



SOMMA

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THE DRESDEN DOLLS

BY KEN SCRUDATO PHOTOGRAPH BY RIJAN

One could make a strong case that indie rock, in all its glorious mediocrity, is at least as responsible as *American Idol* for deadening the provocative edge of modern culture. So it is hardly a surprise that when the Dresden Dolls debuted in 2004 – with the Boston duo sporting Pierrot-in-vaudeville sartorial miens, Victorian-gothic art direction, and pre-deconstructionist intellectual touchstones – they were met with a fair measure of petty disdain by the critical establishment.

Says singer/pianist Amanda Palmer, “Almost every article about us began with, ‘You really want to hate this band.’” Drummer Brian Viglione adds, “When we first started, no one would touch us. All these indie people just immediately dismissed us. Indie rock had dulled everyone’s senses. You couldn’t ‘look’ too much, you couldn’t ‘feel’ too much. Everything had to be completely understated.”

In other words, agonizingly dull.

The Dresden Dolls, by both ignoring the established rock and techno order, and letting their most resplendently feral pretensions run wild, had, most hilariously, frightened the hipsters. (Which, let’s be honest, is not all that difficult.) A nigh biblical determination then swept them across the continents, along with an open invitation to any and all philosophical comrades to join the Brigade, which became a sort of Dadaist sideshow to the Dolls’ performances, its cast of course changing from city to city. But even in this, the duo were keen for it to follow the aesthetic ideology they had laid out.

“The Brigade was and is an amorphous thing,” explains Palmer. “We’re giving them the freedom to come to our shows and fuck shit up. Create art, go crazy, decorate the club, have a parade on the street – but it has to be a reflection of the band. If people are going to be sloppy or dull, we have to actively encourage them to get their shit together, instead of just dressing up and painting their faces. But our fans are not stupid.” Their roaming carnival of imagination eventually began to garner attention, with the British press seemingly leading the charge.

Now, their new album materializes with the Dolls having gained grudging acceptance in various, previously (and possibly still somewhat) skeptical circles. And while their eponymous debut was deliberately steeped in

the theatrical meter of old German cabaret music, the upcoming *Yes, Virginia* (a title which, if you really dissected it, is probably a quadruple entendre... at least) is sheer rock opera minus the bombastic guitars. It thrashes tempestuously from one emotional tenor to another, recalling in no small measure the dramatic grandiosity of glam-era Bowie and Queen, but is clearly informed by a post-punk sense of strident dynamics. Indeed, their dynamic shifts are at times magnificently thrilling, the sonic equivalent of a pulse quickening at breakneck speed. Overall it is much more aurally austere, less angular and certainly more ferocious.

“All the sound effects have been completely stripped away,” explains Viglione, “and the overall production is very stark and in-your-face.”

Palmer’s lyrics are bound to be jarring to anyone weaned on post-modern all-rock weepy-weepy woe-is-me sensibilities. Not so much feminist as determinedly Nietzschean in her outlook, she faces down and settles visceral conflict in vigorous suites, discards the emotionally stunted, and kicks the pathetic and feeble-witted down to the curb where they can no longer be a drag on her forward march. In “Sex Changes,” when she sneers, “To all the ones who tried the most / Was I supposed to cheer your efforts?” it sounds like a virtual manifesto of exasperated detestation.

Surely the Dolls and their unwaveringly august conceptualizations will continue to butt up against suspicion from those discomfited by any hint of intellectual or aesthetic overstatement. And Americans, alas, are doomed to see things in the flattest of blacks and whites, while the Dresden Dolls swim in a sea of glorious grey.

Palmer says with some frustration, “I grew up believing that people appreciated the great imaginations of bands like the Cure, the Legendary Pink Dots and Bauhaus. There was fantasy involved in it. But suddenly it really did become uncool to be a performer, as opposed to what is now accepted which is manufactured ‘authenticity.’ This idea came about that authenticity actually meant no artifice, no stage show. Otherwise, you must be faking it.”

“The truth is,” she concludes, “that you should be able to do whatever the fuck you want. But everyone is really just encouraged to follow.”