

Los Angeles Times

Dolls are coming to life

The seminal band has a new recording contract and is the subject of two new films.

By Richard Cromelin
Times Staff Writer

October 25, 2005

Barbie might be tanking at the toy stores these days, but for another line of dolls, things couldn't be better. Sixteen months after their unexpected reunion, the New York Dolls are in full swagger, their regrouping expanding from the planned show or two into a regular tour schedule, a record deal and plans for a new album next year.

In addition, two Dolls-related film projects are on the near horizon, one a poignant character study of the band's bassist, Arthur "Killer" Kane, the other a raucous video scrapbook from the band's wild party of a career.

This is far more than anyone expected when Kane, singer David Johansen and guitarist Sylvain Sylvain played together for the first time in three decades in June 2004.

The concert at London's Royal Festival Hall — instigated by singer and major Dolls fan Morrissey for the Meltdown Festival that he was overseeing — was supposed to be a one-shot deal. But the spirit was so good and the audience so worked up that they just kept going.

"Things got so kicked up and people really took notice," Sylvain said last week. "And I guess now more than ever our music, I mean it always made sense to every generation, but I guess now even more than ever they're really pickin' up on it."

And why not? The Dolls deserve a few residuals and some overdue prominence from the punk-garage-modern rock scene they helped create. In the dark days of the early '70s, the flamboyant group almost single-handedly kept the flame of raw, liberating rock 'n' roll burning. Although they flamed out in 1975, leaving behind a trail of commercial frustration and overdose deaths, they sparked the punk revolution in a big way.

"I was a fan of the bands that were fans of the New York Dolls; I wasn't really familiar with them," says Greg Whiteley, director of the documentary "New York Doll," which opens Friday at a handful of theaters in Los Angeles and Orange counties. "I liked the Clash and the Ramones, and any time you would read anything about those guys they would always reference the Dolls and talk about them."

But Whiteley did have unusual access to Arthur Kane. Both were members of the Mormon church in West Los Angeles. Kane had converted in 1989, shortly after "hitting bottom" in his battle with alcoholism. In Whiteley's film, Kane makes his first appearance wearing a coat and tie and riding the Santa Monica Boulevard bus to his job in the library of the church's Family History Center.

"He was very quiet, but you couldn't talk to him longer than 30 seconds without him bringing up the New York Dolls," Whiteley said this week. "It was something that really defined him, 30 years after it ended."

"As a graduate film student, I thought, 'Well, this guy's life would make a great screenplay.' I would take notes; we talked about making a film one day. And then when he came to me and said that his band was reuniting, something in my head said I should follow him around with a camera."

Good decision.

Whiteley ended up with 80 hours of footage, including the emotional meeting of the long-estranged Kane and Johansen, as well as reunion rehearsals and the London concert.

As fate would have it, the first-time director ended up with a sweet and sad portrait that could be a bookend for "Mayor of the Sunset Strip," George Hickenlooper's 2004 documentary on L.A. disc jockey and scenemaker Rodney Bingenheimer.

Bingenheimer's English Disco, the famed '70s nightspot, pops up prominently in "New York Dolls — All Dolled Up," a DVD slated for release Dec. 6.

New York-based photographer Bob Gruen and his wife, Nadya, bought a video camera in the early '70s and shot about 40 hours of Dolls material.

"It really shows things how they were, what we were doin'," Sylvain said from New York. "It's one of those that you need to see a few times, I think."