

LADY SOVEREIGN

“I’VE NEVER BEEN YOUR AVERAGE RAPPER”

A 5 ft 1 pixie with giant passion, ambition and sheer raw talent, if there is one theme running through the magical existence of Lady Sovereign, then it’s that of being a fiercely independent creative spirit who, one way or another, was born to be different.

From grasping her unique talent for rolling her tongue around words at the tender age of 13 in the bedroom of her North London council estate, to being signed to Def Jam by Jay Z; from being kicked out of school at fifteen for avoiding class and being told “you’re not going to do very well in your GCSEs, anyway”, to performing on David Letterman, touring with Gwen Stefani, recording sessions with Pharrell and The Beastie Boys and selling over a million units of her single, “Love Me Or Hate Me”; the story of Sov’s charmed life is one of stellar achievement against a backdrop of the most unlikely of circumstances.

“I’m not your average rapper. I’ve always felt that I’m different to everyone else and I never approach things the way everyone else does. It’s without trying. I don’t understand it.”

Perhaps one way to understand it is to begin with Sov’s natural-born flow. Or her amazing all-guns-ablazing voice. Perhaps her steadfast self-belief. Maybe her innate feel for beats. Her refusal to compromise or snugly fit in with the well-oiled machinery of the music industry. Maybe it is simply that rare thing in a world where manufactured reinvention rules; the ability to be nobody else but herself. Or perhaps it’s just that music has always been her blood.

“I always remember hearing music. Every genre you could think of. My mum was a punk, then a raver, then it was all house stuff. You couldn’t sleep sometimes because music was always blaring out. I’m compulsive when it comes to music. I have to have everything. I have to hear a new song everyday.”

Not your average rapper, then. And, off on a first class flight to New York to meet Jay Z and finding herself towering over Times Square in the form of a 60 foot billboard, certainly not your average 23 year old from a North London estate.

But while being different is sometimes a blessing that can win you hundreds and thousands of global fans, the admiration of Jay-Z (“he called me Mighty Mouse”) and the friendship of Gwen Stefani (“I loved being on tour with Gwen, in all honesty it was one of the best times of my life. I was having so much fun. She’s such a cool girl.”), sometimes the blessing can also be a little bit mixed.

A rebel and an outsider from the day she walked into a pirate radio station on her own and let rip on the air waves, aged 15, if there is one thing Sov was never going to be, then it was a grateful slave to the system – no matter how superficially glittering the prize.

That is not say that when called upon to promote her hugely successful US hit, “Love Me Or Hate Me” or to exercise her sharp North London accent, along with the rest of her exuberant personality and talent, Sov didn’t relish getting up on stage in front of over a million faces for an MTV New Years Eve party in Times Square or being suspended over it in a crane for the launch of her single, or any of the other good times which she had while signed to Def Jam.

“They shut down Time Square for my album basically. I flew my mum over. She was speechless.”

It’s just that after a while, the creative act of performing and writing became lost amongst all the interviews and the phoners, the press calls and the meet and greets, to the extent that Sov was beginning to feel less and less like an artist and more and more like a cog in a wheel; soulless, robotic and not very much fun at all.

“It was all the interviews. So many. Arrgh! Sometimes in a week, I would have to do about a hundred things. Ten TV things in a day, twenty phoners to different parts of the world. It was too much. I hate repeating myself. It really got to me.”

A rebel at heart, it wasn’t long before Sov turned the cog she had become into something more akin to a spanner.

“I would storm out of things. I would refuse. I would pull sickies. I’d just lock myself in a hotel at the end of the day, not want to go out, not want to see anyone. Just sit there and cry. It was horrible. Just bad. I was falling apart. I really was. I had suicidal thoughts. I was somewhere else.”

And so, like all exhausted stars, off Sov was duly packed for that catch-all panacea, “professional help”.

