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Diamanda Galás taps into life and Zeppelin

By Alexander Varty



Pianist and singer Diamanda Galás is famous for her intensity, and that's no less true in conversation than it is

performance. But if her concerts often start with sorrow and spill over into horror, her interviews are punctuated with laughter on both ends of the line.

Although she often performs in sacred spaces—as she will on Saturday (November 29), when she plays St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church, as part of World AIDS Day—she's a wonderfully profane raconteur. Over the course of our more than hourlong chat, she touches on wolf songs, the inadequacies of digital sound, Whitney Houston's brilliance, Wynton Marsalis's ego, plus the slim possibility that she might be tapped to fill in for Robert Plant should Led Zeppelin ever stage its long-delayed "reunion" tour.

Which isn't so strange, really, given that she occasionally makes music with Zep bassist John Paul Jones, notably on their 1994 collaboration *The Sporting Life*. Galás claims that she's been teasing her pal about "his little gig with Zeppelin without the singer".

"I'm just dying," she says, reached at home in New York City. "I'm laughing. But would I do it? Yes. I would do it for a limited amount of time, as if I were doing a musical, like the Ethel Merman role. I would do it for money.

"I have to say that I love John Paul Jones, don't get me wrong," Galás continues. "And, I mean, Led Zeppelin? My God, what a great band! It's just that I couldn't sing 'Communication Breakdown.' I did it once, and that was enough for me."

Galás's repertoire is more likely to be traditional tunes from the Americana songbook and sounds drawn from her own Greek heritage—sometimes simultaneously, as on "O Death", from her most recent release, *Guilty Guilty Guilty*. Yes, it's the Appalachian ballad made famous by *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. But it also includes a wordless, wailing vocal improvisation that sounds almost Turkish.

"Right area, wrong people," she says. "It's Greek, Anatolian Greek." She explains that her Anatolian forebears were known for their musical prowess, and that with "O Death" she's drawing on the eerie funeral laments known as *amanethes*, as she will in her Vancouver performance. This concert is in part a memorial for all those we've lost to AIDS—including the singer's brother, playwright Philip-Dimitri Galás. It's also indicative of the singer's unsentimental approach to matters of life and death.

"Everybody's going to get some stupid virus, and everybody's going to get some kind of cancer or something else, and then we'll meet the challenge and move on," Galás says. "That's what I meant when I had my hand tattooed 'We are all HIV-positive'...that we'll get some fucking thing and then we'll do the best we can with it. And we have to. That's just part of life."