

ROCK AND ROLL

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TOO FAST TOO LIVE

YOU MAY THINK THAT THE RAMONES OR THE SEX PISTOLS WERE THE FIRST EVER PUNK BAND BUT, SAYS EMILY MACKAY, THAT WOULD BE DOING LEGENDARY ROCKERS THE NEW YORK DOLLS A MASSIVE DISERVICE.



There's a scene in the second series of fantastic BBC comedy *The Mighty Boosh* that illustrates the dilemma of the New York Dolls perfectly. The main characters are abducted by a cult of hippy Yetis who aim to breed with the humans after lulling them into a trance. As one after another falls sway to the siren call of the Big Foots' patchouli-scented folk lullabies, Naboo, the shaman, turns to Vince, the rock dandy, and cries "This is yeti magic! Don't listen to the hippy nonsense! You're a punk. Stay punk. Think of Johnny Thunders."

Cue blank stares in living rooms across the country. Johnny Who? If they'd said "think of Sid Vicious" or "think of Dec Dec Ramone", no-one would have missed the reference. Such is the sad fate of the trailblazer. You break down the boundaries, lay the foundations, only to find your territory being squatted by a bunch of scruffy urchins who take all the credit. Turn on your telly over Christmas and it won't be long before you're confronted by some odious Z-lister waxing all nostalgic and explaining who 'invented punk rock': The Sex Pistols, The Ramones, Belinda Carlisle.... but don't listen to these fools. The first punks, the real deal, were the New York Dolls. Fusing the raw power of The Stooges, the MC5 and '60s garage with the theatricality, glitz and pop nous of glam rockers like Alice

Cooper, Marc Bolan and Ziggy-era Bowie, the Dolls oozed sex and sleaze and bad, bad influence.

They wore heavily on the androgyny of the late '60s Stones and turning it up to 12 in loose women's clothing and make-up done in the dark. The height of their hair made Dusty Springfield look lazy. They wrote perfect, bluesy, snarly stomps, with infectious rhythms and a witty, camp touch that betrayed their love of classic '60s girl groups like the Shangri-Las. Their directness and pop simplicity was at odds with the dominant art-rock musicianship of the day. They weren't, predictably, really that bothered. "Rock'n'roll is all about attitude. I couldn't care less about technique," sneered guitarist Thunders.

They shared an outsider's sensibility from the start. Second guitarist Sylvain Sylvain came from a family of Egyptian exiles, forced to leave their home country during the Suez Canal crisis. Drummer Billy Murcia and his clan had to flee Colombia when his father got mixed up in a dodgy business deal. Thunders (real name Genzale - his stage name was taken from a DC Comics cowboy hero) came from a broken Italian-Sicilian family home in Queens. Singer David Johansen was a dreamer from Staten Island, drawn to the worlds of art and theatre, who liked to boast to strangers about a (mythical) past in porno. How could New York, city of weirdos and outsiders, fail to take them to heart? >>>



“THEY MADE THEIR LIVE DEBUT ON CHRISTMAS EVE 1971 WHEN THE HOMELESS SHELTER OPPOSITE THE BICYCLE SHOP THEY REHEARSED IN FOUND ITSELF SHORT OF A PARTY BAND.”

They made their live debut on Christmas Eve 1971 when the homeless shelter opposite the bicycle shop they rehearsed in found itself short of a party band, but by summer 1972, word was getting around. On the strength of their demos, they became the support band for The Faces’ 1972 UK tour. A triumphant gig in front of 13,000 people at Wembley was tragically soured when Billy Murcia drowned in a bathtub. He’d been put there to sober him up.

The grieving band returned to New York. In the new year, they recruited Jerry Nolan on drums and signed with Mercury Records. Over one week in 1973, they recorded and mixed their eponymous debut. A classic of arrogant, dandy, gutter-glam punk, it opens with the shonky honky-tonk lunacy of ‘Personality Crisis’ which sets the classic Dolls template. David Johansen growls and yowls like an alley cat over Thunders’ choppy power chord riffs, creating a twisted pop genius that was unhygienically catchy. ‘Trash’, ‘Jet Boy’ and almost every other track are solid gold classics.

