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With two tribute bands in her background, Clementine finds her own voice in *Conversation with Francis Bakin*

By [Amy Kaufman](#)

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After years behind a drum set for San Francisco tribute-band stalwarts AC/DShe and Zepparella, the singularly named Clementine is trading in her old digs for an electronic stand-up kit and playing frontwoman in her newest project, Francis Bakin. What's more, she's writing all of her own songs —no small feat for a musician who spent hours perfecting another musician's style and who admittedly possessed anxieties about the songwriting life.

A wordsmith all of her life, it wasn't until after college graduation that Clementine began to doubt her authority as a young writer. The San Francisco transplant was left with an overwhelming case of writers' block and the notion that she needed to live more in order to write. Armed with her drumsticks, she set off in a different direction. Assembling a close network of artistic collaborators, Clementine was touring the United

States with New York rock group BOTTOM, before landing back in San Francisco to form the all-female tribute bands AC/DShe and Zepparella, but she still shied away from writing her own material.

Her 14-year battle with writers' block finally ended after she was pulled away from a 10-day yoga retreat due to her mother's hospitalization, she said. "She ended up having really serious surgery, but she's fine now. I was still in this weird mindset from the retreat. I was staying in a hospital room and words started pouring out of me. I stayed up and wrote about 12 songs."

Singing vocals over an electronic drumbeat, Clementine built the structure that would eventually support her self-released debut album *Conversation with Francis Bakin*, adding guitar, shifting melodies, and finally altering the drums and bringing the song full circle. "I've written with other people before but never just on my own," she explained. "I don't really play melodic instruments. I have a background in piano, but I'm not a piano player. So I just curled up with my computer as much as I could."

When the songwriting process was over, Clementine enlisted fretless bass player Rob Preston, and keyboardist/sample-man Mike Wells to round out the edges, providing a steady backing beat for Clementine's sporadic pacing. Zepparella accomplice Gretchen Menn would take over the role as raunchy slide guitarist. For the virtuoso with an ear for precision, Menn had to forget everything she learned in school, loosening up for a swampier, sprawling sound for Francis Bakin, Clementine said. "I think she likes the fact that I want her to really stretch out and not think so hard about exactly how it should be played but to just play."

Determined to achieve her specific sound, Clementine co-produced the album with Preston at his studio, Get Reel Productions. The two bonded over "the weird" or "wrong" recordings that they loved so much. "We're constantly trying to convince the other players to live with the things that they're like 'oh no way, you can hear my sticks click!' That makes it real. In this day and age, people respond to real. There's so much perfect out there. The real stuff is the fun stuff," she said.

As a result, *Conversation* plays with the casualness of the '90s —it's grungy but not careless, methodical but not precise, thrashing but not self-destructive. "I like to record quickly," Clementine said. "My first response is always the best one. If I do a vocal track and I'm like, 'that's it,' and I listen back, that's usually it. I can try it three other times, but that one's going to be it."

For the raucous riot grrl at heart, riding the wave of instinct made the recording process a breeze. "Having a limited budget is actually the best thing that can happen for a record," she said. "You end up living with things that you think you would do differently, [but] looking back, those are the best parts of the record."

The once wordless writer has gone as far as to create her own blog to catalogue the journey she took to get to where she's at today with her songwriting. Francis Bakin is still evolving, she says, and Clementine hopes to maintain a certain level of undeveloped freshness by keeping the group from over-thinking and by forcing them to live in the moment. "If I can get to the end of a song [having been] unaware that I was in it —just have been there —then that's when I know it's great."

Francis Bakin [MySpace](#)

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