



Scissor Sisters

by Claude J. Summers

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The American pop band Scissor Sisters was spawned in New York City's gay club scene and has cultivated a large glbtq fan base around the world, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States.

With four of its current five members openly gay men; with the lyrics of their songs regularly addressing transgressive sexuality and glbtq subjects, such as transsexual prostitutes and coming out to one's family; and with the group's music and flamboyant presentation drawing on the rich heritage of gay dance music, especially disco and glam rock: it is not a stretch to suggest that the band expresses a contemporary gay artistic vision, notwithstanding its consistent rejection of the label "gay band."

Although co-founder Jake Shears has said that "I don't believe sexuality really matters when it comes to music," he has nevertheless expressed the desire for the band to be "openly gay" in a way that other bands have not been in the past, without coyness or apology.

Whatever label one attaches to the group, there is no doubt that the band seems to crystallize the joyful energy and genderbending campiness, as well as the sardonic poses, tender yearning, and uninhibited eroticism, of many glbtq young people.

Origins of the Band

The band was founded in 2000 by Jason Sellards (b. October 3, 1978), who was born in Arizona but grew up in Seattle, and whose stage name is Jake Shears; and Scott Hoffman (b. September 1, 1976), of Houston, who is known as Babydaddy.

Sellards and Hoffman met in 1999 in Lexington, Kentucky and quickly became fast friends. After Hoffman moved to New York to attend Columbia University in 2000, Sellards also moved there, where he attended Eugene Lang College and wrote for the gay magazine *HX* and earned extra money as a go-go dancer at gay clubs.

Both young men were eager to experience the freedom of the city and to participate in its alternative music scene. After reconnecting in the city, they soon began making music together and appearing in Lower East Side underground clubs as the Fibrillating Scissor Sisters. Sellards suggested the genderbending name, reportedly an allusion to a lesbian sex position, and Hoffman designed the band's distinctive logo.

On an improbable trip to Disneyland in 2001, they met Ana Lynch (b. August 14, 1974), a singer who had performed at San Francisco's drag club Trannyshack. The two men immediately realized they shared a number of cultural and musical interests with Lynch, who ran a cabaret night known as Knock Off at a New York club called the Slipper Room. Lynch, who is heterosexual and has recently married, has explained her



Scissor Sisters lead singers Ana Matronic and Jake Shears. Image of Ana Matronic by Wikimedia Commons contributor HD. Image of Jake Shears by Wikimedia Commons Contributor Ames. Both images appear under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

immersion in gay culture as an attempt to feel closer to her gay father, who died of an AIDS-related illness when she was 15.

Lynch invited the Fibrillating Scissor Sisters to appear at Knock Off, which they did on September 21, 2001, soon after the terrorist attack on New York City. During their performance, she joined the duo on stage. She was so effective and so attuned to their music that Sellards and Hoffman invited her to become a permanent member of the group. Soon afterwards they decided to drop "Fibrillating" from the band's name and Lynch adopted the stage name Ana Matronic.

The group was augmented by the addition of Derek Gruen (b. August 31, 1977), who took the stage name Del Marquis, on lead guitar. Gruen was first introduced to the band by a friend who at the time was dating Sellards, but became a member of the band when he responded to an advertisement for a guitarist.

The band then added a drummer, Patrick Seacor (b. September 6, 1968), known as Paddy Boom, the only male heterosexual in the Scissor Sisters. The oldest member of the group, Seacor had drummed and sung in several indie bands, including the Sloane Rangers, and had more experience than the other members. Seacor, who took a sabbatical in 2007 after the death of his mother, amicably parted from the Scissor Sisters in 2008.

When Seacor left in 2008, he was permanently replaced by the drummer who had substituted for him during his absence in 2007, Randy Schrager, whose stage name is Randy Real, and who is also a member of the goth band Jessica Vale.

Climb to Fame

In 2002, Scissor Sisters signed with a small New York record company to release two singles. The first, "Electrobix," an original song about gay men's obsession with working out, was less popular than its B-side, an inventive cover of Pink Floyd's 1979 "Comfortably Numb," which reinterpreted the rock classic about a drug overdose as a disco dance hit in the manner of the Bee Gees. Transforming Pink Floyd's somber song into a disco-oriented, high-energy anthem revealed the group's original brand of sardonic irony and savage camp and its tendency to combine upbeat music with downer lyrics.

