

New York Doll. Directed by Greg Whiteley.

One Potato Productions, 2005

Reviewed by Nathan Richardson

There's a tremendous spirit at the bottom of the New York Dolls. There are three living New York Dolls and three dead New York Dolls. The people who are dead, they are with us in spirit somehow. This is like me being in the family history center.

~Arthur "Killer" Kane, bassist, New York Dolls

One day back in the early 1970s when, as the story goes, old fashioned rock and roll was dying a slow, boring death-by-interminable-drum-solo, a band called the New York Dolls changed everything. Offering a sneering, irreverent mix of high-energy rock-and-roll and cross-dress chic, the band grabbed the attention of alienated youth, aspiring musicians, and curious critics. A quintessential live-hard-die-hard act, the drug-induced death of a band member plus internal disputes frightened off major record labels and precipitated the group's disintegration. Before the implosion, however, future musicians of such key punk and new wave acts as Blondie, Generation X, the Sex Pistols, Morrissey, Iggy Pop, The Damned, and The Clash, plus the entire Glam Metal scene found early inspiration in the Dolls' style and sound. It can be argued that all of punk rock and hence all contemporary rock-and-roll owe something of a debt to the fast-living Dolls.

In the years following the breakup, the band's mystique grew alongside each individual member's personal misery. In the late 1980s, two former members met substance-abuse related deaths. With a reunion of the band increasingly unlikely, and having reached rock-bottom himself, in the late 1980s bassist Arthur Kane attempted to follow the path of his three late mates. Instead he met the missionaries. Two bishops and a home teacher later, plus a calling to the family history center at the Los Angeles Temple, and "Killer" Kane had found peace and a new sense of purpose. Making copies and looking up records for his senior missionary co-workers, the bassist who had once rocked Wembley Stadium had found something else

to live for besides a New York Dolls reunion. And then, suddenly, in early 2004 a series of e-mails hinted that Kane's rock-and-roll career was perhaps not entirely over.

Enter the camera of BYU film program graduate Greg Whiteley. Starting on the day that Kane, in the company of film crew and home teacher, returns to a local L.A. pawn shop to retrieve his guitars (using money lent by local ward members), Whiteley documents the history of Kane and the Dolls wrapped around a forthcoming Dolls reunion in New York City and concert in London's Royal Festival Hall. For the rock novitiate, Whiteley walks us through the history of rock-and-roll mixing footage of early Dolls shows with interviews of industry legends Morrissey (The Smiths), Chrissy Hynde (The Pretenders), Sir Bob Geldof (The Boomtown Rats, BandAid, LiveAid), Iggy Pop, Mick Jones (The Clash), and many others. For rock-and-rollers who may never have darkened the door of a church, let alone an LDS meetinghouse, Whiteley offers interviews with Kane's bishops, home teacher, and co-workers at the Family History Center. Couched quixotically in the seam of these two worlds is Kane himself, dressed in white shirt, dark tie, and missionary nametag while he recalls his rock-and-roll days as his "fondest memory," something he is unable to "put . . . away." Formally joined with Kane in the interstices of the two worlds is the bassist's ex-wife who Whiteley films reading from the Book of Mormon, Mormon 9:21, "Behold, I say unto you that whoso believeth in Christ, doubting nothing, whatsoever he shall ask the Father in the name of Christ it shall be granted him." Read to him during a home teaching visit, as Kane's former bishop recalls, Kane took the promise to heart and began praying. For a New York Dolls reunion.

Which then, of course, comes to pass.

And suddenly, the humble family history worker, who reports to fans after a concert that he is "expected back" at his "understaffed" library, becomes, in answer to prayer, once again a front-lining rock star.

And therein lays the fun and indeed, the power, of Whiteley's documentary. An engaging blend of homage to rock-and-roll and real-life testimony meeting, the story that Whiteley tells ends up being (without spoiling the ending) quite remarkable if not simply miraculous. Great, even wondrous, things happen to those who pray and play. But perhaps the real power of Whiteley's film, at least for an LDS audience, is that, as remarkable and even miraculous as Kane's story is, it is ultimately experienced as something quite familiar. This is not meant to discount the beauty of Kane's experience, nor the quality of Whiteley's storytelling. To the contrary. Indeed, what Whiteley captures ultimately is the simple normalcy and regularity of a world in which miracles have not ceased. As I

watched the film, I couldn't help thinking that as fantastic as Kane's experience is, the feelings it evoked and the thoughts it recalled were those of so many testimony meetings I have experienced in so many congregations over the course of my life. Note that I speak of testimony meetings and not merely testimonies. For, Whiteley's direction converts Kane's story into more than merely Kane's own testimony. Certainly, the bishops, the home teacher, and the fellow Family History Center workers each add in their own way their claims of belief and faith. But perhaps most remarkable, at least for this child of the eighties, is how the idolized rockers of my youth manifest their own versions of faith, hope, and charity in their attitudes towards the rather different life of a once and future fellow traveler. All of this is carried out, thankfully, with appropriate subtlety. This is not a "faith promoting film." But it is a film that, in portraying the honest story of an honest man surrounded by honest people, cannot help but ultimately sustain, support, and, indeed, promote faith.

This is, in short, a story for people interested in how the gospel works outside the norms that often we associate with LDS living. It offers a vision of being in but not of the world that may not feel quite comfortable for some but has a sense of reality coursing through it. Kane's world, and Whiteley's film, is a place where an answer to prayer is described as "an LSD trip from the Lord" and where rock stars hope to "convey a Joseph Smith kind of image" on stage. Perhaps unusual but hardly unreal. As Whiteley's camera and Kane's story document, gospel living and teaching go on everyday in all sorts of places. Bassists can and do teach irreverent chain-smoking lead singers about the law of tithing and the Word of Wisdom backstage and then lead band and roadies in prayer before running before thousands of screaming fans. The wildest rockers do appreciate spiritual experiences and perhaps long for a peace of their own. Conservative-looking bishops may just know the history of rock-and-roll and senior sister missionaries can get starry-eyed at the idea of being a groupie.

Whiteley concludes his film with a touching musical tribute to Kane by the Dolls' lead singer, David Johansen, a personal, soulful, not-to-be-missed rendition of "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief." A treat for LDS audiences, the number neatly ties up for all audiences the rock-and-roll/religion dialectic that produced the unique story that is Arthur Kane, "killer" bassist, family history worker, and at last, friend.

Nathan Richardson (nrichar@bnet.bgsu.edu) teaches film and literature at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.