

Sage Francis

INTERVIEWS | WEB EXCLUSIVE | JUN 2010



By Vish Khanna

Hailing from Providence, Rhode Island originally, Sage Francis is a key and provocative figure in underground and independent rap. As legend has it, he started rapping when he was only 8 years old and went on to become renowned as an underground MC with thoughtful wordplay and an ear for adventurous beats. After a slew of acclaimed indie releases on his own imprint Strange Famous, he became the first hip-hop signing for Epitaph Records in 2004 and released his brilliant album, *A Healthy Distrust* in 2005, which preceded an amazing record called *Human the Death Dance* in 2007. He's returned with a release that's heavy and intricate, both lyrically and musically, and features contributions from the late Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse, Califone, Buck 65, Tim Fite, Yann Tiersen, and members of the bands Grandaddy, Death Cab for Cutie, Calexico, DeVotchKa, and more. It's called *Li(f)e*, it's out now on Epitaph and Strange Famous, and Francis recently told *Exclaim!* all about it.

Sage, you're well known as a really outspoken artist, unafraid to speak his mind and, in poring over the lyrics to Li(f)e, I can see you examining a whole host of universal topics and ideas from your own critical perspective. Was there a particular theme or set of ideas that you were hoping to explore on Li(f)e?

The way the album title is spelled, with the 'f' in parentheses, is from an older lyric where I say "Life is just a lie with an f in it and death is definite." When I was creating this album, I kept that in mind and I wanted the content fuelled by that concept, where I focus more on the lies that we live — who's telling them, how we benefit from certain ones, and how other ones hurt us. We all have to juggle that every day — which things are we gonna confront and which ones are we gonna turn a blind eye to? I definitely turn a critical eye toward organized religion on this record because I feel that it can be one of the greatest peddlers of lies, fear, and prostitution of the unknown.

Right, there's a lot to do with spirituality and existential alienation on here; what triggered that?

It's just what I think about I suppose [laughs]. I think about the things that insult me. It's how I experience the world and see how cultures work and people work within them. I look at it and process it and it comes through in my songs. At my age, I'm not so much writing about ex-girlfriends anymore. These are the things that bug me more.

Yeah, but on one of the new songs ("Diamonds and Pearls"), you actually say, "A song about a girl isn't really about a girl." [laughs] Yeah, yeah, whereas that song really is about a girl!

Ah, you're messing with us there. In terms of the music, Li(f)e sounds like no other Sage Francis record because of the illustrious list of collaborators you gathered for these songs. How'd you come to work with these folks and what were you hoping they'd bring to your music?

I worked with almost all of them because of my connections to Andy Kaulkin who is the President of Epitaph and runs the Anti-imprint, which is his own particular roster of eclectic musicians. It's not really the punk stuff, it's all the other stuff they handle. Ever since we started working together in 2004, we always wanted to do a record where I collaborated with, if not a bunch of bands, at least one band for a full album. Up until this point, I never really had the time or resources to do it. Once we got to this final record, because this wraps up my contract with Epitaph, we were like, "We got one more record left and there's no telling what will happen — let's go at it full force. Let's see what collaborators we can write songs with and do it old school, dinosaur style, where we record the whole thing in one studio with a producer." So, that's what we did and it took two years of us fishing around, getting demos from various artists and finally, after I collected enough stuff, we were able to then go into a studio and record this full album. We decided to do this with one main band in the studio and that was Califone from Chicago. They're an incredible band with a blues-folk-rock kinda thing in their own music but they went with the flow, tried some other stuff out on this one, but still with their touch of excellence. I became very close to them over the month we spent together in Chicago.

You also worked with Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse who sadly took his own life a few months ago; did you know him well enough to have any insights about why he made this tragic decision?

