



Dresden Dolls

Yes, Virginia

Roadrunner, 2006



Yes, *Virginia* is not quite as strong an effort as the Dresden Dolls' self-titled debut, but it boasts some terrific songs, and the Boston band benefits from a much rawer production. The arrangements are rarely made up of more than piano and percussion, but veteran producers Sean Slade and Paul Kolderie punch up the levels and much of the band's Kurt Weill-meets-Courtney-Love routine roars like PJ Harvey's *Rid Of Me*. The first track, "Sex Changes," sets up a rambunctious mood and tempo that the band is lucky to maintain for as long as it does, although, at 15 tracks, *Yes, Virginia* is maybe four songs too long.

When the record is most effective, Brian Viglione's nimble drum work complements Amanda Palmer's jangly keys to a hilt, giving room for her barely on-key, confessional vocals to wail away. "Dirty Business," an extended toast to sexual jealousy and manipulation, is the album's finest moment—a perfect little rock song of choreographed recklessness with catchy hooks and random shrieks and hollers. The duo's own "Brechtian punk cabaret" (their phrase) shtick goes much farther than it should, but *Yes, Virginia* seems to falter whenever Palmer drops out of character. At times, such as on "Backstabber" or "First Orgasm," she tries to join the canon of angry, sad white girls, but with lines like "The first orgasm of the morning/Is like a fire drill" and "Rotten like a crackwhore/Begging out the backdoor," this ain't *Arieli*. It's not even *When the Pawn...*

Yes, Virginia takes its name from the *New York Sun* editorial letter of 1897 reassuring eight-year old Virginia O'Hanlon of the existence of Santa Claus. The title is fitting since Palmer's *Go Ask Alice*-tinged lyrics and the mime makeup lend these Dolls a hint of the juvenile. The Dresden Dolls are frequently endearing—such as on their previous hit "Coin Operated Boy," a sexy and cute music box gambol—but on *Yes, Virginia* the adolescent motif is more than a little unsettling. In particular, the first-person "Mandy Goes To Med School" where, to quote the press release, Palmer and Viglione "play a lighthearted and childish game of let's-pretend-we're-back-alley-abortionists." Ho ho!

The Dresden Dolls have a dedicated fanbase—the album's artwork is culled from over 600 fan submissions—but my guess is even seasoned fans will find "Med School" and the holocaust-denying antagonist of "Mrs. O" obnoxious rather than daring. Which is to say that *Yes, Virginia* is hit-or-miss. On the one hand, the Dolls maintain they're much more than just a novelty act. But on the other, who gives a shit what Amanda Palmer's "first orgasm of the morning" is like?

Jimmy Newlin

© slant magazine, 2006.