

Words from a Sage: Art as a Perpetual Balance

I caught up with award-winning recording artist [Rachael Sage](#), who released a full-length studio album, *Choreographic* (MPress/ILS/Caroline), on May 20, 2016. Sage and her music have reached an ever-widening audience since her previous release, [Blue Roses](#), amassing over 9.5 million views on YouTube. I had the opportunity to ask Rachael about her work and her process, and the influence of her voice.

Heidi Basch-Harod (HBH)–You talk about the preciousness of creative freedom. What does that mean to you? How do you see your creative freedom as able to inspire others to unleash theirs as well?

Rachael Sage (RS)–Ever since I can remember, I have had encouragement to be expressive. Foremost, it came from my parents, but then subsequently from various teachers – especially within the arts and more specifically, within the realm of music. For me personally, the opportunity to create songs from a very young age (I began at five and became serious about it by 10) opened doors of possibility that gave me hope, when otherwise I'd have been hopeless. I was badly bullied during my grammar school and later in my high school years, but having the liberty to, in effect, recover from that emotional oppression every single night when I would go home and play piano, write songs, or pour my emotions into dance and acting was a respite without which I am simply not sure I would be alive today. So for me, it was a haven and a creative world that allowed me not only to escape pain, but also to construct joy. There were many artists whose examples of

creativity and uniqueness as expressive, free individuals spurred me on to do my own thing, and at the heart of my mission now is the message that we all have our own magic, stories, and virtues of whatever kind to share with and inspire each other; unleash is a great word. It only takes one mentor or example to set a precedent for possibility, and I was so fortunate to have many!

HBH—In your journey of dance and music, were there obstacles you faced along the way, or still do? Were these obstacles internal or external? Who were some of the most important people who helped you along the way and how did they do so?

RS—The greatest obstacle I faced in dance was my family's values, actually. They prized academic education so much that, while they admired the art form of ballet and encouraged me to do it until my teens, they never accepted it as a viable vocation for me; I would've had to pretty much "run away" to make that happen! As I have a wonderfully supportive and encouraging family in general, that simply wasn't an option; so my departure from the world of dance was rather painful, and has never quite left my memory. It was definitely very much an external obstacle, in terms of being pushed to go to a very traditional, academically stringent university (Stanford) and to leave my conservatory training behind. Ultimately, I was able to channel new levels of enthusiasm and intensity into the areas of music and acting, neither of which were at odds with my parents' larger goals for me, in terms of academic achievement.

I had a terrific acting teacher in high school named Mr. Cohen, who imparted a very deep appreciation of Shakespeare in all of his students. He entrusted us with the very adult responsibility of bringing these beautiful, complex, and rich plays to life and never treated us like children. He definitely believed in his students and their potential to

perform at a professional level. Looking back, I can hardly believe I had the opportunity in high school to transcend my day-to-day reality by channeling such seminal characters in many Shakespeare productions.

Another wonderful mentor I had was a singing teacher named Guen Omeron. Guen had been a professional singer herself, and had many war stories about appearing in MGM movies and various challenges she faced as a single (she was a widow) working professional woman. Without calling herself one, Guen was a feminist who imparted a “you can do anything” attitude in all her students. She not only taught vocal technique – across all styles and genres – but also taught confidence. She helped me refine my goals and always acknowledged that the training I was receiving wasn’t just going to help me sing, but going to help me project my compositional ideas as a musician/performer into the wider world. She was my favorite teacher ever, and I am so grateful that our paths crossed.



Photo via Rachael Sage

HBH—As someone who sees herself as sharing her work across borders and boundaries, do you have a sense of responsibility that comes with that as well? As a woman? As an artist? As a dancer, body image is huge, and we know how many women and girls struggle with this. Do you see yourself in a role to promote positive body image and self-empowerment?

