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Renegade Opera Singer Feline Lang on Her Sweeping Steampunk Dystopia

by VICTORIA LINCHONG on MARCH 21, 2017 0 COMMENTS

Berlin has a fascinating opera underground and [Feline Lang](#) is one of its most inventive musicians. A mezzo soprano who has performed at Schauspiel Leipzig and Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz Berlin, she's now the singer, composer and music arranger for [Feline and Strange](#), a dark cabaret and electro-pop band that is about to release a new cyberpunk album, *Out*.

In keeping with Feline's fervid imagination, *Out* isn't just a CD. The packaging is an art project in and of itself, with instructions on how it can be turned into a pop-up diorama. It's also part of an epic sci-fi story that has spawned a series of concept albums and theatrical release parties. This coming Friday, steampunk freaks and geeks of Berlin will congregate at [Steamball IV. Still on Earth?!](#), the latest installment in these imaginative shindigs.

We sat down with Feline in her studio to talk about her work.

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WED **Premiere Wir müssen draussen bleibe**
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FRI **Designer Sale**
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THU **Traditional Food of the British Isles**
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Punk rock heroes [The Menzingers](#) rattle into town next Thursday - want to go? Well, that can be arranged...



Punk Rockers The Menzing...
Live at Musik & Frieden – Thursday, 27th ...
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Feline Lang and Christoph Klempe of Feline and Strange. Photo by Susanne Clausen.

This is your fifth album and it’s got a huge concept. Can you tell me about it?

The whole concept started with the second record, *Science Fiction*. All the songs are part of a story of some aliens, which is the band, stranded on Earth for some centuries, realizing that they have landed in the wrong time and trying to find out what their mission is because they’re partially amnesiac. They only realized that they are not of this world whenever they feel wrong and strange and not really here. I think everyone knows this feeling, and this is what this album is about and it’s a metaphor for a mad person, for an *amokläufer*, or someone who makes a bomb in the backyard or his garage. The world is so bad and hurts so much, so the aliens decide that their mission must be to destroy the planet Earth. In the last song, the alien is waiting for the spaceship to pick them up, which never comes.

From *Science Fiction*, the back story started to grow into our shows and the other albums. Onstage we were those aliens, talking to each other as the crew of a spaceship, including costumes and ranks and trying to broadcast home. In the first show, we were trying to report home. We never get an answer but we know the broadcasting will take years and years to arrive, no matter where our home planet is, because even that we don’t know, because we’re still not remembering anything from our home world. We just know that we’re not from this world.

We were in the middle of making another album, *Truths*, when [music producer] **Jason Rubal** contacted us. The album was already recorded and mastered and we thought, “Huh, it’s just not there.” And nobody knew what to do. It just seemed like the wrong direction. Then I sat on my computer that night and there was an email from Jason. He said we could make a record in America with the best drummer in the world, **Brian Viglione** from the **Dresden Dolls**. I was always a huge fan of his and when I first met him, I almost fainted.

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But Jason didn’t want to remake the *Lies*, which became our third album. That was my and [band member] **Christoph**

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TAP

Klemke's first trip to America, and our first time seeing all those places we only knew from movies and from conspiracy theories. So we developed our own conspiracy theory, which is not as direct as *Science Fiction*. It's more hints and this cog puzzle in the CD packaging of *Lies*, which has a pop-up folder where you can unveil part of the conspiracy.

We released *Truths* immediately after that and it completes the story we started in *Science Fiction*, from realizing that I am an alien to making the bomb and thinking about what would happen if I really did explode that bomb and destroy Earth. In *Truths*, we have decided that Earth is not really worth it but that the spaceship will definitely come very soon. And humans are all doomed. It's a comic book, by the way. But *Truth* also contains a last page after the story finishes where I, as the captain of the crew, talk to the reader and say, "I can tell them the truth, the spaceship will never come. This is all lies." This is how the story ends.

So this new album is picking up from that or starting something new?

We the aliens realize that it's too late because other aliens have taken over the Earth. Whatever shit is happening now, of course it falls on humans, we won't deny that, but some of those humans maybe are like us and think that they are better than others because they are not from this world. They have secret powers or secret insights so they gain power and are in positions now where they control how we fare with our planet. You know who I'm talking about. All those weird people who you ask yourself, where in that point stopped evolution and are they really humans? There are people like that all over the world right now and all at the same time, so there has to be something bizarre behind that. Maybe there is actually an interstellar conspiracy.

