

## Weekend

## cover story

## ‘We couldn’t look after ourselves. Now we know how to stay sane’

**Scissor Sisters are back, and bringing their sexed-up glam pop to the Tower of London. They tell **Tim Teeman** how they pull it off**



It's not a stretch to imagine the 11-year-old Jake Shears performing *Groove is in the Heart*, as Deee-lite's Lady Miss Kier, for his parents' dinner guests. In a dressing room at Terminal 5, a New York concert venue, Shears laughs: "If they didn't know I was going to turn out to be a queen and a half, they really weren't seeing things for what they were." The 33-year-old lead singer of the Scissor Sisters — born Jason Sellards — has always "loved receiving attention", which is obvious when you see him working the crowd at a gig. Backstage, dressed in tank-top and shorts, he says of songwriting: "I've said my piece, especially with this last album [*Magic Hour*, the band's fourth]. I don't want to make any more albums unless there is something else to be said. Right now I don't feel there is."

There's a lust object for everyone in the band: the statuesque Ana Matronic's (Ana Lynch) fans are called "nuns": a pansexual grouping who call themselves "ansexual". "The best gift they ever bought me was a star in the constellation of Leo Minor, named Ana Matronic," she reveals. "Babydaddy" (Scott Hoffman) and Del Marquis (born Derek Gruen), both gay, bearded and handsome, keep the "bear" and "cub" lovers happy. A Scissors gig, with their full-bodied pop and electroclash-streaked songs such as *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'* and *Take Your Mama*, and new songs such as *Let's Have a Kiki* and *Only the Horses*, is a highly-sexed affair — Shears loves "checking out the eye candy" from the stage.

The band, which formed in 2001, will represent the Americas on July 21 at the BT River of Music, when artists from the 204 Olympic countries will perform on six stages along the Thames. "We're at the Tower of London," says Lynch, 37, "hanging with the headless Anne Boleyn. We have more fun than anyone else in pop music. If we want to be serious we can, if we want to be completely bonkers we are. We are not afraid of people not taking us seriously." Some songs are glittery and bouncy, others glittery and dark: "If you're not writing about the times you live in, what's the use of any of this?" reasons Shears.

The Scissors grew out of the queer electroclash scene in New York in the early 2000s, which mashed up punk, industrial, disco, New Wave and anything else around. Shears and Hoffman, old friends, worked on music for Shears's career as a go-go boy; he was also a stripper at a tiny East Village gay bar, I.C. Guys. Shears and Hoffman, 35, met Lynch when she invited them to perform at a venue she ran, the Knockoff. Marquis, 34, joined later. "We always had ambitions, but never took anything for granted," Shears says. "I still get emotional on stage. We never phone it in."

Lynch and Marquis describe the band as "family"; Marquis defining "that queer trait of finding a family that isn't your own, your tribe. We keep going because we have something special. It's not just four dudes who wanna rock, with wives that bicker." Lynch, the only heterosexual member (she married her husband Seth in 2010) of the four, was "a weirdo from the get-go", growing up in Portland, Oregon. "I was really strange, a smart nerd who was into different things than most of my peers." While she went to gay clubs, "my connection to the gay community is through my father who was gay and losing him to Aids in 1990," she says. "I couldn't be honest about who he was and what he was going through: there was a real stigma. A few people knew, but I kept it on the down-low and said he had terminal cancer."

Lynch had known from the age of 6 that her father was gay. "I didn't get the honesty and support I needed from my peers. I found it in *Paris is Burning* [a documentary about black and Hispanic gay "ball culture" in New York]. That was a really hopeful depiction of marginalised people coming together and creating their own families, which I hold dear — the family I've created with people not related to me

**'If you're not writing about the times you live in, what's the use of any of this?'**



**SISTER ACT** Main picture, left to right: Del Marquis, Scott Hoffman (aka Babydaddy), Jake Shears, Ana Lynch (aka Ana Matronic). Left, Lynch and Shears on stage in New York; above, Shears cools off backstage

but who I will care for until the day I die." Is she in the band for her dad? "In a way, I think. I don't think I would be here had I not gone through that experience."

As a teenager she was a Goth and mocked, "but they were stupid rednecks so I talked back at them". Her inspirations were Siouxsie and the Banshees, Blondie, Annie Lennox, Boy George and Duran Duran. She loved film noir: "My mother was born in 1935, my grandmother 1904, so my frame of reference was much older and more sophisticated than my friends." Singing at Trannyshack, a San Francisco venue, honed her voice and style: "You had to do something different every week. If you 'brought it', you were asked back." When she met Marquis, she said: "You like the Cure? Great, I know who you are." Marquis, who "stalked" Robert Smith for years, "hanging around getting posters and guitars signed", recalls: "I walked into this group of extroverts and I was a closet extrovert. They liberated me."

Shears came out to his parents at 16, Marquis at 15: "I wore my colours on my sleeves to find my identity. You find a use for the baggage. My younger sister is 14 and came out two months ago. No one calls her names, she has no bad associations with being gay. I wonder if I had what she has now, would I have the fire I have within me? I wouldn't change anything, but through my sister I see what's different for the next generation."

Shears and Hoffman met in Kentucky, sharing a love of "video games, horror films, *Valley of the Dolls* and the gym". Hoffman liked rock while Shears was inspired by Chicks on Speed, Peaches and Fischer-spoooner: "Everything Casey [Spooner, one half of Fischerspooner] does is thought out, linking fashion and art. He's a true artist. I don't consider myself one; I'm a singer and writer."

