



Bill Bernstein

## RACHAEL SAGE

### Romance, record deals and the reality of making it on your own terms



SINGER, SONGWRITER AND PIANIST Rachael Sage's 10th and latest album, *Haunted by You*, is a song cycle about love, loss and immediate entanglement. Its tale parallels Sage's own recent personal trajectory, which began with the dissolution of a longtime relationship, followed by a torrid overseas affair—one she soon realized was doomed to fail. But don't go assuming that the "I" in her songs is always Sage herself. "I take licenses with the first-person perspective," she says. "I adopted that voice to convey the widest range of emotions while exploring the ups and downs of love over a relatively brief period—from romances that were really amazing to some I thought were really going to wreck me."

If anyone can manage ups and downs with aplomb, it's Sage. The Port Chester, N.Y., native juggles successful careers as a recording artist and director of her own record company, MPress, as well as taking regular side trips into visual art, acting, dancing and comedy. Sage has always been an overachiever, from teaching herself piano at age 3 and garnering an ASCAP Pop Songwriting Award at 16 right up to marking MPress' first Grammy nod

(for Seth Glier's *The Next Right Thing*) and launching the new album by MPress artist Melissa Ferrick in the last year.

"I've always had one foot in business," says the Stanford University grad. "Even as a little kid and then later as a teenager, I had several small businesses where I'd make things and sell them. That always came naturally to me. I was always hustling and putting my strengths forward. But there are things I haven't mastered by any stretch, and that's stuff I'm always struggling with. It helps to enjoy hard work and survive on very little sleep. I don't know what screw is loose in my head, but that's what I like to do."

If a loose screw led Sage to run a successful independent label, she might not want to tighten it anytime soon. The MPress imprint originated with Sage's own first album, 1996's *Morbidly Romantic*, and was a fully functioning record company by 2001. "I kept learning and observing and going to conferences where I connected with a ton of people," she recalls. "Ultimately I went from my apartment to a small office, and now we've been in the same space for close to a decade."

Although MPress has remained the home for all her albums, Sage did find

herself courted by a major label in the late '90s. "I entertained it quite seriously," she concedes. "Then at the last minute I read an article in *The New York Times* that revealed what an artist contract looks like, and it made me seriously wonder what the benefits of being a signed artist are. There were sushi dinners and meetings in fancy offices with the label president where they'd compare me to other successful artists. But it frightened me, because I didn't want to be like anyone else. By then I'd already had some wonderful doors open for me. They weren't the be-all and end-all, but they were stepping stones and affirmations that what I was doing was connecting to people."

Sage has thrived as an indie act ever since, an accomplishment that must bring her great satisfaction. Or does it? "I think I'm allergic to the word 'satisfied,'" she says. "I don't know if I'm capable of being satisfied. I don't even know what that means. But I am extremely grateful for the life this dream has granted me, and the people who have inspired me and continue to inspire me constantly. I feel this is just the tip of the iceberg."

—Lee Zimmerman