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"Do You Think That You Could Make It With Frankenstein?"



That's a Bob Gruen photo of the one-and-only New York Dolls, honey. Left to right: Johnny Thunders (lead guitar), Sylvain Sylvain (rhythm guitar), Arthur "Killer" Kane (bass), Jerry Nolan (drums) and David Johansen (vocals, harmonica, monkey bidness). If a band could have been born straight from the forehead of John Waters, it would have been the Dolls. Trash-mongers and chatterboxes singing about jet boys and Vietnamese babies, they ruled from 1972 to 1975, and they still rule -- even though most of them are now dead.

For die-hard Dolls fans, the limited video documentation of this most flamboyant of groups has always been a source of disappointment -- like the dearth of listenable audio coverage of the original lineup of The Stooges. But a

few years ago, Rhino Handmade scratched the Stooges itch big time with a heaven-sent, nine-disc FUN HOUSE SESSIONS box set of previously unreleased studio performances (now out-of-print)... and now it's the Dolls' turn to roll out the horn-of-plenty with the DVD release of a (surprise!) feature-length, hitherto-unknown documentary and various extras, totalling an amazing 230 minutes of rude-and-ritzy Dolls-related video. Considering that all that existed of the band on video before this were some rarely-seen clips of appearances on THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL and the BBC, ALL DOLLED UP: A NEW YORK DOLLS STORY (Music Video Distributors, \$19.99) qualifies as a major archival rock release.

What is ALL DOLLED UP, exactly? Well, in the early 1970s, rock photographer Bob Gruen and his wife Nadya Beck invested in a Sony Portapak video camera, which recorded half-inch, analog mono, B&W video. As Gruen explains in his liner notes, there was no commercial market for video in 1973, because video players weren't sold in stores in those days, so he and Nadya and their his friend Rick Fuller went around taping various NYC-based bands for their own amusement. After recording a Dolls concert and showing it to singer David Johansen (later known as "Buster Poindexter"), Gruen became friends with the members and was invited to regularly record what now looks like bonafide rock history in the making.

The material collected here -- which has been culled from those archives and edited into a more-or-less cohesive documentary by Jolynn Garnes for directors Gruen and Beck -- covers the period immediately following the release of the Dolls' self-titled first album for MCA, and sees them performing at NYC's notorious Max's Kansas City, then flying out west to play their first-ever west coast gigs at LA's Whisky-A-Go-Go and San Francisco's Matrix (where they were introduced by LA DJ Rodney Bingenheimer), and making their first-ever TV appearance on THE REAL DON STEELE SHOW. (To see Don Steele -- the voice of New World Pictures -- and Bingenheimer participating in a photo session with the Dolls is like seeing clips from some kind of strange prequel to ROCK AND ROLL HIGH SCHOOL that never got made, and some sort of bizarre annex to

MAYOR OF THE SUNSET STRIP.) The documentary climaxes with the Dolls' return to New York, where they are shown presiding over what the local media described as the city's "first rock'n' roll Halloween party," at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The wildly costumed audience at this gig clearly eclipsed even the Dolls' outrageousness (Johansen was dressed in white tie and tails) and so claimed more of Gruen's interest than the band, but we are given a glimpse of them ending their signature song, "Frankenstein."

ALL DOLLED UP only bothers to document what paraded past Gruen's camera; it doesn't go into the band's earlier history, which ended with the drug-related death of first Dolls drummer Billy Murcia in London, nor does it make reference to the group's second album from 1974, Malcolm McLaren's failed "Red Patent Leather" 1975 makeover of the group, or the breakup of the group shortly thereafter. So don't expect a formal overview or an attempt to summarize the Dolls as a whole. Instead, you'll get a genuine you-are-there feeling of the east and west coast music scenes and privileged glimpses of the happy camaraderie that existed within the group at the time. The guys were such sweet characters that, when their stoic bassist Arthur Kane couldn't play bass at their west coast shows because he'd broken his wrist, they brought him along anyway and bought him a pair of boob-toed slippers at Frederick's of Hollywood as a consolation prize.

One thing that the film documents surprisingly well is the Dolls' chops as a blues-rock outfit. They're remembered for playing sassy, Chuck Berry-styled rock with hilarious lyrics that touched on everything from Frankenstein to the Wolf Man and Diana Dors, but as a straightforward cover of "Hootchie Cootchie Man" shows, there was clearly potential for serious growth here. Unfortunately, that promise was derailed by lead guitarist Johnny Thunders and drummer Jerry Nolan's joint descent into heroin addiction, which led to the band breaking up after their second album, the formation of Johnny Thunders and The Heartbreakers, and eventually Johnny's and Jerry's early deaths. One of the nice surprises of ALL DOLLED UP is how sweet and funny and charismatic these two guys come across in the interview material, taped well before smack made

them sullen and humorless caricatures. The camera even catches punk god Thunders shyly sneaking out of a party into an LA phonebooth because he needs to call his wife back home and let her know he's okay.



ALL DOLLED UP looks

like it was shot with bank security cameras, with lots of hemorrhaging light sources, but anyone who loves the New York Dolls will readily look past the flaws. In the early 1970s, I was a CREEM reader like any other self-respecting punk and I bought my copy of the Dolls' first album when it was released in 1973. So I find it kind of incredible to be able to peek in at some of the group's hometown shows at Max's and see how few people were actually there -- maybe even how few people could actually be squeezed into the room. And this makes it all the more impressive and appreciated that Bob Gruen and Rick Fuller were there to document the Dolls. The disc's biggest rush of sonic excitement comes when the band tears into a standout track destined to appear on their second album, "Who Are the Mystery Girls?", at The Matrix -- happily, one of the performances included in its entirety.

In the context of the documentary, which veers from live performance to interviews and backstage antics, the group's songs aren't always presented in their entirety, which keeps the program true to itself. However, a dozen songs are presented in their entirety in a square-up supplementary section. The disc

also includes a 16-page full color photo booklet with liner notes by Gruen; Gruen's narrated photo gallery; an interview of Gruen conducted by former Dictators front man "Handsome" Dick Manitoba; and the documentary can be viewed in 2.0 or 5.1 mono, or with an audio commentary by Gruen and surviving band members David Johansen and Sylvain Sylvain.

Last year, the surviving members of The New York Dolls (Johansen, Sylvain and Kane) were regrouped by none other than Morrissey, who arranged for them to appear in concert at Royal Albert Hall. That concert, played just a couple of months before Arthur Kane passed away from complications of leukemia, is available now on DVD, but I haven't seen it. The CD's pretty good, though. This music hasn't aged a day.

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