

The New York Dolls'

JERRY NOLAN

BY CURT WEISS

Making their initial splash in 1972, drugs, bad business deals and internal fighting caused the New York Dolls to implode in 1975. Since then they have been name checked as influencing Kiss, Aerosmith, Poison, Morrissey, Guns and Roses and the Punks of 1976 as well as 2006. Now, over thirty years past their initial breakup, a successful reunion of two surviving members and documentaries of two deceased members have left Jerry Nolan, their drummer who passed away in 1992, unjustly overlooked. His sixtieth birthday would have been May 7, 2006 making this an opportune time to re-examine his influence and contributions.



At a time when the accepted great drummers were named Cobham and Bonham, more was thought to be better. More speed, more drums and more complexity. Jerry took another approach that harkened back to 1950's and 60's R&B, Pop, and Rock & Roll. Jerry demonstrated that less was more. To him, it was about the song, the band, and creating three minutes of fun and rebellion. His style forecasted what was to come for both Punk and its children (New Wave) and still stands up today: Short, sharp, loud, and to the point.

Jerry had wonderful teachers: the radio and records. He was a fan of Jazz legend Gene Krupa, instrumental hit maker Sandy Nelson, and rockabilly legend Johnny Burnette and his Rock & Roll trio. To Jerry it wasn't about technique, it was about feeling the music while adding your own spice to it. Few would

think that the Dolls or the band he started with fellow ex-Doll Johnny Thunders, the Heartbreakers, were subtle. However, on closer listen, Jerry added masterful touches to their music: Going back and forth from the tom to the ride cymbal in "Trash"; the little extra note on the snare drum at the end of every verse line in "All By Myself"; riding the floor tom in "Looking For a Kiss"; the snare drum rolls during the riff in "Baby Talk", hitting and closing the hi-hat while still playing the ride in "Bad Girl", or the sheer power of the double time section at the end of "Pirate Love". This was not stuff you learned in a music book. You learned it by listening to and loving the music. As Jerry unabashedly said, "I know my Rock & Roll".

In 1976, the Heartbreakers were asked to join the "Anarchy" tour of England by Sex Pistols manager Malcolm

McLaren, who had managed the Dolls at the time of their split. The goal was to spread punk beyond London to the outer regions of the U.K. This tour, which besides the Pistols, also featured the Clash and the Damned, was so controversial that of the nineteen shows booked only three were allowed to go on, as local town councils were terrified that Punk would subvert their children. When they did get to perform, the other bands gawked from the side of the stage in amazement at the simple awe inspiring power of the Heartbreakers driven by Jerry's commanding drumming. Like his first student, boyhood friend and Kiss drummer Peter Criss, all of these bands improved after watching Jerry. Unfortunately for Jerry, they all had more success as well.

With guitarist Walter Lure, he co-wrote songs like "All by Myself", "Get Off the Phone", "Let Go", and "One Track Mind". These songs were cutting edge Punk in 1977 and brought to mind all that was great about Rock & Roll from Chuck Berry to Girl Groups to the Stooges. They're also every bit as frightening to parents as Black Flag, Nirvana, or whatever kids enjoy terrifying parents with nowadays.

Never one to rely solely on the sound, Jerry's appearance was as stylish as any Rocker. Jeans and a t-shirt would never do for him. His love of clothing was an outgrowth of the early 1960's street gangs of New York who were too busy profiling to get into fights and ruin the creases of their pants. He could sew and design clothing. He would describe in

detail how his collar, shoes, lapels, cuffs, or buttons should be. His remembrances of seeing Elvis in the 1950's centered on the King's wardrobe just as much as the music. Jerry's two tom, pink, lefty drum kit was shocking in 1973 and was his signature. Friends told of how he would say that when his next band got a record deal he'd buy, "A new pink drum kit and a new pair of kicks".