Despite bullying and a brace of high-profile suicides of gay teenagers in the US, Marquis calls this year "a watershed for gay rights", taking in President Obama's publicly stated support for gay marriage and the coming-out of the news anchor Anderson Cooper and the rapper Frank Ocean. Last week Ocean made headlines when he con-



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fessed in his blog to falling in love with a man in the summer of 2007: "It holds up a mirror to black culture and homophobia," Marquis says, "which is almost a disease within itself." Shears, one of Cooper's close friends, defends him from criticism that he should have come out sooner: "We'd love more high-profile people to come out, but it's their decision, not ours," Hoffman says.

"The great thing about Obama was him saying his daughters changed his mind," Lynch says. Would she like children? "I like the idea: terrifying but interesting."

Hoffman is the only single member of the band. Shears has been with his partner, Chris Moukarbel, for eight years. Will they get married? "I don't know if I'm the marrying kind. Maybe someday."

There have been significant gaps between albums: *Scissor Sisters* was released in 2004, *Ta-Dah* in 2006, *Night Work*, 2010 and *Magic Hour* in May. "We're working and writing all the time," insists Shears. "The second album was us trying to be conscious of where we stood in the pop world," Marquis says, "and that didn't do us any favours apart from selling a few records." Hoffman adds: "The world expects you to be front and centre, but we felt it was important for us and the audience that they should have a break from us." Shears is more relaxed than his "edgy" old self, compulsively checking chart positions and record sales while on the road. He hasn't been depressed "for a while": for all its stomping brio, the 2006 single *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'* reflects a period the band felt it didn't want to make upbeat music. "It was connected to being on the road and not knowing how to take care of ourselves," Hoffman says. "Now we know how to stay sane." The band knows they can't "control everything", he says. He felt most uneasy with the band's third album, "when we were pushing forward without an idea of what we were doing — you can't force it."

How have they survived difficult periods? "Good old Dr Jack Daniels," laughs Lynch. "Mar-jiu-ana," Marquis enunciates theatrically. Shears smoked pot for years. "Starting in high school I was a big stoner," he says, "but as the responsibilities of the band started piling up I stopped." What about ecstasy and cocaine? "I mean ... you know ... this ain't my first day at the rodeo," Shears deadpans. "I'm a fairly moderate person, I love going clubbing, I've never been a fan of snorting things. I'm not even a big drinker, although I have really been enjoying vodka lately. Some recreational drug use is fantastic, but I think moderation is really important."

Lynch says the band has weathered pressure by "realising you are part of something bigger than you. To see people screaming, smiling and singing your songs negates any bullshit going on." She thinks Shears's "clarity" was sharpened by writing the musical of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, which premiered in San Francisco last year. For Shears the amount of work was "harrowing"; the musical will be ready for Broadway in four years. Will the band come to an end? "Not definitively," Marquis says. Lynch smiles: "The band is so much about youth, vigour, sexuality and glamour it makes me wonder how we're gonna be in ten years." Shears says: "There might be long breaks, but I can't imagine washing our hands of it."

In the last year Shears has loved

## Summer of music

**Latitude Festival** tonight and tomorrow Superior bloke-rock on the Suffolk coast, courtesy of Elbow, Paul Weller and Richard Hawley (see page 38)

**Hard Rock Calling** tonight and tomorrow If Hyde Park has recovered from its mudbath, Bruce Springsteen and Paul Simon will bring their great American songbooks to Kensington

**BT River of Music** July 21-22 Five stages, one for each continent, line the Thames, hosting bands including the Scissor Sisters, the Noisettes and Staff Benda Bilili, plus the jazz legend Wynton Marsalis

**Jamaica 50 Festival** July 25- Aug 6 Jimmy Cliff, Toots and the Maytals, Lee Scratch Perry, Damian Marley and others celebrate the 50th anniversary of Jamaican independence at the London O2

**BT London Live** July 27- Aug 12 Snow Patrol and Duran Duran kick off the Olympics, Blur and New Order close them — in between there are free gigs at Hyde Park (you can register for guaranteed entry online) from Tom Jones, Saint Etienne, Alexandra Burke and many more

**Meltdown** Aug 1-12 Antony of Antony and the Johnsons takes over Southbank with a line-up which includes Laurie Anderson, Elizabeth Fraser and Lou Reed

For more on River of Music and our full summer festivals guide visit [thetimes.co.uk/festivals](http://thetimes.co.uk/festivals)

becoming a DJ: "People think I'll be playing wedding tunes, but I take it seriously. I listen to a ton of dance music." (The Gossip, the Canadian band Trust and the London-based The 2 Bears are favourites.) He wants to play festivals next summer and is looking to release two songs beforehand. "I'd love to do a particular movie score, but the producers don't know," he adds. Hoffman reveals their record company "would like to put out a greatest hits, but it feels narcissistic". Instead they may release a "collected singles" album, or curate "a collection of songs that were too good to be B-sides," Shears says.

The band has collaborated with artists including Kylie Minogue. Who else is on their wishlist? Shears: "Cher would be really good. She told me she wanted to cover *Mary*. I'd love that." Lady Gaga, I wonder? "Yes, she'd be amazing." Marquis laughs: "In 20 years time we'll be making a Gaga/Scissor Sisters collaboration album." For Lynch, it's Dolly Parton: "She's incredible, an amazingly creative songwriter." Marquis creases up: "Dubstep Dolly!" Lynch's eyes widen: "Yes! We have to do it."

**Scissor Sisters play the Americas Stage at the BT River of Music on July 21** ([btriverofmusic.com](http://btriverofmusic.com)). **Magic Hour is out now on Polydor**