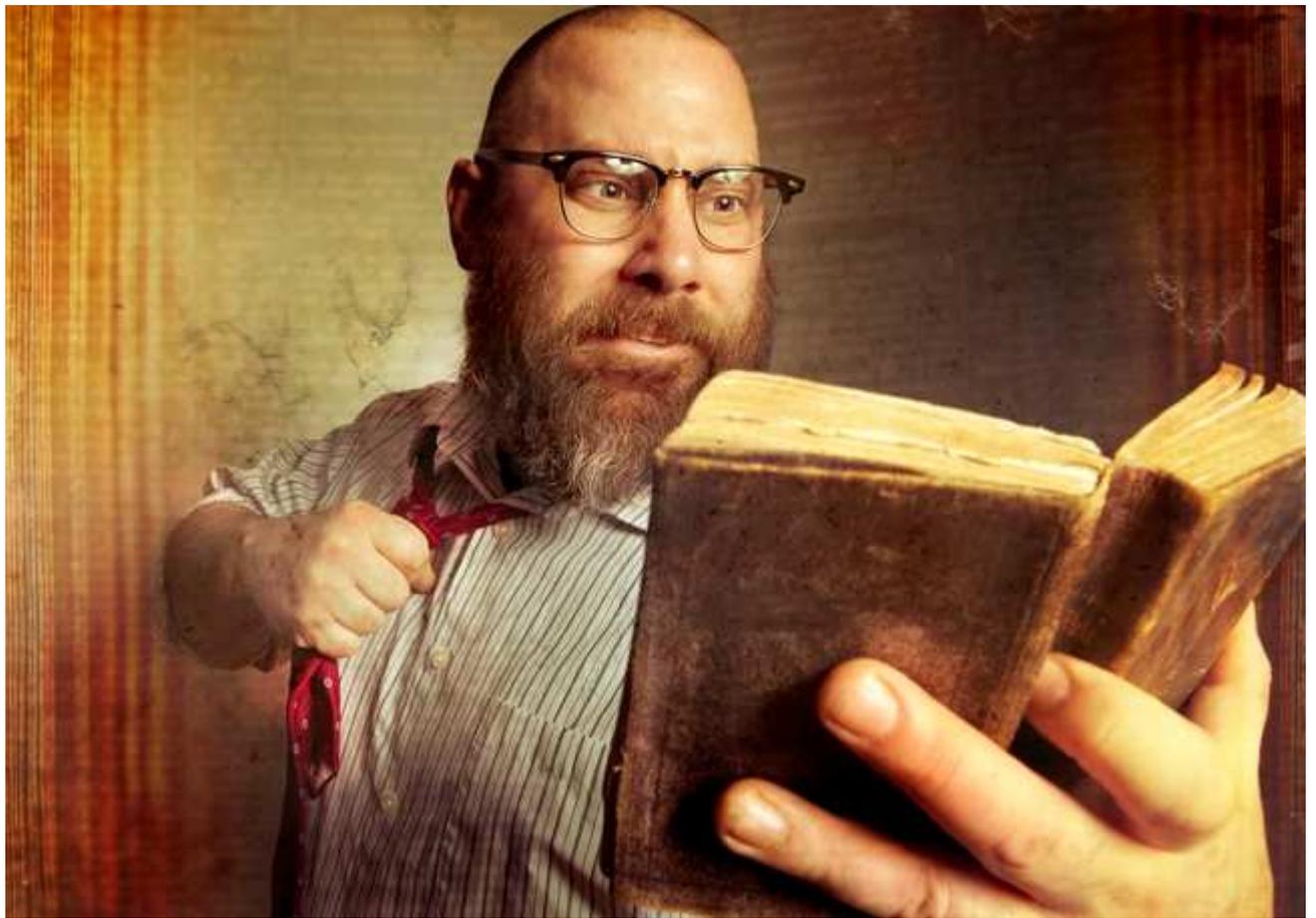


## Sage Francis: On Li(f)e, Old Age, and Selling Indie Rap



Indie hip-hop and indie rock have always existed in seemingly parallel universes: on separate websites, in separate blogospheres, and on separate stages at the same festivals. Leave it to indie rap stalwart Sage Francis to help the two cross swords. On his fourth official solo album, entitled *Li(f)e*, Sage works with members of various rock groups, including Sparklehorse, Califone, Calexico, DeVotchKa, Death Cab for Cutie, and others, not to mention the fact that Iron & Wine/Modest Mouse associate Brian Deck produced the whole shebang. *URB* spoke to Sage about how the hell he pulled off this new LP, growing old in rap years, and how he plans to maintain his record label in an ever-weakening industry.

