

# Dresden Dolls

by  
Brookelyn  
Williams

You're standing twenty feet from the stage at Bowery Ballroom in New York City, and your favorite band begins to play your favorite song. You've forsaken things like groceries and the electricity bill because getting a ticket for tonight is like groceries or electricity for your soul. And now the moment is upon you. The band members whip themselves into a frenzy, effusively pouring their musical hearts out for you. And the crowd that's been jostling and elbowing you on PBR runs for the last hour perks up and displays their overwhelming adoration—by standing still with poker faces on, barely tapping their Chuck Taylor-ed toes. In fact, they have their arms folded and they appear somewhere between bored and cross. Sure, they like the song, but they're certainly not going to do anything so un-hipster-like as to smile or dance.

Sounds familiar, right? Well, I don't know where you are, but you're not at a Dresden Dolls show. Amanda Palmer and Brian Viglione may only be two people, but they're igniting a movement...or at least, igniting movement. This Boston band has begun to free the concert-going masses from their stoic ways all over the world, after the release of their first full-length self-titled studio album earlier this year. Although not yet as well-known as the current reigning offbeat duo The White Stripes, Brian and Amanda are poised to give Jack and Meg a run for their money. A Dresden Dolls concert is like going to the circus, the theatre, and Alphabet City all at once. You're as likely to brush past a mohawked girl in pasties as you

are a bored-looking indie rock devotee. In their own words, it's "Punk Cabaret." Their image and music are designed to elicit a sense of freedom and a sense of self, and no matter how you feel like showing your appreciation, it's okay by them.

I caught up with the Dresden Dolls on their most recent visit to New York City, in the midst of the US leg of their current world tour.

**Brian Viglione:** That is a striking Guns 'n Roses shirt.

**ARC Magazine:** *I love Guns 'n Roses. Well, not so much the current incarnation, but...*

**Brian:** No, but *Appetite*? I gotta say that Slash, Willie Nelson, and Neil Young are probably—off the top of my head—three of my favorite guitar players.

**ARC:** *Slash can't be beat. And he still looks the same; he absolutely has that same Slash attitude even though he's married and has two kids.*



**Brian:** He's still got it.

**ARC:** Okay, enough about Slash, how about *your* band?

**Brian:** Our band is doing well. We've been pretty much out on the road for the last five or six weeks, since mid-September. We started in England—jumping around doing about eleven dates all throughout Europe—and then came back, had a day-and-a-half off in Boston, and then hit the road for this tour. We're on week three of this.

**ARC:** So you're sort of right in the middle of it.

**Brian:** Yeah. And we finish the US leg on November 20, head over to Europe again for two weeks in the first part of December, and then do a week in Australia and New Zealand, then come home for Christmas, and then pretty much go in and start recording the next record. Amanda and I have been having an amazing time and getting such great responses from the fans, that it makes it one of the most immediately gratifying experiences of being in a band. We have all these kids coming out, not even just supporting the band and singing the songs, but to really become a part of the spirit and the atmosphere. [They're] coming dressed up to the shows and doing performance art.

**ARC:** You have local performance artists with you on each of your dates, right?

**Brian:** Absolutely. We try to get as many people engaged in helping to create and promote a kind of creative atmosphere.

**ARC:** To help create a kind of cabaret atmosphere?

**Brian:** Absolutely, that's what it's meant to be. And that's all it takes to perpetuate it, it's just to get people excited about something.

It's not that it has to be part of a "scene" or part of this "genre" or part of this "clique" or anything like that, it's to get people to celebrate their weird diversity, to make the thing greater than the sum of its parts, and we've had kids absolutely going through the roof with it. Even though we don't play dance music per say, people are starting to feel much more at ease with each other as an audience, as a collective. Whereas before, people would be very polite, attentive, and very quiet. They would clap and cheer at the end of the songs, but feel that they sort of had to respect the performance. That boundary has been much more blurred lately, which is a very liberating feeling for us.

