

SINGER/SONGWRITER NIKKA COSTA MAKES NO BONES ABOUT HER AFFINITY FOR the music of the decade in which she was born.

"When in doubt, go back to the '70s," she says. "There's no disputing the creative freedom of that era. There was so much going on in the world that inspired artists. Music was less about business and marketing. And the music was just plain better. There's still good music coming out today, but it's harder and harder to find."

Maybe that's why Costa's 2001 breakout album, *Everybody Got Their Something*, clicked so resoundingly with hip music fans. Produced in tandem with Costa's husband, Justin Stanley, the disc freely displayed the singer's affection for the vintage R&B of Sly Stone and Stevie Wonder while updating the sound with new beats, colorful atmospherics, and cutting-edge production. How, some wondered, did Costa manage to write, arrange, and perform such a masterful collection of tunes on her first release?

The answer, of course, is that Costa was the farthest thing from a new artist. Although *Everybody Got Their Something* made her name in the U.S., she was already a star in Europe and Australia. And her first album had been released 20 years earlier, when she was nine.

Costa's precociousness had something to do with the fact that her father, Don Costa, was a leading Hollywood arranger, known for his work with Paul Anka, Lloyd Price, Sammy Davis Jr., and Frank Sinatra. Sinatra, in fact, was Nikka's godfather.

"Let's face it," she laughs. "He was everybody's godfather! But he definitely did take me under his wing when I was little, and he and my dad were very close. He was cool, but it wasn't like he came to my high school graduation or anything."

Before her father passed away in 1983, Nikka often visited him in the studio, where she met some of the era's great music makers. "But I was young," she says. "I didn't really think about the fact that I was sitting in the orchestra pit doing my homework or playing hangman up at the front desk of the Record Plant while my dad finished a session."

One encounter figures strongly in Costa's memories: "When I was five, I came out to find this guy sitting at our piano in red span-

dex pants, a Mickey Mouse shirt, and a big ol' afro. 'Who's the weirdo in our living room?' I wondered. It was Sly Stone. Of course I had no idea that he would later become one of my absolute favorite artists ever. I guess having that stuff around filters into your being somehow."

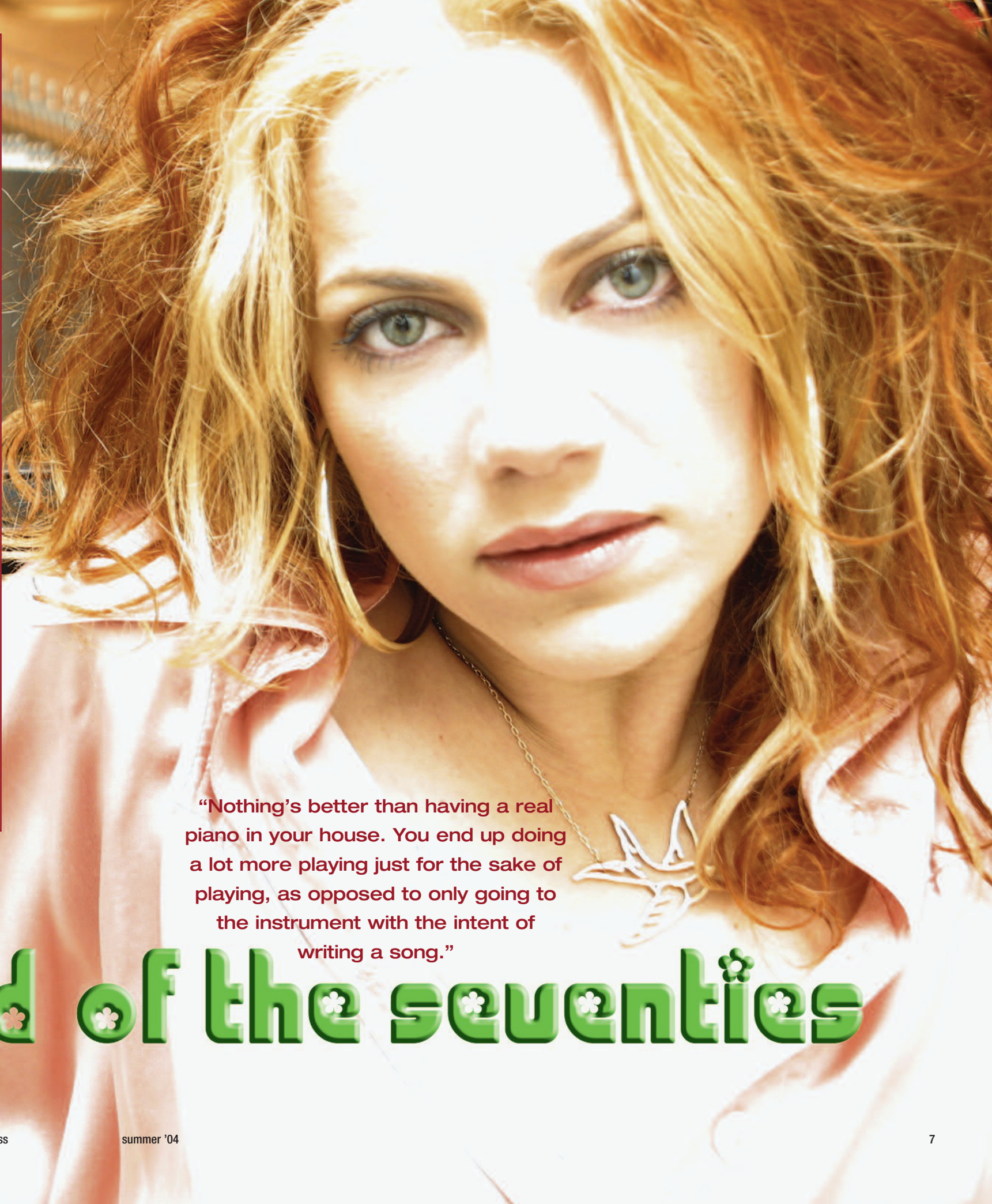
The piano in Costa's present-day living room is a matte-black Yamaha C3 grand. "Nothing's better than having a real piano in your house," she says. "You end up doing a lot more playing just for the sake of playing, as opposed to only going to the instrument with the intent of writing a song. Sometimes it's nice to just tickle away for fun. And of course, sometimes that's when you get good ideas."

Costa and Stanley auditioned many pianos. "Each one has its own sound," notes Nikka. "Even two C3s can sound very different from each other. They're almost like living beings. You just have to try them all to see which one most resonates with you on a timbral level. The one we finally settled on isn't super-bright. It has a real warmth to it."

Subtleties of tone play a huge part in Costa's music. It's a measure of her confidence as a vocalist that she freely distorts and filters her vocal tracks to heighten a song's expressiveness. "Look," she says, "you don't need to prove you can sing in every part of every song on an entire record. You can let go of trying to sound 'good' all the time and focus on what really counts: getting the feeling across. I'm not afraid to show some rough edges or use a sound that isn't pretty. On the next album, there's a song where we slowed the tape down on my vocal — definitely a case of using tools to alter your voice. It's so much more interesting as a singer to experiment with those sorts of things."

Did she say "next album?" After all, it's been three years since *Everybody Got Their Something*.

"It will be out in the fall," promises Nikka. "Right now we're burning the candles at both ends. This album is much more piano- and keyboard-based than the last one. The sound is more raw and in your face, with a stronger, harder funk influence. I can't really separate myself from the music at this point, but other people are tending to describe it as a natural evolution of my style, as opposed to a major



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**nikka costa: child of the seventies**