

sage francis' WAR against hip-hop

by Evan
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A local publication once referred to Sage Francis as a “slam-poet dork” because, during his live shows, he altered the chorus of Jay-Z’s “99 Problems” to “I know 99 rappers, but Jay-Z ain’t one.” It’s hard to imagine that any publication would drop the “d-word” in reference to 50 Cent or Nas, but in this age of irony and bling, it was a slice of contemporary hip-hop bigotry against a straight-edge, craft-driven, lily-white MC *not* named after a delicious candy.

Sage’s style doesn’t fit into popular notions of hip-hop. Journalists have lumped him in with the “backpackers,” his style described as “emo-rap” and occasionally even “nerd-rapper” has been thrown his way. “If I’m a nerd, my idea of what nerds are is completely off,” Sage told me on the phone from his Rhode Island home, “because I’ll punch a dude right in his fucking mouth. And I’ve been known to do that.” Is the threat real or just the instinct of a veteran battler who knows how to balance bravado and balls with wit and wordplay? In true hip-hop fashion, the ex-varsity linebacker-turned-MC still mixes the bar room swagger that has become part of the fabric of rap alongside the measured intelligence and unimpeachable flow that have granted Sage his reputation.

Sage recently released *Human the Death Dance* on Epitaph records—the so-Cal punk label’s first hip-hop artist. Few other rap albums you’ll buy this year will likely make references to Faust, take a swipe at the Suicide Girls, or drop allusions to Alanis Morissette. And we can guarantee you won’t be hearing any songs on the radio that utilize track-length extended metaphors of rising flood lines to describe a dysfunctional family. And, to our knowledge, no rap album has ever featured original music from Oscar-nominated composer Mark Isham, who Sage just finished collaborating with on a soundtrack for the upcoming Ed Norton film, *Pride and Glory*.

Defying lazy expectations has been a driving force for Sage (born Paul) Francis throughout his career. At age 13, the future Scribble Jam champion first began entering and winning local battle contests against more seasoned, senior rappers. “Yeah, I remember hardly knowing anyone there, being one of the only white people in the room, and getting a lot of mean stares,” he recalls. “But I had a fire in me. I mean, I thought I was invincible. And winning people’s approval in that sort of environment was absolutely a huge confidence builder.”

Few recording artists will thank file sharing for their existence, but, for Sage and other independent rappers starting out in the late-’90s, it became their personal internationally-syndicated radio network. “I’m from Rhode Island. I was a white kid. I was anti-drug and anti-drinking. Major labels were not going to pick me up,” he remembers, “so thankfully free file sharing came around.” His since-canonized single, “Makeshift Patriot,” (a haunting, anti-imperialist lament recorded a month after 9/11) made international waves via the Napster sea, which Sage followed with a slew of lauded releases and constant touring.

Sage’s recorded rhymes can be dense and often demand multiple listens for complete digestion. However, his live shows are spectacles of machine gun word play spliced with comic interludes, bringing thoughtful hip-hop to a growing audience in an entertaining fashion. While some might cast his hyper-literate style aside with schoolyard taunts, he’s nonetheless filling venues around the world and trying to offer a different voice to this aging beast called hip-hop. Ω