RS—Being a leader is something I was raised to embrace. My mom is a very strong woman herself, and she dressed me in an ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) onesie as a baby. She was never afraid to stand up for her opinions, whether political or otherwise, and while I am probably more naturally shy or rather, “diplomatic” as a personality-type because I hate confrontation, I was certainly encouraged to stand up for my beliefs. So yes, I not only see myself as having a sense of responsibility as an artist, but it always felt like a very tangible thing in my household: if you have a platform of any kind, it’s a responsibility to use it to help other people and do something positive. There was nothing punk rock or “performance-art-esque” about my family’s orientation to art for the sake of itself, and even though I have since embraced more radical forms of creative expression as a fan, the operative mission in my family was: Use your talent to convey a positive message and do good in the world!

In dance, it was impossible not to see the dichotomy emerge among young girls between the beauty and discipline of the craft of ballet and the ugliness and self-loathing some young girls perceived, about their own bodies. But I also witnessed this equally in regular school, if not more. Looking like an actor in a Hollywood movie, or like a model, for a teenager in any setting in America, is something for which many young people strive. In dance, it was actually more of an anomaly when someone developed an eating disorder, at least at School Of American Ballet (SAB) where, to their credit, the staff kept a close eye on students and always discouraged extreme behavior when it came to self-abuse/eating disorders.

One of my best friends became anorexic while at SAB and was asked to leave and go seek treatment, which was very sad, but at least we were aware and recognized the disease so we could check our own behavior, however challenging at that age. Later on in my 20's, another close friend of mine developed anorexia, and I saw firsthand just how insidious an eating disorder could be, and how it could destroy someone's entire well-being as well as the lives of their loved-ones. So yes, I do see myself now as being in a role where I can thankfully project a healthy approach to self-image. Mostly, I try to do that preventively through my music itself, much of which contains an empowering, lyrical undertone. I also issued a charity compilation that benefited National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) and do my best to not obsess on my own weight/body image, though even this far into my career, I have my bad days with feeling inadequate, physically speaking. Thankfully, performing and focusing on the substance of what I'm singing generally brings me back to a positive sense of self.

HBH—Do you have a sense of responsibility as a public person and as a woman in terms of art, dance, women's mobility, and potential?

RS—Yes, I do have a sense of responsibility! But as they say, you have to take care of yourself first before you're any good to anyone else. So it becomes a perpetual balance. Some days I wake up and feel like I'm the best-qualified cheerleader in the world for others who are being held back or facing life's challenges, and I embrace that role wholeheartedly by visiting schools, doing workshops, or perhaps just answering an emotional email from a young person who's been affected by my work. All of these things take time and enrich me as well. But other days, the words "self-care" become an important mantra as artists become depleted too, especially in public life which, even being an indie artist, I am to some degree. I'm

still learning about what aspects of my life to protect and keep private, and how to strike a balance between reaching out to other women and letting others reach out to me. I've never been the best at maintaining lasting friendships, for instance, simply because I travel so much. But, having time in New York City to mingle with a few close female friends/artists, and for us to become each other's greatest support, has become evermore important to me and to our collective potential to impact the mobility of others. In short: I try to lead by example and am drawn to others who do the same.



Photo via Rachael Sage

HBH—Who were some of your inspirations: artists, teachers, public figures, musical eras, and influences?

RS—In addition to the teachers mentioned above, and the Classical music I heard every day in ballet class, I've also been heavily influenced by the work of actor/playwright Anna

Deveare Smith (who was my advanced acting teacher at Stanford); the pop art of Keith Haring and Andy Warhol; the music/poetry of Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen; the brilliant songwriting/musical sensitivity of Glen Hansard, Bruce Springsteen, U2, Elvis Costello, Neil Finn, Suzanne Vega, Marc Cohn, Sinead O'Connor, Howard Jones, Ani DiFranco, Indigo Girls, Billy Joel, Elton John, Sting, and The Beatles; and the live showmanship and charisma of Prince, Cher, David Bowie, Madonna, Bette Midler, Lady Gaga, and Elvis. In terms of dance, my favorites include Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly; Suzanne Farrell and Jacques D'Amboise (both with whom I studied as a kid), and of course...Baryshnikov! My favorite actor has always been Meryl Streep; she made me want to act as a little girl and inspired me to perform excerpts of *Sophie's Choice* for my school's public speaking contest, which I was surprised to win amidst the mostly comedic entries. That early experience taught me that when you curate your own script, in whatever context, following your passion will always lead you down the right path as an artist.