The album drew a cult following in New York, and rightly so: ‘The band, however, didn’t like Todd Rungdren’s production, and for 1974’s ‘Too Much Too Soon’ Johansen called in Shangri-Las producer Shadow Morton. The combination wasn’t fantastic (although there are few gems, like the gloriously silly ‘Stranded In The Jungle’ and ‘Babylon’), and the record lacked punch. After a poor reception, things began to go a bit Doll-shaped. Johansen and Thunders clashed all the time, Kane tussled with booze, Thunders struggled with smack, the live shows suffered generally. As if that weren’t bad enough, in 1974 they bumped into Malcolm McLaren, who became their manager. McLaren developed his well-known sympathetic, artist-centred management style with the Dolls before moving on to the Pistols. The best thing, he figured, to revive their fortunes in Cold War America would be to dress them in red patent leather and drape them in Soviet and Chinese flags. This genius marketing ploy led to rejection by the public, and contributed to the band’s split. Thunders and Nolan left in 1975 to form The Heartbreakers. The others soldiered on until the band finally stumbled to a halt in 1976. Johansen carried on solo, later recording lounge numbers under the name Buster Poindexter.

The Heartbreakers, meanwhile, headed to London, where the Dolls already had a mythical reputation among those in the know. In 1976, they joined The Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Damned on the notorious Anarchy tour. They brought to the burgeoning British punk scene smack and one Nancy Spungen, who allegedly came over to England hoping to bag Jerry Nolan, but ended up with Sid Vicious instead. By the end of 1977, Hell and Nolan had quit the chaotic group, and Thunders had been deported. He carried on with some new Heartbreakers until his death in 1991 of a methadone overdose. Jerry Nolan followed him in 1992 after a stroke. There the story might have ended, but cult bands will have their cultish fans, and a certain Mr Steven Patrick Morrissey just wouldn’t let it lie. The former Smiths frontman, once head of the UK New York Dolls fan club, persuaded the remaining band members to reunite for the 2004 Meltdown festival. The gigs were sold out, and later released as a live album. Disastrously, however, Kane died less than a month later of undiagnosed leukaemia. The others bravely went on to triumphant sets at the Reading and Leeds festivals. Better still, plans were announced in July last year for a new album, to be this spring. This month sees the release of ‘All Dolled Up’ a live DVD that showcases the Dolls at their peak. It seems they’re finally getting recognised as punk’s true forerunners, though some have always known. Ira Robbins of legendary ’70s New York magazine *Trouser Press* wrote that they “singlehandedly began the local New York scene ... the Dolls were much more than just a band”. “The Dolls had a massive effect on me.... They blew my mind,” concurred Mick Jones from The Clash. Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones recalled ‘I’d never seen anything like that – I don’t think anyone had.’ You can see and hear their influence in Hanoi Rocks, Mötley Crüe, Guns’n’ Roses, The Manic Street Preachers and The Libertines. As was said of the first Velvet Underground album, not many people had heard them, but everyone who did formed their own band. They may not have their own statues like Joey Ramone, or a blue plaque in the ICA like the Sex Pistols, but without the Dolls, none of it would have happened. And that’s the great reward of the trailblazer. ◊

New York Dolls



ALL DOLLED UP

FLMS BY BOB GRUEN AND NADYA BECK

THE NEW YORK DOLLS

All Dolled Up

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WIENERWORLD

This is a historical document a devoted fan of any band would give at least one limb for. Culled from over 40 hours of filming by rock photographer Bob Gruen, it follows the New York Dolls onstage, on the road and on the razz.

Unlike *The Ramones: End Of The Century*, there's little narrative.

Bar one or two early interviews the revealing (if sometimes low quality) footage is left to speak for itself. The film is rich in social context, splicing early shows with bemused news reports, or disgusted travellers eyeballing the highheeled dandies at the airport. But the band themselves, far from debauched terrorisers of Middle America, come across as witty, literate, and overall, a blinding live act. Extras include an interview and commentary with Gruen, which should aid newcomers, a still photo gallery, and 12 full live songs. **EM**