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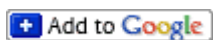
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## All Dolled Up

[Music Video Distributors](#) // Unrated // \$19.95 // December 6, 2005

Review by [Bill Gibron](#) | posted February 4, 2006 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

**The Product:**

They are consistently name-checked when the origins of punk are discussed. Their music mocked the surging glam rock revolution sweeping Britain while tapping into the urban angst explored by Iggy Pop and his seminal Stooges. They were flamboyant and flash, breaking down barriers of sexuality and social relevance, and they wrote some wonderfully rocking music along the way. Yet the New York Dolls were destined for failure. Radio wasn't ready for guys dressed like gals spewing cosmopolitan cool over '50s revival rock chords, nor was their image properly positioned for the 'just getting over the '60s hangover' headlines. By the time the Ramones reinvented their sound and headed down the road to timelessness, the Dolls were a defunct joke, a soon to be forgotten fluke that never amounted to much in the shifting modern music scene. Photographer Bob Gruen is out to change all that. On the landmark DVD presentation **All Dolled Up**, he gives us a unique view of the band, as well as the necessary contextual insight to reestablish their credentials as legends.



MOVIE  
 ★★★★★  
 VIDEO  
 ★★★★★  
 AUDIO  
 ★★★★★  
 EXTRAS  
 ★★★★★  
 REPLAY  
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quickly turned his newly purchased lens on his favorite obsession - local live act The New York Dolls. Selling out clubs all around the city, the Dolls were a phenomenon just waiting to break out of their Burroughs beginnings. The brash, brazen boys, with their lipstick and spandex, fop hairdos and fey ways were a parent's patented nightmare. That they made amazing music to go along with the drag dementia was icing on an already pleasure-heavy cake.

Along with his wife Nadya Beck, Gruen was determined to capture the group on their road to stardom. Out of the over 40 hours of Dolls footage documented, the pair has now produced **All Dolled Up**. More a look at the band live than a detailed documentary on their origins and career, this is a technically twonky but historically meaningful musical travelogue. The couple followed the group from their regular Big Apple haunts to an eye-opening journey to the Left Coast. Shortly after this skirt up and down the Pacific, the Dolls would begin to implode, befuddled by bad management, personal problems and unachieved goals. It's a shame, really, since the video showcases a formidable rock and roll force. It is also obvious that their lack of greater mainstream success had nothing to do with their sonic chops. Like the technology capturing their grandeur, the Dolls were destined to be ahead of - and still a little behind of - the times.

#### The DVD:

It is perhaps easier to say what **All Dolled Up** is not - at least, without its digital presentation context - than what it truly represents. Anyone looking for a *Behind the Music* style tell-all, complete with juicy gossip, unbridled confessions and backstage drama will definitely have to look elsewhere. The most misery you will see in the 95 minute main movie by Gruen and Beck is the look of disgust on bassist Arthur Kane's face when a broken finger (and a rather large cast) keeps him from performing most of the California shows. There are no images of the infamous junkie downfall of influential guitarist Johnny Thunders, or the overriding egotism of lead singer David Johansen. Indeed, everyone here, from rhythm axe man Syl Sylvain to drummer Jerry Nolan are onboard for the big team breakthrough and none of the rifts that would soon rip the group apart are anywhere in view. They are one musical mind, tight as any live act can be, and full of the bravado that comes with potential and promise. Where all those prospects parted ways with the truth of the Dolls reality is left for another day, another discussion. What **All Dolled Up** wants to be is a sonic celebration of an amazing live act - and in many ways, it is.

Not that the new video technology helps matters much. Highly reminiscent of **The Blank Generation**, the out of sync film that focused on CGBGs and the growing punk movement in the mid-70s, the dull, poverty row



monochrome imagery doesn't do the group anything but a grand disservice. Sure, the rarity of such a recording is part of its patina, and the ability to see the boys interact with a gritty and grimy Manhattan is priceless. Yet the club performances, full of sweat and heat, are like adventures in archival averageness. Drained of their color and left to surviving on the band's own magnetism and moxie, we get a very mixed sonic signal. The Dolls appear as good as everyone who references them says they were - an unusual combination of chords, chaos and chutzpah. But without the actual denotation of time - something black and white washes out of an image - this could be any unknown band, pounding away on a home turf stage, waiting for their moment in the mainstream sun. Sadly, such recognition never came to the Dolls, and it makes these musical memories that much more distant and disconnected. Had they been more than an influential force for the future, maybe they wouldn't seem so locked in the lost legacies of popular culture. This vaulted video only confirms that.