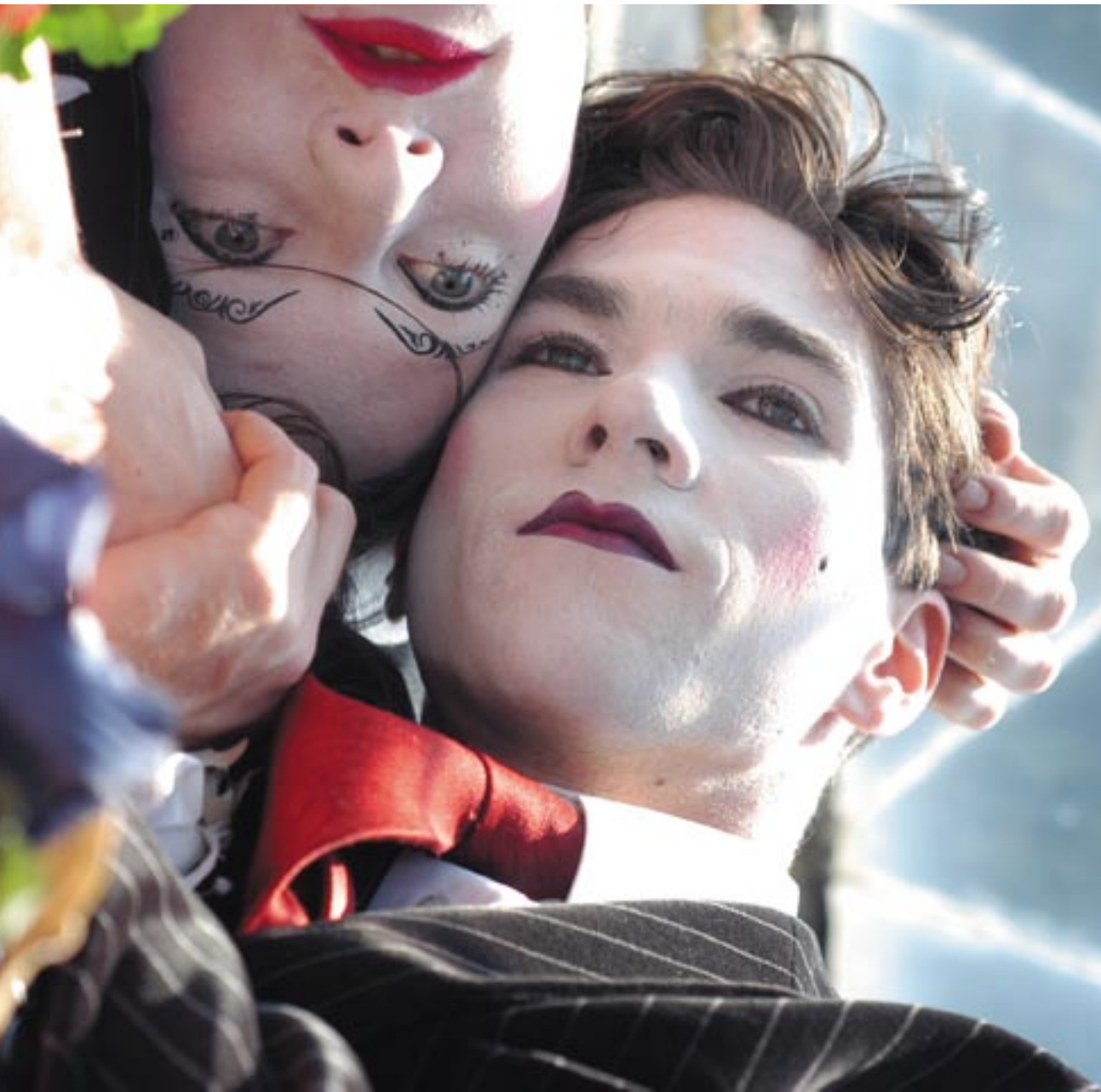
**ARC:** Is that a goal of the band?

**Brian:** Yeah, we want people to feel that yes, it's a performance, but we want the audience to have a good time! And again, it's not that we're, you know, doing the Jim Rose Circus Show, but it's trying to provide an atmosphere where people can really let themselves go, and they can make more of a night out at a show than a stereotypical, mundane concert experience. It goes in waves, but I think people are always hungry for that release and outlet at a concert. I think with a lot of the indie bands, it's looked down upon to dress up with any sort of flamboyancy, and there's a definite kind of indie rock dress code. So to really break free of that and to just have fun, and to be able to say to people, "whether you come in your street clothes or come dressed in a ballgown, it doesn't matter to us. But if getting dressed up allows you a little more freedom and a little more play, then we're all for it, dude."