Feline & Strange: No Life on Mars



What would you like people to come away with after listening to the new album?

My goal is to place the listener in the position of someone who has lost their home, who has nowhere to go. Like with a human who has lost their ability to stay on planet Earth. There's no place we can go. We cannot live on the moon, we cannot live on Mars, we cannot live on any of the planets NASA keeps calling "New Earth" because they don't have atmosphere, they don't have water, and we can't reach them in several lifetimes. So there is no place to go. I think that's how many people feel who have lost their homes in the last years, people who had to leave their home country no matter if they wanted to or not, and are not welcome anywhere else.

Of course, this is connected to how and when I wrote the album. This was when the refugee crisis started in earnest and when Germany especially was like, "Hey refugees welcome!" And people were cheering at stations and giving refugees water and soft toys and food. And then suddenly, it turned 180 degrees. It was shortly after this I wrote the first songs for this album, when the first hate came to the surface and everyone said, "Wow, that's like Nazi Germany all over again." But then we realized that in other countries the situation was far worse. There is basically no place to go for these pe

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I had written most of the songs for this album in Marseille where I had been granted a residency by Berlin Music Award. Marseille is a city by the sea, obviously. That's the second song on the album. And well, it hit me as a city where cultures clash a lot more than I was used to. It feels almost African and there were a lot of illegal people. You could see that they had no passport. And it was also a place where pirates used to sink ships. Of course, I loved it. Reading all the news from Germany was kind of schizophrenic.

Well, the whole thing about borders, we're still at this mentality, but it's obvious that borders will have to evaporate or have to change in some way. I mean in the EU, it's getting there...

It used to be. But now the EU is dissolving and everyone is putting up their borders again. Which totally sucks. We had twenty years of real freedom inside the EU.

But it's all two steps forward and one step back. We take two steps forward and then people get scared that it's so free and different.

People are scared of freedom. And change.

Photo by Foekje Hoekstra.

Getting back to music, you started off as an opera singer...

Well, I started off as a violin player and then I became an actress. And during acting school, I met my singing teacher and studied opera singing too. When I left acting school, I was a beginner opera singer, which helped me get a lot of jobs in theater.

And then you had your own opera troupe?

I founded Feline & Strange with members of [Canteatro](#), which was around for about seven years. We made operas, usually well-known ones like *Carmen*, which was our first show. I arranged the music for a small troupe with rather unusual musical arrangements. I always mixed up the original with what I thought belonged to the piece. Like *Carmen* obviously was flamenco so I arranged that for piano, cello, and a flamenco guitarist. And we had a flamenco dancer teaching us. Also, the flamenco percussion was a big thing. Actually, I learned a lot about how Bizet composed the opera, because some of those piece for orchestra when we transposed them to guitar, sounded like actual flamenco. So I thought, "Okay, Bizet just wrote down what he heard." Flamenco back in the time of Bizet was actually relatively new. Everyone thinks it's centuries old. It's not; it's as old as tango.

Tango is also a big part of your his

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My first really well-paid gigs were as a tango singer. I toured three years or so with a piano player. I was mostly chanson-y. I still like that a lot. You can hear a lot of the tango structure in my own songs, in the way that I am singing and playing.

What led you to making your own band?

I just wanted to make my own songs. I mean, I started off in tango, arranging those songs together with a piano player or a band. It was basically like jazz. You meet up with a band and you say I'm going to sing *Malena* in G Minor or *Sur* in C minor and then we just start. It's like jazz standards. It's just in Spanish. So there's not much creative work. Yes, creative work at the moment on stage, but not creative work fixing things and inventing things. I think it's the instrumentalists who do that. Being a singer is more presenting the song and connecting with the audience. I love that. But I wanted to make my own stuff. And I always wanted to be a director, so I founded the troupe and made operas where I did my own arrangements and own translations for some pieces and it went further and further.

The last opera we did was *Don Quichotte* by Massenet and we made our own translations to German, we made our own arrangements, and we turned it into a multimedia piece with interactive video projections. It was a lot of fun but it was hard. People went out like, *Oh my god, that's too much for my senses!* I'm really proud of that. I'm recycling some of those visuals for the new show, by the way.

Photo by Victoria Linchong.

You've told me before that Feline and Strange is a steampunk band.

