

Features Rachael Sage Continues To Be Haunted By You

By Peter Zimmerman May 21, 2012

Rachael Sage is one of the rare few who, even despite the 90's major label obsession with the female singer-songwriter, can claim sovereignty over their own career and all the decisions and responsibilities implicit in such a statement. Like veteran folk-rocker Ani DiFranco, Sage started her own record label (MPress Records) in the mid-1990s to release her music, which over the past sixteen years has given her the freedom to pursue aesthetic pathways that she found both compelling and potent. What has resulted is a discography of sure voice, solid footing and thoroughly gripping artistry that has engaged audiences the world over.

On her tenth album, Haunted By You, out earlier this month, Sage continues to impress with a captivating collection of twelve songs. Lead single "Invisible Light" appears in two incarnations, but as the album's opening track it introduces Haunted with vigor, a catchy melody, dramatic string section, magnetic vocal performance and some beautiful harmonies from guest singer Dar Williams. But above all, the songs on Haunted demonstrate Sage's skill at weaving story-laced pieces with wonderfully dynamic arrangements.

Glide Magazine had a chance to catch up with Rachael during a moment of rest during a wild week in Austin for the South By Southwest Festival. She discusses her history in the business, coming out of ballet and drama studies and into music, owning her own record label, bringing on some other voices to help round out the MPress roster and why she doesn't like to use setlists (that often).

Your first album, Morbid Romantic, came out in 1995, right?

That's right. Well, I released it in 1996 and recorded it in 95. You know, I really was releasing music at that point in a very DIY way, out of the back of my imaginary truck. But I really didn't have MPress, per se, in terms of an office and other people I was working with until quite a bit later.

So it was just you. What, then, inspired you to go the do it yourself route? Did you shop around to record labels? Did you try to look for other places to get signed?

Good question. You know actually I did when I was really young, when I was in my earlier teens and before I went to college. I was making pop music that was much more mainstream and radio-friendly, but honestly that was still really from my heart. At that time I was a MIDI girl. I had synthesizers and drum machines, and I loved using them. A lot of people don't know this about me. But you know it's kind of like Debbie Gibson meets Kate Bush. You know. (laughs)

I was 14 years old and making demos on a 4-track, and then when I went to college I just naturally discovered a lot of folk music, contemporary folk and retro folk. I also ended up doing some theatre pieces that focused on women's issues. And that's where I heard Ani DiFranco's music. She became a very big influence on me-- not only artistically but in terms of her whole sensibility, with the DIY record label business, and of course her feminist spirit.

By the end of college, I really had no more desire at all to sign with a major label and I abandoned that track completely. It was weird at first, because that whole way of doing things was so programmed into me. As a young person, you're told that there's only one way to "be discovered" and to have a career, but once I stepped away from that way of thinking, I realized that a lot of other doors were all of a sudden opened to me.

Can you isolate the moment when Ani DiFranco's music first came into your life? I know many artists who became aware of her early on remember a cassette tape of that first album, or hearing it on college radio, etc.

Oh absolutely. I was part of this theatre group at Stanford University called the Women's Performance Collective, and there was a young woman in the collective who performed a movement piece to Ani's song "The Story" from her debut album. That was the first time I heard her music, and I was doing all these different things within that theatre piece as well--things that were non-musical, monologues, that sort of thing--and I think after the show that young woman loaned me that cassette and that's when I first heard her, and it really changed me.

You were heavily involved in theatre while at Stanford, so when did you realize that you wanted to leave that world and really focus on music as a potential career?

I'm from New York, and so after college I moved back to the city. But while I graduated in theatre, I had written a ton of music for a lot of plays, so I was doing instrumental music as well as pop music and as soon as I got back, I just resumed my prior kind of demo-making process. I had a couple of collaborators I had been working with in my teens and I just made it very clear to them that this was the kind of music I wanted to do. At that point, I chose to focus heavily on lyrics and just to be true to what I had to say. And, you know, I didn't want to use drum machines anymore. I wanted find a real drummer, instead, and a real violinist, too. I kind of went off the deep end in the other direction of wanting everything to sound extremely organic and folk-infused.

Even though I was a pianist, I became an amateur string instrumentalist and acoustic guitarist. The Indigo Girls were a big influence on that movement away from the piano. But, you know, that only lasted a few years and then I came back to the middle again, where I realized you don't have to throw out the baby with the bath water. (laughs) It's okay to combine all these different styles, and I think that's where I have ended up now. Now it's all more of a balance of my genuine roots as a ballerina and theatre person, because I've definitely re-embraced a lot of the classical influences in my music.

Interestingly enough, though, I recently re-taught myself to play guitar. My new album Haunted By You was written almost entirely on guitar.

I would think at this point in your career, this being your tenth record, that you'd want to put parameters around the artistic and creative processes that go into writing a new album, perhaps to inspire you to work in a new way.

