

An Interview With
Sebastian

Arocha Morton

By Lorenz Rychner

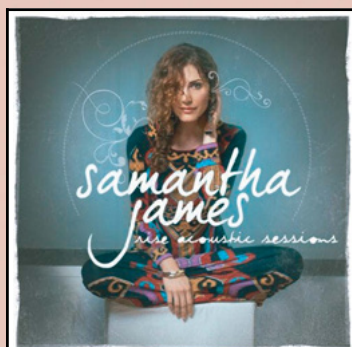


Songwriters don't all operate the same way. Some write their songs and make minimal demos to arouse interest in artists or producers who, it is hoped, will more fully produce and record the songs, maybe even—fingers crossed—turn them into hits.

Another type of songwriter is also a producer who writes or co-writes songs that are tailored to a specific artist, and who then records and produces that artist's interpretation of those songs, all the way through to the finished mastering-ready single or album.

L.A.-based Berklee-graduate Sebastian Arocha Morton is such a songwriter/producer when he's not doing other things in his studio, like producing music for film or TV or doing hit remixes... see our introduction to his body of work with artists from Sting to Seal in our May 2009 issue.

For this issue of Recording that focuses on songwriters and their challenges, we asked Sebastian about his work with Samantha James—two albums to date that have racked up impressive sales numbers and produced hits that are high on Billboard and other charts.—LzR



How did you come to work with Samantha James?

Sebastian Arocha Morton: Through a mutual friend. She had been writing lots of songs for about five years, and she had about four songs that other producers had turned into recordings, but she didn't feel that her vision had been met yet.

You are credited as songwriter *and* producer...

That is the typical role these days. Shane Drasin also had a hand in several of the songs on *Subconscious*. I finished all the production on her two albums.

When you met Samantha, how did you go about it?

First I set out to find what her sound should be. To me that is the most important step, to find a sound for an artist that makes the artist comfortable in expressing who he or she is, and that allows for consistency from one song to the next, so that the fans are comfortable with the work of that artist.

Did you use any of her earlier songs?

We decided to leave everything from her previous efforts behind and start from scratch.

Did she have label interest at that stage?

No, she had done all her previous writing and searching without a label. The songs she had produced earlier were meant to function as artist demos to get label interest, but that doesn't work any longer. Think about it—what was an artist demo? A crappy recording that was supposed to show an idea, to get the artist a deal so that they could do it right and make good recordings. Now nobody wants to hear a crappy recording any more, not for any reason, now that you can produce a good-sounding, mastering-ready track for maybe a thousand dollars. That kind of artist demo is dead.

It's no longer about coming to the label with a song, even a good song well recorded, but it's about coming in with a *sound*. It's about getting the sound, the vibe, the character. Even at the early songwriting stage, you need to think about the sound. Even if it's just a guitar-and-vocal first recording, a demo to sell the song for someone else to produce, make sure you get a *good* guitar sound, and a *good* vocal sound. If its purpose is to sell not just the song but to land a business deal *for the artist*, then make it into a finished record!

How did you go about finding Samantha's sound and taking your work to the label?

We did two songs. Remember—they were not supposed to be demos. We made them as good as they could be. We wanted to make singles with a lot of potential for big success. And it worked. I also made a remix of one of those two songs. That became a hit in Japan before either of the two songs were even out here in the States.

Samantha had long ago decided that Electronica/Dance was right for her. In that genre there are really only about five big independent labels, and I knew that OM Records would be the best fit for what we came up with. It is critical to create a buzz before approaching a label and getting a business deal. We did that, not only with the remix in Japan.

So two songs bought you the deal—but you produced two albums. Is the album as a format relevant to you, or is it all about singles?

The album is still very relevant. The album *Rise*, our first with Samantha, has been in iTunes' top 100 Dance category for three years! But it has to be an album of nothing but potential hit singles. Ok, not every fan or DJ will love every song equally, but every effort and focus has to go into every song. No fillers!

How is radio relevant to you? Electronica/Dance doesn't get much airplay...

True, although when [LA-based "eclectic music" public radio station] KCRW made "Right Now" the song of the day, which is a cut from the first album, *Rise*, and we offered it as a free download for just 24 hours, that brought us a lot of traffic.

But mostly it's subscription radio like Sirius and Pandora that is great for artists, because of Shazam (www.shazam.com). That brings me back to the album: The lineup of the songs is hugely important. No two songs that follow each other should be alike, there has to be variety in tempo, in color, in key or pitch...

When I am at the mastering stage with an album, I live with it in the car for a week, trying to see if there is anything about it that is tiring. If it's done right, you'll find that businesses, stores, some hotels like W will put an album on as background music, and set it on repeat—because it doesn't get boring or repetitious.

