

Stevie Nicks

DOES IT AGAIN

BY BARRY ALFONSO

The sun streams in and warms the soft couch in Stevie Nicks' Marina Del Rey condominium living room.

Nicks is late. She'll miss the sun. But then, considering the shadowy, moon-struck feel of many of her songs, it may not be surprising that mornings don't suit her best. As the reigning

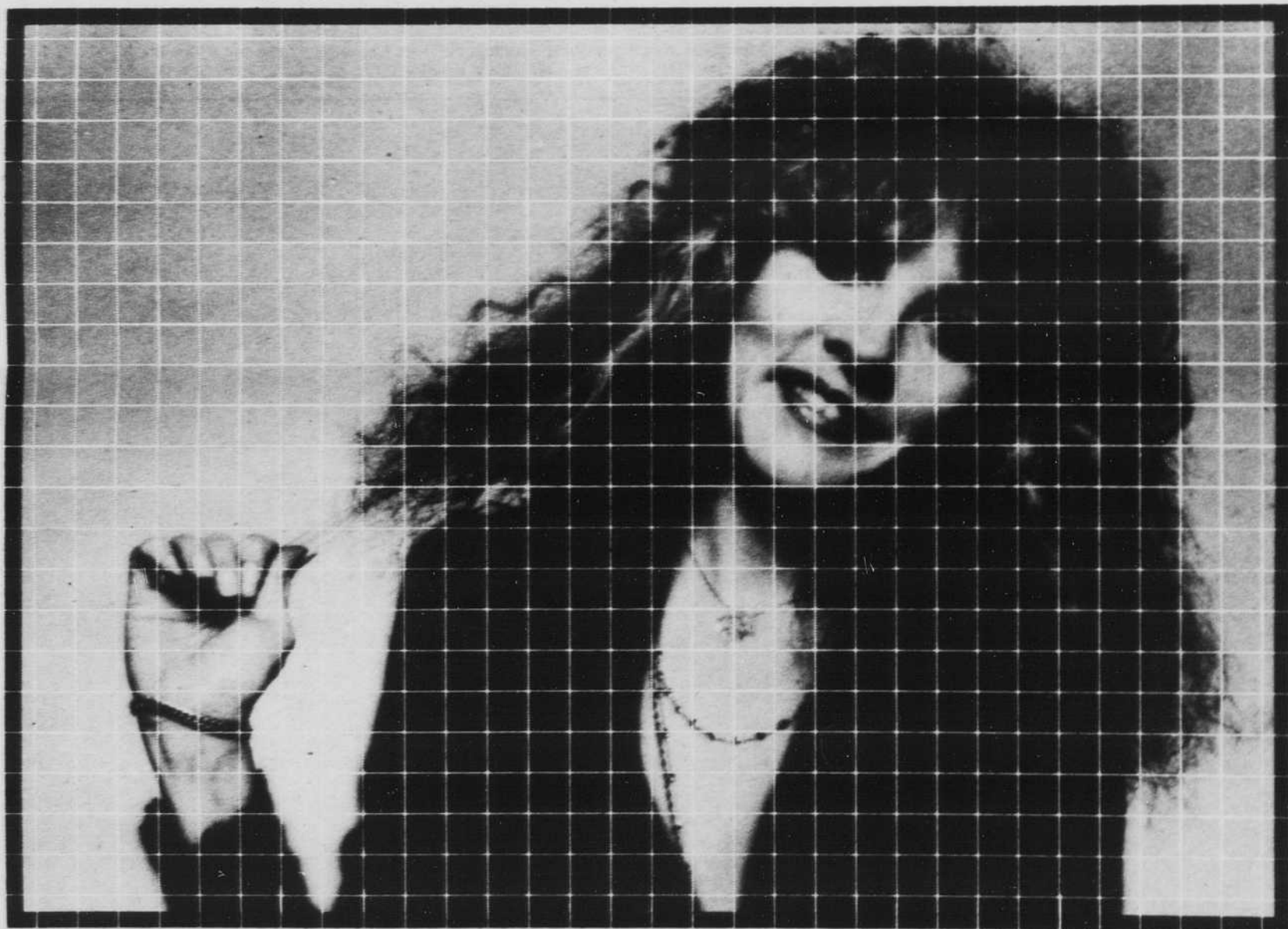
anymore to spend a whole evening sitting at my piano, so when I do see a night coming when I'm not going to have anything to do, I jump on it..."

It's true that Nicks has had fewer free evenings of late. More a happening act than ever, her *Bella Donna* solo LP has been on the charts since late summer and has passed the platinum

far from her mind.

Nicks sits down at her piano and begins to play a simple chord progression and intone a few poetic fragments. From this germ of an idea, she explains, a song will grow. "I have these lines written down on a big pad," she says, tilting her head towards the artist's sketch book placed on top

Things like mood and shades of emotion are much more important to Nicks' art than technical considerations. At her best, her music has an oracular quality that makes it seem she's taking on the voice of some disembodied Other. The most famous of such songs, of course, is "Rhiannon," the tune that helped Fleetwood Mac



Good Witch of AM Radio, the Fleetwood Mac songstress traffics in a brand of mysticism that has given her a Spirit of the Night image.