“I saw counsellors and therapists. I had my energies balanced out. I had people tapping on my face. I’m serious, I went through everything! But I don’t think that’s what I needed. I just needed to stop for a while and I did and it worked out for me because I’ve done this album now.”

As the alarmingly talented lady says – Sov is not like all the others. Unabashedly driven by the music in her blood, her way is the Sovereign way – straight talking, no messing and refreshingly from the heart. No compromise. No exception.

“If you conform to the system, you’d be just like everyone else, like a robot. I almost feel sorry for some big stars because I’m sure they have to do what they’re told to, whether they like to admit that or not, because that’s the way it was for me for a while.”

If it was her fighting spirit that had got her into so much hot water, then it was also her fighting spirit that got her out. Indeed, just at the point where it would have been so easy simply to give up, is exactly when Sov got her mojo back. After her intense stint at Def Jam, which concluded with the departure from the label of her A&R team and Def Jam CEO Jay Z, the truth is that it was only six months before Sov was back in the studio making beats and rhyming again.

“My confidence totally went for a bit until I finally got back into the studio and it was just like relief. Music kept me going. It’s the only thing I can do. I guess I didn’t want to fail. I didn’t want to disappoint myself or my fans.”

Crucially, if returning to the studio with her long-time producer Medasyn, was all about getting back her mojo, it was also about getting back her voice – and most importantly, her control.

And what better way to call all the shots on your own terms than to start your own label? Which is where Sov’s budding empire, Midget Records, comes in. In partnership with EMI Music Services, Sov holds all the creative reigns, crucially her

A&R, marketing and promotion, while EMI provides the scale and mighty machinery of a global platform for Midget Records. A dream partnership, the deal puts Sov in the creative driving seat, while giving Midget Records access to worldwide distribution and EMI's team around the world.

"I feel great now. I feel like I've overcome all my dark times. I get to pick who I want to work with. No one can tell me off or make me do things because I'm the boss. It feels amazing. I've got my own label and everything works my way."

Back in the studio and back in control, her forthcoming album Jigsaw is everything we have come to expect from a rapper whose unique flow and gutsy sensibility has already wowed hundreds upon thousands of fans all over the world. Setting the record straight, Jigsaw tells Sov's rollercoaster story of the last two years with her usual honesty, genre-defying beats and punchy, zest-fresh lyrics. Only, this time around as well as rapping, Sov does something a little bit different; she sings.

"Like my first album, it's not consistent but it works for me. There are genres on there that ain't even genres, I'm unpredictable when it comes to making music, I don't do one genre! I've got a few classic club tracks on there but also songs that show another side, a more developed style of songwriting. It's another chapter to my life. A few of the tracks explain everything that's happened in the last two years, which I didn't get a chance to at the time. I've been listening to a lot of electro, a lot of instrumental music. Working with Medasyn is an inspiration because we always come up with some weird beats together."

Talking of one of the tracks she sings on, album title track "Jigsaw", Sov continues; "I was seeing someone, it was pretty deep. I was loved up. Then it all fucked up and I just wanted to sing about it really. I'm not the best singer in the world but you listen to it and you definitely feel it, you know. Rapping is second nature to me. I feel different when I sing. I feel lighter, it's fun."

Nor does Midget Records begin and end with Jigsaw. Far from it. Sov has giant plans for Midget, very giant plans.

"Producing other people is another thing I want to do. I know what works and I'd love to A&R someone else's record. I've got a massive confidence that I will have an empire at some point and put out some fucking amazing artists. And because I've got the opportunity to do that now, that's exciting to me. I'm really looking forward to it."

Sovereign goes on; "I've always felt that I've got this weird spiritual energy around me that means I'll be okay, like having a guide. Everything's always happened for a reason, things always worked out in the end."

Back in the pilot's seat with an awesome new album and her own label, it looks like that indomitable spirit of Sovereign is bang on; everything is good, everything is working out. And the next chapter has only just begun. . .