

## What's A Nields?

The Nields story begins with the two sisters. **Nerissa** and **Katryn** grew up singing folk songs in the kitchen and in the back seat of the family car. Katryna learned to sing melody with their father, eventually making her an ideal front person for the band. Nerissa, on the other hand, tackled the harmonies; with that skill, she provided a

natural counterpoint to her sister's vibrant lead.

"I knew I wanted to be a singer and songwriter from the time I was 7," explains Nerissa. "I remember I wrote my first song that I was really proud of when I was 13, and right away I had a harmony for it, so I dragged Katryna out of her room and taught her the harmony. It was instinct -- I knew that my sister should be there."

In the late '80s, Nerissa and Katryna met a graduate student named **David Jones**, who had always longed for a career in music. Playing acoustic guitar through an electric pedal board, he joined the sisters as they played open mics in the Washington, DC area. Later, he married Nerissa and took HER last name ("Just like the Ramones!," he said).

The trio then moved to New England and released their first two recordings, *66 Hoxsey St.* (named after the house in Williamstown, MA that Nerissa and David were living in when they started the band, pictured here)



and *Live At The Iron Horse*. They then convinced their close friend, bassist **Dave Chalfant** to join the band in time to produce their third self-released recording, *Bob On The Ceiling* in June, 1994.

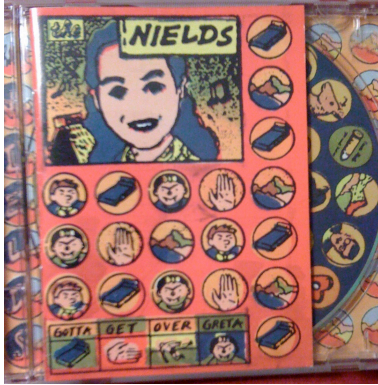


Dave Chalfant, in turn, asked his buddy **Dave Hower** to play drums on five tracks. Yet another Dave felt the magical sway of The Nields and entered the fold.



are hip. They are hot."

By the fall of '94, The Nields were a full-fledged five-piece acoustic rock explosion. The critical kudos were coming in, with *The Boston Globe* commenting simply, "The Nields are young. They



For the recording of their next album, *Gotta Get Over Greta* The Nields enlisted producer Kevin Moloney (U2, Sinéad O'Connor) and mixer Ed Thacker (10,000 Maniacs, Victoria Williams, Phish). Initially released on Razor & Tie in 1997, *Greta's* re-release on Elektra's Guardian imprint later that year had the band poised for stardom. The Nields were touring the country in their aging Dodge van Moby, playing to enthusiastic crowds and constantly adding names to a mailing list that numbered in the tens of thousands.

But at the beginning of 1998, all was not rosy for the Nields, as they got the news that the Guardian label had shut down. The band quickly set up studio at Dave Chalfant's house to begin recording not one, but two records worth of new material. Meanwhile, they continued to tour in Moby, which was on its last legs.

By early June of that year, the Nields had two albums ready and a one-day concert planned to raise money for a new



van. *'Mousse*, a self-release featuring 18 old and new songs, debuted at "Jam for the Van". The concert raised \$24,000, the band had enough to buy a new van (Nessie), and the fans had a new Nields CD to tide them over

until the release of *Play* in the fall of 1998, their first album on Rounder Records' Zoë imprint.

In the summer of 1998, Nerissa and Katryna were asked to play Lilith Fair, but leave the boys at home. The performance was a success, and the sisters decided to do some shows on



their own. This duo configuration, which Dar Williams jokingly dubbed "the Probe effect" (a term familiar to followers of Star Trek) allowed Nerissa and Katryna to travel to places in the country (especially the West Coast) that the full band hadn't been able to get to as often as their usual haunts in the East. Within a year, the duo was opening for Cry Cry Cry, doing a tour of Alaska, playing the Newport Folk Festival and becoming a bona fide act of its own.

Meanwhile, the band continued to play together in the Northeast. Katryna and Dave Chalfant got married in September of 1999 (he kept his name). The band went back into the studio to record *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Now* for Zoë Records, and it was released in March of 2000.

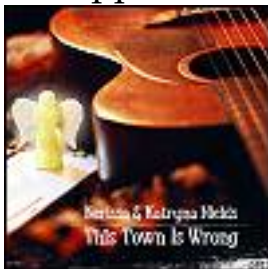




2001 saw the recording at the Iron Horse Music Hall of what would turn out to be the last full-band Nields album, the two-disc self-released *Live From Northampton*. Nerissa and Katryna were touring almost exclusively as a duo at that point, though Katryna did take six months off to have a baby (Amelia Nields Chalfant).



Katryna joined Nerissa in the studio in the fall of 2001 to record their first record as a duo. *Love and China* was produced and engineered by Dave Chalfant. Dave had already made a name for himself in the music world, producing Erin McKeown's widely heralded *Distillation* and Ben Demerath's *Jack of Fools*. Joining the sisters in the studio were Kevin Barry (Paula Cole, Mary Chapin Carpenter) on guitar and Lorne Entress (Erin McKeown, Ronnie Earl, Mark Erelli, Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer) on drums. *Love and China* was released in the spring of 2002 on Zoë, and Nerissa and Katryna spent much of the next year on the road touring in support of it, with baby Amelia in tow.