So Jerry had style and substance. But there was another substance. The Heartbreakers were shameless junkies. Misery loves company and, as junkies can be quite miserable, he helped spread heroin to young punks used to speed and beer. When Nancy Spungeon met Sid Vicious, she was actually looking for Jerry. 'Nuff said. When confronted by fellow band mates about his heroin use, he would often say "Who made you judge and jury"? Inevitably, he would have to leave bands as getting him to methadone clinics or the local dealer just didn't fit into any upwardly mobile band's tour itinerary.

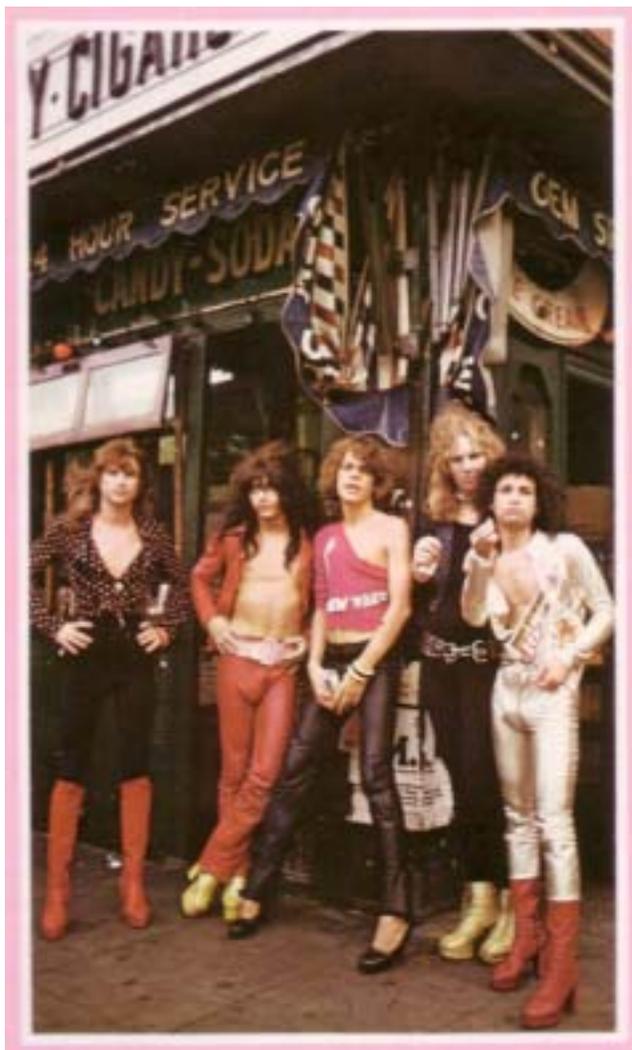
No band Jerry played with was ever as good once he left. Not the Dolls, the Heartbreakers, or lesser knowns like the Rockats, who caused a sensation in New York in 1980. Based on their reputation, they got a million dollar record deal from Island Records the first gig after Jerry's departure. Once Jerry left though they were never as good and soon faded into obscurity, seen only as Stray Cats rip-offs. Few realized they had beaten them to the punch by three years. Such was the effect of Jerry Nolan.

I saw Jerry play with the Rockats many times that year and the images are indelibly etched in my memory. A crowd filled with old Dolls & Heartbreakers fans, newer "Teddy Boys" and well-coifed men and women dancing like Rock & Roll

had just been discovered. It was old and new at the same time. Jerry was the lynchpin. Every time his head swayed back and forth or his right hand came down on the snare drum I can only describe it as feeling as if I was seeing the real thing, not a wannabe.

This is how I choose to remember Jerry, with perfect hair and a pinky ring, driving a band towards Rock & Roll bliss behind his pink drum kit, not as the 110 lb. junkie, with tubes running through him on his death bed at the age of forty-six after falling ill with bacterial meningitis and a stroke.

In the Dolls wonderful version of Archie Bell and the Drells' "Showdown", it all comes together: The Jerry of Brooklyn gangs providing the beat to the big dance off. Before singer David Johansen can "Do (his) jive", he calls to Jerry, "Gimme one Jerry". Ahh... to just have one more.



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