

*Lady Sovereign is
your regular beer-
sneakin, rhyme-
spittin, tag-poppin
teen queen dream.*

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A COMMON PHENOMENON



Inside the Knitting Factory on this July evening the usual concert aroma of body stank is temporarily disrupted as three eager, bare-armed young women squeeze themselves into the last remaining gaps at the front of the stage. Each one smells like a different shampoo—strawberry, peppermint and, I believe, Pert. Onstage DJ Frampster warms up the already well-warmed American crowd with unknown grime tracks that haven't made their way across the internet yet. His DJ set has been going since 11:15, but at 11:50 the crowd makes a sudden collective, unspoken decision that it is time for headliner Lady Sovereign to come to the stage. They express the sentiment by no longer dancing with their arms above their shoulders.

Frampster makes a few furtive glances towards the mirrored stage door, the lights all turn to red and he puts on the Menta remix of Sovereign's "Random". All three minutes and 54 seconds of it, with Sovereign's vocals (and the guest verse from Riko that was recorded over the phone from prison) intact.

The crowd is already straddling the line between anticipation and impatience, so it's a risky and strange move to play a full song by the artist that is about to go on as her introduction—particularly since it's one of a handful of tunes by her they actually know. This performance is Sovereign's first in New York and though the Knitting Factory only holds a few hundred people, those here are the word-of-mouthers whose interest in her could potentially pay off when an EP hits this fall and her major label debut *Public Warning* comes out in the US this spring.

When the outro of "Random" finishes fading around midnight, Lady Sovereign emerges from behind the mirrored door. She looks sluggish and queasy. Nineteen years old and small—with an over-sized Sex Pistols T-shirt, house keys dangling on a chain around her neck, side ponytail and three braids running the length of her skull—she looks like someone's scrappy younger sister. She tells the crowd she's feeling sick and blames the McDonald's cheeseburger she had for lunch, though the night before she had stayed out past 5AM, hitting bars that didn't refuse her drinks or at least didn't say anything when people snuck them to her.

Lady Sovereign's story, up until now, is fundamentality the story of a

teenager. And like teenageness itself, there is something terrifying and thrilling about that.



Lady Sov never takes her house keys from around her neck and usually has a mic in hand. At left, she waits her turn; at right, she controls the mic as Frampster works the wheels.



Sovereign starts her set off with "Cha-Ching"—her song featured on the grime compilation *Run The Road*—mustering as much enthusiasm as her body can take. Still, most of the crowd is immediately and enthusiastically on her side. During the ten song set she grabs her stomach and grimaces as she rhymes, the CD players skip and she starts tracks over, her nausea causes her to lose her place in her articulated high speed flow, but the crowd doesn't give up on her because she isn't giving up either. Between songs she apologizes, teases, jokes. Guys and girls alike yell that they love her—like *love her* love her. She flirts back like an adolescent boy, simultaneously mocking and encouraging. After a group of ladies in the back scream out "Fuck Jentina!" DJ Frampster puts on the "Hollaback Girl" instrumental and Sovereign rips two-thirds of "Sad Ass Strippa", her career-killing dis track about the misguided English pop singer. When it's over someone yells out, "Fuck Gwen Stefani!" "Fuck Gwen Stefani?" Sovereign repeats, then turns her face into an exaggerated look of pleased contemplation. She punctuates the thought with a laugh and a wink.

After she finishes "Public Warning", a new beat-flipping blazer that features children's tongue-twisters and an "Oi! Oi! Oi!" refrain, Sovereign realizes that it was the last song on the setlist and she hadn't even let the crowd know before she started. Someone calls out for her to do her song "Tango" and she obliges, but halfway through the CD starts skipping again and Sovereign throws the microphone to the floor. She and Frampster stay on the stage briefly trying to decide how to proceed, but then the past 45 minutes catch up with her. She quickly leaves the stage, finally, triumphantly, to vomit.

Born Louise Harman—though she hates being called by her given name—Lady Sovereign grew up in the Wembley section of Northern London. It's a diverse, working-class community, but when asked how she'd describe it, she simply says, "Dirty. It's not a clean place. It's just dirty." Yet, it doesn't carry the instant street credibility of East London, where Dizzee Rascal, Wiley and most of Roll Deep come from. Lady Sovereign's early underground tracks "Random", "Cha-Ching" and "A Little Bit

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Of Shh” were produced by Medasyn, the grandson of a Russian composer. These songs stand out among the grime imports that have filtered slowly to the US over the past two years, because not only is her accent more intelligible and her slang more penetrable, but the sing-song quality of her choruses temper the roughness associated with the genre. Her lyrics turn self-deprecation into boasts and she creates split personalities that act as a commentary track to the songs—making side jokes or adding juvenile sound effects.

