

# NewMusicBox

In the 1st Person : November 2003

**The Politics of Disquiet: Diamanda Galás in conversation with Edward Batchelder**

Monday, August 4, 2003—11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Videotaped and transcribed by [Randy Nordschow](#)

## 1. Defixiones, part 1

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** The first thing I'd like to ask you about is the current project that you're working on. I know that you have two CDs coming out in November, and one of them directly relates to the issue of music and politics. Could you start by talking about it?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Okay. The project is *Defixiones, Will and Testament*. Defixiones means "curse." *Defixios* were lead tablets that were placed in certain places, let's say, on the graves of the dead to either warn people that if they touch the grave, their ancestors would come to a very bad end, or to put curses on, let's say, circus performers, enemies of any kind, and all sorts of things. A person who has done a lot of studying on this is [John Gager at Princeton](#). The purpose that I use it for is to discuss the graves that were decimated and desecrated by the enemies of the [Assyrians](#), the [Greeks](#), and the [Armenians](#) living in [Asia Minor](#), [Pontus](#), and [Thrace](#). These enemies were the Turks. I use this as a basic description of the overall intent of the work, which is that *we will not die in peace*.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** How did you come to be inspired by this particular project? How did you come to work on *Defixiones*?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Well, my father is from, I always say an [Anatolian](#) Greek family but a lot of Greeks object to the word Anatolia because [the Turks use it a lot](#), but it means the "sun rising in the east." It's a Greek word. So, my father is an Anatolian Greek.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** From [Smyrna](#), right?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yeah, he has people from Smyrna, from Pontus, and later Xios, where they went to, and [Egypt](#), who were not actually Greeks, but where part of the family was Egyptian. As most Greeks do, he had family from all over the world. My mother's family is Maniates [from the [Mani region in southern Greece](#)], so they were closer to [Sparta](#). But he told me all the stories about his relatives jumping, running, rushing into the sea from the Turks, not knowing where else to go. He told me a story of one person who saw a boat coming and he didn't know whether it was Turkish or Greek, and it was a Greek boat. He has told me stories many, many times. And he's told them over and over again, and the reason he's told them over and over again is because they're very traumatic to him and they're very traumatic to the person who told him, which was his father. Then I saw the book by [Peter Balakian](#), *Black Dog of Fate*. I recognized it as being fraternal to the stories that I heard from my father, and this was about the Armenian genocide and the desert marches that they also went through, like the Pontic [[Black Sea](#)] Greeks. Then I felt very sure that somebody else understood what I was thinking about because I've been thinking about this for a long time. I felt so isolated in knowing how I was going to create this work and so forth. I had some very nice talks with Balakian and also Marjorie Housepian-Dobkin, then eventually my friend Sofia Kostas, and many other people.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** So, in short, like your earlier work about [AIDS](#), it grew out of a very direct, personal experience.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Which you then extrapolated on, the way you extrapolate with all of your work.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes. You don't hear these stories for 20 years, and then forget them. You don't.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** It's part of the process of memory.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** And part of this process of memory seems to be remembering the dead and the way they died. Because even if the story is 100 percent factual, it also plays a certain role in the psyche of the people, regardless of the exact fact content. Hopefully it's not totally unrelated to the facts, but psychologically, we all operate with a history that's been passed down to us.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** That's right. There's also the feeling that I had experienced for many years, which is of course as a person who is a Middle Eastern Greek on my father's side. Most people think of [Turkey](#) as [Turkish—Ottoman](#) Turkish or Turks afterwards or "Turkish"—they don't realize that Turkey was the center of [Byzantium](#), and the center of the greatest [Eastern Orthodox](#) cultures. There was a gigantic amount of sharing of music and literature among all of these groups of people. Then the Turks, wanting to purify the race and get the money off everyone who they felt were wealthier and more ambitious, decided to obliterate the population and take the wealth. We see the same thing happening just with the Assyrians. "Let's get rid of the population and let's take the wealth." Nobody is interested in the Assyrians in [Iraq](#), I can tell you. They are treated like garbage by everyone, by every "special interest" group in Iraq, etc. So you have these gigantic treasures that have been moved. Their legacy has been moved and obliterated. I have friends who are Assyrians who get horrible calls from other groups of people saying, "There are no Assyrians left. You're lying. You're not an Assyrian. There are no Assyrians left." This kind of thing.

## 2. Defixiones, part 2

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** One of the things that I thought was interesting about the [Defixiones](#) CD—at least the version of it that I've heard—is that for a project that relates, as you've said, to the [Armenian](#), [Assyrian](#), and [Greek genocides](#) under the Turks in the '10s and '20s, you've chosen texts from all over the world.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** You have a text by [César Vallejo](#). You have a text by [Paul Celan](#). You have texts by Armenian, Assyrian, and Turkish poets as well. There is obviously a deeper thread that links this than merely the topical issue of the Greeks, the Armenians, and the Assyrians; can you talk a little about that?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** The subject in common is that of being a person who is invisible to much of the population. For example, the genocide of the Armenians, the Greeks, and the Assyrians is

something considered inconsequential to the major powers. So people try to cover it up because it just gets in the way of the more important, let's say, [business activities between the United States, Turkey, and Israel](#). Nobody wants to discuss it. So this is something that is buried constantly.

