

NICOLE ATKINS: ALL BETTER

Things have really taken off recently for Nicole Atkins.

The singer has been on a roll, recently scoring a performance on "The Late Show with David Letterman."

And Atkins and her band, the Sea, are set to perform at the Local 506 on Saturday.

Staff writer Jordan Lawrence caught up with Atkins as she was traveling to talk with her about growing up in New Jersey, her relationship to the Charlotte music scene and awkward talk show moments.

Diversions: I hear you were known to get tired of people requesting Bon Jovi and Springsteen songs when you used to play bars in New Jersey.

Nicole Atkins: That's when I used to play in, like, pubs on the Jersey shore. I don't know why they hired me to begin with.

Dive: What bothered you about it?

NA: It didn't really bother me other than I didn't know any. I used to play just songs I knew. It wasn't that I didn't like Springsteen; it's just that I didn't take the time to learn any of his songs. I know some now.

Dive: I actually notice a lot of thematic similarities between your music and Springsteen's. Both of you seem to thrive on that "you can't go home again" aesthetic. Where does that come from?

NA: I can't really speak for Springsteen, but maybe it's a New Jersey thing.

Where we're from, it's a really, really cool place. It's close to the city. But it's still f--king New Jersey. You want to leave, but you also want to stay. I guess it's just trying to make yourself be okay with it.

Dive: You did the art direction for your EP and album, right?

NA: Yeah. The artwork came from the themes of the songs on (Neptune City). The two black swans on the cover came from where I live, the Shark River neighborhood.

It's right on this river. A couple of years ago I woke up, and there was a black swan on the river. Everybody was like, "Where the hell did this come from?" They only have black swans in Australia.

One day we found it with its neck snapped. They guessed it was just the snapper turtle. Turned out, there was some rich couple that was



COURTESY OF JEREMY BALDERSON

New Jersey native and one-time Charlotte resident Nicole Atkins will bring her velvet voice to Local 506 on Saturday night with her band The Sea.

importing black swans and clipped their wings for their private pond. The day before this one's wings got clipped, it flew to my town.

That's why I put it on the cover with a blue ribbon around its neck, to make it all better.

Dive: Shark River neighborhood?

NA: Yeah, they derived its name from the fact that the shark attacks that inspired "Jaws" happened there.

Dive: Did that make you scared to swim?

NA: No. I mean it's always an underlying fear, but, no, I like to swim.

Dive: You were big into the Charlotte music scene while you were there for art school.

NA: The music scene in Charlotte is a really cool scene. They took me in and let me be a part of it.

Some of them were pretty harsh critics of my work. They pushed me to write better songs than I already was. They gave me a good competitive streak.

Dive: Were there any bands from N.C. that inspired you?

NA: The Avett Brothers. They're two of my best friends. We went to (UNC-Charlotte) together. We both kind of started out having a full go at the music thing and supported each other.

If I didn't have a new song, they would get on my ass about writing more. That was always a really good motivator. Have a good song ready so you don't look like a jerk

in front of The Avett Brothers.

Dive: Your Web site says that the first song you learned to play was by the Grateful Dead. Which song was it?

NA: It was "Uncle John's Band." I went to the mall and I bought a Grateful Dead song book.

Dive: What drew you to the Grateful Dead?

NA: A lot of things. When I was a freshman in high school I went to a show. That whole sense of community, one big party. I was really into the song "Dark Star." It's psychedelic, dark and kind of scary. A song like that really opens a 13-year-old's head up.

Dive: I saw your performance on ("The Late Show with David Letterman"). I noticed he gave you kind of a weird handhold. Was that awkward for you?

NA: He wouldn't let go of my hand. I wasn't expecting that. It was kind of funny. He dug it. He asked me if I wanted to go get a steak.

Dive: Did he actually buy you a steak?