Featuring a falsetto vocal by Jake Shears, the song became popular in many dance clubs and attracted the attention of major producers, including the British label Polydor, who signed the Scissor Sisters to a contract and soon produced their first album, which included a remixed "Comfortably Numb," which was also issued as a single.

The Polydor version of "Comfortably Numb" was the first of the band's single hits. It reached number 10 on the United Kingdom singles charts. It also received a Grammy nomination in the category "Best Dance Recording."

The album *Sister Scissors* climbed to number 1 on the U.K. albums chart and became the best-selling album of 2004 in the United Kingdom.

Six months following its release in the United Kingdom, the album was issued in the United States, where it was not a major hit, selling only 150,000 copies as opposed to ten times that number in the U.K.

Claiming that it contained "a snarling, swaggering attack on conservatism," Walmart refused to sell the album. Despite some pressure from the label, the band declined to produce a "clean" version.

The band's second album, *Ta-Dah*, was released in September 2006 in both the United Kingdom and the

United States. The album featured their biggest hit to date, "I Don't Feel Like Dancin'," which was co-written with Elton John, who performed on piano and who has been a consistent supporter of the group. The song remained no. 1 on the U.K. singles chart for five weeks, and also reached no. 1 on the Euro Hot 100 list and the Australian singles chart.

Ta-Dah also reached the top spot on the U.K. albums chart and was popular in Latin America.

In general, Scissor Sisters' second album is darker and more complex than the first, revealing greater maturity and a kind of world-weariness, the latter perhaps the result of the band members' feeling burnt out by the strains of touring and promoting the group's first album.

Although the band had a successful 2007 world tour, they decided to spend much of 2008 and 2009 in the recording studio. Unfortunately, after working on an album for almost 18 months, they discarded most of the songs because they felt they were not good enough.

Inspired by a visit to Germany and its nightclubs, they began anew on an album they entitled *Night Work*, which Sellards described as "supersexual and sleazy."

The new album was released in June 2010 and included "Any Which Way" and "Fire with Fire," both of which became instant hits. The album debuted at no. 18 on the *Billboard 200* list and at no. 2 on the U.K. album chart. Its cover, featuring Robert Mapplethorpe's striking 1980 photograph of the late ballet dancer Peter Reed's clenched buttocks, also attracted a great deal of comment.

Well received by critics, the album was described by Jim Farber of the *New York Daily News* as the group's "best written, most confidently performed, and most focused album." He observed that the songs recall the gay pop scene in New York before the advent of AIDS.

Videos and Live Performances

The Scissor Sisters have also released a number of inventive music videos, which rely on special effects and provocative dancing, perhaps the best of which are those of "Take Your Mama," "I Don't Feel Like Dancin'," and "Fire with Fire." These videos have proven very popular on YouTube, along with videos of the band's live performances.

Another Scissor Sisters video, which is not on YouTube, has gained a kind of cult following though it is not readily available. Directed by John Cameron Mitchell and filmed in a New York nightclub, it is of "Filthy/Gorgeous," their song about transsexual hookers.

In live performances, as in the music videos, Jake Shears and Ana Matronic are the most striking and flamboyant performers, donning outrageous costumes and dancing with abandon. True to his experience as a former go-go dancer, Shears also frequently dances in near nudity. In contrast, Del Marquis, Paddy Boom, Randy Real, and Babydaddy are more restrained in their presentations.

Jake Shears and Ana Matronic, as the lead singers, garner most of the fan adulation, but all of the band members receive attention. A group of fans, mainly lesbians, drag queens, and heterosexual men, have formed the "Ana Matronic Appreciation Society." In addition, there are groups known as the "Jake Groupies" (consisting of both men and women) and the "Deltoids." Husky, hunky, and bearded Babydaddy, the least flamboyant of the group, is also a sex symbol to many. He has commented that "Jake gets a lot of attention just by virtue of being the lead singer, but when the boys want a little beef, they come to me."

Music and Lyrics

Most of the songs performed by the Scissor Sisters are composed by Jason Sellards and Scott Hoffman, although other members of the group sometimes contribute to various degrees.