This is also very related to the idea of these poets in exile, whose texts I used, and obviously to [Siamanto](#), the Armenian martyr and poet who wrote about the burning of the Armenian women in the desert by the Turkish soldiers. But it also relates to César Vallejo because he writes about being a poet in [Peru](#) and being somebody that nobody had any respect for, an unknown. He was writing to some degree about being a [mestizo](#) there. He was writing about being a person who had no identity there, but he was also writing about being a great poet and no one being able to recognize anything that he was talking about. So he writes this poem and describes himself as these kinds of animals, the most wretched of the earth, a person who is undistinguished in any way and wakes up in a little room, looks at himself in a mirror, and wants to blow his head off. Actually, so many of the poets that I work with did commit suicide or were people who were constantly on the move because they were treated like outlaws. Celan was not able to escape the tragedy that his parents experienced. Even with the amount of cathartic writing that these people did, it was still something that stayed in the brain—this feeling of isolation that is like a potential bullet in the brain.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** With *Defixiones*, and also to a certain extent your AIDS work, it also struck me that it might be possible to say that the work is less about the specific tragedy, atrocity, or whatever you want to call both AIDS and the genocide, than it is about the way in which the culture responds to it. In other words, there's the issue of AIDS, which is in a sense kind of a medical and social issue, and then there's the issue of how the government and people at large feel about it. There's the issue of the atrocities that went on under Turkey in the '20s, and there's also the issue of how Turkey and the United States, and Israel to a certain extent, are reacting to it. It's the machinery that again stifles the voice, keeps people in isolation even after that original catastrophe has taken place. If there is any political focus in your work, it seems to be addressing that issue rather than the original atrocity.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Well, I think all of the above, in other words, both. These voices are often stifled that you're talking about, but often they're not even heard. They're often very loud voices, but they're not heard. They're not told to be quiet, they're just simply not reviewed, they're not in the press, they're not written about, and they're not published. There were many authors that were published that have been objectionable and have set up—I mean since the classic French literature—with their publishing house a kind of blasphemous receipt from the press to use it to con people into buying the book, you know, to get a lot of press. There has been a kind of manipulation, let's say, of the public and the press, and then the liberal press. We've seen a lot of this crap, but they're still published.

That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the people who are not published because they're really saying something that people really don't want to hear, and people are afraid to write anything about them—afraid to write anything negative, positive, or *anything*. That's the position of a lot of the people I'm talking about in the Armenian, Assyrian, and the Acheulean genocide because of the relationship between, let's say, Turkey and America, the relationship between Turkey, Israel, and America, and the providing of arms to both, and because of these very incestuous relationships. So, a lot of journalists who consider themselves to be pro-Israel or whatever, they're not going to write anything against the Turks, or they're not going to write anything against Israel, they're not going to think of themselves, they're not going to write anything. They're not even going to discuss the issue except to tell the Armenians what they always tell them: "Don't you think you should get over it?"

And my answer to that is, okay, what do you mean by that? I had everything taken from me, I had my property taken, my graves were dug up and my ancestors were buried in a hole. I don't even

know where to find the bodies to bury them properly—I mean these were mass graves. We certainly understand the meaning of mass graves from other holocausts. But this one should be anonymous! And this one should be unremembered. So, what are these people supposed to do? In the state of disgrace and invisibility are they supposed to go to old folks homes where they can comfortably lose their minds? Are they supposed to drink themselves to death? What are they supposed to do as people who are just human receptacles of nothing, and who are not heard? I don't know. There is an expression that my friend Michael Flanagan and a friend of his, John St. James, used when addressing the AIDS epidemic: death by media. Which is that most of the media was responsible for actually killing people with AIDS, making them commit suicide, giving them a sense of despair. And with [hepatitis](#), I must say, because the articles you read in the newspapers are just so *not* where the state of medical practice is now, it's very discouraging. This kind of reception in the media that tells people to shut up and that their pain is of no importance to anyone is the kind of thing that can drive a person completely crazy. That means a number of things, but with no will to live, you know, there are very few options.

### 3. Isolation and the Artist's Responsibility

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** You've connected this sense of isolation...I was thinking about that quote that you sent me about your experience of being in the hospital...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** That experience was analogous to this. I talked to you earlier about being in the hospital with [hepatitis C](#) after a certain operation that I had and having no nurses come in to see me because it said on the door "Warning: Blood Disease blah, blah, blah." All they were supposed to do was give me a glass of water and leave it on my nightstand. But they would leave the water near the door and I was not able to get up and get this water. And they wouldn't give me the medicine that I asked for, sleeping medicine, so I was only on [morphine](#). So, I was up all night. I couldn't sleep. I was up all night in this complete state of isolation. I would ask people to help me by pressing a buzzer, and there would come down from the ceiling a loud voice saying, "What do you want?" I had just been stitched up, so I couldn't scream at the ceiling for them to hear me. I'd say something, and they'd say, "Say that again!" It was as if I was a person locked up in a box. It was impossible for me to communicate with anyone, and no one wanted to communicate with me. I think it's very difficult to understand unless a person had experienced it in one way or another.