Now with Shazam, if a store like Nordstrom or some other public place has an internet radio station on, or an

MP3 player or whatever, and a song is playing that a customer or visitor likes, he lets the Shazam app on his iPhone catch maybe thirty seconds, and up comes the data for the song and a download link for iTunes. In maybe 98% of cases Shazam finds it. You hear it, you want it, you buy it—all *right now!* That is huge for artists!

Back to the consistent sound you create...

It unifies an artist's work, and fans like that. If they hear one song, download another one or two, and they are consistent, they are more likely to order all the other songs before even hearing them. It

goes further: After the first album, we had about 80% of the sales of the second one pre-ordered without people having heard it! We leaked one song and some excerpts here and there, and people trusted the other songs to be right for what they expected. So an album is still very much a valid concept. But—again—no fillers!

How do you go about actually writing a song with the artist?

With uptempo songs I like to start with a beat and some elements like a chord sequence and a bass line, with good energy that inspires the artist and myself to come up with melody and



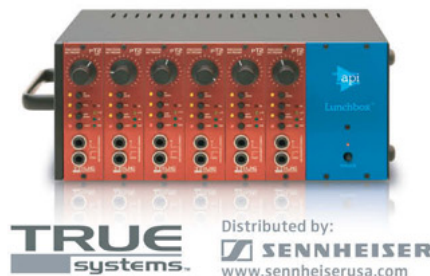
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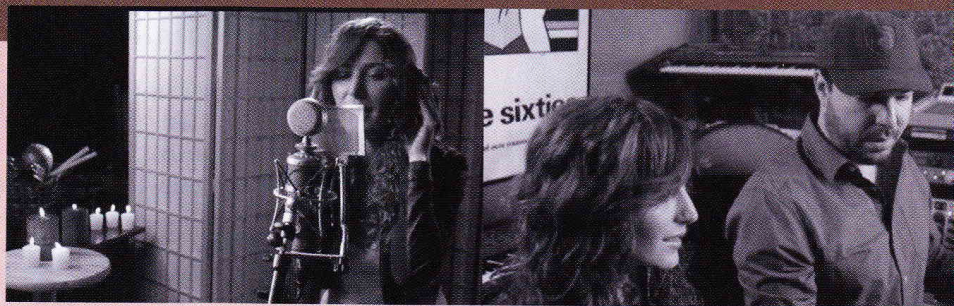


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Sebastian Arocha Morton



lyrics. With slow songs I might start on a regular piano, but then I have to do something to it, like filtering it, or replacing it with a synth sound—something to take away that element of “I’ve heard this before”.

Please explain...

You know, when you play two chords on a piano or a guitar, maybe a I minor followed by a IV minor, a lot of songs immediately come to mind. You’re almost starting to write defensively. But when you have synth flavors, maybe a busy arpeggiator, you can hear the chords, sort of, but you’re not locked in. You’re more free to add a melody, pick a word rhythm, something that is really new.

in a song. You can’t do this if the artist doesn’t consistently perform and phrase the music the way it was written and agreed upon. If the artist comes in early on a phrase, then the next time she’s late, changes the phrasing...it won’t work.

Another aspect of this is the structure—a songwriter has to give the song its sections that make the song come alive, not just chorus-chorus-chorus and maybe something else. There’s a place for the hook, but that’s not all.

Number Four is *Pitch*. It is overrated in its importance. Sure, you don’t want somebody to be awfully out of tune, but if the emotion and passion takes an artist away from being absolutely in tune, it is either exciting and I leave it



What are the most important elements of your songwriting and song production?

Number One has to be *Direction*. Know the sound and vibe and target you’re shooting for.

Number Two is *Confidence*. Wanting to do it and do it right. Not having the artist walk up to the mic and be all shy and hesitant and there to “try” something. Write it with the artist, discuss it so you both know what it is supposed to do and mean... then you both feel great about making something great.

Number Three is *Rhythm and Phrasing and Structure*. Let me explain: As a songwriter you have a certain interpretation in mind of what you have created. As a producer you need to deal with practicalities like making vocal comps from different takes and different sections

alone, or we have tools to deal with it these days. But pitch isn’t everything, so to me it is really priority number four.

We can’t fake passion and emotion in a performance—if we try to construct it out of nothing, I’m sure the fans will sense that something isn’t right. ☺

Sebastian Arocha Morton (arocha@recordingmag.com) is a keyboardist, songwriter, engineer, producer, and composer who works from his RocaSound studio in Burbank, CA. More at www.rocasound.com.

Singer Samantha James has her own website at www.om-records.com/artists/72-samantha-james, with audio examples.

Photos courtesy Sebastian Arocha Morton, album covers courtesy OM Records. Thanks to LAFX for shot of Sebastian at the console.