

BILL BERNSTEIN



Rachael Sage has a positive message to see out a troubled year.

BY MERRYN JOHNS

Last year, Rachael Sage gifted us with the album *Choreographic* and its gorgeously melodic, balletic and uplifting tracks “Try, Try, Try” and “I Don’t Believe It.” Sage was revisiting her formative training as a ballet dancer. “Even though aspects of dance were both physically and emotionally painful,” she tells me, “I feel enormous gratitude for how my studies at the School of American Ballet ignited my creative identity. This album is a love letter to an often bittersweet but always provocative art form. Pursuing authenticity is at the heart of many of the songs.”

While “Try Try Try” is influenced by ‘50s musicians like Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry (when Sage wrote the guitar section she visualized people doing “The Twist”), “I Don’t Believe It” was composed as an anti-bullying anthem. Sage was inspired by a barefoot performance

she saw of Florence Welch, where she was “moving so freely across the stage with absolute abandon.” For the video Sage cast an 11-year-old dancer named Kaci King who possesses “a musicality and lyrical sensitivity far beyond her years” and embodies a sense of innocence triumphing over adversity.

To help get the album out, Sage visited dance and grammar schools across the UK, Ireland and the U.S. and performed “choreographic” workshops, combining storytelling, musical performance, dance improvisation and interactive songwriting with students of all ages. “The results were wildly varied, but always fascinating and extremely gratifying,” says Sage.

Not only was she giving back to young people; Sage was sharing a positive message of acceptance, and sparking creative expression in kids of all ages,

from diverse backgrounds. The experience was humbling and connected Sage to the young people who had heard her songs on the TV show *Dance Moms*.

“Idealism and innovation are inextricably linked, especially in the arts. When we are young we are naturally always dreaming, and all too often it is older people—parents or sadly, teachers—who trample rather than build up our confidence into adulthood. Working with young dancers and students gives me hope, and I feel a responsibility to nurture and protect that innocence, and that idealism so it can thrive and create the possibility for transformation.”

This passing year has been a year of shock and turbulence, with almost unrelenting news of disaster threatening to turn us all numb. But in among all the bad news, Sage has observed “humanity and generosity among average people,

especially in crowdfunding, petitions, and on social media. "For better or for worse, the 'new normal' requires us to dig deeper to reflect and then act upon our individual empathy in a very public way; we are all accountable to each other more now than ever."

Take, for example, her own EP *The Tide*, which offered a response to the upheaval and human tragedy of 2016 and 2017, such as the Syrian refugee crisis. All proceeds from the EP of protest songs were donated to ArcRelief.org.

With her colorful appearance—her pink and purple hair, sequins, glitter, and vibrant clothes are her celebrity signature—it's easy to assume Sage is a privileged optimist. But she confides that most of her songs "spring from sadness, conflict, and melancholy." She then looks for "moments of light, of possibility, of empowerment and opportunity" in any story or situation.

"Human beings are so fucking resilient. At our finest, we are hope, we create beauty and we embody love, and all of that is what I personally believe comprises divinity. To be divine is to uplift and transform pain into comfort; I can't think of anything more hopeful than that. I've been told that this is both very Jewish, and very hippie," she laughs.

It's a welcome surprise, then, that this Jewish hippie has gifted us with a Holiday EP, simply titled *Joy*. On Dec. 13 Sage and her band The Sequins, plus select guest vocalists, will perform a special Holiday Show at Rockwood Music Hall in New York City for her release party, and also as a benefit for the MusiCares Hurricane Relief Fund.

"As one of only two or three Jewish kids at my school, I never really saw a difference between Holiday and Christmas music," she says. "I remember being relieved when my mom told me she loved Christmas carols after I asked if it was okay for me to sing a solo in the school Christmas pageant. I was also happy to learn from her that 'White Christmas' was penned by Irving Berlin.

"Music is music. We can share each other's holidays, and no one has a monopoly on a good tune."

There aren't many catchy Hanukkah songs, so Sage developed some. "I started to add some funny comedic shpiel to my annual December shows in NYC. These events evolved into holiday-themed concerts, which I began calling 'Tchatchkes & Latkes.' So the Hanukkah material on this EP evolved from those shows, and my cover of 'Joy To The World' was sparked by a friend's

request for me to perform a Christmas song at a cancer benefit last December. It is literally impossible to sing 'Joy to the world...!' and not feel joy; I think the holidays encourage us to give more, to receive more, and to appreciate each other more."

So while it's been yet another harrowing year, don't let that get you down. Do something about it.

"This is the time when artists, activists and culture-makers become more vital and essential than ever," says Sage. "As a member of the LGBTQ community and the human family, period, I cling to the earliest lesson I ever learned in Hebrew school, based on the premise that 'every person is a universe': If you change one life, you change the universe. The opportunity to be impactful and truly make a difference in each other's lives abounds every day."

And Sage has reason to feel optimistic about the year ahead. She joins British pop icon Howard Jones for his upcoming U.S. tour, and works on new material from her forthcoming full-length album *Myopia*, due out in May 2018. "I'll be playing all over the country from NYC to Los Angeles, trying to spread good vibes, glitter and catharsis." (rachaelsage.com) ■