But that experience reminded me again of the subjects that I constantly deal with in my work, because when you can't sleep, and you're in a position of isolation, then this means that you're open to everything, but you're in a situation that is completely closed. So your mind keeps racing, but you can't escape. It's like an animal clawing at the inside of a box trying to get out. You're not stationary. They put you on these kinds of medicines so that you can't move. Like in mental hospitals they use a drug called Haldol, or something, where the patient looks stationary—they call them *patient management* drugs. So they say, "The patient looks alright, the patient looks alright." The patient is, perhaps, unable to form the words to articulate what he or she needs. But it's fine, because to the nurses the patient *looks* alright. Everything's fine, and nobody's running down the halls or anything. And this is the horror that people like [Dalton Trumbo](#) have addressed, and so many other writers have addressed—soldiers who have had their limbs shot off and they're keeping them alive, it's this kind of horror. And I return to it clearly because it's something that I understand on a deep level. So, this is the thread throughout this work and all my other work.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** In some ways what you're saying is that you're attempting, out of your own experience of isolation, to articulate the experience and give voice to all the people who didn't have the possibility of speaking?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** People have said that. I don't think it's my right to say that or to even assume it. If people say that, it's a compliment. That's a very nice thing to say, but I'm not a folk singer and I don't make those pretensions. I just do the work that I think is good, and if people relate to it, that's wonderful because every performer wants an audience. Without an audience, I'd be in that chamber of isolation, just doing this all alone, all the time. I wouldn't be able to pay my rent, which would really put me in isolation—I could live in some homeless place. I do support myself doing this stuff.

So, everybody needs an audience. But I never make any presumptions about who gets it. When I was doing *Plague Mass* years ago, I got a lot of flak for that: AIDS lady, diva of disease, and all this crap. Even in '84 people were saying, "There's no art about AIDS. You can't do art about AIDS." And I said, what aspect of the epidemic are you saying that I can't do art about? Because, as with anything, when we talk about exhausting the materials and resources about AIDS, about this epidemic, there are many millions of subjects, many concerns about it. When, if you've started something like this, would you feel that you're qualified to stop writing about it? When would you feel that you had exhausted all of the variables? I've only touched a small place about the epidemic, just a small thing, you know. That's how I think about it.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** That actually sets up my next question, which is, do you have any sense of responsibility to those people that you might be speaking for? Which, obviously you're saying, that because you don't take on the burden of speaking for them...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** No, I don't...

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Do you feel the sense that, "Well, I really should be doing music that they might like, or I should be doing something that they might recognize themselves in?"

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** No, because a person who thinks like that is taking a thermometer and putting it up the ass of their audience, thinking that they can take their IQ. You can't. You can't know how smart someone is in the audience. You can't know where they're coming from, what their tastes are, what they're going to like. People will say, "Well, the sick people who are very, very sick are not going to want to listen to the kind of stuff you're doing." Incorrect. I've had so many people come up to me who are very, very sick, or who came to *Vena Cava* over and over again because they were very sick, and because they were sick of hearing AIDS songs as a kind of tokenistic gesture towards them—"I care about you, and I got one song on my million-selling CD about you"—so they would come to some of my shows and I would be talking about the state of dementia or the state of depression that is similar to dementia, and they would enjoy it because they could relate to it.

So at first, when I received the criticisms about the work being too harsh to a lot of people, it did hurt me because I thought one day that I saw someone, a boy sitting with his mother at one of my shows, who looked really sick, and I thought, how can I do this music? He looks so sick, and how can I do this harsh music? Is there nothing comforting about my music? It really, really bothered me a lot. And then I thought, if I'm interested in doing therapy, then I should be a therapist. And if I want to be doing that, it's a separate profession. As a matter of fact, I did do it as a separate profession. I did go into hospitals with groups of people that I knew. We would visit people and sing really pretty songs that they would request. I took requests from my fake book and everybody would sing while I played piano, everything from "Blue Moon" or "Bali Hai" to whatever... you know, everything. But that's a separate gig, you see. And I'll do that. I can play any fake book song—I played those gigs with my father—but I know the difference between therapeutic music and what it is that I actually do. One should know the difference. One could do both. You could do both... But I'm not here to lie to people either, oh yeah, I'll tell you what some comfort is. What's the comfort, you know? What's the comfort?

#### 4. Empowering Music and Political Action

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** On the topic of comfort, I was talking with a friend of mine about this, and one of the points he made is that he thought that empowering music—what you might think of as therapeutic or empowering music—would actually work against political action because it can give people a false sense of power, which then works against them actually seizing real power. The confrontation with the real despair and difficulties that people live in everyday, but don't necessarily want to face, the confrontation with that actually reminds them of their powerlessness and that might be an effective spur to action. People might be far more likely to take action if they really recognize the circumstances of the situation than if they have a false sense of it: I'm empowered because I'm a woman, I'm empowered because I'm black, because I'm gay, any of the multiple viewpoints people choose to identify with.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** I had some woman's group, I won't name them, asking me to participate in a scream-out somewhere in the East Village. I wrote them and said, my dears, don't you think at this time in history that we are capable of a little bit more sophistication in addressing these issues? I mean, I'm not going to get my [Girl Scout outfit](#) on and go over there and stand in my knickers and start screaming like some goddamn moron. Excuse me, I don't mean to denigrate the [Girl Scouts](#). My mother was a Girl Scout. But this is like ...