On her album *Public Warning* the choruses are even bigger and brighter. Sovereign has continued working with grime-based producers including Medasyn, but has also collaborated with established dance producers like Basement Jaxx and incorporated sonic references to ska, electro and new wave. This appeal to both the mainstream and underground is also reflected in her upcoming remixes, as ultra-rugged producer Jammer is doing a rework and Ordinary Boys, a popular laddish rock band, have been commissioned to cover Sovereign's lead single “9 To 5”.

Sovereign can cultivate a broader appeal because there aren't questions about her authenticity. You can't say she's not street enough because she never talks about the drug game or killing people. You can't question her political credibility because she never calls herself a freedom fighter. The majority of her songs are about her pet peeves and annoying situations. The songs on her recent *Bitchin'* EP cover the following subjects: hitting a girl with a broom after the girl got too drunk and hit her first, how gross a girl who wears too much fake tanner looks, and two remixes of a song about people who talk too much shit. The phenomenon of Lady Sovereign is not just about the rareness of an unmanufactured pop star or the latest

culture-recontextualizing import. Instead her story, up until now, is fundamentality the story of a teenager in 2005. And like teenageness itself, there is something terrifying and thrilling about that. Before Lady Sovereign opened shows for Dizzee Rascal, got a slot on the Streets' “Fit But You Know It” remix, or even responded to a message that DJ Frampster posted on the So Solid forum saying that his crew was looking for a female MC, she was a 15 year-old, writing her rhymes by herself. “When I had quiet time when no one was around I would do it,” she says. “I wouldn't go to school very much and I would stay at home. That was when no one was about, so I could do little shows—turn the music up full blast, have a hairbrush or whatever in my hand, and stand in front of the mirror and do my little poses.” Eventually she started using her computer's basic Voice Recorder application to capture minute long verses, because that was the maximum amount of time the program allowed. Sometimes they would be a cappella, sometimes you could faintly hear the beats playing on her stereo in the background. Then she'd use MSN Messenger to send these clips to people she met in chat rooms. Other times she would use the audio function of Yahoo Chat to virtually battle other MCs. This use of the internet was fitting—years later, the internet would continue to be the vehicle by which people outside of England heard of Lady Sovereign.

Two days before the Knitting Factory show, Lady Sovereign considerably rolls down the window of a taxicab before she belches. The cab turns the corner and starts the long push through Times Square towards downtown. Her manager is along for the ride, as is DJ Frampster, who combats the day's sticky summer weather by not wearing

a shirt for the entire afternoon. (When the Stüssy store in Soho asks him to put his shirt on, he waits outside instead of obliging.) Aside from a one day stop in New York last year during a trip to see friends in Philadelphia, this is Sovereign's first real time in the city. She has questions about Black Israelites, why cops get to park their cars wherever they please, and why she keeps getting spit on (it's really just water run-off from air conditioners). She's been in town for less than 24 hours, but she's already gone to the Adidas store on Wooster and stopped at a street vendor to get the wife beater she is currently wearing airbrushed with a band of baby blue and the words “Ess-Oh-Vee” on the front and “Straight Up Cheeky” on the back. As we walk around Soho, Sovereign's pants keep falling down, but I can't figure out why she keeps re-tying them below her crotch. Then I realize that her plainly visible blue boxers are actually extra material that has been sewn to the top of the denim to give them a built-in sagging effect. Though functional for someone who likes her pants to hang low, it's not a particularly fashion-forward look. In fact, it's the type of piece you might find in a store like Rampage or Forever 21. In the skater boutiques on Lafayette she only has a passing interest in most of the limited-edition sneakers—her big idea is to have a stylist customize a pair of Adidas for her with neon blue LA Gear-style lights in the heel. Usually when young artists are preparing to release their first album under the umbrella of one of the record industry's biggest labels there is an entire team controlling, among other things, their wardrobe. And LA Gear and mall wear don't usually fit into it. But Sovereign didn't get to where she is now by being submissive. “I don't let anyone tell me what to do,” she says. “Except for what time to wake up in the morning.”

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**Like any manic teenager,
Lady Sov sometimes
loses herself in her own
whirlwind as the world
whirls on around her.**