



Josh The Cat & Phia in Berlin. Photo by Susanne Erler.

Berlin Song: Why Australian Musicians love Berlin

By Megan Spencer

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What is it about Berlin that attracts so many Australian artists? [MEGAN SPENCER](#) goes to Europe's cultural hub to find out why they keep coming back.

Minutes into our conversation, The Cruel Sea's guitarist/keyboardist [James Cruickshank](#) says, "there's a saying: everyone leaves a suitcase in Berlin."

We're in the heart of what was Berlin's 'East', a beautiful old neighbourhood slowly being gentrified by foreign investors nipping at its heels.

We're also in the midst of a florist-café and a tropical heatwave. Clothes stick to skin; the atmosphere is hot and sweaty, later made delirious by a giant parrot screeching violently and bouncing off the walls like a pinball, its owner in hot pursuit.

While Cruickshank is being romantic about the city he's called home since 2012, he's also paraphrasing the [song](#) 'I Still Have A Suitcase In Berlin', famously crooned by Marlene Dietrich in 1957.

"It means you'll always come back," he explains of the lyric and his eventual return to Germany's 'poor but sexy' latter-day capital. After a memorable introduction in 1991 – touring with The Cruel Sea supporting The Bad Seeds – Cruickshank just couldn't shake it.

"I was living near Byron Bay really comfortable in an amazing part of the world," the keen surfer continues. "I found myself zeroing in on 50, with no kids, and starting to refer to Australia as 'The Velvet Rut'.

"I didn't want to look back on life with regret.

"I have a belief; one should be able to have a creative life – not be on a merry-go-round of success or at the bottom.

"Here, the avant-garde *is* the mainstream. People *celebrate* the art. For me it's about finding a place to be sustained to create, where you can follow your instincts.



Photo: James Cruickshank in Wowsville, Kreuzberg by Danielle Schriever.

Hence the flurry of music recorded "on a laptop at home" for a solo album due out next year. Between that, composing for TV, performing locally and with touring artists, and yearly trips home to play with The Cruel Sea, James Cruickshank couldn't be happier.

The sentiment echoes around the city as I meet a burgeoning contingent of Australian musicians who also call Berlin home. Some have been here decades, others "minutes", with a number splitting their time between Australia and Germany.

Pop musician [Sophia Exiner](#) (aka Phia, 27) and producer/performer [Josh Teicher](#) (aka 'Josh The Cat', 30) made the move mid-2011. Graduating from Melbourne's VCA in 2008, after flirting with the idea of Tokyo the couple eventually decided on Berlin after visiting "in the dead of winter".

"We knew we wanted to live somewhere else for a while," says Phia.

"We needed time be new again, to play regularly and explore," adds Josh.

They found that opportunity in Berlin. "We were so welcomed even though people didn't know who we were," Phia marvels. After years as a jazz pianist – "a different world" – she embraced loop pedals, kalimba and a new pop direction.

"I didn't play solo until I got to Berlin," she confesses.

"It just seemed like a place we could balance making a living and making music," continues Josh, "and then as a career."

Things are going well. They've set up a studio in their small, bright apartment, collaborate regularly with locals, also recording, with a new Phia album on the way.

The German *Rolling Stone* magazine even invited the pair to record a version of David Bowie's ['As The World Falls Down'](#) to go on a CD celebrating the Berlin V&A ['David Bowie Is'](#) exhibition.

Building on word of mouth, Phia and Josh receive constant invitations to perform - in Hamburg, Reykjavik, Paris, Italy. "It's based on enthusiasm," says Phia. "Any size show you do here, an opportunity will always come out of it."

Bouts of homesickness and the city's transience aside, she adds, "it's made us much better artists. We moved away and started from scratch. It was a chance to examine what we really wanted to do."

[Kat Frankie](#) also relishes this maxim. Intense and powerful, in her mid-20s she scooped up her guitar-driven, dirty folk sound, segued from Sydney to Berlin, and a decade later hasn't looked back.



Kat Frankie at work. Photo: Felix Roser

A firm headliner in Berlin her smallest houses are 800-900 people. While she won't stay "forever," she's happy evolving her career from the musical centre of Europe, which includes a recent performance at massive international summer festival [Citybreak Seoul 2014](#) alongside Ozzy Osbourne, The Deftones, Maroon 5 and Spiritualized. It might not have been so had she remained in Sydney.

Frankie originally came "for a year, for the usual Europe mythology - to write some songs," she grins. She's ended up a welcome fixture, as evidenced in [BerlinSong](#) (2007), a documentary about foreign musicians with deep connections to the city.

On arrival she was shocked "by the sense of community".

"In Sydney I was doing music but didn't feel part of a community – it was very competitive and I wasn't able to be a musician full-time."

While there are "less squat clubs and basement bars" than when she arrived, its essence is the same. "It's cheap here, it's easy to get a gig and people are open... And the feeling has stayed with me – that I have found a place that understands me."

Has the city crept into her music?

"Nick Cave said 'it's a crime to be sad in Australia'," she answers. "You *can* be melancholy here – German audiences are unafraid of intensity, so you can take them to heavy places in songs and they will come out of it alive. Which makes me unafraid."

"My next record is going to be happy and slightly superficial," she laughs.

After extended stints in vibrant Neuköln, singer/guitarist [Justin Cusack](#) (Black Pony Express) tells me he's "finally thrown in his job at Melbourne Uni" and relocated "with no plans to go back."

He generously takes me on a three-hour tour of his beloved 'kiez' (neighbourhood), pointing out its artist-friendly venues and dazzling Templehof Park, once "Hitler's airport", now a vast communal space for markets and music festivals and more.



Justin Cusack in Neuköln. Photo: Megan Spencer

Despite its creative allure, Cusack says Berlin *can* be challenging for fledgling bands, unlike Melbourne "where it's easier to find smaller venues" to hone your live work. The great incentive however is "being close to European major cities."

"You have to hustle a bit! [But] travel costs are less, it's possible to drive instead of fly, major venues are closer and you can play multiple dates in several countries" in a short timeframe.

Plus there are still new music markets opening up in places like Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania.

[Mick Harvey](#) chuckles when I relay this last observation. "Places like [how] Berlin *used* to be," he muses. Save for an unsavoury "EasyJet weekend party" culture, he says the city's pretty much still the same. We meet at a North Melbourne café not dissimilar to those in Berlin where I spent the last fortnight interviewing musicians who've followed his footsteps.

Friends with Cruickshank, Harvey has literally kept a suitcase (room or apartment) in Berlin since first arriving "in the early '80s."

Harvey was in the 'first wave' of Australian underground bands to venture into Berlin: The Birthday Party, The Bad Seeds, These Immortal Souls and Crime And The City Solution, just for a start.



Photo: Mick Harvey by Megan Spencer

These bands were famous for their sense of (mis)adventure, musical experimentation and for taking full advantage of the vacated buildings in the East, post-fall of 'the wall'. Productive, "thrilling" times, says Harvey.

After first moving there in 1982, Harvey now splits his time between Melbourne and Berlin, the base for his flourishing European touring and solo work. Berlin is part of him. So why do Germans like working with us? "There's a connection," he answers. "A likeminded-ness and artistic understanding."

With its rich artistic [history](#), he's not surprised by the continuing musical pilgrimage. "Berlin now is what London used to be in the 70s. It's inevitable – like moths to the flame. [Berlin] brings a particular attention and position with it. It can be a wild place. It is pretty bohemian and 'out there' – you can have an extreme time too!"

"It's a great atmosphere there," he finishes. "It's special. Berlin's *easier* – not such a slog. It gives you that facility to do what you need to do."

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