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Now we're going to get irate letters from the Girl Scouts of America...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yeah, I apologize. I didn't mean to say that ...alright, the Brownies, what the hell. But I mean, it's like, girlfriend, don't insult me and don't think I'm going to be a part of this kind of crap. Use your brains. Oh, we're all going to scream about [Bush](#). I said what are you going to do, get your sound from the latrine? I'm sure he'll be listening. Koutamares!

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** I went to a number of anti-war demonstrations in Nashville [leading up to Iraq](#). One of the things that became clear to me was that an awful lot of the demonstrations were more about bolstering the emotions of the people who attended them than they were about disrupting the emotions of the people who were being...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** That's true. That's true. You know, fair enough, far out. If you want to have a party, right on! I'm just not ...I may rail against the feeling of isolation; nonetheless I'm comfortable with a certain degree of it, and very uncomfortable in groovy scenes - [*laughs*] very, very uncomfortable!

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** That reminds me of two things. One is: didn't you experiment with [isolation chambers](#) at one point...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yeah.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** ...very, very early, actually, before your career?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** At some point in the very beginning, I knew that I was going to work with a voice. I guess I knew it at the same time that I started to work in [anaechoic chambers](#). I worked in anaechoic chambers because I didn't want anyone to hear me outside the door because I didn't know what the hell I was doing and I didn't want anyone to know that. And I wanted to be uncensored. I didn't want to be performing. I didn't want to have to worry. I wanted to be free to say anything in a completely, some would say, musical situation blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But it was like that. I was also experimenting with [LSD](#) and all sorts of stuff. I'd go in there in a situation, like an anaechoic chamber on LSD, and do these vocal things. Now, you know, I don't

know anything about what LSD did to my mind—I don't know anything about that. The speed they mixed in it probably screwed me up more than anything else [*laughs*].

The situation with the anechoic chamber is so interesting because even if you scream, you get no reverberation back. Just as people can't hear you outside, you also can't hear the reverberant sound of your voice in the chamber. It's a very unrewarding circumstance in which to express yourself. It was purely so that no one would be able to hear, or judge, or know anything. I started the performances I did in darkness for that same reason, because I didn't want anyone looking at me. And then I would do performances with my back to the audience because I didn't want anyone looking at me. I'm much better than I used to be about it, but even now I've often used very dim lighting because I really want to be separate from the audience, very separate from the audience. I often get these comments like, "You don't go out into the audience," and, you know, "You don't talk to the audience," and all this. Well, if I were doing that, I'd go to [Las Vegas](#). I mean, if that were my aim ...As Kenneth Gaburo said to me a long time ago, "It's not what you intend to do that is the issue, it's that you're able to go through with it, you're able to realize what you intend to do." It's not for me to judge whether somebody is making a mistake by going to Las Vegas, you know what I mean.

## 5. Love Songs

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** You said in one interview, "In America, they'll starve you to death for not writing love songs."

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** [*laughs*]

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** But it occurred to me that actually you sing a lot of love songs, that they're all love songs.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yeah.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** And with something like "My World Is Empty Without You," you take it to such an extreme of almost psychotic breakdown because of the abandonment of love.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Exactly.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** So, you turn those songs into, in some way, not political statements, but statements of the same sort of isolation?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Well, there is a line that I've used, but many other people have used permutations of it, obviously in their own ways, which is: An artist must learn to embrace his or her own limitations. And I embrace mine, [*laughs*] being that I'm clearly interested in only one subject, which is isolation, this horrible state of isolation that you get to going through the extremes of any experience. Even if I do a love song, I turn it into a song about bereavement, or an isolating, torturous experience. I like to take something and exhaust it...exhaust it! That's another thing I had discussed a little bit—perhaps with Gabourel, I'm not sure, I think so, though—choosing the variables that you're going to work with and then wasting them, just ripping them, using them, permuting them over and over again until you find what the essence is of that. And that's what I like to do with a song.

Someone will say to me, "What are you doing something like *Insekta* for, or *Schrei 27* for, or *Plague Mass*, and then you go and do "My World Is Empty Without You Babe," and blah, blah, blah. "What's your aesthetic anyway?" I say, what's your fucking aesthetic! I mean, don't you

understand what I'm doing? You would never tell a filmmaker, you know, "Why did you do a film about the bad boys in New York and then you did a film about this, and then you did a film about this..." But musicians are asked to put themselves in these locked cases. On the other hand, you'd say, why did [Xenakis](#) write string quartets, then do computer music, and go back to writing string quartets? It's the same kind of thing. It's *what* you do with a song. It's not that you do a song, it's what you do with it. I feel that with all the songs I do—I'm working on [Edith Piaf](#) and even [Marlene Dietrich](#), and all these songs—I like them, they become very cathartic, but not in an undisciplined sense at all. They become cathartic because I take them and master what the chord changes are because the chord changes alone tell you the story. You don't even have to know the words, the chord changes tell you everything. Then I work very carefully with the words and perform it so many times that I understand the essence of the song. It's the same thing, I think, as composing. I really don't see any difference.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** In many ways, you rewrite the songs.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Well, let me just disagree with that because there are people who do rewrite the songs, and I don't approve of that, actually. I feel that if they want to rewrite the songs, then they should write their own songs. And a lot of people who rewrite songs do it unintentionally because they can't play the chord changes, let's say, to a Supremes song, which are very sophisticated chord changes, like the Edith Piaf songs which were written by a lot of classical music composers who really were orchestral writers. She often performed with orchestras, as well. If somebody goes and does something like "Heaven Have Mercy" and then plays it with three chord changes when there are 20 chord changes in it, they're not telling the right story. They're not telling the same story. They can say the same words, but they're not telling the same story. They're simplifying something, they're making it into something wrong. So, I don't rewrite it. I obey every, every instruction of the composer—the person who wrote it—but, in the sense, I interpret it. But through interpretation you learn so much about composition, that's what I mean.

