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NICKI MINAJ THE QUEEN CONQUERS WITH THE FULL INTERVIEW FROM THE AUTUMN WINTER 2018 ISSUE.

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They say it's good to be the king, but to hear Nicki Minaj describe what it is to be the queen, it's more like *Macbeth*, a drama rife with complexities, ghosts of enemies slaughtered in pursuit of power, and, of course, the endless struggle to keep the crown. "People always thought I'd go away, and because I didn't go away, they're angry, so they try to rip me apart. Because they can't get rid of me. So many people have tried to get rid of me," she says. I ask her how it feels to receive criticism when you're as famous as her, with over 90 million followers on Instagram. "The average person wouldn't be able to deal with it, my level of ridicule. Most people mentally aren't strong enough to handle this pressure." And I wonder if she ever thinks they're gaining ground, those out there who want to yank her from the throne. "They lost. They failed miserably," she says. "And I'm still here."

Miss Minaj is still here, a good eight years since she made her major label debut with the now classic *Pink Friday*, and even longer since she first caught the hip hop world's attention with her witty and wild words, rapping and pushing mixtapes on the block in her native Queens, New York. She has a new album out called, resolutely, *Queen*, which bears the weight of that title, a tense, intense collection of songs about life as the commander-in- chief. Throughout the album, she raps of triumph and war, most pointedly on first single, "Chun-Li", in which she slams those who try to make her out to be a villain, and pounds her chest while calling herself King Kong.

Her target on the album mostly remains nameless, though amongst others, Cardi B is an unavoidable spectre, as she is the only woman since Nicki's reign began to have come close to her level of success. The previously inferred rivalry came to a head when they crossed paths at a New York Fashion Week gala at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan this September. Grainy video appears to show the two women, both impeccable in full-length ball gowns, with the Bronx-born Cardi trying to fight through a crowd of security and bystanders to get to a calm Nicki, eventually throwing a red high-heeled shoe at her Queens counterpart. Though Nicki was unavailable for comment after the altercation, when we spoke about a week before the chaos, she was coy but cutting. "My truth is I don't have an issue with any woman in rap. If they have an issue with me they can suck my dick," Nicki says.



Dress DSQUARED2, corset worn underneath AGENT PROVOCATEUR, harness YVY, earrings LE CIEL DESIGN, watch OMEGA, rings MAISON ALEXANDRINE and H.CROWNE, bracelets IZABELA FELINSKI, shoes UGG

But even if Cardi were to disappear tomorrow, when you're the monarch, there will always be someone nipping at your heels. Indeed, Nicki's real enemy on *Queen* seems to be everywhere in the ether, a vague but potent phantom that she feels stalking her in her castle, waiting for her to trip on her royal robes. Throughout our hour-long conversation, she punctuates her sharpest remarks, always said in her healthy New York drawl, with a big laugh, as though to remind me that she's always ready to tussle, has been doing so in hip hop for over a decade, and can scrap it up with anyone, including me. Indeed, I will get into two separate mini squabbles (more on them later) of my own with her over the course of our talk. "I've been at the top of this totem pole for a very long time," she says. "Sometimes people just want to see someone who's been at the top fall, just to see if it can happen. It's a sadistic part of being a human."

She is the most successful female rapper of all the time, a woman who has achieved things that no other woman (or man, really) in hip hop ever has, an MC who has been able to become as successful on the global stage as any more conventional pop singer. By making pop songs (and singing the hooks for them) as gooey sweet as “Super Bass” while maintaining her New York bona fides with gutter tracks like “Beez in the Trap,” she has changed what it can mean to be a female rapper in the industry. Go to karaoke anywhere from Bangkok to Vienna, and you will hear people rapping to Nicki Minaj like they sing along to Katy Perry. She is the woman with the most entries on Billboard’s Hot 100 charts – ever. “When I was first trying to rap, female rappers weren’t out here getting paid a million dollars a show,” she says.

But though “success” is the theme of *Queen*, fame has never been the most interesting thing about Nicki Minaj. She’s a writer, a real writer, and at a time in which celebrity itself is honoured as an art, Nicki has always made actual art, with a command of language and metre and metaphor that is thrilling at its best, and, even with all of her accolades, often taken for granted. Born Onika Tanya Maraj in Trinidad and Tobago in 1982, she grew up in hip hop’s home, New York, where her family settled in Southside Jamaica, Queens. She had a tumultuous childhood, with an alcoholic father who burned down their family home at one point, a trauma she detailed on the track “Autobiography” from her 2008 tape, *Sucka Free*. But she was ambitious, auditioning to be a student at LaGuardia High School in Manhattan, best known as the school that inspired *Fame*, and a storied dramatic arts centre that has produced stars like Al Pacino and Eartha Kitt. “I majored in drama and theatre. We had all the freedom in the world to do any and everything we wanted,” she says.



