

# American Songwriter

the craft of music



Singer-songwriter, producer, and MPress label founder [Rachael Sage](#) released her 10th studio album, *Haunted By You*, in May. In this interview, the former John Lennon Songwriting Contest Grand Prize Winner discusses her approach to her craft, her appreciation for Hall and Oates, her new record and more.

## Who are your songwriting heroes?

I have too many to list. I just love so much music of all kinds, but here are a few: The Beatles, Elvis Costello, Carole King, Don McLean, Billy Joel, Hall & Oates, Buddy Holly, Patti Smith, Suzanne Vega, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Christopher Cross, Indigo Girls, James Taylor, Eric Burdon, Boris Grebenshchikov.

## What inspires you to write?

Little epiphanies of all kinds spark my writing. Pop songs are short, so it's hard to go after big convoluted story-lines, but I do look for those extended moments within any story, whether imaginary or true, that deal with moments of awe, of sudden realization, of anger or love where suddenly the world shifts, and there's a universal emotion or idea worth exploring, in a song. That rules out writing about most of what I'd ever post on Twitter or Facebook, for instance, but includes just about everything else.

## When did you start writing songs? Were they good right away, or did that come later?

I think they were good right away for my age, at least according to my mother. I started writing songs at the piano, shortly after I started playing the instrument by ear around four or five. I'd come home from ballet class and sound out various classical motifs, then fuse some of the melodies I was hearing with pop ideas that just came to me, because I was always obsessed with Top 40 Radio. Later, my parents' music was a big influence, from Buddy Holly to Gershwin to Billy Joel, and I took lyrical cues from everything, equally. Going to see some Broadway shows in kindergarten was really formative, also. Suddenly, I imagined myself to be another character in "A Chorus Line" which was a slight problem when I wanted to sing some of the racier numbers around the house!

My very first song I can still remember was about my best friend, Jenny. "Jenny, you're all I miss..." She was leaving on a long vacation. After that, I wrote a lot of songs about my dad being away a lot, and one of them, "Please Don't Go." I still think would be a really strong pop cover for a wailing R&B singer. I always wrote out of my range, until my late teens. In my mind, I could sing like Whitney Houston so when I finally started making records I really had a rude awakening when my first producer told me I had to "stop writing so expansively" and leave out all the octave leaps...

## What's the last song you wrote?

I recently wrote a song called "Happiness." Musically, it was inspired by the upbeat, pop-energy of a New York City band called "Paper Raincoat." I'm always so impressed by how propulsive their keyboard parts are, which can be challenging for me at the keyboard sometimes. Lyrically, it was a natural progression for me to write something truly imaginative about someone who I haven't met yet, with whom I'll have a transcendent connection, because I'm newly single after years of being in a relationship. So it's a very free, uplifting piece and the bridge says it all: "I've waited my whole life for the chance to become soulful / I've waited my whole life for the chance to become hopeful / and now you've followed though..."

It's sort of a summoning song; if I sing it, it will happen. I wrote it in my head on the subway, actually, after a really wonderful rehearsal, and then arranged the piano once I was at an instrument again.

## What's a song of yours that's really touched people?

"Frost" is a song that's been really widely embraced, over the years, in sort of a viral way. There are a lot of videos of young dancers using it as their music for lyrical dance competitions, which is very flattering, especially as the lyrics are very intense and about adultery. I guess the music

must just hit a nerve, and makes people want to move even though it's a slow piano ballad. It sounds very classical and is solo piano except for a few moments with cello, which is interesting since so much of my other music is much more produced.

Another song that has been sort of a good luck charm for me over the years is "Sistersong". I wrote it for Ani DiFranco, who was a huge source of inspiration for me as an empowered, fearless female in this business, as well as a more personal inspiration to me in college, when I was discovering my sense of feminism and performing in a theater company that focused on women's issues. The song is about being there for each other as women, in a non-competitive, truly supportive and compassionate way, even when others try to pit us against each other in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. I get a lot of people requesting it even though it's one of my older songs, which always feels great.

### **What's the best part about being a songwriter?**

The best part is simply the doing of it. The actual process of receiving that spark, and then hopefully crafting it into something both ephemeral and substantial, that you'll perform over and over in so many different ways and contexts...it's really overwhelming to me sometimes how simply doing something that I love so much has helped me create a lifestyle as rich in adventure and variety as the one I have. When I was 7 years old watching American Bandstand and trying to write ballads and uptempos and envisioning other people singing my songs, I never imagined I'd be leading this life; I didn't know what touring was, or that I'd have the opportunity to collaborate with so many incredible musicians, through the years. I just knew I loved creating and expressing myself through music, and the rest has been a huge blessing revealed through hard work and persistence that I could just have easily applied to something else, had there not have been a piano in my house, just when I needed it.