## 6. Political Content

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** There are two questions that I'd like to follow up on that go in totally different directions. What I would like to ask you first, because you're talking about music and because when anyone touches on the subject of music and politics, it is often understood to be the text content of the song—that a political song is a song that carries a political message in the lyrics. Yet, I think at least from the '60s onward and even before then in debates about other art forms, there is a sense that there is a radical form, which, in and of itself, can have a political message even if the text is not specifically political. Even if you're not going out and singing the "[Internationale](#)" or singing songs about the workers at the barricades, there can be a sort of experimental form which liberates people's minds from a certain way of thinking and can have a political message. When you talk about the chord changes telling the story in and of itself...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** That's right. That's precisely the right analogy. For example, [Xenakis](#) did political music, but the sound of it was also saying what the words were and the words were very limited. There might be a word repeated over and over again, or something like this. Many people have said to me a long time ago, "If you're so interested in the [AIDS epidemic](#), why don't you write very simple songs about the AIDS epidemic so people can hum the songs?" I'm not interested in being the next [Maiakovsky](#). I'm not interested in music as propaganda. I'm not employed by anyone. I'm not a politician. I'm not running for office. I'm not interested in any of that. I'm only expressing my opinion of a situation that bothers me, and that again puts me into that pit that I go into which allows me to create something I feel that I need to create. So, I'm doing it for myself. The scream that comes out of my work, it's not possible for me to dilute, or do it any other way. I couldn't. Again, the words are the same as the sound.

I feel that a lot of artists ...especially there was this [Jesse Helms period](#) where people were drawing these gigantic penises to shock Jesse Helms. Of course he never saw any of them, but all these college students were drawing them, and artists were drawing them and putting them in art galleries. I was like, listen baby, you know, what is that? What is that? You think that that has any effect on anything? An artist is supposed to predict the future, they're supposed to be a visionary. You're not supposed to respond to an article you read in the [Village Voice](#) for Christ's sake. You're supposed to have a little more sophistication than that. I just feel that politics is never an excuse to make a simple-minded statement. If the work, as art, is not good enough, then I really don't care what a person has to say to me because I'm not going to listen to it. You can put a message on anything. A person can make a painting that is completely yellow and say this is about hepatitis. And you can say, I can't argue that. I can't argue with the artist that it's about hepatitis. But essentially it's just a fucking yellow, boring-ass painting, you know. And there it is, so what? That's no better than going to a mental hospital and seeing someone slam his head against the wall and say the same word 25 times—except they make a lot more money doing it.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** You've spoken some about your sense of form and you've spoken about some of your reasons for performing works which—at least in terms of subject matter—are political, but it's clear that your motivations for performing it are not political in a conventional sense. Yet there's a sense that part of your intention in performing this work is to draw people's attention to some political injustice and to motivate them to rise up against it. You said to me once that you didn't think that your work had anything to do with politics, and that you thought of political action as something totally separate. What conception could you imagine, or what definition could you give to politics, that would enable your work to be seen as political?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** I think, for example, if I wanted to have the most direct effect on the AIDS crisis, then I would be working with my friends that have been working in underground AIDS treatment organizations or raising money for AIDS research. I think I would be doing very direct work like that. No matter how good the art is and no matter how direct the art is in response to an epidemic per se, it certainly isn't the most political thing you could do. It's quite removed, as a matter of fact, from the most political thing you could do. I mean, I'm not a doctor who is spending time working with people with AIDS. That's what I'm saying. That would be the most political work I could be doing. Doing this research that so many organizations have done. That's why I always say, don't call me too much of an activist. I might be an *activist* for an artist. I might be an activist because of the subject material, or by default. But I would never define myself as an activist in the sense that they are. I couldn't, that would be erroneous. That would be completely erroneous.

## 7. Lyrical Content

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** The other thing I wanted to talk more about is your choice of texts. We touched on it a little bit earlier with *Defixiones*. The first music I heard when I became aware of your work was *Malediction and Prayer*. As I looked through all of your other work I noticed you draw extremely freely from a wide range of styles. I'm wondering if you see any political importance in that alone? Is there a political repercussion in doing [Ornette Coleman](#) next to a [rembetika](#) song, next to a gospel song, next to a [Pasolini](#) song?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** I don't know about that. I just know that for me not to do that music would be lying. For me that would be saying, okay, I can relate to [Johnny Cash](#) but I can't relate to Ornette Coleman, or saying that I can relate to Ornette Coleman but I can't relate to whatever. Rembetika, you know, I've heard it all of my life without always knowing what it meant when I was very young. People have to tell the truth. I have to tell the truth. That's what I mean by being invisible in this culture. Not only the dead are invisible, the living are invisible, no matter what we do. "What do you mean you're singing Ornette Coleman?" Or "What are you singing [the blues](#) for?"

