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LEFT OF THE DIAL

New York Dolls: All Dolled Up DVD

by Mark Norris



New York Dolls: All
Dolled Up DVD
(Music Video
Distributors)

After watching the much-touted rock documentary, *Dig*, which chronicles the career tragedies and triumphs of the bands Brian Jonestown Massacre and The Dandy Warhols. I was struck by the thought “How did the filmmakers manage to be there at exactly the right moment to capture this stuff?” (If you haven’t seen this yet, do yourself a favor and give it a viewing. I didn’t give a rip about either band’s music before watching it and, frankly, still don’t. Having said that, the pure personal pathos and absurdist egoism displayed in the film is an absolute delight to watch and deserves repeated screenings). Alternately, immediately after viewing *All Dolled Up*, a newly released DVD of behind the scenes and live concert footage from proto-punk rockers The New York Dolls, I had to ask the question, “Why have we never seen this stuff before?” As captured by rock photographer Bob Gruen and his wife, Nadya Beck, *All Dolled Up* represents a truly important document for music aficionados, fans of revved up rock and Dolls newcomers alike. Simply

stated: this is the best film on the New York Dolls to date.

“So what’s the big deal?” you may well ask. Well friend, how about the chance to finally witness what all the hubbub was about in the first place? As told endlessly before, The New York Dolls arrived in the early-1970s ready-made to erase the softy tones of singer-songwriters that were filling the airwaves and bring rock music back to its hard, fast and exciting origins. What the band member’s lacked in schooled musicianship was made up for in pure attitude, onstage swagger and outrageous fashion. While the band’s appearance (make-up, platform shoes and a tight fitting blouse were the norm) certainly flirted with androgyny, the New York Dolls’ music was all machismo. The blisteringly tough riffs of guitarists Johnny Thunders and Sylvain Sylvain were the perfect compliment to the hoarse-throated vocalizations of singer David Johansen. Likewise, the rhythmic section presented by the monolithically-statured Arthur Kane and hyper-limbed drummer Jerry Nolan imbued the Dolls music with a propulsive nature that was simply impossible to ignore. For a time, the band was the toast of New York, even managing to bridge the gap across the divide presented by the “rock” and “art” scenes in the Big Apple, and earned gracious salvos from the British press who drooled at the band’s ability to channel rock music’s early zeal. But, in the end, the band got completely screwed by the music industry (an all too common story) and had to sit back and watch helplessly as most of its distinctions were co-opted by more radio-friendly bands (Aerosmith, KISS, et al). Sure, the Dolls made a huge impact on the nascent punk scene, and the band’s presence can still be felt in genres ranging from heavy metal to garage revivalism, but they never really got their due in their lifetime. While a recent reunion of sorts finally earned the group some long overdue respect (and cash), it seems a hollow victory as Thunders, Kane and Nolan aren’t here to enjoy it.

Thankfully, *All Dolled Up* gives viewers a little taste of who exactly these guys were. Not “the legends” buoyed by the praises of countless bands and tawdry rock bios so much as the real people behind this group. People who loved playing music, who loved partying and who loved all the attention that being notoriously famous afforded them. Early videographers Gruen and Beck, managed to capture the Dolls in their heyday, taping the band’s performances in their hometown and on the road for a brief West Coast tour. Footage of the band onstage finally shows how revolutionary the group’s music must have been to audiences weaned on arena rock and the coffeehouse circuit. Surprisingly, both the audio and video quality of this video is quite high and this film is easy to watch (in contrast top many rock films which must be watched with one eye closed and the volume up full blast). While the band’s live performances are a

revelation, it's the non-staged moments of the members that prove to be the most memorable: a drunken Johansen being chided by a waitress at a San Diego diner; Thunders saying goodbye to his mother and sister at JFK airport; Sylvain shopping for novelty souvenirs in a gift shop; Kane, sidelined by hand injury, mouthing the words to the Dolls' songs from offstage; Nolan sitting prone in a hairstylists chair before a television appearance. This is the real treasure presented by *All Dolled Up*. Thank God it has finally been recovered.

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