

Interview: Rachael Sage!

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Underneath This had the pleasant experience of interviewing the talented and soulful Rachael Sage. According to the biography in her press kit, Rachael is a vocalist and innovative multi-instrumentalist, singer/songwriter and producer. She has also become one of the busiest touring artists in independent music, performing over 100 dates a year (!) with her band The Sequins throughout the US, UK, Europe and Asia. She has earned a loyal following for her dynamic piano playing, delicate guitar work, soulful vocals, and improvisational audience interaction.

Sage has shared stages with Sarah McLachlan, A Great Big World, Judy Collins, Colin Hay, Shawn Colvin, Marc Cohn, The Animals and Ani DiFranco. She has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and received numerous songwriting awards including The John Lennon Songwriting Contest (Grand Prize) and several Independent Music Awards. Her songs have appeared on MTV, HBO, the "Fame" soundtrack, and in the current season of Lifetime's #1 reality series, "Dance Moms."



Photo Credit: Shervin
Lainez

Before proceeding to the interview, check out some of Rachael's [music videos](#).

Please describe your trajectory to becoming a musician.

I have been playing piano since I was two and a half, apparently! I can't really remember a time where I didn't have some kind of relationship to the piano. I would hear songs in synagogue, or at school or in ballet class or just in my house from my parent's doo-wop and Broadway collections, and sound out the melodies by ear. By the time I was four I was writing lyrics and by five I already had dozens of little pop songs influenced mostly by what was playing on Top 40 Radio at the time. I'd use the phrase "making love" in all my songs and I had no idea what it meant, but I knew it sounded like what people sang on the radio! After that I just became known in school and at camp as "that girl who writes songs", and constantly presented them to friends, teachers, at talent shows or wherever...basically, for anyone who'd listen. Upon an uncle's suggestion who worked in TV News, my relatives pooled together and gave me a four-track tape recorder for my Bat Mitzvah gift, which set me on my path as both a producer and recording artist.

You started your own record label when this was less common. What was that like?

I started my own record label as a very practical decision, really. I'd been making pop music demos since I was in junior high school, programming drum machines and synthesizers, and literally recording hundreds of songs to play for publishers, managers - anyone who'd listen to a little kid with stars in her eyes. I got pretty "far" with it too; in high school I was offered a

major publishing deal with Famous Music that my parents (lamentably) wouldn't let me sign because they felt I was too young, and I also was represented by Debbie Gibson's manager, which let's just say, was "an adventure!"

Ultimately, during college I did a 180 musically and my motivation for wanting to be a songwriter and recording artist shifted quite a bit. I became a lot more eager to get my music out there myself, and to say what I wanted to say without anyone telling me what lyrics needed to be cut or what arrangement to play or even what to wear. I was really inspired by the Bay Area folk scene and also, by a summer I spent in Ireland where a large number of local artists were already self-releasing, so it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I pressed up my first album right after college, pretended to be my own manager by wearing my hair in a bun and putting on glasses, walked into Tower Records and somehow managed to schmooze my way into getting them to take in 10 copies. That same week, the buyer decided to put it in their listening station, which really changed things for me as it became their best-selling indie release.

Shortly thereafter, I landed a slot with Lilith Fair and then sent my album to college radio where it received a lot of airplay and charted high enough to prompt some offers from national distributors. It was a very different music biz back then, and things like college radio and moving units at a local record store had a lot more impact, career-wise. Now it's more about YouTube, iTunes and social networking, but for me it all started from just wanting to learn how to represent myself as professionally as possible, and to self-develop as an artist.

Uncut Magazine has described your music as "one part Elton John, one part Kate Bush." Have these artists influenced your style? Who and what else have been influential?

I was not influenced by Kate Bush, no. I probably would've been if I'd been exposed to her, but I was not aware of her music until lots of people had compared me to her! Eventually I became curious and picked up a copy of *The Sensual World* which absolutely blew me away. I definitely heard a kindred spirit in her lyrics, but I feel our voices are quite different. Maybe the fact that we both have dance backgrounds prompted the comparisons, I'm not sure. I'm always flattered by them, though!

I was much more aware of Elton John through his massive radio hits, and would definitely say that he and even more so, Billy Joel, was an influence. I would play his music by ear – anything/everything in the Top 40 really – and in general in junior high school I gravitated toward music from the 70's like Carole King, Cat Stevens and James Taylor. In high school I discovered Elvis Costello whose music inspired me enormously, and all throughout I was listening to tons of Classical music via my ballet classes. My biggest influence, hands-down, has been The Beatles. When I first really dug into their music around age 11, my brain exploded and the possibilities of what one could do with pop music literally seemed endless. Since then my influences have been too numerous and eclectic to name here, but I've been equally inspired by classical, pop, blues, folk and even old-fashioned theatrical music especially from Fred Astaire & Gene Kelly films. Anything with great lyrics and a killer melody, and I'm bound to appreciate it!

