

New Roots and Old on Delancey

By **[JIM FUSILLI](#)**

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Rachael Sage has been living on the Lower East Side for about a month, moving over from Broadway and Eighth, but as the title of the singer-songwriter's new album suggests, for her it's a location already rich with meaning.

On "Delancey Street" (Mpress Records), Ms. Sage's ninth album, she revisits memories of the neighborhood to explore the need for the comfort and sense of identity that community can provide.

"When I was little, I used to come down to Delancey Street with my mom to shop," said Ms. Sage, who was raised in Port Chester, N.Y., and Stamford, Conn. "There was this sense that it was an experience. You were shopping from people who shared a culture. We'd go to the Second Avenue Deli, Katz's or Sammy's. I feel that's when I started to become who I am. It gave me a sense of my roots."

Ms. Sage's ancestors emigrated from central Europe three or four generations ago, her father's family settling in New York, her mother's in Atlanta. Some of Ms. Sage's work is linked to her Jewish heritage. A former drama major at Stanford, she perks up her stage show by speaking in Yiddish or acting like characters Fran Drescher might perform. She's writing a play called "Stop Me If I'm Kvetching" for the New York International Fringe Festival in mid-August. Last December, she performed her show "Tchatchkes & Latkes!" at Joe's Pub. Tuesday, she will celebrate the release of "Delancey Street" with a performance at the same Manhattan club.

Ms. Sage is assertive when delivering her folk-rock and pop songs, and her peer group, at least on disc, is more Shawn Colvin and Sarah McLaughlin than Tori Amos and Regina Spektor. Rarely does she over-emote, and the confessional nature of her songs is sheathed in suggestion, though several times on "Delancey Street" she alludes to a sense of alienation and the need to protect a tender heart. "I choose wisely the people who will help me grow," she offers in "There Is Passion." In "How I Got By," she sings, "You left me stranded on the platform, faded as an antique rose."

"For artists, there can be a sense of isolation, and it's a struggle," she said. "It's intense and you're alone unless you reach out for the connectiveness. Just because you live in a

hipster place that has an historic connotation doesn't mean you'll thrive. It's important to have a broad sense of identity."

Ms. Sage said she long suppressed her need to join a supportive community. Playing music as a solo act at Stanford in the early 1990s, she felt like an outsider—though one gig resulted in an invitation to a barbecue at John Lee Hooker's house. Then she spent a summer at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

"In Ireland, I saw people busking on the street and making a living in clubs and bars," she said. They invited her to join them. "Before, I was always alone. Now I was part of a community. I went back to Stanford, but I had one foot out the door."

She moved to Manhattan, living on Astor Place and playing the downtown clubs while studying acting at the Public Theater's Shakespeare Lab. For a while, she thought she could live in both worlds. Then folk star Ani DiFranco invited her to open for her on tour.

"At the time, I was singing for, at most, 100 people," she said. "Now it was 2,000 to 6,000. It was petrifying. It was a great way to learn the ups and downs of the music business."

Much like Ms. DiFranco, Ms. Sage developed a do-it-yourself ethos early on. She received a four-track cassette recorder for her bat mitzvah. "It took about a month for me to figure it out. I'd play with it until my parents would have to chase me to bed." Today, she runs Mpress Records—her business card reads "Artist/President"—and can arrange her compositions, produce her albums, design the cover art, get the discs into the hands of the right industry people and keep her fan base informed.

She keeps herself informed by carrying a moleskin notebook with a long list of the things she wants to do when she's on the Lower East Side.

"I recently waited for an hour at Russ & Daughters," she said, mentioning the smoked-fish emporium on Houston Street. "It was fantastic."

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