Absolutely. Yeah, it was a very conscience choice. I also had a significant breakup after four years with one person, which for me is like twenty years of marriage for other people (laughs). It was the longest relationship I'd ever had. I definitely felt just how most people feel when they have a break up or a big shift in their lives. You want to start with a fresh perspective and you want to try new things and really make sure you are not repeating yourself. That's the last thing you want to do after you have had a breakup, right? Is repeat yourself.

So yeah, I had this Martin 1966 acoustic that was indefinitely on loan to me from an ex. I just pulled it out and started writing very simple kind of songs, mostly because I don't know that many chords. And before I knew it, I had half the album done. It was a great feeling, because I hadn't written in a long time, and I was loathing writing the same type of riff on the piano. I wanted to really get out of myself.

I assume there'd be a bit of a beautiful frustration, in that you are so accomplished on the piano, to then go to an instrument that so many people are so good at to strip it down, mostly out of technical necessity, must have really sparked some creativity.

Definitely. You have to let go of a lot of ego. I also think that's a sort of great thing to do at a time when you are regrouping and realizing what it means to be self-sufficient and on your own. For me, it's been great because I've recently started playing these songs live. I performed one of them on guitar last night in a great big venue on a great big stage with lots of people. I had never been to that venue before, so I thought I was going to be playing a little tiny hole in the wall dive bar, far away in the corner, but then there was something very different about being up on that stage and playing my little folksy song than you know in a little coffee house somewhere along the tour. This was a very different space for my music, and I thought I was going to hate it, but it was so great for me. Scary, but in a good way.

Even though my record label puts on an artist showcase, and has for the past six years, I've never actually performed at South By Southwest. So, while I know the festival really well, this was in many ways my first one. It was so much fun. We really just took it all in and enjoyed it.

When you say "we," do you mean that you're playing with a band for this tour?

Yes! Rachael Sage and The Sequins.

Does that mean you have to wear sequins every gig?

Every gig, for sure! You know, that's not really a death sentence for me. (laughs)



When you're preparing for a gig, either an artist showcase or even a solo show, how do you choose which music to play? Do you keep the same setlist every night, or do you try and react to what the audience is asking for? With such a big body of work, and then also a new album to promote, I would think it'd be fairly hard to fit it all in.

It's funny you ask that, because I really never use setlists. For me, it's more about what's currently in my repertoire, and it's interesting for me to see what I continue to play night after night, and also what feels comfortable to play. Once in a while someone will shout out a song from my first or second album.

Does that feel good?

Oh, it's the best feeling in the world! Conversely, though, there are those songs you just don't remember how to play or you haven't played it so long you probably forgot the lyrics. And I try not to take myself too seriously. I'll even try to take a stab at doing a little bit of it and if I can't remember the rest and I will segue into something else and we'll all laugh. You know, I think as an independent artist you're just so happy when there are people in an unfamiliar setting who know your work and your lyrics. You look out into the audience and you see them singing along, and I have to say--that an incredible feeling.

So, yeah, I almost never write a set list, even with big fancy showcases like SXSW and CMJ. Everything I'll try to write one, but then I end up not looking at it. Or they'll be taped to my piano, and I still do everything else but those songs! It's just the way my brain works. It's like an Ouija board.

What I do try to do is gauge the energy in the room. For instance, last night when I first started, it was loud-- people were talking from the prior set. It was a dance-pop act, and they were great but that's what it was. So we started really strong. But then I realized if I kept... I mean you're realizing these things in a split second... but I thought that if I kept doing big loud things in a row, they would keep talking. So I decided to do something super quiet, and it really did bring them in, and it compelled them to listen more. After that, it was at my own pace for the rest of the show. I'm glad I did that.

So, let's switch gears a bit and talk about MPress Records, which you've run since the mid 1990's.

Yes. Well, I have a bit of help now. I'm very, very lucky to have a wonderful team. It's a great group. Several of them been with me for quite a number of years, but we also have a couple of new folks. Our marketing team is really fantastic, and they've done wonders for getting the word out about us and the releases. Our label manager is the person who has really been with me the longest. At this point, we read each other's minds. She helps with day-to-day operations with the label, and all the minute details for our albums. Like when I design a package, she makes sure the plant doesn't screw it up and that it ends up looking like it's suppose to. (laughs) We're a family that loves each other and also have rifts sometimes. But, we figure it all out. All of us just live and breathe music.

When you started this record label, what did you see it as being? If someone had asked you, "Rachael, what does success mean to MPress Records?," did you have a delineated answer or plan, such as a quantity-- number of albums sold--or brand equity, like amount of press, etc.?

Well, if you had asked me back then, I would not have known what the heck a metric was! In terms of running a business, my head was not in that place. I mean, as I mentioned before, it really was about a system to release my own work and to also create a community. I always had this Warhol-ian complex in the back in my mind since I was 12 years old. I mean, I used to throw parties and have people come over and make things, make barrettes and paint jeans. I always wanted to know the artists people in any school or camp or club that I was in, and it has been no different as an adult living in the East Village.