How did the Sequins come together?

I met each of the fine players in The Sequins in NYC, in the last few years. My wonderful violinist, Kelly Halloran, was first introduced to me through my label-mate Seth Glier, who grew up with her in Massachusetts. Ward Williams, our cellist/electric guitarist, was in another band prior called Jump Little Children of which I was a huge fan, but I didn't realize that when I met him or I'd have been pretty starstruck! We first chatted after a mutual friend's gig – Alex Wong – and I was so impressed by his beautiful playing with Alex that I shamelessly said, "hey, I'd love to play with you...do you have a card?" We've been playing together ever since! Drummer Andy Mac is the most recent member of our band, and I met him a long time ago but only as a fellow singer-songwriter. I have Facebook to thank for introducing me to his amazing drumming skills via a handful of videos posted on his page, and after I realized what a kick-ass drummer he was, I invited him to play with us and I can easily say he's the most dynamically sensitive player I've ever worked with. They're all great people I love being around, which makes playing and touring together an absolute pleasure!



Photo
Credit: Tom
Moore

What have been some highlights of performing live?

Many of my favorite live performance experiences have been in Europe. I had the incredible opportunity a while back to tour with the great Eric Burdon & The Animals throughout Germany and Austria, which was just a wild and eye-opening adventure! He has lived through and forged so much rock 'n roll history, and the opportunity to be around a legend like that, to watch and learn still sticks in my mind as one of my favorite experiences. I've also really appreciated the opportunity to play in Japan – which was such an entirely different culture, and a very humbling experience to not have anyone around us speak any English. The cities I played in were all beautiful and fascinating in different ways, and I hope some day to go back!

What was the experience like of performing at Lilith Fair? What was that era for you like musically?

I was invited to perform at Lilith Fair in 1999 after winning a local NYC talent search contest they hosted, at The Westbeth Theater in the West Village. Of course it was a ridiculously exciting experience, not only to open the show itself (I was the first act on) but also to meet Sarah McLachlan and so many other artists I admired, including Suzanne Vega and Sandra Bernhard, who've both inspired me a great deal. Musically, I think I was definitely striving to expose my emotions in a much more hyper-personal way than I am apt to now; I was so full of angst and, as one is after college, eager to share all the novel ideas I believed I had, spiritually, politically and otherwise. I was very idealistic – so I guess it was the perfect time to be playing my first festival!

From your experience, how has the treatment of heterosexual cisgender women and LGBTQ people in folk and adult alternative music changed since then?

That's a very interesting question, that honestly, I'm not sure I have an answer to. I've always been very openly bisexual, but on the other hand I've never been overly focused on sexuality or my sexual preference at all, as a creative artist; I'm a pretty private individual. So generally, it's rarely come up unless I've brought it up myself – for instance volunteering to play an LGBTQ benefit or a Pride event. I have composed plenty of songs informed by my experiences with women, but as a songwriter I've always aimed to write songs with which anyone can identify so it hasn't always been obvious (apparently!). Conversely, there have been songs of mine that have been written about a man who my lesbian listeners have assumed were about a woman and I've always just been happy if people found resonance with my work, period, as human beings who love other human beings. Many of my songs aren't even about me or my life at all, versus based on fiction or a film or a friend's experience but I think ultimately the "treatment" of artists tends to reflect social bias in general....so I'm sure you could find examples galore of ways in which bias has affected careers adversely; that's a big part of why I remained indie though admittedly. I wanted to be less reactive and more in control of how I put myself out here (no pun intended). For me, it always just boils down to the music: am I making the best possible records I can make, and am I putting my heart and soul into each live show. I think if you do your job well and respect that everyone in this community of musicians – whether straight or LGBT – has the same goal of self-expression, there are no limits whatsoever anymore in terms of how far you can go as an indie artist. Music is music, and that's why it's such an incredible space for all voices to be heard!

In what ways is your music feminist?

I think my music is necessarily feminist because it aims to celebrate the female experience, while also acknowledging our vulnerabilities and that we can derive strength from the entire range of female expression and emotion. I grew up distinctly fearing that certain qualities I had as a woman were weak or inappropriate or just not fit to be emphasized. My work is all about individuality and creativity and striving to find what it is in each of us that is both uniquely ourselves, and worth sharing with and celebrating in each other.

