

Arts editor: Alison Croggon

“I don’t consider myself a singer, or a pianist, or even an artist. I consider myself as a boy who just wants to tell people what’s on his mind.” — Benjamin Clementine

Jane Cornwell

is a London-based arts, music and culture journalist.

“I’ve made a deal with loneliness,” says musician Benjamin Clementine. “It has always been with me and will never go away. Accepting that lets me figure out what I need to move forward. People with a lot of alone time have a gift from heaven.”

He’s sitting in his recording studio in Florence, Italy, his dark hair teased into a cloud that rises towards the high, vaulted ceiling. “I don’t like going out, unless it is in nature,” he says. “I am in this wonderful space with my pianos from seven in the morning to nine o’clock at night.”

The London-raised artist, 37, began spending time in Italy in 2023, and currently divides his time between Florence and California. When he’s in Italy, he mostly stays inside. Next month he’ll be heading across the globe to headline the Melbourne International Jazz Festival and tour Sydney and Adelaide. “At this moment I am mixing new songs for my next album,” he tells me. “I may play some of them in Australia. I am not sure. I want to approach the Australian people as though I am just starting from the beginning.”

It’s perhaps not surprising to hear about new beginnings from a man who has already lived several artistic lives. Clementine is a Mercury Prize-winning musician and fashion model and has also acted in films, including Denis Villeneuve’s *Dune* and Steve McQueen’s *Blitz*. When he was younger he spent years in Paris, beginning with a period of homelessness, and busked on the streets and in the Métro to survive. He once publicly announced he was leaving his recording career behind, but then came divorce and “different tragedies” and he was back, humbled – “I had been arrogant” – to the drawing board.

He long resisted being labelled as “jazz” – or labelled as anything – but has resigned himself to the human need for structuralist conceits. “I am obviously not a jazz artist,” he says. “But us being able to define things, to put things in boxes, is what makes the world work. I confess, yes, that the people I consider jazz artists will be looking at me going, ‘You motherfucker. You are not jazz.’”

Clementine has been compared to Nina Simone for his unpredictable mix of vulnerability and authority: if he is to be lumped into jazz, he occupies the space at its edges. Onstage, barefoot, bare-chested, draped in a dark woollen trench coat, his 193-centimetre frame doubled over his keys, he sings in an intense, almost operatic tenor about the vagaries of the human condition: bullying, resilience, displacement, solitude. He says he can’t write love songs.

“Well, they say no man can be a prophet in his own country, so I left, here I am,” he sings on “Winston Churchill’s Boy”, the opening track of his Mercury Prize-winning 2015 debut album, *At Least for Now*. “In his left pocket lay the prose of the magnificent Orwell. His right hand embraced a battered guitar borrowed, borrowed from me...”

His lyrics – whether eloquent or slang, spoken or shouted – are his priority. Delivered over grandly theatrical, show-tune piano stylings, they land with an entertainer’s flourish. His songs have echoes of French-language chanson. Jacques Brel and Edith Piaf are among his influences, as is Charles Aznavour – with whom Clementine collaborated on an English version of the classic “Il faut savoir” in 2015. So are Nina Simone – he performs a striking reworking of her 1968 hit “Ain’t Got No, I Got Life” – Tom Waits and Claude Debussy. “When you have something to say, you don’t really care for how it sounds. You just have to say it,” he says. “So, I find myself, when I look back, realising that the people I loved to listen to have a very simple message.”

He reaches towards a keyboard and plays me a section of Debussy’s heavily arpeggiated “Arabesque No.1”, a piece celebrated for its impressionistic evocation of flowing water. “It goes all over the place, but it delivers the message first,” says Clementine. “But in the end, I would rather get my point across than learn complex piano techniques. It all starts with me wanting to say something.”

Admittedly hard on himself – “very, very” – he insists he was too heavy-handed in the making of both his 2017 sophomore album, *I Tell a Fly*, and his third, current recording, *And I Have Been*. Despite their respective critical acclaim, they now feel to him too crowded with instruments and effects – the result of his DIY determination to teach himself production skills and experiment with plug-ins and digital equipment. Australia will find him raw, unadorned, back to basics. “I don’t consider myself a singer, or a pianist, or even an artist,” he says. “I consider myself as a boy who just wants to tell people what’s on his mind.”

This wasn’t his default when he was growing up in Edmonton, North London, the youngest of five children of Ghanaian parents with ironclad Christian beliefs. Secular music and streetwear were banned in his strict Catholic household – “My father cut up our jogging pants with scissors” – and in that of his grandmother, with whom he lived until her death in his teens. All the siblings played instruments. He tried drums before teaching himself to play a dilapidated piano that his brother had brought home. A timid, suit-wearing youth, a fixture at the local library, he was bullied for being different.

For a brief while he played piano – “I suppose, yes, in a jazzy sort of way” – in a rowdy Pentecostal church behind Tottenham Hotspur’s ground, a more vibrant experience than the sombre Catholic church he also attended moments from his home. But it was his alone time, just him and the keys, that nourished him. “I would sit in front of that old piano and imagine some kind of floaty cartoon ghost drifting down and sitting next to me.” He smiles. “I felt accompanied by someone who really loved me. I never thought I could make a career out of music. I thought I would end up doing law, or whatever I was meant to do.”

