

Music Notes: Diamanda Galas's homicidal love song

photo: T.J. Eng

She groans, babbles, gasps, screams, shouts, squeaks, and sobs. She rolls on the floor, jackknifed at the waist, her face covered with eerie makeup, desperately clutching her two microphones like a tenuous life-support system. In her own words, her music "is concerned with tendencies towards excessive behavior," and she considers herself not just a professional performer, but an "obsessional" performer. In the past few years, Diamanda Galas has emerged from the west coast as one of the most original, powerful, and downright — the adjective cannot be avoided — **weird** of vocal virtuosi. No one knows how to categorize Galas's work — the terms free jazz, punk, performance art, avant-garde, and even opera have all been applied — but it is never described in anything but superlatives. Her cathartic performances have mesmerized audiences all over Europe and America, and now she is coming to Chicago for the first time, courtesy of the Chicago Interarts Ministry, to perform her "homicidal love song" **Wild Women With Steak Knives**.

The shape of Galas's career has been a strange one. She started out as a classical pianist, playing Beethoven's First Concerto with the San Diego Symphony at the age of 14. Later she began playing jazz piano with her father, a trombonist and bass player. His Greek Orthodox values, which presumed all singers prostitutes, prevented her from singing until her early 20s, when she began to experiment with a virtuosic vocal style developed from free jazz. Friends at the Living Theater convinced her that the mental hospital circuit was the best venue around, so she started performing for the inmates, many of whom loved her work so much that they began imitating it. Another friend referred European avant-garde composer Vinko Globokar to Galas as the one singer who could execute his inordinately difficult vocal score **Un jour comme un autre**, and soon she was performing the works of Globokar and Greek composer Iannis Xenakis at European festivals. Today she concentrates on her own music, using a stunning array of bizarre vocal techniques and sophisticated electronics that allow her to project her voice to any part of the hall.

I called Galas, almost afraid to talk to this woman whose last record so vividly lived up to its title, **The Litanies of Satan** (Y Records Y-18). Would she speak normally to me, or would I have to babble my questions to her in that strange squealing language in which she performs? My interest was only heightened when a charming, almost melodious voice answered the phone. She was almost scared of an interview herself; her performing so thoroughly exhausts her vocal cords that she often has to choose between performing and talking. The ten-minute limit I promised inadvertently lapsed into a very pleasant hour, in which I realized that here was an artist with a consummate awareness of every aspect of her art, and a philosophical understanding and articulateness that few composers or singers exhibit.

I was interested in the oft-cited political nature of her work. She hated having her works tied down to specific political implications. "Most people use politics to sell things," she said, "and I don't want to do that."



"What do you use politics for?"

"I don't use politics; maybe politics uses me."

"Sorry, it was a dirty question."

"Oh, that's all right. People have come up to me and asked if **Wild Women With Steak Knives** is a feminist piece, and when I say no, they insist that they know it is. Anything you think about my work is probably true; but I think that those composers who say that their work is totally inspired by a particular political event are just lying. My art is inspired by everything, my whole life."

"In discussing **Wild Women**, you talk about expressing schizophrenia; what is the importance of that in your work?"

"Oh, it's very important. I'm trying to show the diffraction of the personality, what is accurate about the soul, rather than just what we see — sort of an X-ray vision of the soul."

"Your work strikes me as controversial, yet all your reviews are so wildly enthusiastic. Don't you ever get any negative reviews?"

"Did you hear about that murdered critic in Santa Barbara last year? Don't think I'm someone who takes my press lightly. No, I'm just kidding. I hate to admit it, but I've actually only had a couple of negative reviews. I do get some negative reactions, though. I can't ever perform at the Joseph Papp Theater in New York because they're convinced I'm in league with Satan."

"Just like all the good 19th-century composers were."

"Thank you, it's about time someone pointed that out. I'm inspired by devils, and I'm inspired by angels; I'm inspired by everything."

In addition to **Wild Women With**

Steak Knives, Diamanda Galas will perform **Panoptikon**, a piece for voice, live electronics, and tape that was inspired by (among many, many other things) **In the Belly of the Beast** by Jack Abbott, the convicted murderer that Norman Mailer took as protege. The title **Panoptikon** comes from a model for a prison in which the warden can see everything that is going on, while each prisoner can't see anyone else, and the piece deals with the balance of personalities between the omnipotent and the powerless.

The **Village Voice** called Galas "the most extraordinary, extreme, and honest vocal performer you'd ever want to see." London's **Time Out** magazine said "Whore, saint, demon, lover, madwoman, or angel, there is no other voice in rock, jazz, or the avant-garde with her violence, consuming passion, and pure elemental force." **Down Beat** magazine said "This is 'bitches brew' music — much more than anything else ever similarly titled." And of her own music, Galas has said:

"My performance is like... public brain surgery. You are checking in, and the doctor has arrived. You have paid, and here we are, darlings, and I ain't gonna give you a break, and I'm not sparing you, and you can go to the disco after this is over, but when you're here, you're not at a disco... you're in my office. I think it's serious, and I think it's entertaining. But it's not entertaining in the sense that we can check out and have fun. This is where you check in. If you can stand it."

If you can stand it, check in at the Apollo Theater Center, 2540 N. Lincoln Ave., Monday, February 27, at 8 PM. General admission is \$6, students and seniors \$4. Details at 935-6100.

— Kyle Gann

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