(LEFT) Top THE BLONDS NY, trousers SPANX, watch OMEGA, bracelets MARIANNA HARUTUNIAN and IZABELA FELINSKI, rings H.CROWNE, shoes LORIBLU

(RIGHT) Custom headband ATELIER SWAROVSKI by AKNA STORE, dress DSQUARED2, corset worn underneath AGENT PROVOCATEUR, harness YVY, earrings LE CIEL DESIGN, watch OMEGA, rings MAISON ALEXANDRINE and H.CROWNE, bracelets IZABELA FELINSKI, shoes UGG

Acting was an early love, but rap is what stuck. She came up locally in New York, putting out her first mixtape *Playtime Is Over* in 2007 and then, eventually, *Beam Me Up Scotty* in 2009, a vessel for her tremendous skill, particularly on a song called "Itty Bitty Piggy" in which she reimagines a nursery rhyme as an aggressive and defining introduction. Her talent was innate and unmissable, and soon she signed a deal with Lil Wayne and Cash Money, home to Drake. She became a frequent and coveted guest vocalist, making dynamic work out of otherwise throwaway songs. Take, for instance, her verse on a single from R&B singer Trey Songz, a 2010 number entirely forgettable but for Nicki's electric presence. On one verse alone, she writes an entire screenplay, going in and out of a number of different characters: a drunk club-goer flirting with Trey in his own song, a hellion who takes her man's Mercedes-Benz, a bad bitch in the middle of a brawl holding a Louisville Slugger, a good well-mannered girl who's bad beneath the surface. She has brought this loose sensibility to her public persona over the years, too, often delightfully and righteously so, like when she called out Miley Cyrus ("Miley, what's good?") live onstage at MTV's Video Music Awards after Miley made some questionable comments about her in an interview.

At times, she's been an avant-garde artist, creating something like a super-sized bizzaro rap version of what Yoko Ono did whooping over rock music. There's "Come on a Cone," a 2012 song from her album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*, released after the success of the cotton candy "Super Bass," from her 2010 debut album *Pink Friday*. "Come on a Cone" is a three-minute long brag done in the voice of Roman Zolanski, a manic character she used to consciously embody for some of her weirder songs. The beat is frightening, like bees swarming, and at moments, vocal effects make her voice melt like metal. Then, she finishes everything by singing "put my dick in your face" repeatedly in her prettiest tone. It's a strange and riveting song, memorable in every sense of the word, but when I ask her about it now, she says that she doesn't really like it. "It's so weird and I hate it," she says. I tell her I'm shocked. "A lot of my fans would love for me to go back to that place because I was very free," she says, fully aware of its inimitability, aware no-one else is putting out anything as exhilaratingly freaky to appease her longstanding fans. "But I do think there's a such thing as being too free."

Though it's a topsy-turvy time in the kingdom for so many reasons, this is still a surprising appraisal of one of her career highlights, particularly because freedom has been such a hallmark of Nicki's career, not just at the beginning, but now: she has received an unbelievable amount of attention for her gig on Queen Radio, a new online program she has been hosting for Apple Music in which she hosts guests, plays music, but mostly just talks shit for two hours and causes trouble. Following the debut of *Queen* at Number Two on the Billboard charts, below the rapper Travis Scott, she went on Queen Radio and claimed he pumped the system for sales by bundling his album with merchandise and having his girlfriend, Kylie Jenner, plug the record by posting photos of their child Stormi. Her album prior to this one, *The Pinkprint*, also landed at Number Two, and *Queen* did respectable numbers for any artist, so it seems odd that she called so much attention to what she claims is an injustice. But when I ask her why numbers matter that much to her anyway, she tells me that I'm the one who cares about

numbers, not her, and threatens to end the interview. "Don't try to be cute," she warns. "I did not talk about numbers. Don't give me bullshit. How old are you?"



