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Movie/DVD Review

New York Dolls

Lookin' Fine On Television

By Ric Hickey
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Lookin' Fine On Television opens with an endearing interview excerpt from so early in the Dolls' storied career that they seem like a fresh-faced band of brothers doing their best imitation of Rock Stars. They stumble over each other's words, interrupt one another continually, finish each other's sentences and stammer corny one-liners with a child-like innocence that even hardcore fans might never associate with the Dolls, a band that has carried a reputation of confrontational danger since day one. But in the early days of their career, when this indisputably historic footage was shot, they very much were still boys impersonating Rock Stars, posers imitating musicians.

The disc brilliantly blends black & white archival footage of several different performances from the band's New York City club daze in the early to mid-70s with offstage clips of the band clowning around on the streets of Manhattan, cavorting in gangster outfits, and goofing off in L.A. porn shops and toy stores. Dolls' aficionados will revel in rare footage filmed at the photo shoot for the bands' iconic first album cover shot, and their infamous Halloween show at the Waldorf-Astoria where we catch a glimpse of Ace Frehley among the crowd in full make-up. In between songs there are additional interview excerpts that illuminate the path of the bands' early days. One is virtually transported back in time when watching this DVD, as it captures the risqué spirit, elusive spark, and ramshackle magic of the Dolls and the explosive art party scene that surrounded them in their early days perhaps better than any previous film about the band.

Among the unexpected revelations herein are live clips of Johnny Thunders and drug buddy drummer Jerry Nolan looking more like urban hippies than the forefathers of Glam Rock, decked out as they were in nothing more elaborate than cowboy shirts and tight jeans, their long hair flying freely and messily about, not yet teased and tamed into the sky high coifs that were soon to emerge.

With guitarist Sylvain Sylvain and singer David Johansen the only two original members still alive today, the current line-up of the Dolls has achieved on record and on stage well beyond the expectations of many fans. Though it's been nearly four decades since the release of their hugely influential debut album, one simply can't begrudge them for their ongoing success or their desire to carry on the Dolls' tradition into the 21st century. But watching this DVD the long shadow of the late, great Johnny Thunders looms large over the bands' legacy. Some have suggested that a Dolls reunion may never have happened if Thunders were still with us. But the band exists today in its current incarnation as a living metaphor for the world of Rock n Roll in a much larger sense, in that, as great as they are, it just ain't the same without Johnny.



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