

STUDENT LIFE

Consuming passions on campus

Songwriter on the rise



JAMIE ROSE/KRT

Rachael Yamagata released "Happenstance," her first full-length CD last June and is now one of 2004's best rising talents.

By Chuck Myers
Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service (KRT)

ARLINGTON, Va. - In the space of about a year, singer-songwriter Rachael Yamagata has gone from support act to headliner, emerging as one of 2004's best rising talents in the process.

That's no small achievement. But then again, having an impressive debut album will tend to put a charge into a blossoming career.

After five years with a Chicago-based funk/soul/hip hop group called Bumpus, Yamagata had written enough material to strike out on her own. Following a self-titled EP in 2003, she released her first full-length album in June, "Happenstance" (RCA Victor). Since then, Yamagata has watched her solo career gain more momentum.

"Everything always kind of always happens backwards and very fast for me," said Yamagata before a recent gig in Arlington. "I take these giant leaps, regardless of whether I'm ready for it or not. You just have to do it."

Some music observers have drawn similarities between Yamagata's music and that of other female solo artists, specifically Norah Jones or Fiona Apple. But the comparisons don't quite stand up. Yamagata exhibits a distinct creative identity on "Happenstance" by melding a variety of styles, from rock and weepy country licks to jazz and searing blues. Added to this textured sonic bouillabaisse are alluring orchestral elements that further complement Yamagata's husky, expressive vocals.

"I always write everything kind of at the same time: melody, music, lyrics," noted the 27-year-old artist. "I always have a little keyboard or whatever instrument, whether it's a bass or guitar, and I'd morph it through pedals to make it sound like an oboe or clarinet or some sound, just to add some touches. ... It was a big kind of trial and error to see what kind of skin I wanted on the album."

Filling out the album's orchestral atmospherics in a live setting is no easy task. Yet, Yamagata manages it brilliantly on stage, backed by a quintet of solid players that includes cellist Colette Alexander and violinist Becky Doe.

While "Happenstance" possesses its share of upbeat moments, Yamagata strikes her strongest chord on the record's affecting ballads, particularly on the elegant "Even So" and heartrending "Quiet." Most of the album's lyrical focus flows from introspective musings about heartache and yearning - inspired, in large part, by Yamagata's own experiences with love.

"It's usually very personal," said Yamagata. "It always has something to do with what I'm going through. Certainly some of them (the songs) are very personal experiences, talking specifically to a certain someone. If they're imagined, it's all based around a framework of things that actually happened. But you get great inspiration all the time. Like you can have a waiter come over and say some flippant idea and think, 'oh my God, that's poetry,' and you write it down."

Born in Arlington, Yamagata split time as a child between her divorced parent's homes in Maryland and New York. She started playing piano at 12, taking lessons briefly before abandoning formal training for a self-taught route. More recently, she adopted a similar play-by-ear approach to learning guitar.

"A few years ago, I picked it (guitar) up just as a writing instrument," said Yamagata. "I kept getting frustrated because I couldn't perform. If there wasn't a piano, I couldn't play some things. So now I'm trying to re-ally figure it out and learn. I love writing off of it. But even at that, I just play it by ear."

Although "Happenstance" has given Yamagata's career a firm boost, she doesn't dwell on the unrealistic expectations that the album may create for her future musical endeavors.

In fact, she maintains a clear perspective on her growing success and creative journey.

"I try my best not to think about it too much because it's a lot of unexpected pressure to know what to do. If you start thinking about it too much, then you trip yourself up, and it won't happen. I'm feeling good now about the band, about the live shows and about the new songs. I'm very proud of the record. I think I'm just in line with where I should be at this point."

better than what they can get at the drug-store," Morrison says, "... but when they get dressed up, they are going really high end."

Today's young adults have gobs of disposable income, but they have attention deficits when it comes to brand loyalty. As with the Generation X-ers and baby boomers before them, cost and packaging are the No. 1 factors that drive spending habits.

These youngsters, however, are picky about how they receive sales pitches. They prefer to get them through their e-mail inboxes, music videos, video games or on Web sites. They have little time for casual conversation and magazines.

They are marketing-savvy and understand business, Morrison says, even if it's on a superficial level.

"They not only know what focus groups are, chances are they've been a part of one." Morrison has followed college students' spending habits since his days at Haverford. Back then, he had an out-of-a-dorm-room business selling electronics - VCRs, radar detectors and CD players - with customers on 14 campuses.

He grew up with entrepreneurship and marketing: His father is a retired vice president of marketing for Lipton; his mother is an independent college guidance counselor.