But then came his parents’ divorce, a family fallout and a stint in a homeless shelter in Camden. Soon after, he arrived in Paris with £60, no mobile phone and nowhere

to stay. “I did not want to ask my father for help,” he says. After six months on the streets, writing poetry in notebooks, reading William Blake and Charles Baudelaire, he climbed the steps to Sacré-Cœur, put his Kangol hat on the ground and started singing a cappella. He was 19. “People gave me food and money,” he says. “I didn’t ask for anything. They just did.”

He checked into a hostel in Montmartre where he shared a room with nine others, stashing his old keyboard under his bottom bunk. He played Bob Marley covers on the Métro – “I treated each carriage like a stadium” – and performed his own material at parties. He was spotted, then signed.

In 2013 he was booked for a short European tour that included the North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands. Unable to afford the train fare, he attempted to walk the 45 kilometres to Rotterdam but didn’t make it. The same year he appeared barefoot on *Later... with Jools Holland*, singing about karma and consequences. His singular aesthetic turned heads: fellow guest Paul McCartney told him his performance was “amazing”.

British luxury brand Burberry asked him to perform at its 2014 menswear catwalk show. In 2015 he was listed as one of the 50 best-dressed men by the *Financial Times*. “We humans are fascinating animals,” he says of his relationship with fashion. “We get excited with life by putting on clothes ... or a pair of sneakers or Gucci loafers. I still can’t fathom that part of our culture.”

In 2016, the year after he won the Mercury Prize, he fell for English-born, Paris-based singer-songwriter Flo Morrissey. They had a son, married, moved to London and then to Topanga, a community in the Santa Monica Mountains in California. “Meet music’s enigmatic poetic couple” ran the tagline for a 2019 video made by British *Vogue* in collaboration with Gucci, in which Clementine magics prose on a vintage typewriter as his wife leans moodily, hair tumbling, in a rustic doorframe.

The movies came to him. His American agent got him an audition for a film with Angelina Jolie, which he might have done was he not offered a support slot on David Byrne’s *American Utopia* tour. During the pandemic, with live music at a standstill, he tried out for another role. “In the scene I was crying and very emotional. It felt just like I was onstage performing a song. They all loved it. But it was a no.”

A few months later, back in Holland Park, West London, with his wife and small children, he got a call from Denis Villeneuve, who was casting for *Dune*. The director had seen Clementine on YouTube performing an NPR *Tiny Desk* concert and thought he’d fit the role of Herald of the Change, an otherworldly interplanetary official. The script arrived a week before his audition.

“Every evening I would jump over the fence into Kensington Park Gardens after it closed and be there by myself,” he says, “walking and shouting my lines again and again.” He did the same when rehearsing his role as Ife, a gentle Nigerian air-raid warden, in 2024’s *Blitz*. By then he had split with his wife and had determined to be “even more faithful to the idea of being alone for the rest

of my life”. “I like to think I am a sane person,” he says good-naturedly. “But I personally think I will not lie to you and say that I am a totally normal person.”

Clementine seems to attract people who see something in him. Theaster Gates, the Chicago-based Black artist and curator, interviewed him for *TANK*, the British art and fashion magazine. He has joined productions of Guy Ritchie and Julian Schnabel and collaborated with Damon Albarn. More recently, he has found love again. “So, *boom!* I am now in a beautiful relationship.” He grins. “It felt like an intervention. She showed up and I needed that, especially for the children to see that a healthy relationship with love and togetherness is still possible.”

His father died just before the birth of his eldest son. He had always been open to being in touch, but they did not have the kind of connection Clementine wants for his own family. Now he is writing *Corridor*, a book about fathers, and making a YouTube series of the same name with his three children. “They’re in England but I see them regularly and they’re used to me going and coming back,” he says. “The thing about children is consistency. I am grateful to have children that love me and I love them.”

He says his kids love his new raft of songs, especially the singles “Pizza Mind”, a take on modern passivity and laziness, and “Can’t Always Be Winner, Argentina”, an earworm that uses the language of football as a metaphor for hubris. There’s more humour in his writing now, albeit absurdist and bone dry. “I was so serious when I was younger because I wanted to cement something,” he says. “I do still have a lot to prove, but not in the same kind of way. My perception has changed. See, life is a bad joke.”

Fame has never really mattered. He is, after all, just a boy with stuff to say. He tells me about his recent headline slot at a festival in Portugal, where a child in his sightline held up a sign reading “I was named after you. Can I have a hug?” “It was this huge crowd, 20,000 people, and I did this high-ass jump to get off the stage and over to him. I’d played that same festival 10 years earlier, and this kid was 10,” he says. “That was cool. It makes me think all this is worth it.”

The working title for his new album is *Sir Introvert and the Featherweights*, though – happier now – he still might call it something else. It’s a reflection on his desire to hide and of the gentle souls – the ghosts and angels – who come down to sit with him. “It is probably going to be my best work, and I did it all here.” He looks up and smiles. “Alone.” ●