(LEFT) Harness DEAD LOTUS COUTURE, bra custom HOUSE OF HARLOT, briefs LA ROXX, chaps LA ROXX, earrings LE CIEL DESIGN, nail ring MARIANNA HARUTUNIAN, shoes LE SILLS

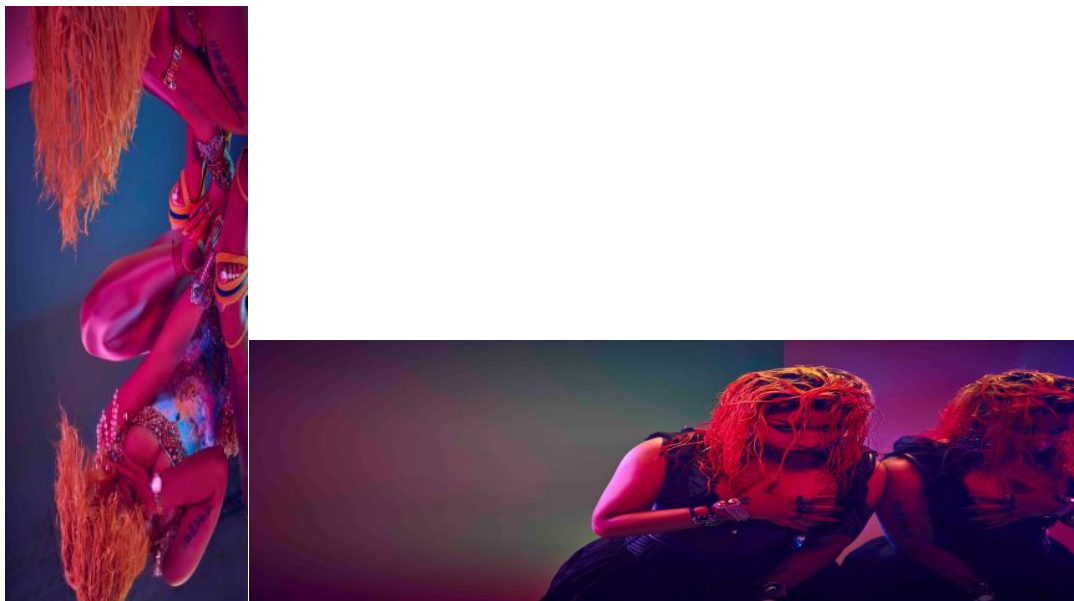
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My confusion in this moment feels like something of a stand-in for the mystification of the whole world, which has been left wondering if Nicki, one of the biggest stars on earth, is earnestly pissed or merely gaslighting in her jabs at Travis Scott, using him as a launchpad to get her weight up and draw attention. "My God – I love trolling. I love trolling," she taunts diabolically before changing direction. "The thing about trolling is that you can't really say that you're trolling. Here's what I will say: people do not understand my sense of humour, because they've never seen a young black woman acting like Howard Stern. You don't call Joan Rivers and Howard Stern angry or say they are having breakdowns or meltdowns. When it's a black woman, all of a sudden she's ranting, she's angry. A lot of times they want black women to only be a certain thing. You have to be black girl magic. My black is not magic for some strange reason." And also: "By the way, we have the number one show on Apple."

She has put everything in our conversation on shaky ground, which is perhaps, for her, like levelling the playing field, since that seems to just be the atmosphere in her world. And the strategy, if something this instinctive can be called a strategy, works, at least on me in this conversation: has Nicki just been misunderstood all this time, a Joan of Arc that we've thrown into the bonfire? "I'm not going to change myself. People have to loosen the fuck up," she says. For good and for bad, Nicki has never been afraid of controversy, sometimes with joyful effect and sometimes not. The night before we speak, she had a wardrobe malfunction which exposed her breasts live on stage, and to me, she admirably shrugs it off by saying, "Everyone has already seen my nipples." But she can also be truly frustrating, like with her recent duet with New York rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine, who pled guilty "to the use of a child in a sexual performance" in 2015

relating to a case involving a girl of 13 years-old. When discussing criticism of their collaboration on Queen Radio, she basically called the allegations fake news: "When I know somebody there's nothing you can tell me about them."

Beneath the current chaos, it is wise to remember that there is real pathos in Nicki Minaj – she has proven again and again that she is a sensitive, creative, even vulnerable soul, no matter her current level of outrageousness. I ask her about a moment in 2015, when she read on stage at a benefit concert the famous poem "Still I Rise", by Maya Angelou, about what it means to be a black woman in the face of all the shit the world dishes out. "Does my sassiness upset you?" Angelou asks in the poem at one point. "I didn't realise even until I was up there reading it how much it resonated with me personally," she says. "That poem reminded me that I will always come out on top. When your heart and your passion are in the right place, you come out on top. I know who I am." She giggles sweetly and says she has a boyfriend now, though she won't say much about him, just calls him "new boy" and says that pregnancy, something she has long publicly wished for herself, is on the horizon, too. "I've got to get married first then I'll have a child. I might be closer than people think actually," she trolls again but playfully so. "I love children. I'm not going to put that off for much longer."

