

Queen of Sad Songs

By Dara Pettinelli

"It's my life we are living. Sorrow is a good thing," Rachael Yamagata said to a sold-out crowd at New York City's Bowery Ballroom in October. It was Yamagata's last performance promoting her debut album, *Happenstance*. If the voices of Janis Joplin, Norah Jones and Fiona Apple were thrown into a blender, Yamagata's voice would be the result. She is riveting on stage, sultry and soulful. As a songwriter, she is influenced by sorrow and guided by a sense of loneliness, and her songs have become her dearest friends while on the road.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR SONGWRITING JOURNEY?

Songwriting for me is definitely a purging of sorts for whatever emotions, thoughts and situations that I've been dwelling on. Sometimes I'll wake from a dream with a melody in my head, or have certain words or a phrase that just don't leave me alone until I find a place for them. When I write, I am just trying to find a language for the way I am perceiving the world around me, and that language needs words, a perspective, melody, chord voicings, vocal texture and a delivery...so I need all of those things to really get out what I am trying to make sense of. If I can connect authentically to it, then I don't worry about too much else. The process itself can drown you at times, but without it...for me it's like living without water. Something just feels wrong when I'm not writing.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WRITING AND PERFORMING?

I started singing and playing piano around 12-years-old. I just did the basic school choruses and plays. I started on the flute and I kept passing out because it was so respiratory. So, I switched to piano, had a year of lessons and then quit that. I just didn't have the discipline for it. But I always just kept playing and writing these little songs and I didn't really do anything with them until way later, but it was always a really good release for me. A creative release.

HOW DID YOUR BAND BUMPUS TAKE IT WHEN YOU DECIDED TO GO SOLO?

We definitely went through a traumatic period of time because I certainly never planned on going solo. I love that band and I think they're amazing and I pretty much think they could take over the world. Their shows are so electric and they were really what got me into music in the first place, so it was bizarre...it was weird.

AND YOU HAD AN EX-BOYFRIEND IN THAT BAND. IS HE IN YOUR BAND NOW?

No, no, but he certainly inspired many songs.

YEAH, I WONDERED ABOUT THAT. IN "REASON WHY," WHEN YOU SAY "I'LL BUY A MAGAZINE SEARCHING FOR YOUR FACE/FROM COAST TO COAST OR WHEREVER I FIND MY PLACE/I'LL TRACK YOU ON THE RADIO," ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR HIM?

No, most people think that it's a love song but it's actually very centered around me leaving the band. It's so funny because you're always looking for a cool angle to leave a band, because it really is such a dramatic experience when somebody separates, and there's just so many layers as to why it happened. So that was kind of my exiting song where I could get all those things out.

YOU CLAIM YOU'RE NOT A "MASTER OF HAPPY SONGS." CAN YOU ONLY WRITE WHEN IN PAIN?

I probably could write when I'm happy but I think I'm so excited about having a good day or about being in love that I'm just too busy going out and doing stupid things and running through fields thinking, 'You're so amazing, I'm so glad we found each other. Who has time for songwriting?' I seem to submerge myself in sorrowful situations.



YOU JUMPED AROUND AS A KID, TRAVELING BETWEEN BOTH PARENTS, AND YOU NEVER STAYED IN ONE PLACE TOO LONG—AND YOU DID IT WITH COLLEGE A COUPLE TIMES. DO YOU THINK THAT HELPED SHAPE YOU AS A SONGWRITER?

I think in some ways it must have, because I think I became pretty dependent on my own ability to entertain myself because I didn't really understand the value of friendships probably until I was in college. I never turned to friends to help me through basic emotional experiences. So in that respect, I always had my songs to have those conversations you usually have with a good friend to help you get over things.

WHAT SONG DO YOU WISH YOU HAD WRITTEN?

"Ballad of the Sad Young Men" by Roberta Flack. It's so insanely beautiful. The lyric is about all the young guys who are probably in their 20s who kind of almost lose their youth and waste away in these bars, and the only thing they're good at is being lovers—and these women become infatuated by them and give them a break from the fact that they're questioning their life. It's just so sad because they're losing their time just sitting and drinking.