For me, music had been incredibly healing especially because I was badly bullied as a child, by other young girls. The behavior was either completely ignored by teachers or encouraged by parents, and the fact that I was at an all girl school made it hard for me to trust other women until I went to college and realized the girl-culture I experienced was not exactly the norm. Feminism and the concept of supporting and nurturing other women through the arts was something I grew into in my 20's, and as a member of several female music collectives, I have continued to learn more about how we can support rather than compete with each other are women, in music and the broader entertainment industry.

I love being a part of the organization Women In Music, for instance, and have also been a member of such groups as Indiegrl and GoGirls Music, as well as an artist salon called UrbanMuse comprised of NY-based female singer-songwriters. All of these groups have helped me get and keep my bearings not only as a female/feminist artist, but as an artist, period. I hope that sense

of empathy and compassion in general comes through in my work, even when it's exploring darker themes.

You and several other musicians collaborated to raise funds for homeless youth. Kudos to you all! How did that endeavor come about?

Well, we've been releasing charity compilations on my label MPress Records for a number of years. The fourth volume of the compilation series "New Arrivals" benefits National Network For Youth, primarily because as New Yorkers it's impossible to not be acutely aware of the homelessness problem throughout our city. I also happen to live right next to a homeless shelter, so when the topic came up re: which charity to pick, it just seemed like we should try to do something around homelessness. My tour manager and I visited the offices of NN4Y in Washington, D.C. on tour, really admired what they were doing, and they were eager to have us become involved through our efforts.

With what other activist causes are you involved?

Through my label MPress Records and individually, I have been involved in fundraising for World Hunger Year (founded by Harry Chapin), NEDA (National Eating Disorders Association), Habitat For Humanity, Doctors Without Borders, and a handful of local NYC organizations that continue to assist those affected by Hurricane Sandy. You can read more about our charity compilation series at <http://www.newarrivalscd.com>.

I was touched by your writing about the definition of a home (<http://www.themortonreport.com/celebrity/causes/celebrity-causes-rachael-sage-for-artists-against-youth-homelessness/>). What places feel like home to you these days?

I feel most at home in New York City, my literal home, but I also feel very at ease in Dublin, Ireland, San Francisco, CA, and Boston, MA. I also really like London, where I am currently!

What was it like collaborating with Dar Williams on "Invisible Light" on your 2012 album, "Haunted by You?"

Dar Williams is just such a delightfully down to earth and warm person, you almost forget what an extraordinary artist she is until she opens her mouth to sing! She came over to my home studio very well prepared, and sang the song "Invisible Light" in just a few passes. She was very generous with her ideas, and kept the mood playful and light. Honestly, it felt like we were just hanging out chatting and laughing, and then suddenly the track was done as it was time to go have a coffee together. It's a day I will certainly never forget!!



Photo Credit:
Shervin Lainez

"New Destination" is your 11th album. Congrats! The record seems to possess a different sonic feel than many of your earlier records. It also seems like there is a different energy. What do you make of the differences and similarities between these songs and your earlier ones?

Thank you! New Destination is actually my first EP of previously unrecorded material, i.e. a short-form recording of only four tracks. (My 11th full album isn't coming out until Fall 2014). I decided to release these four tunes because once I'd written the title-track, it felt like this group of songs just belonged together and I wanted to share them right away especially as I'd been playing them all already live. New Destination was musically inspired by Carole King's song I Feel The Earth Move, which I heard on Broadway last year in the musical "Beautiful." So it has a very positive, uptempo energy and lyrically I wrote it for a good friend who was going through a tough breakup...but it could really be about anyone just trying to shift their perspective and make some kind of a change. It came out in the Spring, and I definitely think it was a good seasonal sentiment! In terms of the other tracks on the EP I think they all explore some aspect of transformation, and hopefully, a feeling that there's a glimmer of light at the end of even the coldest, darkest tunnel.

What was it like making this album? What was your favorite track to record? The most challenging?

Of course I loved recording all of these tracks, but I think my favorite was Wax, because it's just a very different kind of groove for me. Doug Yowell played the drums, and he has such a brilliant sense of dynamics. We recorded it as a duo, just me on piano and him playing drums live, and then we built the rest of the tune around that foundation. It's also the first song I ever played electric guitar on, so that was a blast!

My favorite song on the album is "Misery's Grace." What is the story behind that song?