**ARC:** How did you and Amanda meet?

**Brian:** This time of year is especially pertinent for us because we met on Halloween, four years ago at a Halloween party at Amanda's house. She played a solo set upstairs on a





piano in the attic for all the guests. I had been seeking for somebody else to play with; up until that point I'd been playing bass in a band that I wasn't very happy in. I saw everything that I wanted to be doing musically encapsulated in [Amanda]. I was completely

stunned, almost thinking, "Is this real? Is this person really managing to capture all of these influences? Could there be someone that has the same eclectic, weird taste in music [as me], and with spunk and flair?" A few days later I had her over, and within the first

ten minutes the chemistry was there—even beyond saying, “I understand what you’re doing musically,” the personal chemistry was right there immediately, too.

**ARC:** Amanda, did it take more convincing on your end? Or was it immediate for you as well?

**Amanda Palmer:** Well, Brian had the advantage of getting the full goods before I did: he saw me playing solo. Within minutes of playing with him, however, I knew I had found my musical soulmate. I may never experience love at first sight, but I can imagine how it feels. This was musical love at first sight.

**ARC:** Let’s go back to your fans, briefly. With many bands, there exists a sort of “common denominator” amongst their fans—the Grateful Dead, for example. There’s very much a...

**Brian:** (pointedly) Unifying theme? (laughs)

**ARC:** Yes, exactly. Another example would be Ben Folds. His concerts are full of music-theory heads, who can read music. He’s standing on his piano, directing everyone in all these rather complex four-part harmony singalongs, which you couldn’t really do at your average show. Do you see a common denominator with your fans, or is it more of just a wide, general swatch?

**Amanda:** That is one of the most beautiful things about this band. There are some obvious ones, like the beautiful and misunderstood teenage girls, but the vast majority of our fanbase is made up of a weird cross-section of *everybody*. It’s like a twisted “Up With People” out there in the audience. I’m very proud of this weird diversity; it also helps us feel like our music is striking a universal chord.

**Brian:** From age, taste in music, lifestyle, ethnicity, all types of fields—it’s really wonderful to see how it’s now transcending all these different things, whereas when we first started out, it was sort of like, “okay, it’s this sort of weird Cambridge/Boston, high-fallutin’ art thing,” but that’s been all blown to hell, thankfully. Amanda and I have opposite, yet conducive, influences that definitely play off of each other.

**ARC:** So what do you see reflected in your fans?

**Brian:** A general sort of openness, very much like Amanda and myself. It’s people attracted to very passionate, emotive music. We’ve managed to escape being pigeon-holed, and there really isn’t a “scene” around Punk Cabaret, thank God. I hope there never is—that would absolutely be the downfall of the greatness of what this music can do in terms of unifying people and making it okay for all types of people to come together and say, “yeah, it’s a rock show, I guess, but I also like, you know, Hawaiian guitar playing,” or whatever.

**ARC:** What do you think is the ultimate success Dresden Dolls could have as a band? The underground scene has become the mainstream. It seems everyone is taking either what we’ll call the Brian Jonestown Massacre response, which is rejecting any mainstream outlet, or what we’ll call the Franz Ferdinand response, who have become media darlings,





play arenas, and get played on MTV's Total Request Live.

**Amanda:** We have what we want and we're prepared for anything. We have already reached so many people and played shows that have overwhelmed us, so I can imagine that starting to feel a lack of intimacy at shows being a drag, but I come from the theater, and there are plenty of creative ways to fix that once we get there.

**Brian:** I feel like the ultimate goal of my career has been attained, and now it's a matter of sustaining it and being able to keep ourselves happy. We've always wanted to get out and try to provide the same sort of atmosphere, release, or opportunity for people to feel inspired by our art just like we have. I remember driving in my car going 90 miles an hour listening to Black Flag, just thinking, "I love this band! Thank God they exist!" If we can help be a band like that for some kids who feel like "this band has helped breathe some life into my day today," or made them psyched to get back to learning their instrument, or to take up a particular creative outlet, then great. What I've always taken from music, like any great jazz, is like, "Oh, this really gives me something to believe in, and lock onto." So, I hope that we can do that for some people too—sort of like an anchor of, not truth, but something with some integrity that helps people follow your own path. I think a lot of times musicians can put out an image of like, "This is what's cool! This is

who we have to be." I feel really liberated to be in this band and to go where our impulses take us. As long as you're being honest with yourself, you're guaranteed to be pretty happy—or at least to cut through the bullshit that can often distract you. I hope we can offer that to people.

