



Pansy Division

by Linda Rapp

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Pansy Division in 2003.
Promotional photograph
by Richard Turtleaub.

San Francisco-based Pansy Division, now consisting of Christopher Freeman (b. 1961), Jon Ginoli (b. 1959), Patrick Goodwin (b. 1973), and Luis Illades (b. 1974), was the first rock band entirely composed of gay musicians who sang frankly gay-themed tunes. After a productive period of recording and touring they had a fallow spell but have recently re-emerged with a new album and a more mature sound.

Guitarist Jon Ginoli and bassist Chris Freeman started the band in 1991. They were accompanied by a drummer, but for the first five years the percussionists came and went with regularity.

Ginoli and Freeman felt doubly marginalized: the rock world was not particularly welcoming to gays, and many in the gay community were less than enthusiastic about punk rock music. They rose to the challenge by writing music that was unabashedly gay and punk and that also showed a sense of humor.

Pansy Division's first album, *Undressed*, which featured titles such as "Fem in a Black Leather Jacket" and "Boyfriend Wanted," appeared in 1993. Thereafter, they put out an album a year until 1998.

The debut album caught the attention of another Bay Area band, Green Day, who signed them as the opening act for their concerts.

The Green Day band members were not gay, but they strongly supported Pansy Division and brought them along on tour for five years. Concert audiences were sometimes hostile to the gay band, however. On several occasions Pansy Division found themselves pelted with objects thrown by the crowd.

Despite the adverse incidents Pansy Division began winning a devoted fan following with their songs that frankly celebrated gay sexuality. They were particularly gratified to receive letters from gay teenagers who had felt isolated or even suicidal but found hope and solace in Pansy Division's positive messages. "Those letters alone make me feel like what we did was worthwhile," commented Ginoli.

One of Pansy Division's constant messages was the importance of practicing safe sex. They not only sang about it but also included information on proper condom use in the materials accompanying their CDs. Ginoli stated, "While our HIV-positive fans loved the fact that we were so life-affirming, we wanted to make sure our HIV-negative listeners stayed negative."

Pansy Division gained a permanent drummer in 1996 when Luis Illades joined the group. Born in Tijuana, Mexico, Illades left home and moved to San Diego at sixteen. He subsequently settled in San Francisco. Although he acknowledges that Mexico is not as accepting of glbtq people as it could be, he has stated that he "feel[s] nothing but love" for his homeland. Fortunately for Illades, his own family has been extremely supportive of him.

Guitarist Patrick Goodwin joined the group in 1997. The two new band members made the group more solid musically, and Pansy Division's 1998 album, *Absurd Pop Song Romance*, moved the band in a new direction--

away from the in-your-face punk style toward a more lyrical pop sound--while retaining a gay-positive message.

Instead of gaining them new fans, however, the album proved their least successful commercially, and their tour of North America and Europe was fraught with problems. Upon their return to California the discouraged group broke up. The members drifted off to join other bands.

Pansy Division's record label, the independent Lookout! Records, asked the group to reunite and play at a college music festival in late 1999. Although the members were reluctant, they consented and were rewarded with an enthusiastic reception from the audience.

Buoyed by the experience, Pansy Division began practicing and performing together again, sometimes with understudy guitarist Bernard Yin (b. 1964) sitting in for Goodwin, who was also working with another band, Dirty Power.

Their concerts, in which they played both their old standards and new material, drew a mixed response from fans, many of whom came for the classic numbers and were less interested in the band's more mature work. Gay British rocker Tom Robinson, who faced a similar situation, said of Pansy Division's dilemma, "I have a theory that every band fortunate enough to write the songs that become the soundtrack for other people's lives ceases in time to own those songs. They have a responsibility to act as caretakers for that heritage" as well as moving on musically.

Pansy Division's 2003 album, *Total Entertainment!*, was described by reviewer Nate Cavaliere as "straight-ahead power pop" that departed from both "the simplistic punches of their early days and the power balladeering" of their previous effort. Echoing Robinson, he stated that "die-hard queercore fans may bemoan the change," but also noted that "without Pansy Division, those fans wouldn't exist in the first place."

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Pansy Division. www.pansydivision.com.

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