Let me tell you something, if you don't change or *refresh* the blues, then the blues is going to be a dead coffee table tradition. If you tell people, "You're the one to do the blues, you're not doing the blues, you're not doing this, you're not doing rembetika, and you're not singing country music," what's going to happen to the music? It's going to die. I sat with, I guess it might have been the Golden Jubilee Singers—some [gospel](#) singers—on a plane once and they said, "You know, people think that all we do is study gospel music and listen to other gospel records. We listen to country all the time and we get inspiration for our next songs through country. We listen to classical music, we listen to ads on the television, and we listen to this." It's the same thing, you know.

For me the [Middle Eastern musical](#) influence—the [scales](#) from the Middle East which are so different and so ornate next to [the pentatonic scale](#)—which is [the West African legacy of the blues](#)—is something that can be a great addition to [the blues scales](#). You can't just hammer down a fuckin' scale for the rest of your life. That's what you have in this country with all these [rhythm & blues](#) singers singing the same blues scales. I don't care how many singers rip off [Whitney Houston](#), she ended the line and they just keep ripping her off and ripping her off. It's because they're exploiting the same scales. They're not going outside the culture. They're not interested in the Middle Eastern culture except to sample it on a record because it's tokenistic music—"They're just a bunch of Arabs and Greeks" and whatever. That's a mistake. So what I do is take these musics, and I don't combine them to be interesting or to create a fusion, I just tell the truth about what I hear, and in that form make the music new. That's why I'm capable of singing "Lonely Woman" by Ornette, because you gotta be a great singer to sing "Lonely Woman." If you're not you shouldn't touch it. I've heard people touch that song before. I've heard hysterical versions of it—man, they should just be hippie anthems because they're so ridiculous.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Do you have some sort of consciousness about what text and what music you select to illuminate a particular work? For example, it seemed to me as I listened to [Plague Mass](#) that you draw on a lot of gospel work, whereas in [Defixiones](#) you draw on Byzantine music.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes, that's true. The [Roy Acuff](#) song "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" was the central song for [There Are No More Tickets to the Funeral](#) [a section of [Plague Mass](#)] and that's one of the particular gospel areas that you're talking about. That song was handed to me directly by my father because he had this gospel choir that came to the house. For many years he was a gospel director. They sang all these songs, all these songs. "Holy, Holy, Holy," "There's a Balm in Gilead," and a lot of the songs I recorded. So I grew up with gospel, [Byzantine](#), and [flamenco](#) music all at the same time.

## 8. Early Influences

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** When you talk about that range of influences, and the way that you talked about the culture of the [Ottoman Empire](#) earlier, you talk about it in the way that people talk about America being a mongrel culture; a culture without a firm sense of division between different races, different ethnicities, and different religions. If you go to [Memphis](#) and you go to the [music museums](#) there, it's very clear at a certain point that there was an incredible mixing going on between the early blues tradition, the early country tradition, the early folk tradition, that those things weren't distinct categories.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** That's right. [Ray Charles](#), one of my heroes, did an interview and they said, "Well, what do you do? Gospel, blues, do you do country music?" He said, "Why do I have to make that decision? I'm a musician, I don't make those decisions." And since I was five years old when I was playing at the piano my father would put the fake book in front of me and say, "Okay, now you've seen the fake book, now I'm putting it away." He'd take his bass out and I used to do

gigs with him when I was 13, and I didn't have a fake book. We just went through four hours every night of every song from, I've said this before, "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" to "Kansas City," to bam-bam-bam, to everything. I just had to recognize the changes, I couldn't stop in a middle of a song. I never thought about it. Then he'd do "Volare" and then he'd sing a Greek song. Just like any real musician, I came up doing all music.

Again, when we talk about the categories it's like saying to [Leontyne Price](#), "You better not sing opera because you're black. You better not sing [Italian opera](#). And let me tell you something, you do not have the genetic predisposition to..." That is just a bunch of garbage! One of the greatest singers of the Italian repertoire, an incredible singer! It's garbage. It's reflective of the same thing that we're talking about that the Turks did, which is to try to sterilize a country with the objective of racial purity. You can't do it. You can't do it. You can't tell a person not to hear what he hears. When a person hears what he hears, he plays what he hears. We have these idiots in New York like [Wynton Marsalis](#) and all these morons at the higher centers of culture like [Lincoln Center](#) who are playing the same old permutations, and they've screwed lots of innovative jazz musicians out of a living. They're just recycling the same old trash and they've been doing it for years. Let me tell you, man, if they want the music to stop, it will stop. It'll stop. They'll be good for it. Maybe one of them will kick off soon and somebody else can take their place. Who knows?