HBH—What have been the most powerful experiences you've had with an audience? How do you know when you are reaching them and what is the message or feeling you want to leave them with? Why is it important to you? Is it more than just enjoying the act of performing?

RS—It's hard to pinpoint any one or even a few powerful experiences as I've toured so widely now, across 12 albums...but touring Japan does spring to mind. I didn't speak any Japanese at all, although I did my best to translate some phrases that would allow me to at least communicate who I am, what I do, some simple greetings, and even a few jokes. It was definitely a humbling experience when I showed up at one venue in Japan, which focuses on acoustic music, and there was a house band that had already learned my song, "Sistersong." I couldn't believe it; it was like falling into another planet yet being

welcomed so instantaneously that all nervousness and fear fell aside. When we played/sang together, it was actually quite good; they had really done their homework, and the fact that it was a surprise for me was pretty staggering.

Another experience that comes to mind is when Ani DiFranco decided to sing harmonies with me at a show in Nashville when I was opening for her on tour. However, her voice wasn't in my monitor at all and she was behind me, so I never saw her come out on stage until the very end of my set, at which point, of course, I was blown away and became very emotional in front of thousands of people. Her music had uplifted me so much, at a very dark time in college, after suffering from depression following a sexual assault. I had felt so alone, and there was Ani with such a strong sense of self, of empowerment, and of intelligence. So when she took it upon herself to generously sing on my song... well, that pretty much showed me how, regardless of our separate stories/backgrounds/goals, on stage we can create solidarity with one another that is truly transformational. I have tried to emulate that quality through my own efforts at MPress Records, in terms of encouraging fellow indie artists whose respective stories are all equally inspiring and unique.

HBH—What have your cross-cultural experiences been? Are you able to reach women and men of different cultures and backgrounds through your music and how does that affect your work and your worldview?

RS—The thing I love most about touring is the cross-cultural aspect. I love that part of my job inevitably becomes proving that we are all human; we are all searching for the same truths, the same joy, healing, inspiration, and humor. There are so many ways to convey what we have in common, and it's a nightly adventure learning and relearning what "works" on stage, what may work in one place and not in another, and just

trying to keep writing music that contains universal themes, musically and lyrically. A lot of it is subconscious, but there is also a lot of thought and reflection that goes into deciding what material to perform on any given night, and the opportunity to experiment from place to place with different audiences is the lifeblood that keeps me engaged with my own journey as an artist.

After each show, I hang out by the merch table and wait, inevitably, for people to come up to me and start telling me about themselves. There are very few other jobs I can think of where this happens as naturally, and I absolutely relish these exchanges, listening to people's stories and hearing about their passions, whether musical or otherwise. Music is a key for so many people which prompts such emotionally honest, often profound responses, and it's not uncommon for me to have my own revelations or epiphanies as a result. My worldview tends to be that our differences are beautiful, but in sharing them and granting each other permission to explore them, we ultimately reveal that most of us need the same things: to be heard, to be seen, to be valued, to be productive, to be accepted, and to be loved.

MORE ON RACHAEL

Rachael Sage is a soulful vocalist and innovative multi-instrumentalist, singer/songwriter, and producer. She has become one of the busiest touring artists in independent music, performing 100+ dates a year with her band, The Sequins, throughout the United States, the United Kingdom, 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, Shawn Colvin, Marc Cohn, Jamie Cullum,

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 16 of her songs have appeared in the last three seasons of Lifetime's controversial reality series, Dance Moms (including several songs accompanying breakout Sia video star Maddie Ziegler's winning routines). For more information, visit rachaelsage.com.

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