

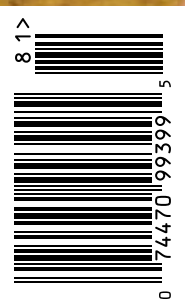
SIGNAL TO NOISE

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diamanda galás

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HEART OF DARKNESS

Singer and pianist **Diamanda Galás** is a performing artist sui generis, a larger than life persona known for bloody stage shows and her banshee scream, who's confronted in her music the AIDS epidemic, the Armenian genocide, mental illness and violence against women. She's also a canny interpreter of music as diverse as Johnny Cash, John Lee Hooker and Diana Ross. Story by **Kurt Gottschalk**. Photos by **Libby McLinn**. Makeup and Styling by **Kristofer Buckle**.

Diamanda Galás is standing in front of a large photograph of a hyena in a gallery in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, clearly enthralled with the tooth-baring canine pictured in front of her. "The way they hold their tongues and their teeth is exactly the way singers are taught to hold their mouths. I'm not a scavenger, by the way," she laughs. "I'm a predator of the highest order."

The singer, at least as well known for her goth appearance and her epic, sometimes bloody, stage shows about viral and governmental genocides as she is for her music itself, cuts a very different figure offstage. She's dressed all in black, of course, with black fingernail polish, but this is New York; here Galás is incognito, East Village casual. Without the severe makeup she wears onstage, she's virtually unrecognizable. But it's not just that—the woman who reacts to requests during concerts by hissing "Do you see a fucking tip jar?" is upbeat, enthusiastic—one might even say... bubbly?

"I've always been interested in hyenas," she says, quickly crossing the small gallery, examining the pictures. "They're horrible—they wait for the other animals to do the kill. They're like little devils—it's something to admire."

The exhibit at the Yossi Milo Gallery, a solo exhibition by South African photographer Pieter Hugo, depicts a Nigerian traveling roadshow, a group of men who travel from village to village with hyenas, pythons and baboons, putting them on parade for tips. The hyena handlers believe that the dancers in the troupe are capable of transforming themselves into animals. "This I can relate to," Galás says. "I don't know why, but I can." Then, admiring the thick woven muzzle and heavy chain leash one of the handlers has on his beast, she announces, "That is some macho shit, dude—having a hyena as a pet."

Diamanda Galás can own a room. There are singers, there are pianists, there are composers, and then there are people with "presence"—that ethereal quality that makes a musician bigger than their music. And if offstage she doesn't exude the same stardom, she can still possess a place. She's an emotive speaker, animated, reliving a fight one moment, laughing about her comeback the next, none of it delivered in language one might reserve for polite company. She's an intelligent, quick-witted pottymouth, and she's nicer than she might want you to know.

We leave the gallery and walk down 9th Avenue to find a café, Galás talking about the changing neighborhood—once rehearsal studios, then galleries, now starting to show signs of boutique invasion—as I run through questions in my mind. It's hard to know what to expect from an interview with Diamanda Galás: Does she hate journalists? Will the wrong question make her get up and walk? We wander into a typical Westside spot—slightly funky, thriftstore antiques. Diana Ross is playing on the radio—a good omen. I resolve to put to her the one question I didn't know if I had the nerve to ask. But before I can say anything, her eyes dart toward the speaker: "Something about her is fucking me up."

Few musicians careers can be as neatly bifurcated as that of Galás. She's well known for her harrowing one-woman shows, with multiple microphones and hundreds of candles, tackling such weighty and controversial sub-

jects as the AIDS crisis, mental illness, political torture and genocide. But she's become just as identified with her interpretations of other musicians' songs, which manage to cross jazz classicism with ironic rock cover versions.

And she manages to keep pushing on both sides of the equation. 2004's *Defixiones, Will and Testament, Orders from the Dead* (Mute), was eight years in the making, an 80-minute commemoration of the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian victims of the Turkish genocides from 1914-1923. It was also, no doubt, an stark examination of her own identity. Her father was Turkish-Armenian, her mother was Armenian and Syrian, she herself identifies as Greek. But while she was working on that, she released two albums of songs: *Malediction and Prayer* (1998, Asphodel) and *La Serpenta Canta* (2003, Mute).

Both contained versions of the Diana Ross song "My World is Empty Without You," a staple of her girl-at-her-piano shows (she freely uses the term "cover version"). It's hard not to laugh when the song comes up in her concert: the music of Ross, as significant a figure in the breaking down of racial boundaries in popular music as she is a queen of schmaltz, being sung by a woman whose tinsel and glitter is the stuff of mortuary fantasy. Collecting my nerve, I ask the question: Do you think there's humor in your music?

