

**Budapest-born Jazz Vocalist Nikolett Pankovits Makes a Magical Debut  
with *Magia*, a Gorgeous and Highly Personal Collection of  
Traditional Hungarian Songs and Pop Hits,  
American Songbook Standards, and Originals**

New York City isn't just an essential crucible for jazz talent. It's a creative hothouse where artists from around the globe come together and develop new hybrids evolving from the experience of transplanting their musical roots. For the Hungarian-born vocalist Nikolett Pankovits, the Gotham scene provided an ideal forum for melding the music of her youth with her love of jazz and kindred musical currents. Her impressive debut album *Magia* is a startlingly beautiful project that centers on Hungarian songs set to various Latin American rhythms.

Pankovits possesses an arresting voice, pure, lithe and warm, and alive to countless shades of loss, longing, ache, regret. From the lamenting opening arrangement of "Kis Kece Lányom," a traditional Hungarian song immortalized by Bartok, to the bilingual English/Hungarian version of "Gloomy Sunday," *Magia* is a stunning fever dream of an album, marked by disorienting dislocations and surprising but inspired intuitive connections. It's an album haunted and redeemed by history, particularly the two torch songs "Száz Panasz Ég A Dalomban" and "Fogadj El Engem" gleaned from the repertoire of legendary Hungarian actress/singer Katalin Karády, whose career bloomed amidst the carnage of World War II but quickly crashed when she fell afoul of the post-war communist regime.

"She did 22 movies in four years, and risked her life to help Jewish families during the war," Pankovits says. "She ended up in jail, escaped and moved to Brazil and then New York. Her story was very inspiring."

In titling her debut album *Magia*, she hit upon a word that evokes the singular cultural confluences that defines her music. Since moving to New York in 2010 from her native Budapest she's immersed herself in the city's thriving community of South American jazz musicians, and she christened her album with the Spanish and Hungarian word for magic (with the addition of an accent, *mágia*). But the Spanish pronunciation of "magia" is almost the same as the Hungarian word for the Hungarian people, Magyar. Like so many immigrants, Pankovits never felt more connected to Hungary than when living far from home.

"I wanted to tell the story of my life," she says. "You come to New York from somewhere and think you can sing soul and R&B, and then you start understanding where those traditions are coming from. And when you're away from home you look for your roots. What music did you sing when you were young? We decided to build this repertoire from the songs of my childhood, folk songs that everyone in Hungary knows."

Just about every song embodies some kind of cultural collision. Pankovits was a child when she first heard her father sing "La Dama de la Muerte" in Hungarian. Originally documented on a field recording by the great Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist, and educator Zoltán Kodály, the song was an Eastern European version of Roma-mocking minstrelsy about wailing, but Herrera and Pankovits transformed the tune into a Mexican-style Day of the Dead celebration with Spanish lyrics written by Herrera.

“Every song has a story,” she says. “When I was working with my Italian friend, I started humming ‘Besame Mucho’ and he started humming it as well. I said, how do you know that song, it’s Hungarian, and he said no it’s Italian. That’s when I realized all these songs I knew weren’t Hungarian and each European country has their version of these standards in their own language.”

The album’s cohesive feel and organic conception flows from her stellar cast of collaborators, most importantly Pankovits’s husband, Colombian-born, Venezuelan-raised guitarist, arranger and producer Juancho Herrera. He’s worked with a glittering array of international artists, while helping define the sounds of genre-melding divas such as Chile’s Claudia Acuña, Colombia’s Marta Gomez, Oaxacan-American Lila Downs, and Argentina’s Sofia Rei.

He’s released several acclaimed CDs of his own, most recently 2015’s trenchant and stripped down concept album *El Mismo Sol*, a stylistically expansive collaboration with Yayo Serka and bassist Ben Zwerin exploring the nature of conflict. With Pankovits he dexterously threads a needle in capturing the mood of the Hungarian songs while inflecting them with South American rhythms, like the samba/Venezuelan joropo arrangement of “Fogadj El Engem.”

The brilliant Puerto Rican bassist John Benitez has been an essential rhythmic catalyst for many of the most creative Latin American musicians in New York over the past two decades. Brooklyn-native Jason Lindner is “one of jazz’s most interesting keyboardists, with an identity spanning genres, cultures, formats and technologies.” (JazzTimes). He is known for leading the electro-groove band Now Vs Now and for his work with Meshell Ndegeocello, Donny McCaslin, Anat Cohen and David Bowie on Blackstar.

The supremely versatile drummer/percussionist Yayo Serka tours and records with Lila Downs and Sofia Rei, Adriano Santos is one of the best Brazilian drummers in New York, and violinist Zach Brock is a standout on a scene brimming with conservatory trained players delving into improvisation. Most of these players are close confederates of Herrera’s but saxophonist Greg Tardy was something of a wildcard.

“I heard him four or five years ago at a concert and promised myself if I ever record that I’m going to collaborate with him,” Pankovits says. “I contacted him out of the blue after he moved to Knoxville, and he was wonderful. We flew him in and I love what he played.”

Pankovits closes the album with Alan and Marilyn Bergman’s “Where Do You Start?” backed by just Lindner and Tardy, a rueful and utterly devastating version of perhaps the most beautiful song ever written about divorce. It’s a song that hits close to home for her. In many ways Pankovits itinerant upbringing laid the foundation of her cosmopolitan musical sensibility. Her parents divorced when she was three, and she lived with her mother in Budapest. In order to maintain close ties with her father, a professional chef and avid amateur musician, she often traveled with him around Europe.

“He introduced music to me,” she says. “I studied music in elementary school, and every time we traveled we were singing. Since the countries are really close to each other in Europe, we’d get in the car and drive to Spain or France, and the whole time we were singing. It influenced me to start music, have it be part of my life.”

She studied acting and musical theater in high school and ended up being cast in a lead role in a revival of Gábor Presser's influential musical *An Imaginary Report on an American Rock Festival*. In the midst of her five-year run, Pankovits realized she was more interested in singing than acting. She got first hand experience of the US in 1999 from the American relatives of her sister's husband from Chicago. The visit stoked her growing fascination with American culture, but she realized there was a big divide when she took a lesson with a vocal coach in Chicago and "she asked if I thought I'm the best and I said no," she recalls. "She said, when you think you're the best, come back. That was a shock. It's not the way we think in Eastern Europe."

Back in Hungary, she started to connect with Latin American musicians based in New York while working for a company that produced concerts on boats plying the Danube. She met Colombian-born percussionist Samuel Torres when her company booked Richard Bona's band, and when she spent six months in New York in 2008 he introduced her to a wide cross section of New York players. She ended up meeting Herrera at Torres's wedding and after several years of traveling back and forth they settled back in New York. She studied at the Brooklyn Conservatory for a year and pursued her love of jazz at City College while using her background in economics and marketing at Bernard Stollman's seminal avant-garde label ESP-Disk.

"I always felt a little lost between having an everyday life and an artistic side," Pankovits says. "I was always somewhere in between. If I do something, it has to have a message and meaning."

With *Magia*, Pankovits has broken through ordinary stylistic constraints and expectations. This is music that melds disparate worlds, an act of alchemy unlike anything else on the today's jazz scene by a singer with a singular sound and story.

[www.nikolettpankovits.com](http://www.nikolettpankovits.com)

-30-