

Leisure

SECTION H



Today, Sharon Flanagan spends a lot of her time singing with keyboardist Randy Friel at Steve & Cookie's restaurant and bar in Margate. But in the late 1990s, the local native was singing in a trio with an up-and-coming pop star, Pink.

Staff photo by Danny Drake

Ventnor singer recalls brush with fame and life with Pink

By VINCENT JACKSON
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VENTNOR — Singer Sharon Flanagan looks as far from a pop diva as possible — as she sits in her kitchen in flip-flops, white pants and a black T-shirt while Sarah Vaughan's music plays in the background.

But a decade ago, Flanagan sang in a trio with Pink and Chrissy Conway. The group's name was Choice and they were on the verge of stardom — with different labels wooing the undiscovered girls for their music.

Pink would ultimately go on to sing Top 5 hits like "Get the Party Started," record double-platinum albums and win a Grammy Award. Conway made it big as a Christian pop singer in the group Zoegirl. Flanagan, now 27, came home to southern New Jersey.

The vocalist opened up for the first time to anyone in the media last month about her experiences in the commercial pop-music machine.

A musical prodigy

As a teen, Flanagan lived in the Pomona section of Galloway Township and studied with Linwood vocal coach Sal Dupree, who put Flanagan in touch with another of his students, Conway. Flanagan is a 1997 graduate of Absegami High School.

"Sharon had beautiful color to her tone. She sang with good, sensitive, emotional feeling. She was able to interpret words and make them her own. She wasn't plastic," said Dupree, who would become a fan of the music of Choice. "I thought they

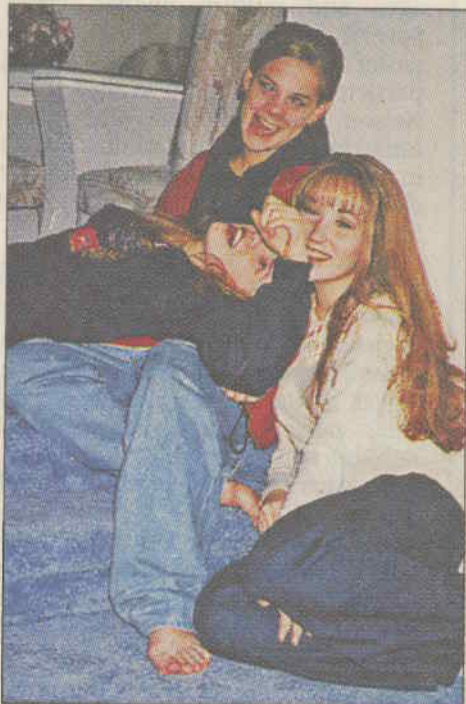


Photo courtesy of Sharon Flanagan

Pink, clockwise from top, Flanagan and Chrissy Conway hanging out in the late 1990s while members of the group Choice.

given Destiny's Child a run for their money. Their sound was unique."

An early version of Choice featured Flanagan, Conway and other singer, but one of the trio's producers helped the group find Pink, born with the name Alecia Moore, a member of an R&B group at the time.

"We sang, and it instantly meshed.

Choice Shows

■ **Randy Friel & Sharon Sable** perform jazzy standards and blues songs 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. Sundays from now until at least Sept. 3 at Steve & Cookie's By the Bay Restaurant and Bar, 9700 Amherst Ave., Margate. For reservations, call (609) 823-1163 or book online at:

www.steveandcookies.com

Sable, born Sharon Flanagan, also appears regularly as a guest singer, but not weekly, with the jazz and blues group as the Randy Friel Combo with saxophonist Howard Isaacson 7 to 11 p.m. Fridays at Sails Restaurant / Bar, 998 Bay Ave., Somers Point. For reservations, call (866) NJSAILS. For further information, visit:

www.njsails.com

■ **Pink**, right, with opening act Matt Nathanson at 8:30 p.m. July 15 at the Electric Factory, Philadelphia. Tickets \$25 advance, \$30 day of show. Tickets available at Ticketmaster outlets, call (856) 338-9000, or at:

www.ticketmaster.com



■ Christian pop group ZOEGirl, which includes **Chrissy Conway**, is scheduled to perform Nov. 3 and 4 at the Liacouras Center in Philadelphia, according to pollstar.com The shows are unconfirmed at this time, according to a Liacouras Center representative.

Flanagan

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There were sparks," said Flanagan about the first time the new trio sang. "It worked really well."

Flanagan said the group knew it could land a recording contract. In this case, the teen girls backed up their boasting. A battle took place between Sony Music's Stonecreek Recording (the label of Boyz II Men at the time) and LaFace Records to sign the group.