### **URB: Bring me back a little. How'd you discover hip-hop?**

Sage Francis: Well, that was so long ago that I don't remember, really. I have a story that I tell when people ask me that, that I think is true. It was just on the playground, tapes were floating around, I heard kids in the neighborhood playing stuff that I wasn't familiar with—that I didn't know was hip-hop at the time, but that's what it was—and when eventually I decided I wanted to figure out what it was I was hearing, I was in my aunt's house. I think it was a public service announcement came through on the television where a girl was rapping about not smoking cigarettes or something like that, and I had an adult present so I pointed it out, like, "This is what I want, I need to find this kind of music." They didn't really know what kind of music it was

either, and my aunt kind of scowled her face and was like, “You like this?” And I was like “Yeah, this is what I like. I like this, I want more of this.” And that’s just my one distinct memory of pointing it out and saying that’s what I wanted to play in my radio.

So since then I just actively sought it out. I got Run-DMC tapes and eventually the Fat Boys tapes and every time my mom went to the mall, I’d go to the music store and there were no rap or hip-hop sections or anything like that. I just had to scour through every category and look for what looked to be a hip-hop record, which would be like a black guy on the cover with big gold chains and shit like that, or some name that was MC whatever, and I’d have to grab that.

**URB: Do you remember when you decided you wanted to pursue rap as a full-time career?**

Sage: I think all kids kind of have that ambition for whatever their passion is. They think they’re going to do it forever. So even as a little kid when I would start writing the raps and when I was recording them and coming up with songs, I never considered I would never do it at some point, it was always like this is totally what I’m always going to do. So even at a really young age, right when I started, it was kind of decided for me I would do that. Now I think in most people’s cases that passion or fantasy fizzles out and people go through phases and grab other shit, but it never went away for me. Right now I’m in my thirties and I’m still acting like a kid.

**URB: Tell me about the new album compared to the previous few.**

Sage: There’s not a single record I’ve ever done that took as long or as much money. It just was such a monster of a project. It took three years and we completely worked the long route. Usually I try to take as many shortcuts as possible, to cut down expenses, and the hip-hop guy inside of me usually tends to want to sample stuff and get a good sound that way. With Brian Deck producing this record, it was like everything was the long route, and everything was the long way. He was very precise and he knows what he’s doing, but it was like, if we wanted foot stomps from a crowd through a whole song, he had to get a crowd of people to fucking stomp their feet through the whole song, and do multiple takes of it. That kinda shit. And it was me sitting there like, “Uh, why don’t you just sample two feet stomping on the ground and layer it? And just loop it!” [Laughs] But that’s not his style and that’s why he has such a unique sound and a quality sound, because he’s not Mr. Shortcut the way I am. It was good to kind of let go of those reigns. Typically I have authority over every single aspect of my record. On this one, where he was designated as the producer—and pretty much I’ve produced every other record of mine, not in the hip-hop sense, like I didn’t make the beats, but I produced the whole overall sound and how things would be on the record—so this was a different thing. I was involving myself in things that were definitely out of my realm and I just had to go with the flow and see how it went. Whenever something felt wrong, I would say “No,” and we would try another path and find something that worked well with me. And yeah, that took time. I lived in the studio in Chicago while we recorded it, which was very expensive, and ate a lot of great food, got a little fatter there.

Still, all in all, I’m working with dudes who have never worked with hip-hop, all these different writers, all these different musicians and bands who have never had anything to do with hip-hop. Same with Brian Deck, who never did anything rap related. So it was all foreign territory for them, and we were just trying to make sure we were

coming out with an authentic sound. Not trying to emulate any previous records, not trying to sound like rap-rock, definitely not trying to sound like fucking rap-metal. There was a conscious effort to definitely keep ourselves away from that sound. And yeah, I think what we ended up with is a truly unique and genuine article.

**URB: How'd you link up with these different rock guys?**

Sage: Well, this is my last record with Epitaph, or Anti-, the subdivision of Epitaph. Andy Kaulkin is the president there—and he's been one of my best friends in the industry since we started working together back in 2004—and he's always mentioned all these artists he'd like for me to link up with, he always champions my music to all these different musicians, and he's always been sending me stuff. For the reasons I just explained, about how it was a monster of a project to put together, I just didn't want to involve myself with something that would take that long or be that expensive. Basically what I'm saying is it felt like way too much work. It was always easiest for me to work with [beat makers]. However, this being my last record with Epitaph, out of our three-album deal, I kind of was just like, "Shit, I might as well make use of what's available to me, through them, because I'll never have this opportunity again." This kind of record will probably never be made again by anybody, just because of where I am at this time, where the world is at at this time, who's doing what, why, and how. I just really wanted to make the most of the situation and that's how it started. Andy would reach out to the artists who he works with in different genres, and he's the magic man as far as this is concerned because not too many people would get music from these artists. I got *demos* from these artists, and these are all well-established musicians. It was just crazy.

