nicki Minaj with the idea of being photographed by fashion legend Karl Lagerfeld, the rapper nearly lost her mind. "I wanted to cry," says Minaj, who flew to Paris in April for the cover shoot. "All I do is wear Chanel." The duo had met once before, at a dinner thrown by Gan, "but it wasn't like we became best friends at that dinner. He was cordial and nice, and we took pictures. But this time I felt like he and I grew up together. Like we were BFFs." Lagerfeld shot Minaj at Studio 7L in Paris's Seventh Arrondissement. "He made himself so available to me," she says. "I thought he was going to be a snob, but in fact, he was so personable, looking me in my eyes and asking me, 'Do you like this?'" Minaj's favorite setup, pictured above, is an instant classic. "Karl was sleeping on the couch, and Stephen said, 'Walk up to him, and try to wake him up.' I had on this really sexy dress, so I walked up to him and he opened his eyes, and I was looking at him all Marilyn Monroe-type, and everybody in the room started shouting, 'Stay, stay, take this picture, take this picture.' It's so iconic. After that, I couldn't think straight anymore. I was like, Oh my God, I couldn't...it felt like a dream."

Hair by Kim Kimble at SixK.LA; makeup by Tom Pecheux at Calliste; manicure by Chloé Desmarchelier at Atomo Management; produced by Céline Guillem at Octopix

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