

## Mafalda's Empathy

Tommaso Cartia (March 23, 2017)



Mafalda Minnozzi is a true ambassador of Italian music. Her universal musical language brought her to combine Italian melodies with rhythms from all over the world. In 2015, after a long solo career, both she and New York guitarist Paul Ricci formed the “eMPathia Jazz Duo.” It’s a successful partnership that brought them to perform on some of the world’s most prestigious stages, like the Birland Jazz Club in New York. We met her there where she told us her life’s story.

The Birdland is a New York Jazz temple that has hosted some of the greatest gods in the history of music. Some names include [Charlie "Bird" Parker](#) [2]—who inspired the club's name long ago in 1949—[John Coltrane](#) [3], [Miles Davis](#) [4], and [Lester Young](#). [5] In addition to jazz musicians, other artists and celebrities were regulars at the club, from Gary Cooper and Marilyn Monroe to Frank Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, and Ava Gardner.

### **Mafalda: A Pure Performer**

During the club's sixty years of activity, perhaps nobody has been able to present such a rich repertoire of classic Italian pop music. [Mafalda Minnozzi](#) [6] did it thanks to her personal vocal style, which allows her to sing songs like [Azzurro](#) [7], [Parole Parole](#) [8], [Come prima](#) [9], [Arrivederci](#) [10], and [Nessuno](#) [11] in a swing, jazz, samba, or bossa nova style. She never forgets, however, the importance of songs interpretation.

For her set list, the singer proposed more than just Italian songs. She chose Brazilian pieces from [Antônio Carlos Jobim](#) [12], some American ones from [Cole Porter](#). [13] as well as an homage to the French singer [Édith Piaf](#) [14], who has always been a big inspiration to her. Mafalda is a wholesome performer in the best sense of the word, and she's in line with great Italian music artists like [Caterina Valente](#) [15], [Mia Martini](#) [16], [Ornella Vanoni](#) [17], and [Mina](#) [18]. Her virtuous voice is like a musical instrument, and it reminds us of the beloved and much missed [Giuni Russo](#) [19]. Russo was a Sicilian performer gifted with an exceptional vocal range, which she often used to experiment in music.

### **The eMPathia Jazz Duo**

Next to Mafalda here at the Birdland, we find [Paul Ricci](#). [20] the American soul of [eMPathia Jazz Duo](#) [21]. Ricci is a guitarist and composer who attended [New England Conservatory](#) [22] in Boston. He has collaborated with big names in music like [Astrud Gilberto](#) [23], [Bobby Sanabria](#) [24], and [Harry Belafonte](#) [25]. The musician found in Mafalda's voice the perfect instrument to express his passion for jazz, Brazilian, and African music. The duo already produced two significant projects: eMPathia in 2015, which was nominated for the [Premio Tenco](#). [26] and Inside, which was produced by Grammy winner [Jeff Jones](#) [27] in 2016.

From there, a series of concerts had them touring in Italy, Europe, the United States, and Brazil—the second homeland of the singer. For the past twenty years, Mafalda has been considered the official ambassador of Italian music in Brazil.

The empathy that the duo creates with the public is the same empathy that you feel when you talk to Mafalda. The singer is a communicator in the truest sense of the word, a woman who loves to share her soul with her listeners, closing the gap between the stage and reality.

After her performance at the Birdland, she told us about her story, with the same truth and honesty that can be perceived in her singing.

### **Mafalda's Story and her Origins in Marche**

"I was born in Pavia," Mafalda begins to tell us, "But I subsequently moved to Marche, the region where my parents were from. At Pavia's [Istituto delle Canossiane](#). [28] I began getting involved in music. I used to sing in the chorus. There, I learned the discipline and how to listen. In reality, my mother, with her soprano voice, was the first to pass down a passion for music. Through singing, I tried to talk to my mother with whom I had a difficult relationship. Then I discovered Caterina Valente, an Italian singer who struck me when I was very young. I tried to emulate her. I liked the fact that she performed in so many different languages, as if they were a single language.

Marche is a region full of great musical and poetic traditions from opera singer [Beniamino Gigli](#) [29] to poet [Giacomo Leopardi](#) [30]. Singing and storytelling are dominant in our culture. In Macerata, we have the [Sferisterio](#) [31], the second biggest arena for classical music in Italy. I grew up here artistically. The arena also hosts "[Musicultura](#)." [32] a very important festival that I had the honor of participating in."