Eventually stuff started coming in, and I would be like I can't do anything with this, but then I would hear certain tracks that I could hear potential in. I would put it in my home studio, chop it up, do a demo over it, then he would send it back to them to get their approval, and we would build from that before anything went official. The first musician I was doing that with was Mark Linkous, of Sparklehorse. He was giving Andy the demos, and I was recording over his music. Then we'd send it back to him and get the thumbs up. He was like, "This is great, I never expected to hear any rapping over what I do but I really like this." So then Andy was able to show that to other musicians like, "Look what he did here. Maybe you might have some music he can do something with." And on and on. It was a long process, but that's really how it all came about.

**URB: Tell me about the origin of the title.**

Sage: The title is in reference to an older lyric of mine: "*Life is just a lie with an F in it, and death is definite.*" That particular lyric eventually turned into the amalgamation of what the album title is now, which is Life with the F in parenthesis. I didn't come up with that; my fans came up with it. This lyric in that song is something that a lot of fans started gravitating towards, and getting tattoos of, and I've just seen it used in multiple ways all over the place over the years. Eventually I came up with this incredibly large collection of Li(f)e memorabilia, well not memorabilia but things that Li(f)e was written on, whether it be a tattoo or a piece of artwork or whatever. I just started getting immersed in the whole fucking frenzy of it and thought, "Hey, I like this. I wanna use it."

That's where it came from, and that was sort of the underlying theme on a lot of the record, where I was trying to tackle exactly what is the lie that we all live: What illusions do we live under? Why do we live under them? Who's responsible for the lies? And you know, some are detrimental, some are helpful. How do we juggle that? Which ones should we call out and which ones should we ignore? So it was the launch pad what for a lot of the songs ended up being about.

**URB: On the first single ("Slow Man"), you're coming from an older, more weathered perspective, looking back to the early years in your career. The way rap's changed in the past decade and a half or so, do you feel like an old man in a young man's game?**

Sage: [Laughs] Yeah. I always felt that way. I always felt that and now I'm finally there. Now I'm actually old. Not by regular human lifeline standards but by hip-hop standards I'm at the age where, when I was kid and I thought about someone who's my age, it's like I shouldn't be rapping right now. Too old.

**URB: You've grown your record label a ton in the last five or so years. How do you keep this business growing, and keep up with the business side, and still maintain creativity and grow artistically?**

Sage: I have a very tough time with that. It's part of what is full-on burning me out. So, I don't have a good answer. I've just been trying to stay on top of every item. I get my creative impulses whether I'm working or not, and when I get a creative impulse I follow it and that all works itself out, but the business side of things really takes up 99 percent of my fucking days. That's annoying. That's definitely not what I envisioned for myself, and yet at the same time it's the only way I can stay creatively active and put out my material, and my friends' material, artists like my contemporaries, who I'm kind of responsible for getting their records out and making sure they get the acknowledgement that they deserve. If I don't stay on top of the business side of stuff, that will all go away. Of course there will also be 50 or 100 or 1,000 people that seek it out on their own, but still I want as many people as possible to be exposed to the records that I think are incredible from these talented artists.

It's a headfuck for sure. I don't wanna spend this much time doing this, but on the other side of the coin, I know if I don't, it could potentially all fall apart. So yeah for five years I've been on that, and I've been working my hardest. And we have people who are working for us helping to build this mini-empire. It's not like I'm trying to take over the fucking music industry, but indie hip-hop has no base. We have to keep hitting up all different avenues, different media outlets, that don't specialize in what we do at all, and convince them to cover our shit so more people can be exposed to it, and that's a pain in the ass. Even getting stores to carry it is a pain in the ass. Getting distributors to distribute it is a pain in the ass. There's no easy element. The easiest thing is making the music, and I like that part.

**URB: It seems like all the labels that are similar to your own are going in different directions. RhymeSayers is getting bigger and bigger and taking on practically-mainstream acts like Freeway and Evidence, while Def Jux is about to go on hiatus. Do you see Strange Famous Records going in any specific direction?**

Sage: As far as Strange Famous is concerned, I don't wanna go that route. I don't wanna keep growing bigger and bigger. I'm fine with just the roster that we have,

which is the main artists that I've been working with through the years. Some are very active, some are not so active. All of them inspire me, and I think they're all super-talented, and when they have records to put out, I'd like to help make that possible. We're just gonna keep it like this. I don't wanna grow bigger than we can handle, and I think what we're going to have to figure out is how to just be reliable. Reliability is the main element of what we need to focus on as far as being the place where people come to get their music from. I really would like to just be a place where people know that they can trust to come and get news, or albums, or shirts, or whatever, and just maintain ourselves. And that might be weird, and it might be the worst business move of my life to say, "I don't wanna grow," but I don't. I really don't want to expand beyond our ability to handle it. And I don't have ambitions to do that, either. I just don't want to do it. I don't want to play the parts of the game that are necessary in order to grow, and I think we have the ability to do that but that's not where I want to focus my energy and my time at all. As head honcho of Strange Famous Records, I'm fine with where we're at. We do well, we get by, and we make music with no concessions at all.