

'If he were my boyfriend, I'd break up with him'

The Dresden Dolls like make-up, dressing up, playing 'loud, aggressive music' – and arguing. By **Dorian Lynskey**

The Boston home of Amanda Palmer, singer and pianist with the Dresden Dolls, is so eye-poppingly weird that she could get away with calling it a tourist attraction and charging admission. If Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen were ever invited in, he might describe the decor as "haunted curiosity shop". Vintage dolls loll disturbingly over the frame of a print of Benjamin Franklin. Bookshelves groan with tomes on Dali, the Holocaust and Duran Duran. The walls are hung with German railway signs, French revolutionary art, old flyers, newspaper cuttings, pictures of Oscar Wilde and Avril Lavigne. In the hallway, Palmer has posted a New Yorker cartoon: it shows a restaurant pianist pinned to the floor by an upturned grand piano, saying, "This next song's about pain."

The Dresden Dolls do a good line in songs about pain. Palmer and drummer Brian Viglione make the kind of music that troubled teenagers will pledge their lives to, and that the rest of us can admire for the way it delivers confessional lyrics with the dexterity of Tin Pan Alley pros. Their powerful live show has won them new admirers at Glastonbury, Patti Smith's Meltdown and on the last Nine Inch Nails tour. "We rarely have a show when the audience is like, 'Fuck this, we're going to the bar,'" says Palmer. "Even when we're bad we manage to hold an audience's attention."

The band's eponymous 2003 debut sounded as if Sylvia Plath had turned to cabaret; their new album, *Yes, Virginia*, adds a healthy dash of Dorothy Parker-esque black humour, as well as a

mighty sonic wallop. The album's first single, *Sing*, is a darkly unorthodox anthem with some of the most arresting lyrics you will hear this year. You can imagine the record label's consternation when they heard Palmer deliver the lines, "Sing for the president, sing for the terrorists/Sing for the soccer team, sing for the janjaweed." "Let's not talk about the meeting the label had with me about that one," growls Palmer. "We were thinking to the terrorists, not for the terrorists." If you can't get the spirit of that song you're an idiot.

Palmer and Viglione met in this same Boston house at a Halloween party in 2000. She played five songs that would end up on the first Dresden Dolls album. "I could feel already that there was this connection," says Viglione. "We played music a week later and we were jumping up and down going, 'I can't believe we found each other! You're perfect!'" Sitting

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facing each other like bookends on Palmer's chaise longue, the pair have the kind of heart-on-sleeve emotional articulacy that sounds strange to British ears, but is undercut by a keen sense of humour – Palmer is throaty and blunt, Viglione mischievous and camp. When the photographer arrives to take their picture, we head upstairs to the living room. Palmer puts on some Rachmaninov and ballroom dances with the bowler-hatted Viglione among the pot plants, toy trains and antique furniture.

Palmer, who is 30 this year, grew up immersed in the past. Her mother and stepfather bought a huge, rambling house from the last in line of a grand old Massachusetts family; the attic was stuffed with the flotsam and jetsam of several generations. "I was a really lonely kid. I played by myself in the attic almost every day. There were literally hundreds of boxes of stuff: clothes and letters and old wedding

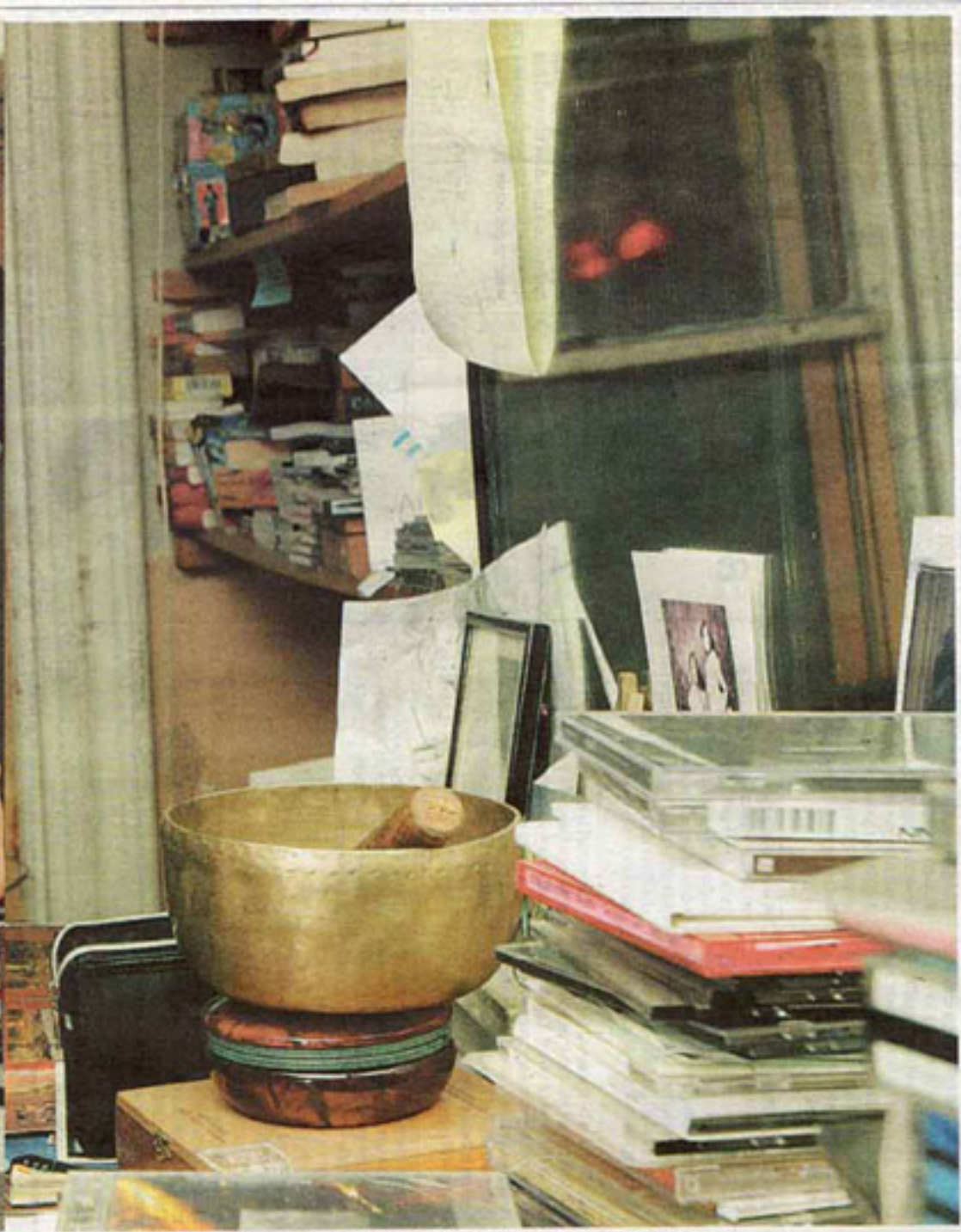
dresses. That's what I did for fun. I was very nostalgic and sentimental even when I was 10 years old. 'Ah, when I was eight...'"