Hoffman, who plays multiple instruments, including the rhythm guitar, studied writing and music production at Columbia. When he and Sellards first formed the band, Hoffman wrote the music and Sellards provided the vocals and the dancing. Subsequently, however, Sellards also contributed lyrics, and most of the Scissor Sisters songs are attributed jointly to Sellards and Hoffman.

Most of the songs are witty and sardonic, and sometimes joyful; but they can also be serious and touching. The songs often celebrate androgyny and pansexuality, and seem to revel in hedonism, yet they also expose hedonism's dark side.

Scissor Sisters songs frequently combine cheerful music with bleak lyrics to create an unusual effect. In juxtaposing a bright tone and insistent beat with barely concealed vulnerability and suffering, they make statements about the need to celebrate even in the face of sadness and despair and about the coexistence of happiness and pain. "I Don't Feel Like Dancin'," for example, chronicles the fear of commitment and rejection, but its infectious beat compels us to dance even in the face of its refrain, "I don't feel like dancin'," and its complaint, "My heart could take a chance / but my two feet can't find a way."

The songs deal with issues as serious as prostitution and drug abuse and coming out, but often they present these issues with a misleading lightness, as in "Take Your Mama Out," which at first hearing seems to be a rollicking paean to having a good time, but only later reveals itself as possibly a plaintive account of the desperate need to come out to one's family however painful doing so may be.

Although the songs typically work by indirection, eschewing the bald statement of meaning and often deflecting a definitive narrative, that is not true of all of them. For example, "Mary," which was inspired by Sellards' love for his best female friend, who supported him when he came out as a teenager and who died of a brain aneurysm in April 2006, speaks straightforwardly and touchingly of love and concern for a troubled friend suffering from obesity and low self-esteem.

Collaborations

The Scissor Sisters have collaborated with a number of other artists, including Elton John and Kylie Minogue. With Minogue, they co-wrote such songs as "White Diamond," which she performs on her 2007 album *X*; and Hoffman and Sellards wrote "I Believe in You," which appears on the *Ultimate Kylie* album (2007). The Scissor Sisters have also performed with her, as well as with a number of indie bands.

The band has also worked with such acts as Andy Bell, Pet Shop Boys, Blondie, and Tiga. In addition, they have toured with such bands as Depeche Mode and Duran Duran. In September 2010, it was announced that Scissor Sisters would open for one leg of Lady Gaga's Monster Ball Tour.

Sir Ian McKellan contributed the voice-over to "Invisible Light" on the *Night Work* album.

Jake Shears is currently collaborating with playwright Jeff Whitty on a musical version of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, which is due for production in 2011.

Activism and Awards

Although the Scissor Sisters avoid soapboxes, their openness as to their sexualities has amounted to a kind of activism. While disavowing the label "gay band," they nevertheless embrace transgressive sexuality.

In a 2006 conversation with Elton John, Jake Shears proposed that the Scissor Sisters, the Pet Shop Boys,

and John give a gay pride concert in Moscow. Although no such event has yet occurred, it remains a possibility.

The Scissor Sisters received a 2005 GLAAD Media Award for their eponymous album, beating out such other nominees in the category Outstanding Musical Artist as Melissa Etheridge and Rufus Wainwright.

The gay members of the group were included in *Out Magazine's* 2004 list of "100 Most Intriguing Gay People of the Year." *Out Magazine* also ranked *Ta-Da* no. 82 on their "List of the 100 Greatest, Gayest Albums."

In 2010, Jake Shears was named to the *Advocate's* annual "Forty Under 40" list of young leaders in the glbtq community. Upon being so honored, he remarked, "If I had to hide being gay, I wouldn't have a creative process. I wouldn't have a career."

In response to the spate of suicides in September 2010 by gay youth who had been bullied or humiliated, Shears contributed a touching and revealing video to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" YouTube channel.

In the video, Shears reveals that he was bullied when he came out at 15 and even contemplated suicide. But, he assures young people, things got better for him and they will for them. He comments that the rage he felt over the way he was treated has fueled his music and urges that they similarly translate their bad times into good ones. He also laughingly assures them, "queers have more fun."

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