**ARC:** You're starting to be played by MTV2. Are you nervous that the message will get watered down through the medium, or are you just happy to be reaching a wider audience?

**Amanda:** It's a tricky business, but I'm all for the spread of good music. It's up to the artist to figure out where the balance lies, and it's different for each one. Plenty of artists have maintained massive amounts of integrity and crossed over bigtime: Bjork, Radiohead, the list goes on. *Uber*-hip bands like Franz Ferdinand seem to be riding a different wave. They seem to be part of the new cool disco revival. They're catchy as hell. I remember hearing them in a restaurant and asking, "What the fuck is this? I must know!" That's very rare. Most things don't stick out like that. I had the same experience with Le Tigre and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

**Brian:** It's a mixture. Obviously it's going to get a bit watered down because of the distance. Right now, we feel especially effective because we've been able to play these very intimate shows for a few hundred people. If you start playing stadiums, that energy gets diluted or the message cannot fully penetrate to the extent that you would like it to, but I think that the exposure that we're getting is helping turn on a lot of people to what we're doing. And because it's very different from most of the stuff out there, we want to at least get people to think and examine their own preconceptions about what they think is in front of them. A lot of our dear old friends are saying, "Oh, you're on MTV. That's so weird!" And there's a lot

of possessiveness—people want to feel that we belong to them.

**ARC:** That they're not losing you to the big faceless masses?

**Brian:** Yeah, [losing us] to the people that won't understand. You can't expect to win over everybody. You try to reach as many people as you can.

**ARC:** What do you think sets the Dresden Dolls apart from anything else happening in music right now?

**Amanda:** We mean it.

**ARC:** Art, Revolution, Culture: talk about those words and what they mean to you. They're words you hear a lot, but can become devalued—we can become desensitized to them. What's your take?

**Brian:** Now's the time when I need to be witty and articulate. Hmm, art to me is anything created by someone out of a necessity to express something. In terms of revolution, I think it's always fun to sort of see that pendulum swing, and when a certain style gets played out, see the reaction to it. I'm really excited to what the reaction to us will be, the people that will want to rebel against Punk Cabaret because it's too played out! I'm sort of looking forward to seeing that because our time will pass. What or who's going to revolutionize what we've done? That's beautiful. That reaction is an ever-changing thing—the push-and-pull that people have against an accepted form.

**ARC:** Are you of the persuasion that nothing's new, or that what you're doing is new and breaking new ground musically?

**Brian:** A lot of it is perspective. You need to allow yourself the opportunity to do something new. If you say there's no possibility, it has

already been done, then that will ensure that nothing better will come of it. You need to try to inspire people to get something new. You can't tell me that Bjork has already been done. At the least, that will inspire someone to create something new. I am more partial to music of the past, but that's not going to stop me from trying to create something relevant for today or tomorrow. A very interesting thing I remember hearing Joni Mitchell say is that there is a real lack of role models for musicians to look up to and emulate today. There's been a real homogenized watering-down in the caliber of performer that's come out over the last 25 or 30 years. The Louis Armstrongs, Billie Holidays, and Sarah Vaughns of yesterday, and the real attention to musicianship, artistry, and craftsmanship they had, has dwindled. These days, it's now more of a struggle to find those really unique and truly talented voices. But that's our responsibility as the public and as artists, to find each other and to bring each other in contact with one another and draw that out. You can't just give up and say corporate America is taking over and we're all getting sold the same thing—that's an excuse. Use corporate America to your advantage, find those beautiful voices and bring it out. Use it to its capabilities. Don't be afraid of MTV. Use it to your advantage. Go to it with an empowered sense of yourself.

**ARC:** Culture?

**Brian:** Well, there you go. Culture has tremendous potential. Try to tap into it and don't be afraid of it. Embrace it and try to find creative ways to maximize its potential.

**ARC:** What about you, Amanda? Art, revolution, culture.

**Amanda:** If I were king of the world, these things would barely be distinguishable. Art can give birth to revolution, and vice versa. Culture is the general wake. ★