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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

MIDDLE

Singing Intravenously

By Laura Schmitt

If you witnessed Diamanda Galas' fundamentally brilliant performance at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine a year ago, you know what it means to be killed and resurrected within the space of three hours. You know what it is to see gods, devils, love, hate, beauty, ugliness, horror and inspiration in the same creation. You know what it is to hear the dead and the angry, the living and the damned. Diamanda Galas' voice is not simply an instrument, it is a weapon, used without fear or apology. In the context of Galas' music, "self-discovery" takes on parameters violent enough to destroy listeners' entire realities, leaving them to rebuild and restructure themselves only after a severe and frenzied search for truth.

The most accurate words to describe Galas' music would have to be the artist's own: intravenous song. It is either within you, or you have made it unattainable. Some critics have called her art Satanic, blasphemous, horrifying, and—most ridiculously—invalid, but to see Galas from only these perspectives is to qualify the unqualifiable and to attempt to rope absolutes around something that is ultimately beyond constraint. Galas' music is the most serious and terrifying questioning of society ever to have been conceived on the level of art.

Experiencing Galas is nowhere near traditionally "pleasant;" some sounds she makes are not what one would usually categorize as "beautiful," or even human. And yet to listen to anything Galas has written—from "Wild Women with Steak Knives" to "You Must Be Certain of the Devil" to "Soy La Carne Magullada"—is the most emotionally powerful activity one can undertake.

With a three-and-a-half octave vocal range, every note of which she has strove to perfect, Galas is the ultimate artist. She has often been compared to Jimi Hendrix for her sonic innovation, and the comparison is accurate, if not an understatement (although many would find her much less "accessible" than Hendrix). She can go from full opera voice to gospel, to the most primal and piercing shrieks you will ever hear within seconds. Although known for using up to five microphones at once to create her art, Galas still gives non-amplified performances (sometimes

in mental wards and AIDS wards), often accompanying herself on piano. Galas' mastery of non-vocal sonic manipulation is as thorough as that of her voice, and her singing is partnered ideally with her musical compositions.

Galas started out as a child prodigy at the piano, and has played with Ornette Coleman, David Murray and Butch Morris, among other post-Coltrane jazz artists, but she decided that the voice was the first instrument—the instrument from which most jazz musicians take their styles, phrasings, and sounds. After intensively studying voice in San Diego she moved to New York, where she lives today. Along the way, Galas has, to this date, put out seven recordings of her own music (**The Litanies of**

Satan, Diamanda Galas, *The Divine Punishment*, *You Must Be Certain of the Devil*, *Saint of the Pit*, *Masque of the Red Death*, *Plague Mass*); appeared on four compilations (*Double-Barrel Prayer*, *A Diamond in the Mouth of a Corpse*, *Smack My Crack*, *The Last of England*); and has written a film soundtrack (*Antigone*).