### **What's a song on your new album you're particularly proud of?**

I'm very proud of the song "Everything," because I could never have written it on piano, yet it's my favorite song on the record. It's simple, direct, from the heart and took a lot of restraint for me to not bring it from acoustic guitar – a new instrument for me – to the keys. I started to write a bridge on piano for it after I ran out of chords, but then I thought, "I really want to be able to stand up at my shows and sing this in a spare, organic way, just me and a guitar," because that energy best reflected the emotion of the song. So I kept at it, until I was happy with it and now it's my favorite, most relaxed moment in my new live show. It's an unabashed, romantic song with no angst whatsoever, which is generally not my forté.

### **What's a lyric on the album you're especially proud of?**

"It's a little ironic you wear tight jeans / every time I think about it I'm jealous of the seams / everything that you have chosen to reveal is like a dream." I'm proud of it because it's sexy, and whenever I get to that part of the song I really have fun with it live and it makes me smile. I tend to write from a much darker, more conflicted place and that was a very open, easy lyric that really reflected the situation I was in at the time. Being able to write so directly, in a more folky way, is new to me and I think switching to an unfamiliar instrument like guitar really helped me connect with that.

### **Are there any words you love, or hate?**

I love and hate all words, I think. I love them when they say what I want them to, effortlessly, and I hate them when they get in the way or have one too many syllables. Specifically, I try to avoid words and phrases that come up all too often, like "baby," "I'm leaving," "I love you," and anything with "sunset," "blue skies" or "sunshine." Sometimes, they can't be avoided, but you have to know when to keep it simple. It can be a fine line.

### **What's your typical approach to songwriting? Do you revise a lot, or do you like to write automatically?**

I don't really have a typical approach anymore, because I've been doing this for decades now so I've tried to embrace all different ways of doing it. I look at it like ballet; ballet is a foundation for so many other types of dance and if you have great ballet technique, you can pretty much do anything but you still have to put in the hours learning jazz, tap.

For me, my earliest technique was just spending hours at the piano, literally exploring the instrument. I'd happen upon different melodies and motifs and then wrestle with them, trying to get the perfect pop lyrics to fit into the music that came to me much more easily. Later on, I started writing both lyrics and melody simultaneously, the more I did it, and I've also written many songs in my head, with no instrument but just hearing everything at once, or at least a melody and lyric. The key for me is always to have a pen and paper, because I will remember the melody if I write down the words; they become a mental roadmap for me. But if I don't, I'll forget them and that's always a drag.

### **Is it easier, or harder to write songs, the more you write?**

I don't think it really affects how easy or hard it is, how much I write. Logic tells you that the more you do something the easier it gets, but for me, there've been some songs I've written as a commission, such as wedding songs, or music for a play or dance piece, that were a huge struggle, simply because they required me to use other people's ideas. I don't think that will ever get easier. It just boils down to concentration and craft, and since I'm a bit ADD, it's always a little stressful creating under a deadline.

Conversely, when I haven't written in a long time, sometimes a great idea just comes to me, or I'm more eager to seize it because I crave that feeling of completing a new song, and just need to get something out that's been building. That kind of process can be instant, or just walking down the street, and those are the most fun songs to write, in my experience.

### **Who's an underrated songwriter in your opinion?**

I used to think Hall & Oates were underrated, but now, thankfully, everyone seems to recognize just how enormous their contribution has been to pop music, in part because of Daryl's brilliant show, "Live From Daryl's House." I watch it religiously, I just think his ability to integrate his own

classics with new, emerging artists' work and to lead an incredible band is pretty much unparalleled.

In terms of contemporary artists, I think Caleb Hawley, who appeared on a charity compilation my label produced called *New Arrivals*, is wildly promising. He's already written one of the best pop songs I've ever encountered, "Other Side Of It All," which is an instant classic along the lines of so many Stevie Wonder or Billy Joel hits. He's made some interesting career choices such as appearing on American Idol, but in my opinion, he is among the most underrated songwriters and performers in indie music today; he also has a command of the guitar and his own vocal range that allows him to write and perform songs across all genres, and do it well. I really believe in his talent, and look forward to hearing anything he does in the future.

**What do you consider to be the perfect song written by somebody else?**

"Everyday" by Buddy Holly and Norman Petty, is a perfect song. At only two minutes, it says everything it needs to say, and is everything a pop song should be: universal, poignant, catchy and melodic. A lot of people seem to agree, because it's been widely covered. Maybe I should do a version.

My other perfect song isn't really a pop song at all. I think Elvis Costello's "I Want You" is perfect, because it's not only a beautiful melody, but it feels like it was totally spontaneous. It sounds like someone almost excruciatingly obsessed, just spilling their guts out in a song, and like so many Elvis Costello songs, it's universal but also incredibly personal and quirky, with a lyrical voice that could only be him. No one else writes lines like "since when were you so generous and inarticulate." Sometimes perfection is heartfelt originality.