She laughs. Cackles, even. "Oh sure, fuck yeah, absolutely. It's fucking hilarious," and then, just as abruptly, turns serious. "Many things can coexist. But it's a song in its own way that tells a story." She recalls starting the song at a concert in Richmond, VA, and turns again, this time to chatty conversationalist. "There were all these queens in the audience—I had to stop 'cause they were giggling so much," she says. "It's inescapable how funny it is. It should have been interpreted by Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Can you imagine?"

The song, for her, goes back to the '80s. "I was coming off of a lot of speed," she says. "I can't remember what was worse, coming off the speed or coming off the person who gave me the drugs." Her explanation adds another level of meaning to her interpretation of the song. It is fucking hilarious, in theory. It's also harrowing. When she sings:

*From this old world / I try to hide my face /
From this loneliness / There's no hiding place /
Inside this cold and empty house I dwell / In
darkness with memories / I know so well*

it isn't funny anymore. It's real. She brings out the isolation and downplays the rhyme scheme. And, Motown via her native San Diego perhaps, it's autobiographical.

"Diana Ross, when she was in the Supremes, she was really singing well," she says. "And I'm a big fan of Whitney. I can't wait for her new record. I love her voice, I love her performances. She's like a hyena. She

sings these mainstream songs like she's having a seizure. She's never flat—even on crack, she knows the changes."

Whitney Houston? She insists she's not joking. I pray we're not playing fuck-with-the-reporter. Doris Day, she insists, is another favorite.

Another *Malediction* song, "The Thrill is Gone," also turns listener expectations upside-down. It juxtaposes image and genre, and brings out the blues in her playing.

"That song is a masterpiece," she says. "The first time I heard it I was ending a relationship and I didn't want to hear the words because I knew the words would tell me the truth. I hear something and I have to do it. I have to. The melody and the changes—it's such a gift to feel that way about cover versions."

As much as she puts herself into other people's songs—and her new record, *Guilty, Guilty, Guilty*, is another disc of covers—they don't necessarily come easily for her.

"The scary part is word memorization," she says. "I've met tons of excons who, man, they can sing, and they know all of the words, more than I'll ever remember."

When she does covers in concert, she doesn't use sheet music. She's been playing piano since she was a child. The music is the easy part. Instead, she uses lyrics propped up on the piano. She remembers, laughing again, a concert where she found herself onstage with two copies of the first half of the lyrics of Johnny Cash's "25 Minutes to Go" (also on *Malediction and Prayer*). The song is essentially a countdown, but she had to quit, chastising the laughing audience.

"Sister Golden Hair," one of the most despicable songs in pop history, comes on the radio. Galás is unfamiliar ("America is the band?") so I explain that it's about a guy who is such a free spirit that he stands his fiancée up at the altar, but that he believes the sometimes "a woman sure can be a friend of mine." La Diamanda is appalled.

"You know what?" she says. "I'm gonna ask her to turn it off."

She rises and goes to ask the server to kill the radio. Rebuffed, she asks "How low can you turn it?" The volume is slightly reduced, and she returns, espousing again before she hits her chair about the value of cover versions.

"Those songs are so sophisticated, and you know what the song is about before the lyrics even start," she says. "The people who wrote those songs, those chord changes, are very sophisticated. A lot of those chord changes come right out of East European music. They all studied Liszt and Chopin. A lot of East European Jews came over and wrote songs that were then covered by people like The Supremes. It was good. It was slick. And The Beatles show up—ugh, I'm sorry. So fucking bubblegum. I just didn't get it. Fucking

overproduction, jumping up and down—when too many people in a room are having a good time, I get really depressed."

"**Guilty,**" released by Mute in March, treads once more down those historic paths. She covers Cash again, with "Long Black Veil," but reaches back deeper into the well with Ralph Stanley's "O Death." She finds the sophistication of the pop tradition with Joseph Kosma and Jacques Prévert's "Autumn Leaves" (originally titled "Les feuilles mortes," or "dead leaves," a title that might have been more appropriate for Galás), as she did on *Malediction*'s "Gloomy Sunday." Those styles—blues- and gospel-based music, jazz and country—have been with Galás her entire life.