Viglione, who is three years younger, was born in rural New Hampshire. "Typical small-town, divorced-parents, blue-collar, backwoods, hick upbringing. And that was the good stuff! I immediately bonded with all the fucked-up broken-home kids. 'Oh wow, all our parents are divorced! Let's form a band!' I think that's what saved me." His first passion was heavy metal. "I wanted fast, aggressive music because I had a fast, aggressive dad."

While Viglione was moving through a succession of bands, Palmer was channelling her energies into theatre, keeping her songwriting to herself. "Music for me was very lonely. It was something I did late at night with my headphones on." After college she worked as a street performer, a living statue called the Eight-Foot Bride. "It

gives you a confidence of steel," she says. "People would throw shit at me, try to push me over, tell me to get a job. If you can handle being a street performer, the stage is a waterbed."

Whatever she can't funnel into her lyrics, she vents through her equally frank blog, posting the kind of angsty juvenilia that most musicians would place in a lead-lined box and throw into the sea. "I've always had an attention-getting personality. I struggled with it because I hated myself for being this way. I thought I was an evil person. It took me until my



'We were totally attracted to each other on lots of different levels'... (left and below) the Dresden Dolls

mid-20s to say, "This doesn't have to be negative. I knew that if I found the right person to collaborate with, and I could be in a band instead of this freaky girl, that would be the step forward."

The Dresden Dolls like to tell interviewers they fell in "rock love", which is a cute way of simplifying a very complicated relationship. In their physical closeness and the way they bat answers back and forth they act like a couple, which they almost were. "We were totally attracted to each other on lots of different levels," says Viglione. "The band was our lives, so it was like being in a marriage. We tried to channel all the sexual tendencies into the music – the worst thing we could imagine was the band breaking up because of a romantic dispute."

Even so, they have a couple's volatility. Viglione almost quit during the band's first year, frustrated by Palmer's insecurity and inertia. "There are a lot of ways in which Brian and I have nothing in common," says Palmer. "I remember saying to Brian – it broke his heart but it was true – this is the one-year point where if you were my boyfriend I would break up with you, but this is a band."

Last summer Palmer toured Europe on her own. When I mention this to Viglione, he laughs abruptly and says: "Oh, I went insane." He says that the strain of constant touring, along with the fault-lines in his relationship with Palmer, reached a messy climax amid the swamps of Glastonbury. "I had an existential crisis, where I felt utterly trapped in this band. I felt that I was blessed with a situation I'd been seeking all my life, but with emotional dilemmas that seemed completely unsurmountable. I think it was extreme fatigue from touring. I felt like I just wanted to kill myself."

Instead, he returned to Boston and reacquainted himself with normal life. By the time he rejoined Palmer to record *Yes, Virginia* he was feeling sane again. "It's like sitting in a room all day going stir crazy and going out to get a breath of fresh air," he explains. "This band is such a close relationship; it kind of fused and became one."

"I think we've learned to be much more careful with each other," says Palmer, looking fondly at her bandmate. "We're insanely lucky – in spite of all our differences we've learned to fit together. It's incredible we've made it this far" ●

The Dresden Dolls play the Lighthouse in Belfast (02890 325968) on May 1, then tour. Yes, Virginia is out now on Roadrunner.

Download an exclusive track from the new album by visiting arts.guardian.co.uk

