

Living Dolls

HAILING FROM BOSTON AND COMPRISING OF AMANDA PALMER AND BRIAN VIGLIONE, THE DRESDEN DOLLS' UNIQUE STYLE, THEATRICAL VIDEOS AND DISTINCTIVE SOUND HAVE BEEN EMBRACED BY AUSTRALIANS AND NEW ZEALANDERS ALIKE. SOPHIA PLESSAS CAUGHT UP WITH THE DRESDENS WHILE ON TOUR IN LONDON TO DRESS UP THESE LIVING DOLLS AND TALK ABOUT WHAT SUCCESS FEELS LIKE FOR THIS PART CABARET, PART PIERROT DUO.

When did you and Brian form the band?

We met in 2000 on Halloween night at a party that I was throwing at my house. I lived in this artist's community and used to throw these big art salon parties. Brian got dragged over by a friend of mine and it was a crazy evening with three hundred people all dressed in costumes.

Brian saw me playing a set of solo songs, later on that night, as part of the programme. I only played about five songs, but the minute he saw me play, he said something clicked in his head. He just knew. So he invited me to play with him a few days later. The minute we sat down and started making music together it was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was so perfect, like playing music with someone you feel that you have been searching for your whole life, because I had been. I had tried playing music with a bunch of other people but nothing had clicked, then all of a sudden Brian descended from heaven.

So we started the band immediately. We started pretty small, putting on a lot of local Boston shows. We then began performing in New York and doing that sort of thing. But we really didn't tour for a long time because we preferred to stay local and build up the fan base and also let the band grow. And once our show started getting really tight and solid and we had that ease on stage with each other, things started to happen.

It wasn't an overnight success. It was the sort of thing where one thing leads to another little thing that leads to another. We were both working maniacally on managing the band, doing our own bookings, doing everything ourselves for a long time. We didn't have any help, not even a label. The CD that is out now, we put out ourselves through a record label that we started purely to put out our own CD. The label doesn't exist anymore. And that was a real challenge, and we did it. And then we got signed six months later.

How did the concept of The Dresden Dolls come about?

The concept grew out of the music itself. When we started the band we had the name and a bunch of songs I had written but no particular idea about how we would evolve. In fact, for the first six months of shows, we played in our street clothes and wore no costumes or make-up whatsoever. One night we did it for kicks and then became addicts.

Your videos really bring both The Dresden Dolls and your music to life.

Who develops the ideas for the videos?

The videos hatch in my head as natural outgrowths of the songs themselves. I usually have some sort of visual in my head from the beginning because the songs lend themselves so well to film. With all the directions one could go in, however, it's difficult to pick something practical and affordable and I'm still learning how to do that. A concept in one's head is not always the best concept for a video that needs to be shot on a tight budget and I often get a little too carried away.

Michael Pope is known around town as 'the third doll'. He's been with the band since the beginning and worked with me on every film and video project. He has such an intimate understanding of our aesthetic and our personalities that despite not having ever shot a music video in his life (before he met us that is), he has



in my apartment, scenes in the garden, scenes in Zea's apartment (she's the designer and resident painter) and Pope's apartment would turn into a production office for a few weeks. It was total madness.

Your videos and performances are very theatrical. Do either of you have a background in acting?

We both do, in so far that we were both really active in school and community theatre. I was way more focused on theatre at school than on music and that's where my natural talent seems to lie, because I wasn't in the school band, wasn't in the orchestra, and I couldn't really play an instrument. I was always writing songs and playing piano, but when you are writing songs like this and you're fifteen, what do you do with them? The subject matter of my songs were so dark and personal, it wasn't something I wanted to share with anyone really. So I kept it really private. That said, at the age of twelve I basically decided that I was going to be a musician.

You have been touring a lot in the past year. How has that been?

Touring is very difficult for me because I am very much a solitary kind of creative person and I love socialising but I like to be able to separate - so its very hard being on the road not having any creative time. It can also start to feel very promotional, being tugged in all directions and not really having time to recharge, reset and write, which I will do when I get home.

What have been the highlights of touring?

We just finished a world tour with the Nine Inch Nails, and overall we have been getting a fantastic response from the audience, people seeing us for the first time and getting really excited and going nuts about the band. Everything has been so positive and I think we needed a show like that.

How about being involved in the Meltdown Concert at London's Royal Festival Hall in which Patti Smith was curator? You performed at a Brechtian night with the likes of Patti herself, Marc Almond and Antony and the Johnsons. Can you tell us more about that?

That was wonderful. We went to the Download Festival at Donnington right before that and I felt that's where Brian found his spiritual route, as he was into heavy metal music as a teenager. And then I went to the Royal Festival Hall with all these theatrical freaks, I felt like I'd finally made it, and I was joining with my people. There was lots of rehearsing and people playing piano backstage and doing all these theatrical things together. It felt like the real deal. That's why I got into this in the first place, for this sort of atmosphere, to watch people making art together, even if they're doing it badly. Especially to see so many amazing people supporting each other, to watch Marc Almond from the side of the stage, Antony (& the Johnsons), watching Patti Smith looking at Marc Almond singing an incredibly emotional song. I really miss that kind of support from my theatre days, the idea that we are getting together as a cast to put on a show for these people. You don't get that sort of feeling at all at rock festivals. You go backstage and there is no sense of camaraderie. I really miss it. But I felt it that night and it was beautiful.

How do you feel about your popularity in Australia?

I think it's beautiful but it totally mystified us at first. Because we were on our home front and we were working so hard, so closely with our fans in Boston. So to watch something happen without us being anywhere near the place felt like a real coup because it meant that the record itself could really speak for the band and win over a ton of fans. We were really excited. I don't think it would have really happened without the support of Triple J. The audiences in Australia and New Zealand are so warm and welcoming, we were just blown away. We have this thing called the 'brigade', where a bunch of performers will show up at our concert and do performance art. We've toured two or three times in Germany and France where we've had a few performance artists here and there, wanting to get involved. But the minute we got to Australia, all these freaks descended upon us, people brought paints to the shows, turned up in crazy costumes- it was pretty much a match made in heaven.

How would you describe the way you dress? Are you conscious that you may very well be setting new fashion trends?

Well, we've crimped so much from others that I don't even know if you could call it a trend. If boys start wearing suits and bowlers and girls start sporting vintage lingerie more often than usual, fantastic. But it wouldn't be the first time. Our look has been passed down through the ages. One thing that's very distinguishing is the broken and ripped side of glamour. Never look perfect. Smudge it, rip it, and stain it before you spill something on there.

That comes, I think, from my early obsessions with Madonna and Cyndi Lauper and the whole vintage-glam of the early eighties, and from the fact that I've never been able to take care of 'nice-looking' clothes. So I've learned to shrink from actual glamour. Can't stand it. I'd always rather see the zit, the broken zipper, the beads of sweat and the running mascara. Models in magazines that look picture-perfect aren't as interesting to me. Give me some humanity.

Dresden Dolls are currently recording their second album, for release in 2006
www.dresdendolls.com

Photography Oleg Mcheyev
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