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Can you talk some about your relationship to all these different influences?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** They are completely separate scales, and they have different temperaments and subtleties of emotions associated with them. If you're going to sing the work "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" a gospel song written with a blues scale—what people correctly call Afro-American music, I would call it Afro-American operatic music, really—then you have to be consequent to what that tradition is, as I am and was. What I was doing by singing that song was to show the idea of a crucifixion as one of the most painful ways to die: showing the breaking of the spinal column slowly, showing the blood, and showing the body after days of decay. There was a word that was used called [horripilation](#). It was a type of torture practiced by the Chinese. They would give the victim [opium](#) and start chopping off body parts one at a time—just ripping small parts off the body. I wanted people to understand what happens, instead of just seeing the song as: "Let's discuss it *ex post facto*, let's discuss it in a requiem sense." This music isn't for those who are standing by a grave and saying, "Oh well, I may not have been there when the person was suffering, I may not have been there when the person was in pain, but now I've come to his funeral and I'm so sorry he suffered but he's no longer suffering." Well, those of us who see someone dying can't think like that. We certainly can be glad that the person is no longer suffering, but we cannot escape the remembrances of all those days of anguish that the person went through. It's an inescapable nightmare. So, what I did with the song, what I do with all these songs, was to dissect it, the words and melody. You hear a lot of the multiphonic singing that I'm known for and so forth, but it's part and parcel of how I consider the song to be sung, with this crucifixion in mind.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they nailed him to the cross?  
[Were you *there*? Or were you *not* there?]  
Sometimes it causes me to wonder, wonder, wonder  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

So, I go into detail about this. It's a dissection of the subject. Yes, that's why it starts off with gospel, but "This Is the Law of the Plague" and a lot of the other work. "Sono L'Antichristo" is actually more Byzantine sounding, and certainly *Cris D'Aveugle* is...

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** There are moments when I hear a foreshadowing of the *Defixiones* project.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes, that's true. In a sense, an artist does tend to repeat him or herself in a way—also because of the Byzantine sound of the music and scales that are used in "Blind Man's Cry." I was often very much at a loss as to how to combine certain parts of the three or four albums that I did dealing with this subject because they struck me as very dissimilar, and they *were* dissimilar. So I eventually composed new work that united parts of the work that made sense and it became *Plague Mass*, not arbitrarily at all. A lot of new work had to be composed to write *Plague Mass*. I spend a lot of years dealing with the AIDS epidemic. I'd say from '84 to '91. I didn't stop, because *Vena Cava* continued after that in '92, which was more specifically about AIDS dementia and the depression that seems to look like AIDS dementia so people think that AIDS dementia has arrived before it actually has in certain people who are sick. Anyway, *Schrei* still calls back to that as well. I don't see that as a project that is ever completed and I said that. It isn't completed. How could it be completed? I said until the end of the AIDS epidemic, and we're certainly not at the end of the epidemic. We are doing much better in the United States in many ways, but still the situation with protease inhibitors, a lot of people are exhausted by that. It doesn't always work for everyone.

## 9. Reception

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Can you talk a little bit about how your work is received? I know that when you perform in Europe, you perform in much more of a concert hall situation than you do in the United States.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Oh, yeah.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** The perception of your work there is quite different there than it is here.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes. It's completely different. There's no comparison. I perform for very large audiences there compared to New York. I could not afford to perform at *Carnegie Hall* because I do not have the money to produce the concert. You need to produce these concerts. Many artists that perform at *Brooklyn Academy of Music* must produce their own concerts. They get on the bill, but they spend a lot of money producing concerts. I don't have that money. So, in Italy these people produce the concerts. I perform a lot in Italy. I perform in Greece, Spain, and Latin America. A lot of the countries that are Latin based get it. They don't see me as being too much. They understand the emotion because they're cultures that are constantly screaming, raising their hands, and doing things ...the English would call it "over the top."

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** But you also perform a lot in Germany, which of course seems to be the other end of the spectrum from that.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** I don't perform a lot there. I perform there somewhat nervously. Not because I think anyone is going to do anything to me in Germany, but because the disposition of a lot of Germans just makes me nervous. It just makes me nervous because I'm not the way they are. They're very contained as people, very contained. I find that very difficult to be around. I feel very inappropriate there. I just feel inappropriate. So I go on stage, I get my money, and I split. It's kind of like that. I used to say that I felt like they were drawing my blood over there. Now, it's not because of any kind of political sentiment that I would feel this way, although, many people have their political sentiments about Germany. It's not that. It's just a personality thing. It really is.

In this country, nobody knows really how to quantify Greeks, that's for sure. Most people think the Greeks are a group of people who died long ago, that the original Greeks are all dead. They died in the Golden Age and left behind a great ancient literature and so forth. They're not aware of *Seferis*, they're not aware of Yannis Ritsos, Yiorgos Seferis, and C.P. Cavafy, they're not aware of a lot of the writers and musicians, they're not aware of *Xenakis*, they're not aware of any of

these people. They think that it's a dead culture. This country, whereas it's more and more scrupulous, let's say, about recognizing other cultures, is very remiss in recognizing Middle Eastern cultures, which includes Greek cultures, and even knowing the *real* meaning of what Egyptian culture is.

For example, in this country we have [this stupid film](#) about Achilles with Brad Pitt. Well, no Greek looked like Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt doesn't look Greek. Why do we have a movie like that? Then, on the other hand, in the black studies classes, they teach that [Cleopatra was black](#). She was Nubian. No! I'm sorry, but she was Greek. She was from the race of Ptolemies. It's a long road from Nubia to Macedonia, let me tell you that. So what people say is, "Okay, the Greeks are like the Assyrians, nobody knows who they are. They're a souvlaki culture—you can get your souvlaki and your falafel down the street." But let me tell you, that guy doesn't know anything—all the original Greeks are dead. I'll tell you something as a Greek, they are not dead! I go to Greece every year. They are not dead! And they know when they're being ripped off and they laugh like hyenas when they hear that Cleopatra "wasn't Greek." In this country we miseducate people based on the proportion of their ethnic group to the population. "Okay, alright, you want to be a Cleopatra? Well, you're X percent of the population, you get to be Cleopatra." What the fuck is that? So what does that mean, we Greeks now only lay claim to souvlaki stores? So I fight that and get all sorts of repercussions from that, but I don't give a fuck.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** On a related level of the reception, to get back to the issue of political music, do you have any hopes for an impact for the work that you do? You made a comment once that your voice had been given to you for the torment of your enemies. Do you see this project, for instance, as in any way contributing some small amount of weight...

