

LANA MÍR

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“Growing up in Kiev, I was isolated from the music I loved,” says singer-songwriter Lana Mír, whose self-titled debut is forthcoming on Unfiltered Records. “I couldn’t fulfill myself creatively, so I had no choice but to move to New York.”

Lana was born (a year before the Chernobyl disaster) and raised in the Ukrainian capital, where, as a child, she began to suspect that a world of music existed beyond her reach. MTV had just arrived. It was broadcast once a week, for 30 minutes, but that was enough. “The first video I saw was ‘Nothing Compares 2 U,’ by Sinéad O’Connor,” she recalls. “I’d never seen or heard anything like it.”

Prior to Ukraine’s independence in 1991, there was virtually no access to Western culture in the former Soviet republic. Though Lana was born into a free Ukraine, she says, “Our choices were very limited. There was always a hassle to get cool music. When someone I knew traveled abroad, I would bug them to bring me new stuff.”

She returns to her MTV epiphany: “That music was so powerful. Discovering artists like Sinéad and Björk and Madonna was exciting, but frustrating, because it made me understand just how much I was missing.”

Her first album, *Lana Mír*, is something of a creative homecoming. Its themes of seizing the moment and taking a chance ostensibly refer to grabbing the brass ring of love – also suggested by her unexpected rendition of the Stone Roses’ “I Wanna Be Adored” – but knowing her story, you can’t help but think she’s also singing about her love of music, something else worth uprooting yourself and moving half a world away for.

There’s a lilting innocence in Lana’s voice, a coolness that recalls Astrid Gilberto and Sade, but also a measure of world-weariness, a melancholy reminiscent of Billie Holiday. Still, contemporary ears are more likely to hear notes of Feist and Dido in Lana’s vintage-tinged alternative-pop songs. When Unfiltered Records principal Andy Chase (of Ivy and Brookville) first heard her sing he was impressed by her distinctiveness. As Chase describes it, “her Ukrainian heritage gives her an unusual vocal presence that’s hard to forget.”

When Lana started secondary school, she knew she wanted to be a professional singer. She was riding the subway one day when she spied the editor of Ukraine’s lone music magazine, whom she recognized from TV. She approached him and he ended up co-writing a song for her. She took a recording of that song to what was considered the trendiest and most commercial Ukrainian-French radio station in the country. The programmer promptly put it on the air and hired her as the “face” of the station. In this capacity, she was soon performing at events, among other spokesperson duties.

By the time she reached her late teens, Lana’s exposure to Western music had greatly increased, much in part to the Internet. She became a fan of, among others, Deborah Harry, whose work in Blondie made her want to sing, and she realized that she could no longer stay in Ukraine. “I had to be where that kind of music was happening,” she says. “I couldn’t stand it anymore and decided to move to New York. I’m an only child, and leaving home was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done, but I had to do it.”

After a period of crushing loneliness, struggling to make ends meet serving cocktails, she found her way to a Russian-American café that booked live music. There she met a group of local musicians who taught her jazz and bossa nova. It took some persuasion, but she eventually secured a weekly gig. This gave her the confidence to write her own material. “I had to express myself,” she says. “All my life I’d heard melodies, and I’d vocalize them, but I had never written anything down.”

Through a chain of friends she came across Brookville, and was so enthralled by what she heard that she reached out to Andy Chase and suggested a collaboration. Chase ended up co-writing, co-producing and playing on *Lana Mír*, as did his frequent collaborator Bruce Driscoll (Ivy, Brookville, Blondfire). “Andy had this brilliant vision for the album and such focus that we were able to accomplish a lot in a short time,” Lana explains, “which kept everything fresh and spontaneous. And Bruce has a real feel for bossa nova, which you can hear floating in and out of the music” (observe the charming “Goodbye Girl”).

Among the most affecting tracks on *Lana Mír* is “These Days,” in which Lana’s wistful vocal glides atop an unadorned arrangement of guitar and piano. “It’s a happy *and* sad song,” she says, “about holding little pieces of life in our fragile memories, taking them out and looking at them through the kaleidoscope of time.”

This bittersweetness also surfaces in “Say You Need Me.” Lana ventures: “When you meet someone new, your hopes are so high. You want him to promise you the world, but even if he says the words, you know he can’t give you forever.”

There’s an explicit fearlessness in this outlook, the audacity of an artist who left behind everything she’d ever known to find her creative home. But in her typically unassuming way, she sums up her time in America thus far by saying, “I don’t think my story is anything extraordinary. I’ve just done what anyone else who’s ever followed their dream before has done. I’m just happy to be in New York, finally able to have the chance to do what I love. What more could I want?”