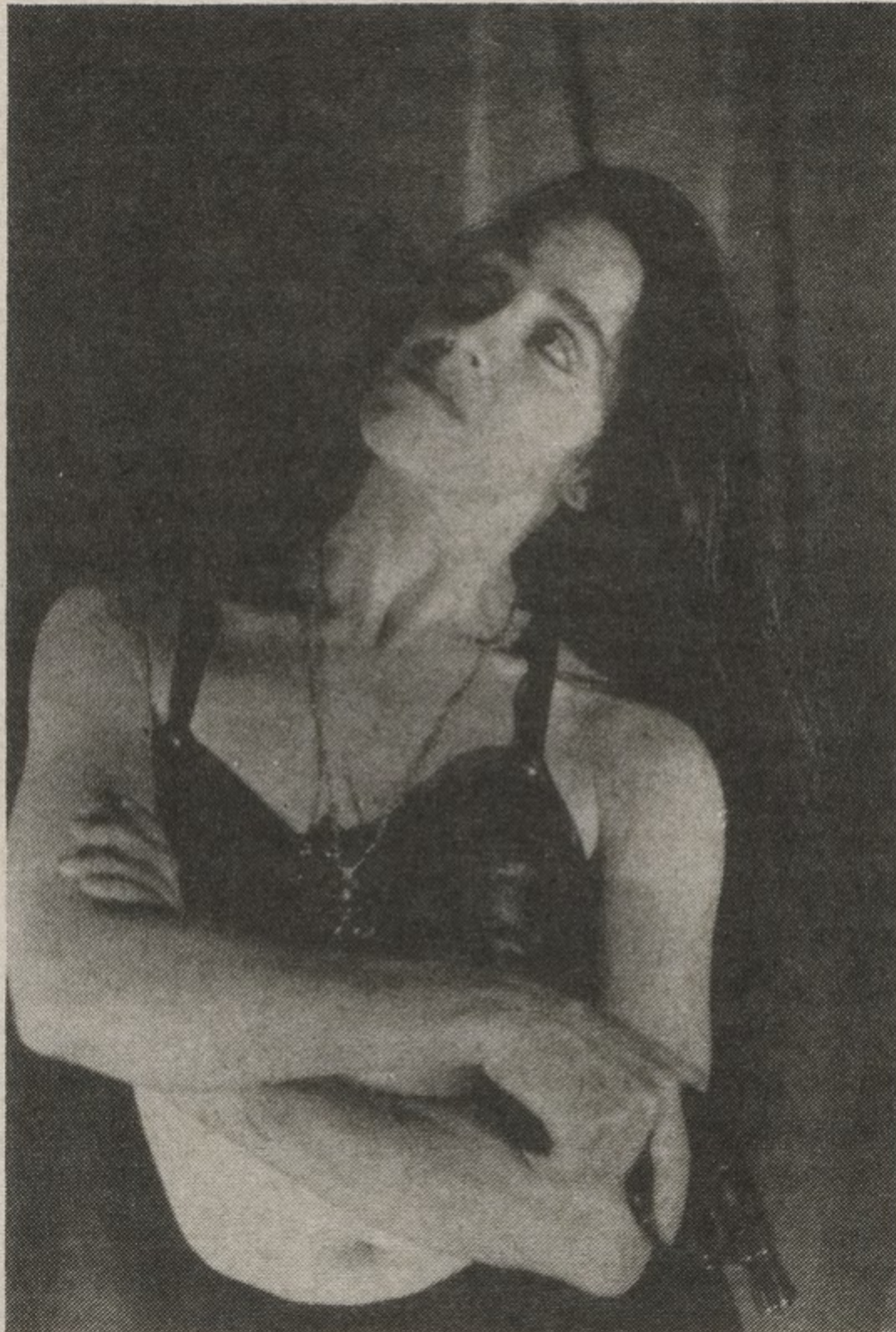
Galas' latest work, *Plague Mass*, was written—and continues to be written—about AIDS. She began it in 1984, and says she will not finish until the epidemic ends. It was performed and recorded (under its then-most-recent name, "Masque of the Red Death"), with a new section, when appeared at St. John's in last year. The text consists of Galas' own words, plus excerpts from the Bible in both English and Italian, works by French poets Gerard Nerval and Tristan Corbiere, and an incantation written by her brother, Dmitri, in Greek.

Plague Mass is not a plea for sympathy, pity or passive mourning. It is a demand for action which is rife with pure rage and pure sadness. The Episcopalian administration of St. John's played it up as a Mass denouncing those who consider AIDS divine retribution—namely Catholics (more specifically, Cardinal O'Connor)—and, granted, this is one of the piece's implications. However, to view it only from the religiously political side is to cloud what is perhaps the Mass' most visceral point: the anger of the dead.

Greek tragedy and Middle Eastern mourning practices are what inform Galas' performance and fuel her musical vision. In those traditions, not only is the anger of the dead acknowledges and sung about, but it is used as a method to incite: to get people to act and to fight. This is the point of *Mass*. Galas purposefully contrasts Judeo-Christian text and ideas with a Shamanistic, ritualistic performance style and brutal vocals and music, then applies this—seemingly contradictory—mass of influence to the tragedy and anger of those involved in the AIDS crisis. She creates the epidemic itself in every sound of the *Mass*. All of Galas' performances are beyond entertainment—and far beyond music

as a placating, assuaging medium; they are violent, urgent, primal and necessary. **Mass** takes this idea of "art as war" to its overpowering and brilliant fulfillment, and will continue to do so.

The tenth section of **Mass** has a text that reads: "I am the scourge/ I am the Holy Fool/ I am the shit of God/ I am the sign/ I am the plague/ I am the Antichrist." Diamanda Galas is all of those things. Within her art she is man, woman, witch, devil, god, goddess, angel, savior. The point of Galas' work is not to sing about, it is to sing what is. Because of this ultimate honesty, confronting Galas' art will remain one of the most challenging, difficult, and intensely necessary undertakings for both audience and critics alike. By confronting Galas and her art, you are forced to confront yourself as well.



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Anger of the living