



Jana Mila
Chameleon
Biography

When the Amsterdam singer-songwriter Jana Mila (pronounced Yah-nuh MEE-lah) began writing a song called “Chameleon,” she thought she was writing about someone else—a friend who seemed to be changing her colors to please other people. “But the more I lived with the song, the more I felt like I was writing about myself,” she admits. “Doesn’t everybody try to reflect other people? Don’t I change my own colors in order to be accepted? Especially when you’re young, you can lose yourself in other people if you don’t know who you are.”

That is the central idea behind her debut album, also titled *Chameleon*, which introduces Mila as an artist deeply committed to self-reckoning and self-possession. Our innate desire to belong and to be loved can lead to a kind of self-annihilation, making us strangers to ourselves. Writing songs is her means of finding and sustaining her identity. “The album is a conversation with myself, a way of getting to know myself better. There are little fears woven into every lyric, but there’s also advice to myself. I’m writing to find a part of myself that has some wisdom.”

Musically, Mila is the best kind of chameleon. The album draws from a wild array of sources, entertaining new ideas on every song: dusty Laurel Canyon folk on “It’s True,” catchy Nashville country on “Let Me In,” driving ‘70s rock on “I Wasn’t Gonna.” She puts her stamp on every note, turning those fears into an album of remarkable confidence, eloquence, and power. *Chameleon* is a self-portrait rendered in vibrant detail.

Mila comes by her eclecticism honestly. She grew up in a household devoted to playing and teaching all kinds of music: her mother sings Brazilian music, her father plays saxophone in big bands, and her brother studies Indian music. “It’s a lot of different styles in one family,” she says with a laugh, but notes that she initially rebelled and pursued a more literary form of expression. She wanted to be a novelist. “I loved reading and I wrote a lot of stories. I had all these ideas for books I wanted to write, but I was never patient enough to pursue them beyond just writing them down in my notebook.”

Even as she taught herself a few basic chords on guitar and even as she switched from prose to verse, Mila never abandoned that interest in storytelling. “Writing a verse felt like writing a chapter in a book. It felt like a safe little space for me. I felt free, because I never had in my mind that I was making music or writing songs for an audience or that I was pursuing a career. That would have been far too scary for me.” Her first audiences were her friends in her music class, who encouraged her to share her songs. “It did feel good to do something a little scary. I started to think that maybe I did want to share my songs with the world.”

When she was 17, she entered a local contest for young songwriters, where she debuted a new song called “Rosie.” At the time she never could have dreamed it would hit as hard as it did—or that it would anchor her debut album. Ostensibly it’s the story of a girl who goes missing and the family she leaves behind, but it reveals layers as it proceeds, becoming a remarkably nuanced and generous examination of loneliness and grief. Then as now, she performed it solo, just her voice and her guitar, with nothing else to cut that stark sense of loss and confusion. “When I first played it, I noticed a lot of people were getting emotional. They would ask me who Rosie was, but I didn’t base her on anyone in particular and I certainly couldn’t tell people I was having my own experiences with loneliness. I wasn’t ready to recognize that I was writing about myself. I wasn’t ready to make myself vulnerable. But it was the start of this very introspective journey.”

As she played more shows around Holland, Mila caught the attention of Dutch country superstar Ilse DeLange, who took her under her wings and arranged a songwriting trip to Nashville in June 2022. They spent two weeks hanging out and swapping ideas while making new friends, including veteran producer/songwriter/musician Todd Lombardo (who has worked with Kacey Musgraves, Morgan Wallen, Kelsea Ballerini, and more). “I already had some themes and stories in mind, and they were all very considerate of the ideas that I brought with me and the way I wrote. It was like a group therapy session. You can find out things about yourself just by talking with people and working with them. You have to be very open to new ideas, but you also have to be confident enough to protect your ideas and tell the stories you want to tell.”

One of the songs that took shape during those sessions was “In Between,” which features Mila’s wrenching vocals and anguished lyrics about not growing numb in response to pain and alienation. “When I wrote it, I never would have thought it would turn out so dramatic. But I immediately felt a connection with Todd as a person, and he picked up on the feeling for this song and his arrangement and production helped me turn it into something bigger. It sounds heavy because the story is heavy. And if it fits the story, why should I hold back?”

Just a few months later, she was back in Nashville recording *Chameleon* with Lombardo at his home studio. Together they devised arrangements and recorded quickly, the better to capture the ideas at their most volatile. A few days into the sessions, however, Mila caught Covid and had to quarantine away from the crew. “I was in bed with my headphones on, listening in on the sessions. It was weird, because it made me feel even freer to say whatever I wanted. I was just there alone in my room and typing into WhatsApp. *Yeah, that sounds good, or You should do a little more of this or that.*”

Now that she is taking these songs to even larger audiences, Mila has realized how much songwriting has changed her as a person and how it has made her feel more at home in the world. “Sometimes when I sing those songs I wrote years ago, I feel like an older sister talking to my younger self. Oh, did you really think that back then? Did you really have to be so dramatic? But songs are very organic things. They’re not static. Every time I play a song or even talk about a song, my perspective on it changes, and therefore the song changes. There are infinite ways to hear it and interpret it. I used to be so scared to ask questions about myself, but now I have more courage and I want to have people understand me through my songs.”