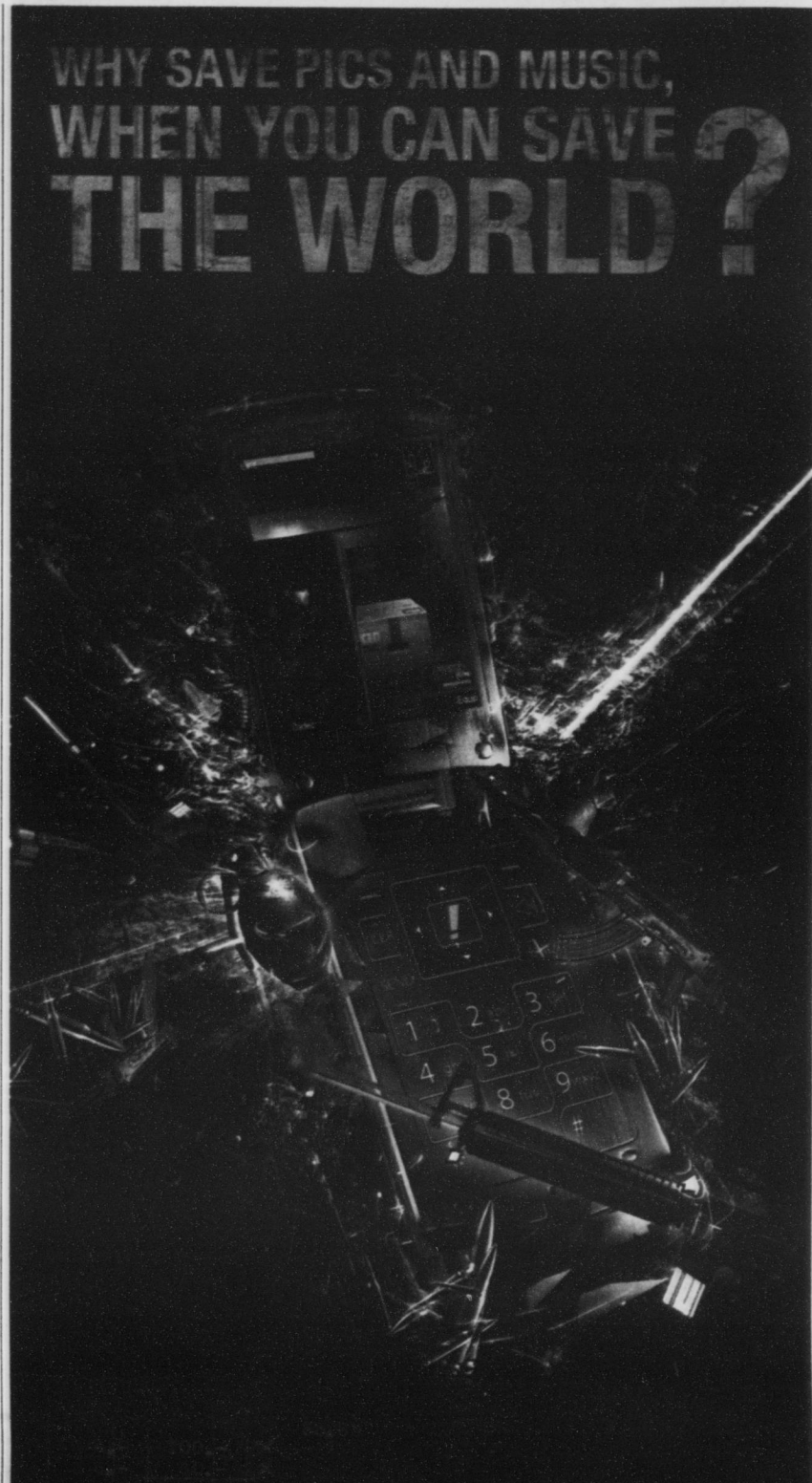
NA: No. **Dive:** That's lame.

NA: I guess that's, like, show-biz speak for "good job."

Dive: Well, hopefully I'll be able to come up and offer to buy you a steak at 506.

NA: Yeah, I'm keeping a notebook of people that owe me food.

Contact the Diversions Editor at dive@unc.edu.



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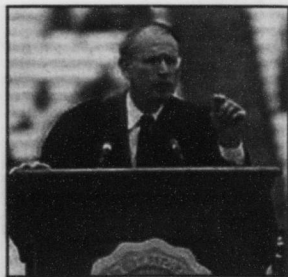
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