



# album

## life sentence

Words: Petra Davis

Illustration: Laurie J Proud

### Diamanda Galas

Guilty, Guilty, Guilty (Mute)

#### now, for a time, you are mine

Every year, on Valentine's Day, Diamanda Galas plays a massacre in New York. Stakes out the hearts of the assembled, snakes tales of death-bound love into ready ears. It's a powerful prohibition. This collection is largely taken from the 2006 show at the Knitting Factory. It's not only that rare moth, a successful live document; it is also a beautifully balanced and persuasive argument on our inevitable mortality, and equally of its powerlessness against the love that survives it.

This it has in common with Galas' entire recorded output. This woman is notorious for her complexity and range. Her ability to marry – no, not to marry, to forge – styles and traditions that only make sense together as a gigantic labour of love and rage; her subjects, isolation, dispossession, the cry of last resort at the moment before, or even after, death; contrary to expectation, these sit squarely behind this collection of largely jazz and blues-based covers, including such standards as 'Autumn

## Isolation, dispossession, the cry of last resort at the moment before, or even after, death

Leaves', 'O Death' and 'Heaven Have Mercy'. Though these choices recall her work on 1992's *The Singer*, which gathered gospel and blues under her prodigious crow's wing, she instills them with every bit of the same passion and protest that inhabit her less obliquely political work, such as *Defixiones: Will And Testament* (her 2003 project, describing the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian genocides at the hands of the Turks). These love songs, all but one, have in common a desperation, seeking the possibility of beauty and dignity at crisis point. The strength of her delivery alone is apotropaic – not merely an expression of extreme emotion, but a warning, a hint of the power of the powerless, the secret of the curse in the final breath. Perhaps her interest turns on that moment of extremity, rather than its history, the betrayal and devastation that precede it.

#### so much more than my heart can hold

But it's the one song that does not explore that crisis point that Galas has chosen to centre this collection. 'Interlude (Time)', with pride of place at track four of seven, abandons the certainty and finality of the rest of the songs

to pour a creamy, reverberant vibrato over lines describing the mystery of love's origin. I've listened to this song maybe 40 or 50 times over the last few days, attempting to analyse its power, and my conscious mind slides right off it every time, lulled by its ghostly comfort, its Debussyan otherworldliness. Galas changes the lyric slightly from the 1968 rendition, made famous by tragic blue-eyed soul star Timi Yuro; rather than asking, "Who knows if it's real, or just something we're all dreaming of?", Galas quarantines the character with her imagined lover, addressing the question only to him. Love, this version contends, has the power to destroy time, remake the world, defy the grave, yet it deranges, leaves lovers somehow alone, isolating us in our uncertainty.

#### could be the beginning of love

Galas enjoys mastery of not one, but two, monumental instruments. Armed with an astonishing voice, the woman also plays the piano like the byzantine monster it is. Her background as a teenage concert pianist – her first solo outing with the San Diego Symphony aged 14 – was followed by a lengthy stint in the improvisational jazz scene of Seventies LA, playing with Bobby Bradford and Roberto Miranda (which is like saying you came up as a librarian in Alexandria). And it's not even her primary instrument. Perhaps a more human touchstone, and the one most return to in reference to Galas' blues-based work, is that

she accompanied her father's gospel band on piano as a child. There. Feel better?

Her blues style is percussive and emotive, almost essential. She allows the piano to preempt her swift changes of mood, leaving the songs' sometimes complex narratives to chord changes to convey, and reacting with vocal theatrics as tender as they are extreme. She melds jazz and blues, playing '8 Men And 4 Women' as a gnarly amalgam of both, swapping blues bass hand with lightning strikes of high-register improvised right hand, and adding the honkytonk of silent film – before her voice shifts from 12-bar blues to the indescribable, multi-tonal ululation for which she is most famous.

The album closes with an outstanding performance of Edith Piaf's 'Heaven Have Mercy', which paints lost love as slavery, as much by its juxtaposition to the preceding track, Ralph Stanley's 'O Death', as by the atonal, guttural hopelessness of its misericordian appeal. "Must I stay here in hell? Lord above, let me die," begs Galas, before returning for the last time to the unbearable refrain which is the album's final word.