



KATIE STELMANIS at Wrongbar (1279 Queen West), tonight (Thursday, July 24), 10 pm. \$10, adv \$8. 416-516-8677.

Music Feature

Katie's on fire!

Bridging the classical/industrial gap

By Bryan Borzykowski

These days, genre-hopping is a regular occurrence. Bands mix rap and rock, country and electronica, even klezmer and pop, but Katie Stelmanis has combined three styles that rarely interact: industrial, opera and classical.

“My music comes from a lot of different places,” she says on the phone from her Toronto home. Her debut disc, *Join Us* (Blocks Recording Club), is easily one of the oddest-sounding pop records to come out of the city in a long time. It combines frenetic blasts of distortion, huge, operatic vocals, dark, haunting themes and even a cover of *Natural Woman*.

Eclectic as it is, it's both accessible and engaging – as long as you're open-minded.

“I've had good responses, but also some harsh ones,” says Stelmanis. “The sound is really different. It's definitely an acquired taste; it can be hard on the ears.”

For years the songstress played classical music – she's proficient on piano and viola – and spent a lot of time in various orchestras. After high school she was getting ready to go to McGill University to study opera, but that didn't quite pan out.

“I backed out at the last second,” she says. “I wasn't ready to commit to the lifestyle of singing opera. You have to be careful about your health because your body is your instrument. I wouldn't have been able to go out.”

So what does a music-obsessed, socially active teenager do instead? Join a rock band, of course.

For a few years Stelmanis played vocals and guitar in the gritty alt-rock trio *Galaxy*. While the band didn't accomplish much, she says without it she'd never have been able to become a solo artist.

“I’d spent years on classical training in music that’s super-technical and rehearsed, and joining this DIY rock band was the only way I could have transitioned,” she explains. “I didn’t know how to sing or play guitar. We figured it out ourselves.”

Although she ignored her musical roots for a while, it wasn’t long before those operatic sounds surfaced. But instead of grabbing the next bus to McGill, Stelmanis stayed put and discovered MIDI, which enabled her to create sweeping orchestral sounds with a push of a piano key.

Still, she wasn’t ready to abandon her love of rock. “I really love loud music,” she says. “I’ve always been a Nine Inch Nails fan, and that definitely comes through on my solo stuff. I could keep my singing classical, but I do like the more dirty, distorted sounds.”

It wasn’t easy for Stelmanis to fuse her harder-edged, riot grrl persona – which she perfected in Galaxy – with her classical self. Her first solo tunes were just random ideas that barely made sense.

“I was writing small pieces of music that I thought sounded good, but I hadn’t given any thought to the direction of the song,” she admits. “Eventually I started to write songs that were poppier.”

There’s no arguing that the self-produced *Join Us* is a unified record that’s infectious, complex and curious, but Stelmanis thinks she could have done a better job putting the disc together.

“I like the way it turned out, but some songs are still a little self-indulgent and don’t exactly make the most sense,” she says. “I’m working on a new one, and I’m getting much better at making actual songs, which could be a good or a bad thing.”