



Radar

The Dresden Dolls

Boston

words: Patrick Rodgers

Maybe it was, as drummer Brian Viglione suggests, "fated" that he and pianist/vocalist Amanda Palmer met at a Halloween party in 2000. It would certainly make sense considering Viglione and Palmer, the dynamic duo that is the Dresden Dolls, appear at live shows wearing costumes that look as if they have crawled from the darkest corner of a Weimar-era cabaret; as if Bertolt Brecht was writing a love story for the Droogs from *A Clockwork Orange*. And, it would be natural that, five years later, putting the finishing touches on their second studio release, their whirlwind fall tour would end, where they began, on Halloween night in their hometown of Boston.

After listening to the Dresden Dolls' music, fate begins to seem like a rational answer. Palmer and Viglione have an amazing chemistry. As Viglione describes it, "When I saw her play, I said this is a perfect match." With influences ranging from jazz to punk to musical theatre, they manage to blend disparate forms and eras of music into a style that is truly

unique in the contemporary soundscape. While the most commonly used description is 'punk cabaret,' the term does not begin to explain how smoothly the different worlds of Kurt Weill and The Cure, to name just two, are blended seamlessly in their songs.

On their self-titled, first album, released in 2004 (the band also has a live compilation, *A Is For Accident*), their brutally evocative songs run the gambit of human experience, alternately angst-ridden and pleasure-filled, but always incredibly personal.

Amanda's piano playing forms the basis of their rawness. While she has played since she was a child, she continues taking lessons to learn how to read music. Playing from feeling rather than formal training, she moves effortlessly from a well-formed cascade of jazz to punchy three-chord riffs that could fire up a mosh pit. Her deep vocals, reminiscent of P.J. Harvey or a more vivid Courtney Love, rise to unstable heights and crash back into sensual whispers, complimenting the piano swells perfectly.

Behind the emotion of the piano and vocals lies the controlled temperament of Brian's drums. Influenced heavily by jazz and hardcore, his

rhythms and fills offer a sense of control while adding to the expressiveness of the song; more Max Roach than John Bonham. This aspect of freedom is, for him, the advantage of playing in a duo. Rather than being confined to the roll of rhythm, he is "free to illustrate and play off of her in a much broader sense."

Behind the costumes and powerful musical arrangements, however, are not a couple of art school students trying to prove how the world is suffering. "People are turned off because we wear a costume and make up, but there's not a lot of pretentious, high-falutin' bullshit, there's no high art aspect, we do a cover of 'War Pigs'."

Currently, the Dresden Dolls are back in the studio, finishing up their second album with the help of legendary Boston-based producers Sean Slade and Paul Koldrie, who list among their credentials such albums as Hole's *Live Through This* and Radiohead's *Pablo Honey*. In the words of Viglione, the new album is "pretty full-tilt on both ends of the spectrum; some really soft personal songs and some of the most full throttle, balls-out playing that we could come up with. No frills. Just piano and drums as raw as we can get it." ■