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** ...of torment to my enemies? Absolutely, and that brings me gigantic joy. I have always been more delighted by the misery of my enemies than my own joy in succeeding in something. I'm not really sure why that is, it must be a Greek inheritance because I really, really love that sort of thing. People will say that's a very low consciousness and I would have to agree. But I have no reason to desert it. [*laughs*] I see no reason to desert it.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Do you see this, the *Defixiones* project in particular and the earlier AIDS projects, as adding any weight to a certain side of the scale in terms of contributing information and contributing to the public consciousness?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes, [my Web site](#) is already listed on one of the top Turkish hate lists, and I didn't even *try* to get there. [*laughs*] I mean, they have all these people that they are convinced hate the entire Turkish population. That is not what I'm talking about. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the same thing these women are talking about, a lot of whom starved themselves to death to object to the prison situations in Turkey, many of whom when they go to prison get raped and tortured, many of whom go to prison because of having been raped and tortured, then telling the police and then getting sent back to prison. There are so many injustices. Turkey is really a frightening country if you try to raise your hand in a different direction. It's a very, very frightening country. These are the things I object to. I don't object to the right of a person to be a Turk and to live in Turkey. But you know, if these people want to put me on a Turkish hate list, fine. The people who put me on the list, they're the ones that I hate. No problem, no problem. I have no trouble discussing what I don't like. None. After all, that's American isn't it?

## 10. Future Projects

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Do you have any visions of the next project?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** We're almost finished with the recording of *Insekta*. I'd like to just get that released because we're almost finished with that project.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** And *Insekta* is more or less about... ?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** It's reflective of a person who is institutionalized. It had a lot to do with what I heard about many institutional experiences, but in specific, *Willowbrook*.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Willowbrook?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Willowbrook was in *Staten Island*. It was a place for the severely disabled: people born without arms and legs, people with *cri du chat*. People left them there and they did a lot of experiments on them. Experiments, let's say, like infecting a thousand of them with *hepatitis* and just watching them die just to see what the progression of the disease was. It was shut down. But that piece was performed after very little rehearsal. It wasn't ready at all to be performed but it was one of those situations where you got paid and you've got to perform it at this point. So we were able to go into the studio later and perfect it. But it was performed in a cage that went very high, up to the ceiling. There's a lot of work we want to do on it.

In any case, after that another piece, *Nekropolis* ...but I'll discuss that when we get around to it. Of course in the meantime I'll probably do another record with the *Edith Piaf*, *Marlene Dietrich*, and O.V. Wright or Hank Williams songs that I did recently under the title of *Guilty, Guilty, Guilty* which are homicidal love songs—yet more homicidal love songs. There is no end to my joy in doing those songs. I think it's always going to be that way. It's going to be both of these kinds of projects and why not?

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** But presumably you don't see *Defixiones* as being a project that has an ultimate conclusion date either. Isn't that in a sense also on-going?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes. You're right. That leads to the discussion of *Nekropolis*, but I'm not quite ready for that discussion. *[laughs]*

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** Alright, I guess we can get to that some other date. My last question here, and I don't know if you've ever answered this before, is: do you think that we have any political or ethical responsibility to the dead? As I looked through interviews with you, and as you've talked today, you talk about your sense of not being able to forget the suffering. "Fine, the person has died and they're not suffering any longer, but for those of us who were there, those of us who in some way took part vicariously, perhaps, we had our own experiences of suffering. That experience goes on." Yet, at other points you'll say, "There's nothing glorious in being dead" and that your work is all about the living. Those seem to me to be two very opposing statements.

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Actually, that's a very interesting point. Whilst they do seem to be opposing, they're actually the same because of a line that I could draw from "Blind Man's Cry," when the person is on the cross but he doesn't believe in God and he's saying, "I wished I believed in angels, I wished I believed in God. The only thing I can believe in is death as the escape from this pain." That's the thing that I'm talking about. Looking at that and saying that the worst thing is not to believe in God, not to believe in an afterlife, not to know that there is any justification for your suffering except that you suffered—that there was no reason for it—to have everything stolen, to be raped, to be tortured, and there be no reason for it. There is no good reason for it. There is not martyrdom. That's the person in "Blind Man's Cry" saying that. There is no martyrdom here. I'm not going to be kissed by the angels. I'm not going to go to heaven. I'm not even going to hell. This is hell. And that's where it unites with my saying there's nothing glorious about death, and where I say the living, the living dead, or the dying alive is my subject. In the last breaths a person would draw, I can only imagine he or she would be thinking about a

legacy. What have I left? Will anyone remember me? Will anyone remember me? Will anybody shed a tear for me? And that's what I'm talking about.

**EDWARD BATCHELDER:** And that's the basis for the political content in your work, so far as it has a political content?

**DIAMANDA GALÁS:** Yes.