



THE BANDS PLAY ON

Pop music has been a sexual medium even before Elvis first swung his pelvis on national television. Pop—and the rock 'n' roll it spawned—have mostly been heterosexual phenomena, at least in the way they are perceived. But that doesn't necessarily have to be, as the success of gay-activist bands such as Bronski Beat and, to a lesser extent, Tom Robinson, have shown.

Los Angeles being an industry town, *Frontiers* went looking for that 10 percent of musicians and bands who speak to the gay mindset. Neither Bachelors Anonymous nor Histrionic Cartel finds it essential to hide sexual orientation, yet neither chooses to make an issue of it. Both units do well in the intense competition that is the Los Angeles music scene, yet neither has broken through. It is hard to make it in the music business regardless of one's sexual orientation.

Bachelors Anonymous is the best-known of the two groups. Chalk this up to the fact that they have been around longest and have the most product to show for it. A two-page *Advocate* spread heralded the release of their self-titled 1985 cassette EP. This was followed by their 1987 Christmas single on their own Significant Other label.

This year, they've been working on another album.

"We're almost ready to finish two songs as a demo," says Bachelor Robert Berg, "and then to shop those two songs. We can release it on our own label and that's probably what we're going to do. But you know it costs money to produce these things."

"So we need rich *Frontiers* readers to contact us," says the wise-cracking David Hughes.

While the Bachelors have been known to play live dates using backing tapes, the specter of live performance is not looming large in their future at present. "We can't even think about playing until this comes out," says Berg. "My personal philosophy is that we've been playing quite a bit and it's good experience but it really hasn't gotten us anywhere. It isn't going to provide the bread and butter on the table that it would by having a product to sell."

In the past, Bachelors Anonymous has been seen at the Christopher Street West festival, the tiny Be-bop Records in Reseda and the trendy Club Lingerie night spot in West Hollywood. How has the response been of their predominantly non-gay audiences—and has that response been at the expense of their gay audience?

"At one point, I really thought we should head for dance because all the gay bands head for dance," Berg answers. "But we seem to just do what we do. If it's dance, it's dance and if it's not, it's not."

"If there's a gay theme running through the songs, it doesn't mean the other doesn't exist," says Hughes. "For the most part, the gay oriented stuff is more disco oriented."

But, he cautions, "it's the same when you're talking about the Communards. It's still basically disco."

Now, with the addition of drummer/percussionist Del Mar Richardson to the keyboard duo, the band is "getting more into rock rather than being such a techno band. The first tape was dramatics and drum machines," adds Berg.

The Bachelors were also the focus of an intense letter-writing campaign in the pages of one music trade publication. "We provoked some response from someone," says Berg. "They didn't like the fact that we were a gay band. They felt that just because we were gay didn't mean we were special. Which is true in a way."

"The only thing that separates gay people from other people is the fact that they're gay," adds Hughes. "People are going to like what they like. It has nothing to do with sexual connotation. If we wanted to get into gay culture, the songs would be a lot different."

"We're just artists writing songs that say what we want to say," sums up Berg. "If we're gay, we're going to write some things that will relate to a gay audience. Our life is reflected in our songs and anybody can relate to them because they're about life."

Histrionic Cartel has been through as many personnel changes as any local band, but always at the helm has been 26-year-old singer and songwriter C. Maguire Cartmill. Except for Cartmill, the five-piece band is all male and all non-gay. Their au-

dience, like the band, is mixed.

"I haven't advertised in the gay publications so I just draw in your basic club crowd," says Cartmill.

"I don't make any distinctions. I'm not carrying any crosses for the lesbian community. I just happen to be a songwriter who's gay. That's basically the way I deal with it. I don't write women's music *per se*. I just write music. I don't really consider myself a lesbian songwriter. I'm a songwriter who's lesbian."

One might wonder whether Cartmill has ever thought about incorporating her sexual orientation into her music. Even though the group has played the Christopher Street West festival, most of their playing has been done in some of LA's better known showcase clubs such as Club 88, The Central and FM Station. "First tier clubs," as Cartmill likes to call them, "are clubs for bands with no management and no exposure," making exposure, perhaps, a bigger priority than militancy.

"I haven't ever thought about it," she says. "I was classically trained on trumpet. I went to Berkeley College of Music in Boston. My sexuality and music have never mingled."

Not that she is in the closet. Cartmill has been married for one year and she is obviously happy with her relationship. "I think most gay and straight people know

that Nadine and I are a couple just because of the way we interact," she says. "We're not all over each other, but I think it's very clear to anyone that we are together."

Everyone assumes that it is harder for a female musician to be treated as an equal than it is for a male. Cartmill acknowledges that the LA gay male community is hard to reach, but that is not a surprise, she says. What is surprising is that she has so little trouble finding male members for her band who are willing to take direction. That is, after all, difficult even for a male band leader.

"I have no problem," says Cartmill. "I did a lot of auditions before I settled on these guys and I think with one bassist I ran into a prejudice. But I think his main prejudice was that he didn't want to take direction from a female concertmaster. I just got someone else."

With her current line-up, there are relatively few problems. "They take me seriously. Audiences, too, seem to respond well to me. I think what helps me personally is I'm not a Madonna-type lead vocalist and I'm not just a lead vocalist. I pick up the trumpet and I play keyboards. I think—and I'm sorry to say this for all the lead vocalists—that it helps that I'm a musician. I think that helps the seriousness."

What are the future plans for Histrionic Cartel? "I hope to get better as a songwriter," answers Cartmill. "And I want to tour. The whole band has that attitude that we just want to play."

By TOM KIDD

David Hughes and Robert Berg

