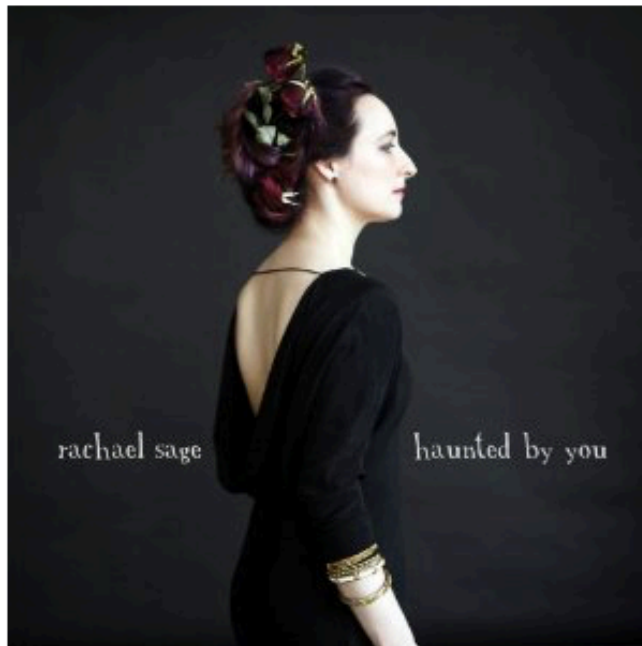


Rachael Sage

Haunted By You



Mpress Records www.rachaelsage.com

Ms Sage has the pale, black-clad look of someone who ventures out only at night - and her music very much confirms the nocturnal chanteuse character and skills. On her latest album 'Haunted By You' she is by turns coquettish, languid, waspish and the cityscape equipment of pastoral. Hence the album easily ranges between strident and toe-tapping to winsome and heartbroken. The evident strength of the writing is emphasised by the clear keyboard work and more tentative yet still defined occasional acoustic guitar outing. Experiencing these songs and others at a splendidly-organised showcase gig in London's Ladbroke Grove is an education. Rachael's on and offstage persona is not the customary ice-queen haughtiness of the generic cabaret diva at all, in fact she seems delighted at the interest shown in her by the writers, industry types and music lovers present at the event. Our mention in dinner conversation of the late great queen of NY night music Laura Nyro elicits the fact that Sage has in fact only recently heard the musician and singer's work and yes, she can see why some veteran listeners might find her work similar in style in some ways to Nyro's. It's not just the piano chording and fills, indeed they are sometimes delivered with echoes of Billy Joel. Lyrically Sage is just as interesting as Nyro but her own style brings in tinges of reflective humour, commenting on personalities and behaviour and situations. Of course these days it's possible to top the charts on both sides of the Atlantic and far beyond by travelling on a sonic raft 95% built on self-pity (Adele) or by cooing the robopop synth-soaked Stepford Chick radio-friendly ditties that Perry, Lott and Rhianna churn out. Proper songs that merit a close listen are less common and Rachael makes an effort to let listeners hear each lyric clearly, as her sprightly piano dances in and around the dark cello bowing of the amiable Dave Eggar, one of her Sequins band / ensemble. The album features the full group, but the two-instrument platform of the London showcase gig leave no doubt that these songs are crafted and inspired and not slung together. When Sage plays guitar, Eggar deftly adapts his tone to keep the chording free of any clutter.

When I saw Tori Amos live a couple of years back, her musicianship was breathtaking but the overall delivery a tad chilly - Ms Sage however has great line in intro stories and sometimes sardonic asides and quips. These and her knowing smile warm the room up with speed, ease and charm. She seems a natural performer with maybe hints of acting ability.

Let's turn to some of the songs on the album - opener 'Invisible Light' (reprise as the sets closer) is a Joan Osborne type melodic bouncy number with a string-decorated bridge. You have to the credits to ensure it's not a lost Carole King song !

'Abby Would You Wait' is softly-delivered love song with trumpet and wahwah guitar in the backing and what sounds like Wurlitzer and Hammond keys parts. A truly lovely song and I believe, an imminent single.

'California' has warm electric piano chording, breathy vocal and lightly skipping pace. Violin figures float over the song like coasting gulls.

Whilst 'The Sequin Song' has the line 'Can't be the only Catherine Wheel' which is as fine an expression of anguish as you'll find outside the work of Nico or Armatrading. And we are talking really about someone as individual as these two, in her own neon-flickered night-time way.

A live set highlight 'Performance Art' seemingly finds Sage trashed in a relationship but aching to survive and find some kind of redemption. It's striking, cliché-free with a pinch of baroque in the arrangement. The chord sequence has gorgeous flow that suits this world-weary bitching. The title track 'Haunted By You' is happily not Adele territory but sounds nonetheless intensely personal, aided by the soft leslie-speakered guitar and stately progression. The arrangement keeps this sing well clear of the Angst'R'Us over-the-top songstress fodder unceasingly shoved at us by X-Factor type shows. Sage seems to avoid twisting notes and words around, bless her.

'Ready' has a great pair of guitar solo's, I must mention.

'Birthday' is perhaps the gentlest piece here, all delicacy around a lyric of regret and thoughts thereon, not far from Sarah Bareilles' work. The lightest of drumming shows a percussionist who knows exactly how to frame a lyric.

A beatnik tempo'd 'Hey Nah' sounds like a band set-closer to these ears, you could name all your stage players over this beat and bow out. Oh and it's catchy as anything....

'Soulstice' sounds pretty bleak and maybe needs a legato electric guitar line in the background to take the edge off the sadness, but another poetic lyric, to be sure.

An extra brisker tune or two would have given a touch more variety to the pacing of this album I think, but there again what is here sounds heartfelt and so well-played that this is but a minor carp.

Elegant warmth - a rare commodity, but delivered by this longplayer

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