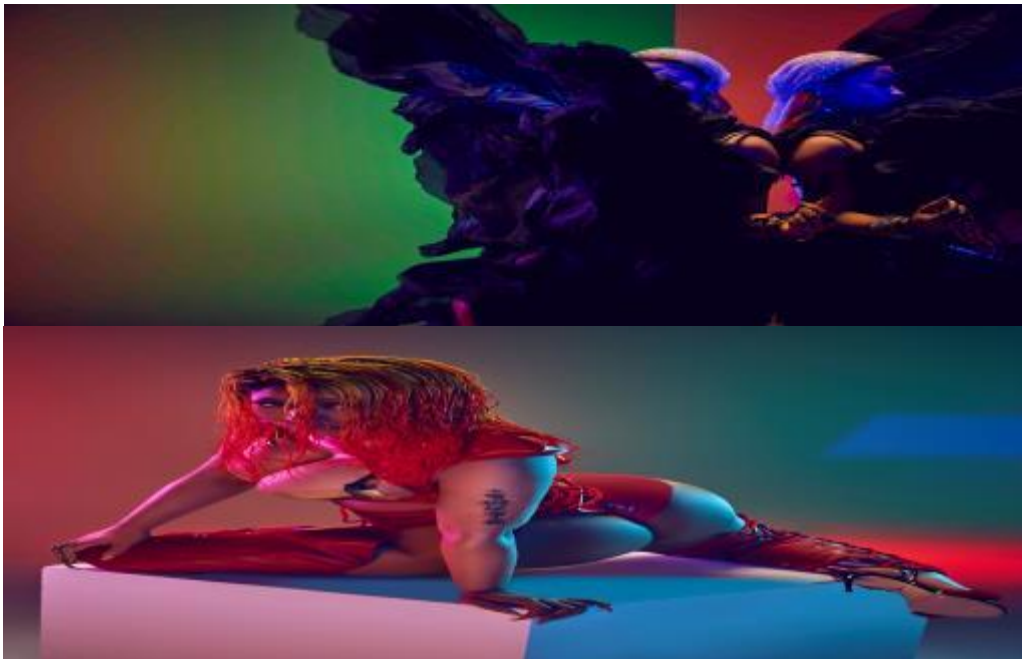


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Of course, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ends in tragedy for the king, but Nicki Minaj's *Queen* concludes on an exciting, even hopeful note. The album's coda is a song called "Coco Chanel" and it expresses everything you could ever love about Nicki Minaj in one three-and-a-half-minute moment – here, she is the happy warrior, rapping in Jamaican Patois and Spanish, cracking braggadocios jokes ("They call me Miss Bitch / But I don't miss, Bitch"), and conjuring a menacing but feminist fantasia of her native city, New York, by inviting the trailblazing Brooklyn rapper Inga Marchand, also known as Foxy Brown, for a guest verse. "Had to drop *Queen* on 'em like a

guillotine” Nicki raps to no one person in particular, like Robespierre threatening everyone with a reign of terror. When I tell her how much I love “Coco Chanel,” she, at first, takes it as an insult because of my wording; I had said, “‘Coco Chanel’ is the Nicki Minaj I always want on a song.” “I don’t know why that’s the Nicki you want so bad when that’s the Nicki that’s here. Has she gone somewhere?” She laughs, and I apologise for the misunderstanding. “No, no, no. Don’t try it. Why do people feel the need to rip Nicki up into parts?”

But then something funny happens: we both get past our egos and discuss how the track was created, and she sounds not like a king or a peasant, but like any great artist, excited by the grind and a little mesmerised by the magic. “I had been recording the entire album in Miami, and I had a week in New York, and I went into the studio one day – a freezing cold studio in New York. Juice, my engineer, he put the microphone right in front of the couch, so it was eye level with me while I was sitting, which we hadn’t been doing in Miami,” she remembers. “He started playing that beat. And I started free-styling. I started mumbling and saying the word ‘Coco’ over and over again. I found it, this dope melody. A cadence.” She pauses, incoherently stammers and then coherently raps along a few bars of the chorus: “mmphmmph Coco, mmphmmph Coco.” And then, in one quick quote, she sums up better than I ever could exactly why that song works so well. “It reminds me of the streets of New York,” she says. “It’s perfect.” She’s right. It’s a song that captures the everyday hustle that’s at the heart of all of the best rap. Which is to say: here she is, Nicki Minaj, the long-reigning queen of rap, who can still leave behind the madness of the royal court and hit the city pavement – when she deigns to.



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