By the age of 10 she was playing military bases in her father's jazz band and gospel choir, but singing wasn't allowed for the young girl who would grow up to have a four-octave range. The only women who sing, her father would tell her, are whores. But she learned the elements of blues, jazz and stride piano that still feature prominently in her work.

"I've always had a strong left hand," she said. "Look at these hands. These are man's hands. I grew up playing in my father's gospel choir, and we'd do these four-hour sets without a fake book. He said 'You either have ears or you don't have ears.'"

By 14, she'd performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 as a soloist with the San Diego Symphony. Later she'd study music performance at the University of San Diego, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees while beginning to turn her attention towards avant-garde music and the visual performing arts. In her 20s she played piano around San Diego, continuing to hone her chops while backing visiting free jazz musicians like David Murray, Butch Morris and Bobby Bradford.

By the mid '70s she was living in New York and playing psychiatric institutions through a city-funded program she heard about from two friends at the Living Theater. "There were really sad, awful illnesses," she recalls. "It's nice when people come to you. If someone comes to play music for you, it's probably neat, I guess. But there's nothing worse than being in a place with no family, no visitors, left alone, that will kill you. A lot of my work is about that."

She was also studying the Italian *bel canto* operatic style, and when Slovenian avant-garde composer Vinko Globokar heard a tape of her singing, he invited her to perform the lead role in his opera "Un Jour Comme Un Autre," based on Amnesty International's documentation of the arrest and torture of a Turkish woman for alleged treason, culminating in a now-legendary performance at the 1979 Festival d'Avignon in France that introduced her to a worldwide audience. She toured Europe in the early '80s, both as a solo act and performing with ensembles





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rooted in mana, or “mother”). “I call it a God invented by despair.”

Which is what ties it all together, what makes the Plague Mass and a Diana Ross song parts of the same big picture. The psychiatric institution, the AIDS ward, the POW camp—those are all physical manifestations, the extremes, the microcosms of the isolation of earthly existence.

Her first major works were about the AIDS crisis. Her brother—playwright and activist Philip-Dimitri Galás—was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986 and died the same year, during production of the first part of Plague Mass. Her social circle was filled with gay men and injecting drug users, people with or at risk of contracting HIV. Her work may have moved on to other concerns in the years since, but it remains a political aesthetic that defines her work, and her knuckles still carry the “We Are All HIV+” tattoo, a lifelong reminder of a terrible epidemic.

“Protease inhibitors have helped a lot of people, but then there are people in their 60s who are just starting to get AIDS,” she says. “You’ve got these bug chasers—if you’re in a place without public health insurance, I shouldn’t think that’s a club you want to be

a part of. It’s as if there’s a timeline for this virus—15-20 years and then it ended. That’s absurd. The HIV viruses that have survived are very powerful and people who think they can get past that shit are either stupid or ignorant—they actually believe that it’s over.”

The focus of her work started to broaden after she was diagnosed with Hepatitis C, another potentially deadly virus, in the early ‘90s.

“I had to go through years of chemotherapy to get rid of the virus,” she says. “I got rid of it, but it was a very painful time. That took my mind off the HIV because I had my own thing, and there was no cure for it at the time. What most people don’t know is a lot of people with HIV also have hep B or C, or both of them. And you can’t take treatments for both at the same time.”

Since her first recording (the 12” single, “The Litanies of Satan” backed with “Wild Women with Steak Knives” in 1982), Diamanda Galás has, intentionally or not, courted controversy. She has sung about things most people don’t want to talk about. She performed at St. John the Divine in Manhattan nearly nude and covered in blood. Even her use of language has been criticized. After a concert in Melbourne, critics panned her

for singing in Greek. The next night she joked with the audience, saying in Greek “In New York, in Melbourne, we have these masturbators who all think we’re furniture salesmen.” Half the room laughed, proving it’s not a dead or irrelevant language.

But the anti-Christian charge may be the most serious (and the most apt) criticism hurled at her. After a performance of The Plague Mass in Rome, the Italian government accused her of being “more blasphemous than Madonna,” suggestive of too many associations to even fathom. It also—as such criticisms often do—ignores the deep humanism in her work, as if Jesus would have opposed giving voice to the sick and dispossessed. But such attacks are of little consequence to Galás.

“I just say, ‘Go with God,’” she exclaims, laughing. “If I were to spend time explaining to imbeciles why my music isn’t blasphemous, I wouldn’t have time to make more blasphemous music.” *

Kurt Gottschalk writes regularly for Signal to Noise and All About Jazz. He wrote about Tom Verlaine in STN#41