

**UNDER  
THE  
RADAR**  
THE SOLUTION TO MUSIC POLLUTION

# The DRESDEN DOLLS

"It's like a device. I compare it to actors traditionally wearing masks on stage. It's not that we're playing characters, but there's something about becoming kind of a blank slate that allows an audience to really lean in and relate more," says Dresden Dolls songwriter-vocalist-pianist Amanda Palmer.

Palmer is referring to the Boston duo's burlesque-inspired stage appearance, for which she and drummer Brian Viglione apply pancake makeup and lipstick. Palmer performs in lingerie and black-and-white-striped stockings, while Viglione dons a bowler hat and variations of a suit. Based solely on press photos, one might mistake The Dresden Dolls for descendants of '80s one-hit wonder Taco. But Palmer and Viglione have discovered valid reasons for sticking with the image they adopted on a whim.

"People have always wanted to go to a show to see a show, traditionally," says Palmer. "And I think people really get off, at some visceral level, seeing performers dressed as performers and saying, 'When I hit stage, I'm here to put on a show for you. And I'm inviting you to look at me. I'm inviting you to get involved and look at what's happening.'"

That's a bold rationale to espouse, considering that there was a time when Palmer was too embarrassed to sing her piano-composed songs in front of others. The Dresden Dolls, who have described their music as "Brechtian punk cabaret," possess an alluring dynamic that extends beyond the flamboyant theatricality, sex appeal and intense musicianship of their stage show. The catalyst in this postmodern collision of provocation and pastiche is Palmer's deeply personal songwriting, which invokes a wide range of musical genres and tones. Between the punk frenzy of "Girl Anachronism," the playful longing of "Coin-Operated Boy" and the delicate whispers in "The Perfect Fit," allusions to statutory rape and self-infliction surface on the band's self-titled studio debut.

Palmer and Viglione met on the night before Halloween in 2000. She was hosting a party/recital at her home, and Viglione, who had been playing in bands since he was 16 years old, was immediately smitten by Palmer's music. He remembers, "I never felt like I was getting all that I really wanted until I saw Amanda. That's why I was so completely blown away. I thought, 'Here's the theatricality, the emotiveness and expressiveness that I've always been craving.' And diversity too, and intelligence. It wasn't just dumb rock songs that had to be bashed out, or just straight jazz. It was a really interesting and refreshing mix of styles."

The pair made a perfect match in that Viglione's jazz and metal backgrounds allowed him the versatility to match Palmer's diverse styles and moods. And the confidence Viglione had gained from playing hundreds of shows in clubs helped ease the burden of insecurity that weighed on Palmer when performing such confessional songs. She recalls, "When I left college and moved back to Boston, I started putting together little solo shows here and there. But it couldn't pick up any steam because it was so few and far between, and I was also so nervous about pushing it and talking to people about it, 'cause the stuff is so personal. You know, the stuff I was playing solo is like the most personal stuff on this record: 'Slide' and 'Half Jack,' the heavy shit. And it wasn't until I started playing with Brian that I could even really go up to people after a show with a smile and say, 'Hey, what did you think?' Because, before I met Brian and I was doing this, it was always such an emotional experience that I would just take off and go hide somewhere."

Like Viglione, Palmer began playing music before her teens, but she admits that their adolescent experiences were dissimilar in respect to performing. "We went down two very different tracks," she says. "I was sort of a lone, isolated songwriter in private. And that was my main musical outlet."

"I had very encouraging parents, but emotionally, the stuff I was writing was always so personal that I never wanted to share it. It's like letting your parents read your diary. Because even when I was 13 and 14, I was writing these heavy songs about love and hate and it was too embarrassing."

It wasn't until she attended college at Wesleyan University that Palmer began to receive warm responses to her music. She played her first real show during her freshman year. In the months leading up to the performance, she rented a room at the university and practiced tirelessly on a grand piano. "I was terrified," she recalls. "Cause I was totally jumping into the cold water. These were songs that no one had ever heard, and I had no idea how people were gonna react...what they were going to think."

Palmer estimates that between 30 and 40 people turned out, from teachers to friends and acquaintances. "I think I played maybe 10 songs, and people applauded, and they left sort of distressed and disturbed and silent. And I had no idea what people thought. I just had no clue. And then later that night, around four in the morning, I had my radio show at the university, and so I stayed up all night." Palmer explains that freshmen at WESU were generally given the worst shifts. "And this guy that I vaguely knew rang the doorbell of the radio station, 'cause it was locked. And I went through the radio station and opened up the door, and he was there with a Twinkie with candles in it and a POWERade, and he said, 'I was at your show tonight, and I think you're amazing. Do you want to share this Twinkie?' And I was like, 'My first fan!' And we ended up dating. And he ended up dying, but that's an entirely different story. Anyway, that was one of those moments where I was like, 'OK, someone out there is getting the message.'"

During the three-plus years leading up to the national release of *The Dresden Dolls* in April, the band had played almost exclusively in the Northeast. But now they are selling out large clubs throughout the country, and Palmer says that performing for new faces in new cities helps keep the songs fresh. "You can draw on the excitement of: 'These people have never seen us play; they've never heard this song live,'" she explains. "And that's really inspiring because, even if we're doing it for the seven thousandth time, you know that it's new for somebody, and it's like the excitement that you get from taking someone's virginity."

The Dresden Dolls draw upon countless musical influences and aren't shy about disclosing them. As a youngster, Viglione asked jazz drummer Elvin Jones to sign his jacket underneath a KISS patch. Palmer has Kurt Weill's name prominently displayed on her keyboard and cites *The Legendary Pink Dots* as an inspiration. She also admits that the album's epic closer, "Truce," lifts a lick from Fugazi's "Blueprint," which they now cover. Death Cab for Cutie's *Transatlanticism* has emanated from speakers before performances, and the fun, vaudevillian atmosphere at a Dresden Dolls show allows them to cover Britney's "...Baby One More Time," Black Sabbath's "War Pigs," and Jacques Brel's "Amsterdam" in a single night. But be sure to muzzle your drunken friend when he's compelled to cry out "Free Bird," because Palmer has threatened to master the 9-minute version.

Till then, the band plans on taking some overdue time off before recording their follow-up in the late spring or early summer. The next album will be their first since signing with Roadrunner Records. Palmer also reveals, "We just started talks with a theater in Boston that wants to collaborate with the band on a huge project. Not quite sure where that's gonna go, but that may keep us at home for a little while, maybe in the fall or something."

Don't expect The Dresden Dolls to think too far ahead though; in their case, that could prove detrimental.

"It may seem hard to believe, but nothing has ever been planned," says Palmer. "We've never sat down and said, 'Let's make cabaret-influenced music. Let's dress up in costumes.' Everything has just sort of happened. And I think that's why it works so well."

Words by Chris Baxter

Photos by Wendy Lynch