

Exploring the sound barrier

GIG

Diamanda Galás

When you experience Diamanda Galás in performance, you're unlikely to ever forget it. The stage seems uncluttered – a vampish woman at a piano – but the atmosphere is heightened to vertigo-inducing effect, thanks to a voice and keys that mutate between breathy blues and guttural, otherworldly tones. Lauded by rock musicians and avant garde artists, she is both fantastically alluring and quite terrifying.

Galás has released several live recordings so far, and her imminent 17th album, *Guilty Guilty Guilty* (Mute), is painstakingly mixed to retain the intensity of her 2006 New York Valentine's Day Massacre show. This record comprises her versions of several heart-wrenching love songs, including a tumultuous take on the 1940s standard *Autumn Leaves*. It's dedicated to her elderly parents, both of whom she cared for during ill health; there is anguish here but also deep empathy. 'My mother has attempted to listen to the album

but when my father comes in, she turns it off. He has never been a great fan of my vocal work,' she says, amused. 'He is 91, for heaven's sake. Why *should* he like it?'

When she played London last year, she appeared to berate the audience – and drew even more adulation in response. 'You are funny. How nice,' she replies, slightly unnervingly. 'I didn't berate the audience, however, only a listings magazine for writing nonsense about me being a "Gothic screamer". I do *not* scream on stage; I sing. It is

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always lovely to hear that a crowd applauds when an impolite writer is taken to the gallows.'

Gulp. When she's in the throes of improvisation, does she forget her surroundings? 'I am conscious of the crowd but I'm free to go where I like. This is a rare moment. The rest of my life can be compared to a job as a bill collector.'

She's said that she goes on stage 'empty' before she performs; how does she feel

afterwards? 'If the performance is as it should be, I feel quite refreshed mentally. If there have been musical mistakes, I'll dwell on them. If there are problems with the sound system, I will be very unhappy.'

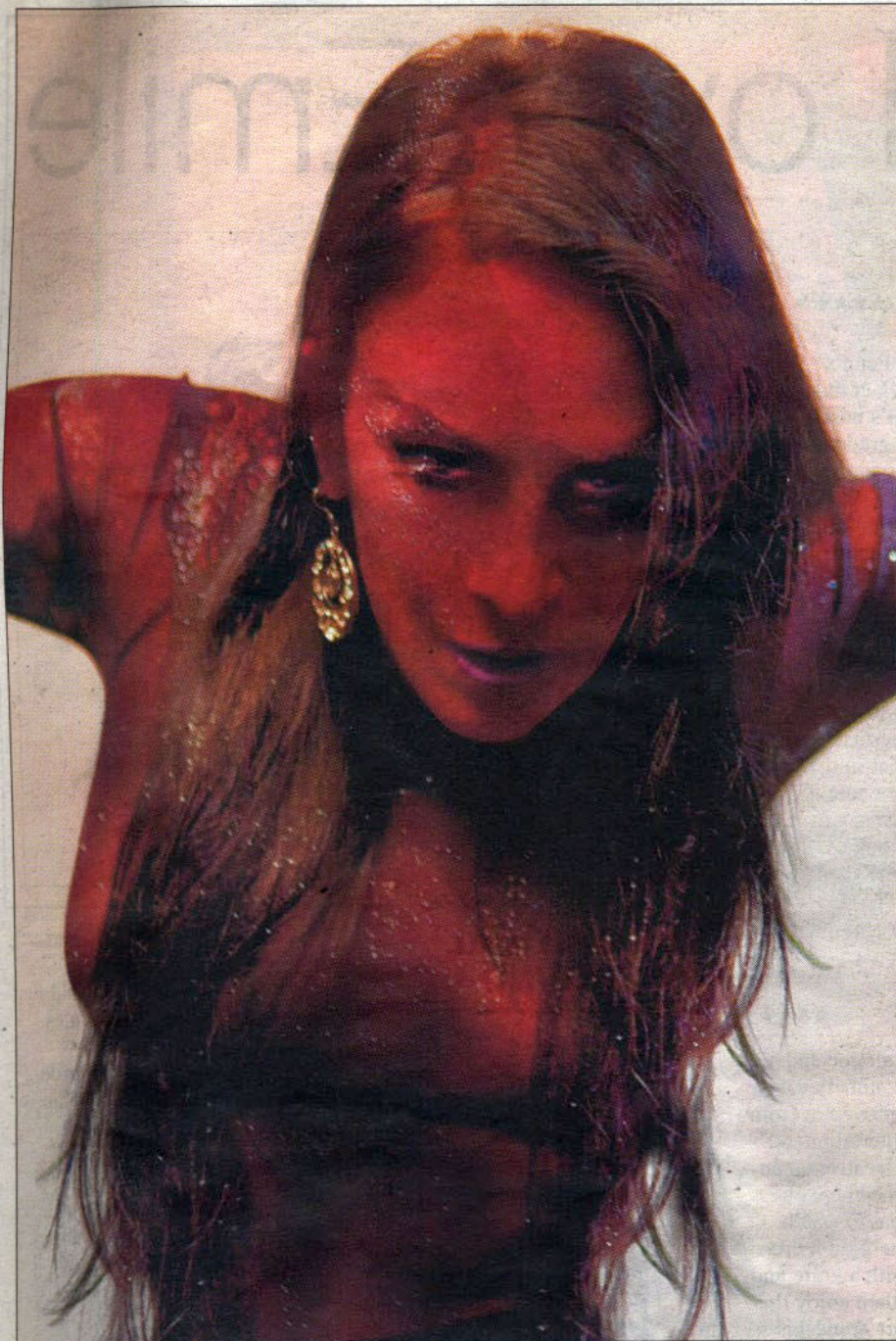
These are incredibly exacting standards but they reflect her appetite for cultural and technical knowledge; Galás is outspoken, whether tackling apathy about Aids (on her 1982 benchmark, *The Litanies Of Satan*) or political heritage – and she gives 'weakness' short shrift. 'I don't like passive

people or those who talk out of both sides of their mouths. And I'm in an industry where this ability is admired, so life is not easy.'

Such righteous fury fuels some extraordinary sounds. Take your chances to fall under her spell this week.

Arwa Haider

Tonight and Thu, Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank SE1, 7.30pm, £17.50 to £20. Tel: 0870 380 0400. www.sbc.org.uk Tube: Waterloo/Embankment



Unique: Diamanda Galás can switch between breathy blues and guttural, otherworldly tones