I never intended that. We published Science Fiction and then I got a ping back on the website and followed the link and saw that somebody wrote about us on his steampunk blog, "I found a totally great new steampunk band!" I thought, what the heck is steampunk? And I discovered that we had been steampunks all along. We love to tinker, we love to connect old and future times, so the retro-futurism thing is totally us. It fits well with our music and very well with our theatrical antics because the people in the steampunk scene love bands that are telling a story because that's cos-playing. You're playing a role when you put on a steampunk outfit, even if you don't have a total biography. Well, most people actually have and they have a steampunk name and stuff. So it's really theatrical. But I rather consider us cyberpunk because of the dystopian theme and all the alien and science fiction stuff. And also because there's a lot of '80s in our music.

That brings us to the Steamball this Friday. What can people expect?

People can expect a dystopian but f
audience get their visa applications
people to fill in. And if people are successful in filling in the application, they can actually win

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prizes. We only have one problem: the party will be closely monitored by a ninja troupe and maybe they will interfere at some point. We don't know.

And there is music and dancing...

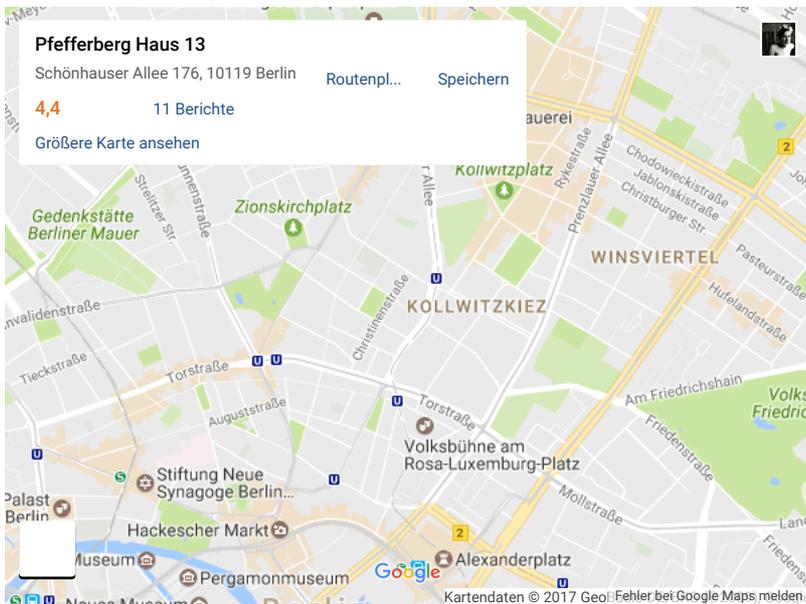
There are three bands performing live and all those bands are doing theatrical acts. You can basically expect a night of several pop operas. The first band will be the [Clockwork Faerie](#), an inventor from former times who not only sings beautifully with her opera-trained voice, but also makes automatons. She will come with her broken dolls who will perform a beautiful ballet if everything goes as intended. And then there's **Feline and Strange**, of course. We will do the premiere of our new show, which is also a piece of theater. And there will be some things friends of Feline and Strange have never heard or seen before. The third band is the [Jack Affair](#). We tour with them very often and they are one of the most fun bands on the planet. They are doing Latin funk punk, which is exactly what it sounds like. They will make people dance so they don't even realize that the party has started which will then go to the wee hours with [DJ Swango Fandango](#).

Of course, for all this fun, we expect something from the audience. The least they can do is dress up in their finest and weirdest. As we are talking about dystopia, people can wear their most intricate and beautiful cyperpunk and steampunk outfits. But they can wear the regular clothes a zombie would wear after the apocalypse. Or they can show their self-made weapons or devices, whatever they like. We only demand that you bring a story with what you are wearing.

Steamball IV. Still on Earth is on Friday, March 24th. Find out more on the [Facebook event page](#). More about Feline and Strange is on their [website](#). More about Feline Lang can be found on her [website](#).

Steamball IV. Still on Earth

Pfefferberg Haus 13
Schönhauser Allee 176
10119 Berlin



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Victoria Linchong is a NYC native who writes about theater, film, underground communities, ethnic groups, untold history, and amazing personalities. She has penned biographies of radical Latino writers, written about the beginning of Off-Off Broadway, and blogged her sex life for New York Magazine. She's also a director, producer, and performer in theater and film. But in Berlin, you can mostly find her taking off her clothes as the campy burlesque artiste Viva Lamore. vl@berlinlovesyou.com

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