## **From Marche to Rome and then Around the World**

As she likes to say, she was always "curious and in love with life." So guided by an insatiable hunger for artistic expression, Mafalda then moved from Marche to Rome. There, she studied music and dance. She attended the theatrical school of Saverio Marconi from "La compagnia della Rancia." The singer was then ready to dive into great challenges and to present herself to the world. Her first recitals took place in 1986. She wrote them, and her husband, Marco Bisconti, directed them. Today, he is her producer. After this experience Mafalda packed her bags with classics from the Italian songbook, and she took them to Paris, Greece, and Germany.

As a traveling storyteller, Minnozzi then continues her journey around the world until she discovered Brazil. Love at first sight turned into a twenty-year career. Here she would meet Paul Ricci, and the United States would open its doors to her.

"Paul and I met in Rio de Janeiro, and we never left each other. He became the artistic director of my work. I enjoy not only the sense of freedom but also the discipline that he works with. I learned so much from him; he's a great musician and a great person who is very patient and generous. He writes scores in a very meticulous and precise way. Paul was able to bring the great tradition of American jazz to a land that really loves this style of music, Brazil, and to combine it with Brazil's own rhythms.

## **Music as a Life Mission**

Mafalda's long career was rich with important artistic and personal encounters such as those with Italian singer [Lucio Dalla](#) [33], [Milton Nascimento](#) [34], [Guinga](#) [35], [Martinho Da Vila](#) [36], to name a few. However, she was never greedy for success. For her, music is a mission: to recount the lives of others through her own voice.

"I lived through the great life of everyday people, as [Chico Buarque](#) [37] and Carol Porter told through their music. Artists are tools in the hands of an art that is given to them from birth. You don't become an artist; you don't learn to sing or to play. Talent is natural. Then you can improve it and study later on. You're born with a gift, and you need to thank Mother Nature for it. I am a bit agnostic, but I feel that I'm a very spiritual person. I'm very Franciscan in many ways. I believe in the values of brotherhood, exchange, forgiveness, and sticking together."

Mafalda has a wholesome approach to her career as a singer, and she has always wanted to preserve this purity without making any compromises. In a recording industry that continuously tends to limit an artist's expression, Minnozzi chose to stay away from certain market trends. This is why the singer founded her own record label and manages every single detail of her career, from the clothes she wears on stage to the promotion of her CDs.

"I was always true even if it hurt me. Being true to myself caused me to lose some professional opportunities. But music is born to make people stick together and to tear down walls. Music was born to be free. It's a universal language that everyone can speak and understand."

## **Ambassador of Music**

Publicizing Italian music around the world is another important mission on Mafalda's artistic journey. The singer is impressed by the enthusiastic feedback that the public gives her when she proposes songs by [Umberto Bindi](#) [38], [Paolo Conte](#) [39], [Luigi Tenco](#) [40], [Ivano Fossati](#) [41], and other great Italian singer-songwriters. She was also amazed by how Italy seems to have forgotten about this immense musical heritage. She shared with us her feelings from her last performance on the Birdland stage.

"Bringing Italian music to the Birdland is not simple. I'm bringing a language that the audience doesn't understand. This evening there were people from all over the world, and they appreciated this repertoire. I don't understand why we Italians don't believe in our culture and in our past. We have an extremely important musical tradition that is rooted in the [villanelle](#) [42] from the '400s and



baroque music, and then we pass to folkloric music until we arrive at today's singer-songwriters. This year at the [Sanremo Music Festival](#) [43], I heard songs that have melodies that you really can't sing along with. They don't represent our musical identity. They don't have any durability. However, when I go back to Italy, I propose my repertoire of great classics, and the audience goes crazy. It's not true that the public isn't interested in this music anymore. Perhaps, they're not used to really listening to it."

Whether in Italy, in Brazil, or on the stage of the Birdland, the empathy that Mafalda creates with her audience makes her a great ambassador of music, not only of Italian music but also of the world.

Mafalda and Paul are already in the recording studio for eMPathia Jazz duo's next disc, and they're ready to continue their unstoppable tour around the world. Next stop, Brazil.

For more info on the band's tour and news check out their website here [>>](#) [44]

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