I wrote Misery's Grace for an old friend of mine who lost his wife to cancer. I first learned of his loss on Facebook, as we'd been out of touch for several years, and the outpouring of love and support was staggering, but also clearly, not much consolation for this man who seemed to have had a Hollywood Movie-esque romance with his true soul mate, who left this earth inexplicably to soon. The song is a tribute to their relationship, and the only way I knew how to reach out to my friend, to show him he was in my thoughts and I understood his enormous loss.

"I'm not Leaving You" was written based on the reactions to the death of Cory Monteith. What was it like recording this song? Have you played it live?

I actually wrote the song from what I imagined was his girlfriend's perspective, earlier in their relationship. I tried to put myself in her (Leah Michelle's) place emotionally, and to imagine what it must be like to be so young, talented, in love and under so much constant pressure from the media. It's a song about loyalty, about braving the elements – whatever they may be – together and essentially, loving someone unconditionally in spite of any and all obstacles. I dated someone in my early 20's who struggled with addiction, and while it's easy for me to look back now and question my choices or my willingness to stick with that person in spite of my need for sobriety, the fact is I loved him deeply and in many other ways we were beautifully alike. Losing someone to substance abuse it's just about the most painful experience I can imagine...so the song was my attempt to capture what I imagine must have been a very strong bond between two much-beloved talents, one of whom we lost tragically too soon.

If you could cover any song, what would be?

I can cover any song! Who's going to stop me? 😊 I haven't done many covers because I just tend to write so many originals, but I've covered songs by Neil Young, Hall & Oates, Marc Cohn, Sinead O' Connor and a version of the song "Fame" by Irene Cara, among others. I've enjoyed giving those songs my own spin, and I think it would be a positive challenge for me to cover a song by Judy Collins. I only grew up aware of her cover versions of songs like Both Sides Now and Send In The Clowns because she had such big hits with her versions of them; but her own songwriting is really extraordinary, and her piano playing has such a gorgeous flow to it...I think I should definitely attempt to cover some of her music, especially since she's been such a wonderful supporter of mine!



Photo Credit:
Bill Bernstein

You have also acted and danced. In your experience, how do these art forms compare to making music?

I think acting and dance are both much more about what's happening physically and emotionally...what you're able to summon to project onto your own personal canvas to help tell a story or convey a feeling. That canvas is some combination of one's body, one's sense of musicality (even with acting), and one's personal voice i.e. character. You're using yourself as the vessel to do all of that and it takes years of training and some degree of intuition and 'talent' to be a great actor or dancer. I loved the training that acting and dancing required, and I know that the discipline and endurance I learned from both continue to inform my approach to music. But the main difference has been that as a composer I am also my own director. I choose my material, I choose whether or not to improvise or stick to a set list, and of course I get to do all my own 'casting'. What I miss sometimes about dance is the sheer ability to let go, and not be in one's head. Dancers are so intelligent – they have to be to govern their bodies so meticulously and to absorb choreography as they do; but there is a feeling of getting lost entirely in the

dance itself or even the language of a play written by someone centuries ago that is very different from the adrenaline rush of playing music. I try to include aspects of my dance and theatre backgrounds in my live performances, but it's true often wish that I could still perform on pointe or go join a Broadway production! I would appreciate being part of an ensemble in a much different way now I think, now that I've forced myself to learn all facets of composing, performing and producing. I think it might be somewhat of a relief to immerse myself in a character and be part of someone else's fantasy world for a while! Never say never...

On what projects are you working next?

I am currently completing my 11th album, "Blue Roses", and am so excited that it's almost finished after over a year of working on it!

What insights do you have for aspiring musicians?

The best advice I never received was to get a regular gig, and shed, shed, shed until you know who you are, what you do best, and how to connect with an audience. I wrote songs nearly all of my life, and I wanted to be an entertainer so badly, but I really didn't have much experience outside my own living room or school talent shows before I got my first big break, opening for Ani DiFranco. It was a bit of trial-by-fire and looking back, I really wasn't ready. Much of the time I'd been working so hard to create recorded versions of my music and get them as perfect as possible, I kind of forget about the live performance side, which was when I decided to start touring my tuchus off so I'd get better just by doing it. But I do wish someone had told me the virtues of playing for ten people at a local coffeehouse, every week, early on. There's so much to learn just by experimenting and making mistakes...which I was always so afraid to do. Embrace your mistakes, and relish the process! And don't be in such a rush. Music isn't going anywhere, if it's truly your passion. But the people and things happening around you are more transient; take the time to be part of your community, to go hear other artists, and to hang out with good people. It will all make you who you are, which is your #1 asset: your point-of-view.

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