Also in 2002, Nerissa was approached by Scholastic to write a young adult novel, *Plastic Angel*, based on the song "This Town Is Wrong" (from *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Now*). She had already been at work on a semi-autobiographical novel about a touring band, and jumped at this chance. Since the protagonist of *Plastic Angel* is a songwriter, it naturally follows that a CD should accompany the book. Nerissa and Katryna recorded the companion CD in the fall of 2003 (with Dave Chalfant once again producing), and *This Town Is Wrong* was released in 2004. The book was



published in the spring of 2005.

2006 saw the release of the Nields' first family album, *All*



*Together Singing In The Kitchen*, a collection of songs for all ages. This CD, a lifelong dream of Nerissa and Katryna's was full of the songs they learned from their father when they were kids. They were so excited about making the CD that they even enlisted their father to sing on many of the tracks, and they hoped listeners would learn the songs and sing them along with their family.





Their fourteenth album, released in 2007 was *Sister Holler*, which brought them back to their folk roots while at the same time showcasing their growth as musicians and songwriters. The premise of the album is that folk music has always been passed down orally, and as such, it changes with each generation of singers and songwriters. Each song was inspired by a pre-existing song: there's a revised version of the old spiritual, "Ain't That Good News," a modern sea shanty — even a version of Pachelbel's Canon in D.

"Best of all," quips Nerissa, "this CD is green: reduce, reuse and recycle is its motto. There are plenty of great old songs out there; why write new ones?"

Meanwhile, with the release of *All Together Singing in the Kitchen*, and the birth of Katryna's second child (William) and Nerissa's first (Lila), the sister discovered a whole new dimension to the term "musical family." After three weeks of motherhood, Nerissa was seized with the terror that unless she were being paid to show up and play her guitar, she might never do so again. Katryna had just been trained as a Music Together teacher. The sisters teamed up to create HootaNanny, an early childhood music program for 0-5 year olds and their grown-ups. Starting in the fall of 2006, with two classes in the fellowship room of a Quaker meeting house, HootaNanny burgeoned into the busiest music program in the Pioneer Valley. By 2013, Nerissa and Katryna were teaching eight classes a week, including a class for older kids (HootaNanny Singers), a guitar class for parents who wanted to learn how to accompany their own family's singing and playing (HootaNanny Parent Guitar), as well as a monthly

family      sing-along/jam-along      called      Niels      Family



HootENanny.

Though Nerissa and Katryna choose their favorite songs for the Hoot curricula, Katryna often commissioned Nerissa to write new material. (Nerissa’s kids also inspired quite a bit of this, too.) By the fall of 2008, Nerissa had given birth to her second child (Johnny), and the Niels released a double family music CD— *Rock All Day/Rock All Night*—the first CD being up-tempos for dancing to, driving to, cartwheeling to. And the second is all lullabies.

Eager to share what they had learned about nurturing a musical family, Nerissa and Katryna wrote a book for Shambhala/Roost books called *All Together Singing in the Kitchen: Creative Ways to Make and Listen to Music as a Family*. They also created their second blog, Singing in the Kitchen ([www.niels.blogspot.com](http://www.niels.blogspot.com)). (During Katryna’s second maternity leave in 2004, Nerissa felt the acute need to continue to talk to the Niels’s fan base. Blogging was a fairly new activity, and several folks encouraged her to start a blog—and May Day Café ([www.nerissaniels.blogspot.com](http://www.nerissaniels.blogspot.com)) was born. To this day, Nerissa posts about once a month, with a focus on writing, parenting and spirituality.)

To celebrate their twentieth anniversary, Nerissa and Katryna invited their fans to join them in Northampton for a weekend full of Nielsian activities—including a full band reunion concert at the Iron Horse. Dubbed “Jam for the



Fans,” the weekend began with an open mic night, where fans could sing their favorite Nields songs—backed by the band. There was a scavenger hunt, a family show, and a “Nields Museum” in the basement of Thornes. The weekend culminated with a “Gospel Brunch” at Paul & Elizabeth’s, a beloved restaurant in the heart of Northampton.



In 2012, Nerissa and Katryna released their 16<sup>th</sup> CD to date: a musing on family life called *The Full Catastrophe*, a song cycle about marriage, motherhood and the struggle to maintain an artistic career in the full sunlight of a blessed



life. Robyn Day of WBUR’s ARTery writes:

They’re cheery, these two, but not Pollyanna. They know that life is hard, and making art while tending to our other obligations, especially as women, is a painful

struggle. “But someone has to cut the brambles back / Someone has to stave the weeds’ attack/ Someone has to bring the harvest in.” Sure, the Nields may fantasize about casting off to sea, or replacing obligations with time to write, or simply getting an extra hour of sleep. But then, life and art both are enriched by the full catastrophe. The joy that underwrites their music is a new adage: “Complicate, complicate, complicate.” After all, what’s wrong with an overflowing cup.

**Want more tidbits of Nields past?  
Nields-Nook historian Bruce Palmatier presents: [This Day In Nields History](#)**