

conversation 1



d i a m a n d a

words > **wesley joost** images > **tom caravaglia** > **rotem**

“When I began the trilogy most of my so-called artistic and business associates tried to discourage me,” she revealed in June 1988. “They said it would be a bad direction. After *Wild Women With Steak Knives*, *Song From The Blood Of The Murdered* and *Panoptikon*, I guess they were hoping that I’d get soft and do something more polite. Well, the music world is full of cowards, idiots, impotence and homophobia. In the face of that level of resistance to my intuition, that attempt to sabotage my vision, I’ve had to say, ‘The Mike Tyson of the voice does not waste time talking about bull—.’”

Diamanda Galás

A funereally dark stage - you can barely make out a river of glassy, raven hair. The only light - three tiny, hypnotic dots of red reflect off the lip of her glossy black Grand. With rumbling jangly blues and subdued classical piano playing, laying the foundation for an astonishing three-and-a-half octave voice, Diamanda Galás mesmerized an ecstatic audience at Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall.

> Never before at any opera or rock performance have I seen such an enthusiastic and adoring response (or a gathering of such cool well-dressed people). For once, the screams of “Brava” were fully justified. Truly brave, she bared her soul and her spirit. During the conclusion of *Insane Asylum*, a song about the terror a boy feels during his incarceration, she released an unforgettable shrill of insanity and despair. Again, truly bravura. With a flawless technique she took her voice where only Yma Sumac has gone before – twice ! Both coloratura freak-outs were identical, perfectly executed, for all their incredible elaboration.

> You do some amazing work speaking in tongues. What are your influences? Did you have to observe schizophrenics to get such a genuine sound?

No, when you have the fortune of being an educated paranoid, you don’t have to actually watch anyone. I’ve been doing that work for so many years now. It is

DGalás is an international vocalist, composer, and performer who was first seen in Europe at the Festival d’Avignon. At Avignon she sang in Vinko Globokar’s opera *In Jour Come Une Autre*, based on the Amnesty International documentation of the arrest and torture of women for alleged treason. From there she went to Paris to record two solo works. In all Galás has recorded twelve albums, including her most recent *Malediction* and *Prayer*, a live album featuring voice and piano

not influenced by anyone, it’s just work I’ve been doing from the very beginning. I never call it anything. People call it things and I let them call it whatever they want. I’ve been to conferences where they got different people who spoke in tongues and tried to get them to speak together – which was completely insane. Because the idea of it is very alien to wanting to communicate with another human being. It’s in a sense of a very anti-social instinct. So the conference was a complete failure because people just looked at each other saying: who the hell are you?

> It’s one of your most intense records.

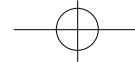
I have been told it is one of the most “unlistenable” ones. I’m very amused, but not surprised, by this because I knew ‘they’ (ha ha) wouldn’t be able to listen to it. But it doesn’t make any difference. If I hear something, it seems irrelevant whether or not someone else can listen to it in deciding whether or not I should lay it down on tape. Once released, it is an object into itself and will remain wholly ignorant of anyone’s assessment.

> Aren’t there commercial problems with your record company when something is so difficult that probably won’t sell very much?

Of course, that’s implicit. Daniel Miller (who heads Mute Records) and I have had these discussions before. He has always been a fan of the most unlikely people, a lot of electronic composers. While he recognizes that certain works are not going to sell, he still knows the worth of them. Miller is the only person who would ever have said in 1986 or in 1996, “Certainly I will support your trilogy dedicated to the AIDS epidemic.” And this was my first project recording for Mute.

Do you see yourself in the tradition of Greek Orthodox mourning women?

Yes. This is not something I thought about when I initially did my work but yes, >>



The ancient
feeling of the
Greeks was
always that
they had one
claw in hell
and the other
in heaven and
that's how
they kept their
balance.

G g a l á s



definitely. It occurred to me afterwards and many people have told me this. I used to do performances in Europe and have people from North Africa, Ethiopia, and Uganda come backstage to talk to me about the work; and they would ask, "where did you come into this tradition of singing? This is a tradition that would be interesting to the people of my country." It's very strange. My mother knows a lot about our relatives and background – the Maniac tradition of the funeral mourning. But my performance approach was not an academic one. Of course later I read about it and this "inheritance" and it made a lot of sense.

> Your re-creations of spirituals are really great. You're there.

Spirituals are American classical music. I am an American, and I am one of the masters of this form. I take it seriously and I have taken this music into another place because I recognize what were and are the political imperatives of the music. Probably one of the only singers who would understand a lot of what I have been discussing about is Nina Simone. Lonesome, lonesome cowboy.

> What is your vocal technique?

I was trained in bel canto, which ultimately was the technique that Wagner wanted his singers to use because it was the only technique that would cut through that huge orchestral sound. He wanted singers to project the sound through the skull with all the facial bone resonances you need to sustain a line in bel canto. I studied that in my twenties because I had to continue to be equal to what I heard as an improviser; otherwise I'd either be a liar on stage or I'd stop performing. In order to make a career, just like an opera singer, I can't just perform once a month and lose my voice. I had to build up a lot of stamina, a lot of power, a lot of physical wisdom about where the sound is placed. So I never hurt my voice singing.

> What do you think of Goths – who seem to be a very large part of your

audience?

I think it's very nice the way they dress. You can never tell anything about a person from the way they dress, but, on the other hand, if someone wants to give me respect and spend a lot of time in front of the mirror looking beautiful for my concert I have no objection whatsoever. In fact my Carnegie Hall concert was the first time Carnegie Hall had what looked like an opera audience for years. These rich people who go to see opera and classical performances now show up in sweat pants. With my audience a lot of them came in full drag. I heard they were devastating...I'm always delighted to know that my audience is doing well.

When you perform are you yourself or are you literally possessed?

I am a different aspect of myself. If you read about Nijinsky you know that when he came off stage he was an entirely different person than when he was onstage. That's a professional. If you come off stage and you're the same way you are onstage, you're probably not very good, unless you are Jussi Bjoerling, who could sing in his sleep. It's as if you're onstage for the first time and you're nervous and afraid and you do your job just like a middle-weight or a heavy-weight, and then when you're done you can sit down and have a conversation with somebody or you can shut up. You don't have to keep hitting people all night.

> Some of your lyrics are satanic, do you literally believe that Satan exists as a personality?

I would say I have nothing to do with the Anton LaVey school of Satanism. I have often called it Las Vegas Satanism and I often regret that because I heard he was a very charming gentleman. The thing that I'm talking about is a very very ancient form of Satanism – as considered the enemy of the religious-political