But it has been challenging to forge those relationships. So, along the way I've been a part of artist collectives. When I first moved to New York, I was a part of something called The Urban Muse NYC. It was a group of women, who were singer-songwriters, but we all also did other things and we would get together at each other's apartments and talk about different issues, making music and playing each other's songs. I wanted to bring something like that into the business I was running and into my life as well. We're still working it all out. We are continually evolving, and I have other ideas in my mind, in terms of bringing in photographers and filmmakers and things like that--having a company where if you love what someone one does artistically, that you are able to support that continually by assigning new projects to them. I'm very cooperative minded and yet we are also running a business, so it can be tough.

It's tough enough to start a business. It's even tougher to sustain a business, and you've had this going for over fifteen years.

It's true. I don't if you know this but I started out in the jungle business. I used to hide it and what it was not something to be proud of, or that it was just too quirky or whatever. And what I realize now is that amazing gift it was to be in my early 20s and to have had someone take me under their wing to sing and write about their stuff and then teach me how to do it. I did it for a number of years and it enabled me to start this label. And that was my day job, you know, but I used a lot of those skills for MPress. With jingles, you had to come up with this spot for 30 or 60 seconds, and you had to come up with it in a couple of hours. Half the time it was rejected and you stayed up all night working on it. And it's really no different from a lot of the work that we do as artists. You have to just believe so much that what you do is going to connect with the audience because it connects with you, and just persist. (laughs)

One of the artists you've signed to the MPress Records roster is the young singer-songwriter Seth Glier, whose latest release, The Next Right Thing, was recently nominated for a Grammy. What was that like?

Yes. He had it for best engineering, and our engineers that we brought on that project: Kevin Killen, John Shyloski, Brendan Muldowney.

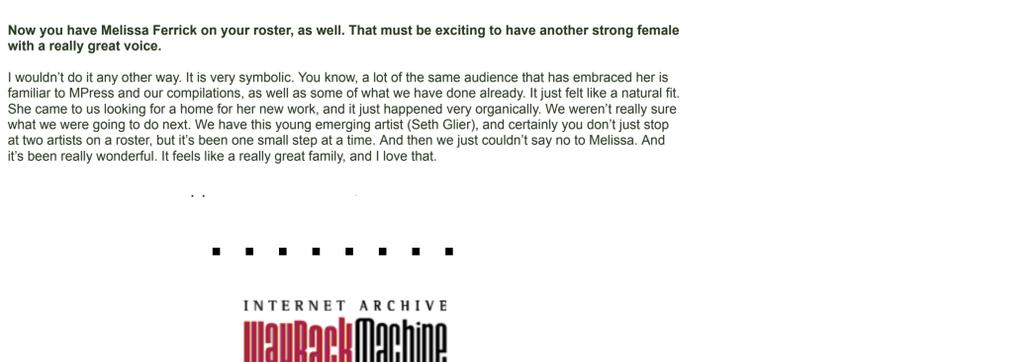
Kevin Killen just produced the new Dar Williams record, which is really great. She sings on Haunted By You, right?

She does! She came and sang in my closet in my apartment, actually. (laughs) At that point, I was almost done with the record and when it finally appeared that she was going to be available to do it, I jumped on it. She had been so nice but just super busy, and then at one point she was like "Can I come over tomorrow?" I cleaned up my apartment and I got a bunch of snacks and I tried to make it fun. I set up the ProTools in the closet and she was just so awesome about the whole thing.

But yes. Seth has had a quite whirlwind of a year. And all of the engineers that we've worked with for a long time on a lot of releases were a part of it and nominated, so it really felt like a wonderful moment where all that hard work w as rewarded and everybody got to be there together out in LA for the ceremony. It was surreal. A little wacky, but fun! We all got dressed up and just drank it in.

Now you have Melissa Ferrick on your roster, as well. That must be exciting to have another strong female with a really great voice.

I wouldn't do it any other way. It is very symbolic. You know, a lot of the same audience that has embraced her is familiar to MPress and our compilations, as well as some of what we have done already. It just felt like a natural fit. She came to us looking for a home for her new work, and it just happened very organically. We weren't really sure what we were going to do next. We have this young emerging artist (Seth Glier), and certainly you don't just stop at two artists on a roster, but it's been one small step at a time. And then we just couldn't say no to Melissa. And it's been really wonderful. It feels like a really great family, and I love that.



For more information, visit Rachael Sage at her official website. You can also follow her on Facebook and Twitter. Haunted By You can be purchased here or on Amazon.

sage-continues-to-be-haunted-by- il&layout=standard&show\_faces=true&width=450&actio

Add a comment... Comment using... Facebook social plugin