Still, **All Dolled Up** is an amazing bit of performance happenstance. Without Gruen and Beck's desire to experiment with the latest technology, had the Dolls been bigger than their local NY roots, had a more mercurial management stepped in and stopped the illegal taping of their act (think of how corporate and cutthroat today's musical groups are), we wouldn't have this anarchic artifact. Indeed, much of the sound made in the early part of the 70s - from the end of the hippy movement to the start of punk - seems to have vanished in a haze of AM radio hits and Dick Clark declared stardom. All the other groups grinding out a living on the outskirts of the social norm - the Dolls being perhaps the biggest example of this - are forgotten and faded from view, left to be lamented or laughed at as memories only. But thanks to video, and its new portability, the Dolls get a chance at resurrection. Indeed, even the most casual fan, or music minded person who knows of Johansen, Thunders and the boys from the numerous mentions elsewhere, will find a brand new appreciation in what the Dolls do/did. Songs like "Personality Crisis", "Trash" and "Who are the Mystery Girls?" literally come alive, far more powerful and potent than what the band was relegated to when placed on vinyl.

Indeed, what makes **All Dolled Up** an exceptional document of the New York Dolls is that it lets the music do the talking. Sure, we would love to hear about how Thunders discovered the joys of junk, and spent more time with a needle in his arm than playing guitar. We'd rejoice in seeing the remaining living members dish the dirt on those no longer around to defend themselves. We want to hear blame spread and grudges glorified. Instead, what we get is what makes a life in rock and roll the ultimate fantasy. Whether it's in front of a packed New York club crowd, or a barely stirring California collective, the Dolls melded their

differing sonic styles into a glam slam whole that broke up the whole acid rock revolution and spit back the paisley pieces. It borrowed the spaced out spunk of Bowie and his brethren and gave it a notorious nasal Big Apple twang. They reinvented rockabilly and perverted power pop. The result was a heady combination that sounded surprisingly similar and yet unlike anything around at the time. Without Gruen and Beck we'd be stuck with a purely oral history of the band. **All Dolled Up** offers a chance to witness the wildness, the weirdness and the wonderfulness first hand. The image may be sub-par, but that's the only underwhelming aspect of this performance peek into a lost legendary act.

#### **The Video:**

If you ever want a reason to bow down to the bitrate, here is a perfect argument for advances in technology. The old video footage, shot over 30 years ago, looks pretty pitiful in this 1.33:1 presentation. The image is cloudy and fuzzy, the flaring from white lights obvious and obtrusive. Still, a real remastering attempt has been made to doctor up the visuals, and this renders the material imminently watchable. It's not pristine by any stretch of the optical imagination, but one imagines that these ancient archival elements could look a whole Hell of a lot worse.

#### **The Audio:**

Wisely, someone decided to rework the aural mix for this title, giving the entire production a wonderful Dolby Digital Stereo 5.1 Surround Sound environment. When the Dolls are playing live, the channels rattle and hum, delivering speakers full of hot sonic bliss. Not much can be done with the rather derivative dialogue facets, but we really don't care about conversation with a title like this. We want to here "Looking for a Kiss" or "Frankenstein" in all their audiophile glory. That is exactly what we get here.

#### **The Extras:**











In what has to be the best set of bonus features offered by a music DVD in quite some time, MVD dresses up this package with more complimentary content than most releases ever get. Beginning with a 16 page booklet covering Gruen's connection to the band (and some of the photos he took) we begin to get the backstory that **All Dolled Up** otherwise lacks. Even better, Gruen gives us an hour long look at his snapshot scrapbook, and offers up the missing oral history of the band and why it broke up. This amazing narrated photo gallery is like a second documentary all its own. Then two of the three surviving members of the group step up to provide personal perspective on the film. Syl Sylvain sits in with Gruen, and it's all new to him. Asking someone to remember specifics about life 30+ years in the past is a tall order, but he gives it a grand old try, while marveling at how young and vital he once was. Johansen, who managed a decent solo career out

of the character Buster Poindexter, is far more pointed. He has specific recall of certain events (like the trip to California) and is more open about the issues that frayed the band than anyone else. Along with a 30 minute interview with Gruen (moderated by Handsome Dick Manitoba) to fill in the remaining storyline gaps, this is a brilliantly fleshed out digital release - well worth digging into and savoring.

### Final Thoughts:

Catchy, crude and incredibly creative, the New York Dolls were not so much ahead of their time as unstuck in it. Even with their obsessive metropolitan fanbase, it's hard to see their kind of gender-blurring brazenness translating to a demographic drowning in Elton John and various one hit wonders. The Dolls appear to forever be poised as the boys that other bands worship, a missed opportunity with nothing to blame except the ever-ticking cosmic clock, if that. While the content alone would be enough to warrant a glance in the direction of a *DVD Talk Collector's Series* rating, this DVD will earn a **Highly Recommended** for one reason only - the lacking video footage. Sure, it seems harsh to blame the technology of the time for not being as clean and clear as images captured today, but the visual element is not the hampering aspect. In basic monochrome, the Dolls maintain their memory status. Oh how they would shine if seen in the ever-loving light of a billion different hues. In color, the group would probably see a renaissance and revival in interest. In black and white, they are part of the past, and no matter how important or enigmatic, they will always appear that way. It's prescient - 40 hours of their most amazing performances and not a single one seems real. That was the New York Dolls all right - pure phantoms of music's memories.

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