There's a large smoked-glass crescent moon mounted on a pedestal; an old fashioned lamp with a patchwork, fringe shade; a pair of children's fairy tale books on the coffee table before me. With a large video player and stereo equipment surrounding me also, the atmosphere here is half-antique, half-1980s.

Nicks is up by about two o'clock or so, dressed in a mostly-purple neosorceress outfit. "Sorry I slept so late," she offers. "I was up all last night writing — I don't have that much time

mark. "Leather and Lace," her duet with Don Henley, is currently ascending the singles charts, likely to match or surpass the success of "Stop Draggin' My Heart Around," which paired her with Tom Petty. Naturally, a tour was called for in the wake of the LP's appeal, and so Nicks spent late November through mid-December on the road in the Southwest with keyboardist Benmont Tench (of Petty's Heartbreakers), pianist Roy Bittan (of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band), session guitar-whiz Waddy Wachtel and other rock notables. Yes, Nicks' time is at a premium these days—but, she emphasizes in our conversation, her first love of songwriting is never

of her piano. "I just pull lines out of them and sing them to see what sounds best. I record it over and over, and the whole song happens from there."

Benmont Tench, who completed an unfinished Nicks tune, "Kind of Woman," for *Bella Donna*, added some insights on Nicks' writing process on the phone some time later: "She writes in an almost two-fingered piano style, very stream-of-consciousness. The way she works is fascinating — her songs are kind of wild in structure and entirely instinctive. She's not locked into the things that musicians who know a lot about chords and so forth are."

rise to the pinnacles of rock popularity in the middle of the Seventies. Dramatizing the song on stage, Nicks improvises new lyrics as she weaves about in trance-like fashion. More than any other of her songs, "Rhiannon" defines Stevie Nicks' particular niche in pop music.

"It's a very strange thing with that song," she explains. "When I wrote it back in 1974, I hadn't read the legends of Rhiannon, a witch in Welsh mythology. I'd read the name in a novel and liked it — two years later I read the books of Rhiannon. It turns out that Rhiannon was the goddess of steeds and the maker of birds, and there's birds all over my 'Rhiannon.'" So, I

don't know ... maybe old Rhiannon's up there and she wanted a song to be written for her." Nicks flashes a pearly, satisfied smile at the thought.

When Nicks was writing, "Rhiannon," she and ex-boyfriend (and current partner in Fleetwood Mac) Lindsey Buckingham were financially depressed and near-disillusioned, seemingly at a career dead end after the release of their duo LP on Polydor, *Buckingham Nicks*, in 1973. Waitressing for a time, Nicks was writing the songs that would eventually make her famous. "It was probably the lowest point for Lindsey and me as far as our belief in what we were doing goes," she remembers. "I was in a real slump, period — I didn't think anything that I was writing would be on anything at that point." The course of Nicks and Buckingham's fortunes changed around New Year's Eve of 1975, when Mick Fleetwood asked the two of them to join the newest incarnation of Fleetwood Mac.

With the multi-platinum records that the Mac has earned has come well-publicized friction between the band members, disagreements that Nicks doesn't hesitate to discuss. "Fleetwood Mac changes all the songs I give to them," she says. "And many times, they're changed into something I don't like. At that point, I usually compromise — I'll give up the whole idea of something if I feel that somewhere the essence shines through. But when that essence goes completely, I can't handle it."

One sore point that irritates Nicks to this day is the exclusion of her "Silver Springs" from Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* album (the song can only be found on the B-Side of the band's "Go Your Own Way" single). "The song went off the album because they said it was too long," she fumes. "Lindsey decided to put another one of mine, 'I Don't Want To Know,' in its place. I literally had a nervous breakdown over that. I ran out into the parking lot of the studio and screamed!" She laughs and adds bemusedly: "That was not a good experience at all."

Bella Donna, on the other hand, features Nicks' songs more or less in the same form they were originally conceived; she was involved in the recording of *Bella Donna* every step of the way, in contrast with her Fleetwood Mac experiences. "Before, I've been banished to the control room — on the Fleetwood Mac albums, they play, I don't. I never fought to be one of the players, so that's my fault, not theirs. But with the solo album, my producer, Jimmy Iovine, didn't allow me to be dependent on anybody. He said, 'If you want to do a song, you'd better learn how to play it real good and go out and do it.'"

Nicks is currently in the position to pursue any career option she chooses: remain with Fleetwood Mac, go solo, or attempt to do both.

"The fame and fortune hasn't made much difference," Nicks insists. "If it had, I would've quit if it had started to kill my love of songwriting. I don't let the rest of the world in on that particular plane of my life too much."

Whatever astral plane Stevie Nicks' music is created on, it obviously has filtered down into the hearts of millions of record-buyers. It's reassuring to know that as introspectively whimsical a person as she can make it to the big time. "I love atmosphere, to have twinkly things around me that startle me a bit. Even when I'm on the road, I light a candle, put a drape over a lamp and create atmosphere anywhere I am. I can make a hotel room into a real groovy little place."