In summer 1996, Choice signed with LaFace Records, a label founded by Antonio "L.A." Reid and Babyface. The whole group moved during the summer of 1997 to the home of their label, Atlanta.

Everything started off well with the group members spending their days doing demos of songs for their CD and working out six hours daily in preparation for the possibility of touring in the future. But things changed between May 1996 and May 1998.

How will it work?

Some of the group's R&B producers preferred Moore's (Pink's) voice to that of the other members. The vocal trio became a lead vocalist with two backup singers.

Choice recorded a song titled "Key to My Heart," which appeared on the 1996 soundtrack to the Shaquille O'Neal movie "Kazaam." A song titled "Stay," originally recorded by Choice, even appeared on the second Destiny's Child CD, 1999's "The Writing's On The Wall."

But, the process and the music business as a whole didn't bring joy to Flanagan.

"There were songs we liked that didn't make it. This was our first album, but I wasn't really proud. I can't hide my emotions. I remember thinking, 'I kind of want this to end. I don't want to fake the funk. I knew there was something missing for me,'" Flanagan said. "They were going to put us out, but not put a lot of marketing into us. I couldn't see myself on TV faking it. How will it work? Everybody would be able to tell I was miserable."

LaFace Records eventually decided to offer a solo deal to Moore, who would become



Staff photo by Danny Drake

Ventnor resident Sharon Flanagan, who performs under the name Sharon Sable, at one time was a member of a female singing group with Pink that was signed to LaFace Records.

had deep respect for each other, and we all knew we would blossom in our own element."

Platinum memories

Flanagan remembers only the positive things about her time in the group with Moore and Conway.

"Chrissy, Alecia and I laughed a whole lot. We could turn an airplane ride into our own comedy show. When we weren't laughing, we were usually singing gospel in our kitchen," Flanagan said. "I remember the three of us being deeply moved by our voices together. It was something very special."

Flanagan recalls the time she and Pink were booed in an Atlantic City pub. The two had driven from Atlanta to Philadelphia in July 1998. They ended up in Atlantic City at McGuire's Erin Bar. An Irish folk singer performed on stage, but audience members

ence that night wanted to hear the Irish folk singer more than the girls. The crowd started to boo. Moore told the patrons off while singing.

When Pink started her solo career, she didn't forget about Flanagan.

Flanagan and Conway appear on Pink's 2000 debut CD singing background vocals on an old Choice track "Love Is Such A Crazy Thing." In the credits of Pink's first solo CD, she refers to Flanagan as "Sherita" and wrote "without you I never would've made it. My portable peace."

"We knew Alecia was a powerful singer. I grew to be very close to her ... It was a heartfelt thank you. It was tough for her to go (solo). We all did have a serious bond," said Flanagan, who added Pink was loyal to the group and resisted the push to make her the lead singer of Choice. "There was a portion of it where it was really tough for her, too."

A new chapter

Jealousy doesn't play into Flanagan's feelings regarding her former group mates — even with all their success.

"Obviously, we're all very different, therefore, neither of their paths would be right for me," Flanagan said. "I have everything I need. I believe success is measured by happiness, and I'm happy."

Pink and Flanagan stayed close until the last couple of years. After losing touch with Conway, she found her Myspace page and reconnected recently.

During Flanagan's stint in Atlanta, she started playing guitar and piano and writing songs. When she returned to the area, she explored all of these things more deeply. She listened to and digested everything, even alternative rock like Bjork and the world music of Peter Gabriel. She held various jobs, including ones at Borders Books Music & Cafe in Mays Landing and a restaurant where she sang sometimes.

About a year and a half ago, Flanagan performed at a blues dinner show at the Tuckahoe Inn in Marmora and at the Bubba Mac Shack in Somers Point.

By doing these shows, Flanagan met her current musical collaborator, keyboardist Randy Friel, the founder of the roots and blues record label, New Moon Music. He has been singing and playing piano for the last four years at Steve & Cookie's.

Friel started working with Flanagan a year ago, helping her find jazz standards and blues songs that she might like to sing.

"On average once a week, I would play her some songs, try to get the right key for her and the right tempo," said Friel. Flanagan, who now sings under the last name Sable, joined him at his gig with owner Cookie Till's approval. "As soon as she starts singing, she has a quality to her voice that people find compelling and makes them want to hear more."

Under the billing of Randy Friel and Sharon Sable, the duo performs from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. on Sundays now through Labor Day weekend at least.

"The week before Memorial Day, it was official. It was exhilarating. I felt like I was supposed to be doing it. Donnie Hathaway, Sam Cooke, Billie