Morrison started TwentySomething Inc. when he was 22. At the time, he thought major businesses were full of 50-year-old executives trying to understand people in their 20s.

If you ask Morrison, TwentySomething Inc. was one of the first consulting companies to niche-research the youth market - before Soul Kool and Teenage Research Unlimited.

His first projects included refining programs at the Entrepreneurial Center at the Wharton School of Business and helping Vibe Magazine fit into urban and suburban worlds. His company developed a strategy for Nokia cell phones to market color face plates. (He's tight-lipped about other work he's done because of nondisclosure contracts.)

Morrison has five employees and keeps satellite offices in Mexico City, Sydney, Australia, and Seoul, South Korea to pick the brains of teens across the globe.

He spends his days talking to his target market in the malls and setting up focus groups across the world. Right now, he says, he's working with more than 60 companies, more than half of which have made the Fortune 500.

Morrison's book, "Marketing to the Campus Crowd: Everything You Need to Know to Capture the \$200 Billion College Market" (Dearborn Trade Publishing, \$25), has sold 3,500 copies. That's a really good number, says Courtney Goethals, a spokeswoman for Dearborn Trade, because its market is so specific.

The book is required reading for the 20-plus directors at the National Association of College Stores, an organization that tracks the success of college bookstores.

"Those of us who've gone to college, we tend to base our paradigm of what college students want today ... on what we wanted as students," says Marianne Wascak, vice president of marketing at the association.

"But David does a good job at pointing out that students these days are different. They don't trust corporations like we used to. Just because you give a college student something for free doesn't mean they are going to buy it."

On a recent afternoon, Morrison stands in front of the University of Pennsylvania's Barnes & Noble campus bookstore. At 37, he has strawberry-blond hair that's graying at the temples, but his face is line-free.

He talks at a rapid clip, totally excited about his recent trip to New Orleans, where he launched a campaign to hip up a fast-food chain. Ask him the specifics, and he gets cagey. An experienced businessman, he refuses to divulge key details.

In the store, current best-sellers are on the bottom floor, near the magazines, and in the back is every laptop accessory imaginable, from label makers to cameras.

On the top floor are the textbooks. But the cafe is where the "it" brands are evident. The college palate is much more sophisticated these days, Morrison explains, so the cafe offers scones and flavored coffee.

Young consumers are making buying decisions based on how healthy they perceive a product to be, how well it fits into their lifestyle, and how diverse the advertisements are, he says. Right now, this age group is on a health kick.

That's why the front of the store is full of Fiji water (kids can't resist the squared-off, blue bottle) and VitaWater. For snacks, it's all about Odwalla energy bars and big plastic tubs of trail mix.

Students are getting what they want, Morrison surmises.

"This is a market that marketers cannot afford to ignore. ... If they lose this pulse for a second, they're going to wake up and wonder why their brand is no longer relevant."

Abercrombie & Fitch fashions are a lot like Gap's this fall: lots of denim, polos and soft cardigans.

But to the college-age shopper, Abercrombie is "so over": Gap is what's up. "Abercrombie lost it when they became a little too white with their advertising. They lost and alienated a lot of people who didn't see themselves or their friends represented," explains David Morrison, founder and chief executive officer of TwentySomething Inc., a Radnor-based firm that analyzes the shopping habits of the 18-to-35 set.

Morrison helps the nation's top fashion, electronics and food brands market themselves so they stay on the minds of consumers in their teens and 20s.

It's six weeks into the fall 2004 semester, and young people are rewriting the "hot" brands list because of more reserved fashion trends and a still-weak economy. Dunkin' Donuts is creeping up on Starbucks. Mitsubishi is edging out Honda.

Fashion-wise, college kids are leaving behind the late-90s low-riders and sliding into tweeds with ribbon-trimmed preppy style. Tommy Hilfiger, Polo and J. Crew are "riding high," Morrison says. LaCoste, with its brightly colored mini-polo shirts and tennis dresses, is hip, too.

The vintage craze has made Converse All Stars the tennis shoes of choice. Adidas are a cool second. Pumas, Morrison adds, are on the cusp of hotness, thanks to their old-school-rap connection. Nikes, namely Air Force Ones, and Reeboks are falling off.

"This market won't wear those as much, unless they're (ball) players," Morrison says. College students would rather be caught dead than wearing shoes from Payless, but they want shoes from DSW Shoe Warehouse.

They love Target and Wal-Mart, but can do without Kmart.

Philosophy's cinnamon bun, blueberry pie and orange sherbet-scented shampoos, conditioners and bath gels are the preferred shower-caddy fillers, pushing aside long-popular Bath & Body Works. (We can thank the nesting trend for that.) Also, Morrison says Burt's Bees all-natural makeup is a must-have.