Personally, no. He had a sordid history and was going through troubles. It's really unfortunate that this happened. I was shocked when I heard about his passing and I know Andy, who was my connection to Mark, was very distraught. I mainly worked with Mark through emails where we would send each other stuff and talk about the songs that way. But Andy was the one who knew us both closely and was the middleman between us. The first demos I worked on for this album were with Mark. He was the first one who opened up and took the risk of sending me music that was actually for his own record, just to see what I could do with the music he makes. We did two songs together and then we pitched them to other bands to show them what the potential was, because a lot of people were not sure what we were going for. I have to imagine that a lot of people were very reluctant to offer their music to a rapper and might say, "Okay, please don't suck. Please don't talk about stupid shit over my music." Or else have this novelty-type mash-up record made, which has been done tons of times. We were very careful not to go down that route and make sure this album had an organic feel that wasn't forced. So it was my entry into getting more demos from other artists, once they realized that this was how it was gonna work out between me and other musicians.

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Well, that comes across for sure. Every once in a blue moon, a publicist will ask me not to ask an artist about something. It could be something personal or something that's just been talked about so much, it's kinda oversaturated. Much to my surprise, I received such an email from your publicist at Epitaph, asking me not to bring up three things because they might derail the entire interview "in a positive way." Without saying what these three things are at all, can you tell me why you've chosen to do this; what does this say about you as an interview subject that you must censor yourself?

I wouldn't call it censorship. Those things tend to be part of every interview and interviewers always ask about the same kind of things and I just wanna talk about other stuff. It's maybe offensive to you or other interviewers...

No, no...

Okay, well, whatever it is. I can see how it might be offensive. Even if it was me interviewing someone and I was told not to ask about certain things, all that would do is pique my curiosity and wanna ask about those things. But, I just wanna control the narrative a little bit and not focus on stuff that I've spoken about to death in interviews I've done over the past five years. What I wanna do is focus on the new record and talk about stuff that's happening now and not really revisit old stuff and talk about people who've screwed me over in one way or another.

All right, that's fine.

What I call it is "anti-promotion." I anti-promote certain people.

I see, pre-emptively. That's smart. A lot of pro people will take whatever's asked of them and spin it into whatever they wanna talk about.

That's okay, that's all right [laughs]. I mean, laws don't get broken and no one goes to jail.

So can't you do that? These seem like fairly benign subjects but maybe they're not. Anyway, we're not gonna talk about it.

Well, it seems like we are [laughs].

No, we're not at all. I thought an interesting way of talking about it would be not talking about it at all. At this point in the interview, what do you wanna talk about?

Well, something that I haven't mentioned very much is that I don't really intend on maintaining this kinda hustle or grind — putting three years into one project and spending the next year performing and promoting it and leaving my home — for too much longer. It's almost like I wanted to give this one last go and I wanted to go really hard for one last year. Maybe after this is over, I'd like to focus on other things. I don't really know what those are yet. My home life, maybe jumping into some other crafts, and trying to apply my creative side in different areas.

Now wait a minute, does that just speak to you as Sage Francis

the artist or would that affect Strange Famous Records, which you run?

To be honest, running a record label in 2010 is a nightmare. It occupies the majority of my days and nights, all week long, all month long, and all year long. It's very disheartening to see how things just become more and more difficult for artists on my label. Here I am trying to juggle their careers and it's not often that I'm able to give them good news. It's really frustrating and I've given the majority of my adult life and obviously all of my childhood to this craft and I have done my best, worked incredibly hard, and now I kinda need to decompress for a little while and let the music industry figure itself out somehow without me having to risk everything. I don't even know why I do it; I fell into this trap of me being a workaholic and ignoring other aspects of my existence.

Well, it seems positive that you've come to this realization, while you're still at the peak of your game.

[Laughs] Yeah, I'm 33 years old right now and, in the grand scheme of things, that's not old. In the rap sense, it is though.

Yeah. So you're looking at retirement?

It's not gonna be retirement. I am gonna evolve in other ways and I want to give myself the breathing room in order for that to happen. I believe it will happen and if it doesn't, that's okay. I'm very happy with how things have turned out. I'm happy with my accomplishments and happy to have the fan base that I have, that has stuck with me for all these years. I don't mean to leave people high and dry. If they want more material, I promise to produce more in one way or another. I just don't know that it's ever gonna have the push or availability that my music has right now.

So people who are checking out your tour dates and aren't sure if they should go, they prolly should go?

That's what I'm saying.