Revlon and Avon are beating out MAC and Bobbi Brown, because they are more affordable, yet college girls would rather spend big money on a dress they bought from a boutique. (Think Nicole Miller or Nanette Lepore.)

"They are super-expensive, and teens aren't convinced that these (makeup) brands are any

Comfy clothing, compact colors

By Kim Ossi
Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service (KRT)

Benefit is rolling out two limited edition-palettes with everything a girl needs to pretty up for parties (or general doings). Though marketed as a "holiday" item, this is already on the company's Web site. Also, oddly, both palettes are reminiscent of a season other than win-

ter (to aid with thinking warm thoughts, perhaps?).

"Decked Out Dandelion" brings to mind warm spring days, lying on the grass, blowing dandelion seeds all over the place. In actuality, the palette adds pretty rosy aura to your look perfect for the fair-skinned, with pink hues galore. Included are a tiny applicator brush, two eyeshadows, a lip cream and a sheer powder.

"Hoola Hues" brings to mind yet another season and setting: sitting on the beach, sipping fruity drinks and wearing a sarong while soaking up some good old-fashioned vitamin E. This palette is perfect for the deeply tanned or darker skinned. It includes the same items, but in warm, neutral tones.

Get your palette pick at www.benefitcosmetics.com for \$28.

Kelley keeps cranking with 'Boston Legal'

By Rick Porter
Zap2it.com (KRT)

David E. Kelley insists that he'll be scaling back his day-to-day workload on his new show, "Boston Legal." Eventually.

"I've been pretty involved in the first few, helping to launch the series, but as we go forward the responsibility for writing these characters will fall primarily with (executive producers) Jeff Rake and Scott Kaufer," he says.

"That's a good thing, because the last thing I wanted this series to be saddled with is an element of sameness, and when you have the same person writing it, there is that danger."

Kelley's prolific nature is the stuff of Hollywood lore in the late 1990s he was writing or co-writing nearly every script of two shows, "Ally McBeal" and "The Practice" (from which "Boston Legal" was spun off). He believes, however, that "Boston Legal," which premiered Sunday night, has a better shot at success if it's allowed to develop a voice separate from his own.

So far, so good. Despite continuing the story of several characters who appeared at the tail end of "The Practice" last season, "Boston Legal" is about as different from its predecessor as two legal shows can be. Where "The Practice" featured dogged and righteous (sometimes self-righteous) defense attorneys fighting for justice, "Boston Legal" has anything-

goes civil attorneys fighting for their clients - and a fat fee.

Leading the charge are James Spader as the oily Alan Shore and William Shatner as senior partner Denny Crane; both men are reprising roles that won them Emmys this year. The tone of the new show, Kelley says, will be much more upbeat as it celebrates its characters' eccentricities.

"This one, I think, will cater more toward escapism," he says. "The storylines will be more fun, there will probably be more soap opera as we go forward. ... When you have at the center of your hub a character like Alan Shore, that necessarily shifts it to a different being."

The challenge for "Boston Legal," Kelley thinks, will be keeping Shore's irreverence intact now that the people around him are just as amoral as he is.

"The equation has changed a little bit (because) none of the surrounding characters take themselves quite so seriously" as did the lawyers on "The Practice," Kelley says. "We always want him to be the guy who disrupts and upsets apple carts, sometimes even his own."

"I think the key for all the writers as we go forward is to explore him in all his complexities and not be afraid of his darker side."

Kelley may occasionally be one of those

writers, but he says he's taking part in a "12-step program" to let Rake, Kaufer and fellow executive producer Bill D'Elia - who previously worked with Kelley on "Ally McBeal" and "Chicago Hope" - take charge of the show. Kelley has collaborated on several of "Boston Legal's" first six scripts but is slowly trying to extract himself from the day-to-day running of the show.

"My difficulty is when I'm sort of one foot in and one foot out," he says. "If one foot is in, I tend to want to step over the line and be immersed up to my chest like I am with the shows I've historically run. When I'm out, when both feet are out, I've been able to do that successfully. ... I think we're shooting episode six (this week) and probably I've taken a half-step back with each episode."

Old, workaholic habits die hard, though.

"The reason I wanted to step back this year is because I really wanted more time to develop what the next beast will be," he says of his plans to work on a new show. What that will be, he isn't saying yet - he knows only that he wants to challenge himself and that "I don't want it to be something I'm facile at."

"So that will be my challenge, and the other challenge, I guess, will be knowing when to parent and when not to on this series," he says.

"But for the most part, I have a terrible time letting go."

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