

Scissor Sisters

Tripping The Light Glamtastic

By eradicating boundaries of genre and sexuality, the Scissor Sisters are supplying a much needed, refreshing jolt to the rock scene.

By **Shane Kite**

Named for a method of sapphic intimacy, the Scissor Sisters may seem subversive at the core to mainstream punters. Such categorizing does injustice to this group of seriously talented songwriters, musicians and performers, who have sold millions of records by skillfully reinterpreting 1970s British rock, American soul and disco.

Foremost a singer-songwriter-fed rock-n-roll band the Scissor Sisters evoke glam dance fever in a way that seems neither forced or mean-spirited. It's an accomplished task owed, in part, to a versatile ability to mix scene-setting, empathetic lyrics with piano-powered jubilation and break-beat sass.

They spin the disco ball with real guitar, bass and drum riffs, drawing in digital beats primarily for color. It's an opposite approach than that taken by the also-rans in the moribund electro-clash scene from which the Scissor Sisters have triumphantly evolved.

Steeped in the iconography and sounds of T. Rex, Elton John, Queen and Wings, the Scissor Sisters are bridging a chasm that has otherwise made fabulous attitude, decadent glamour and post-modern substance seem separate and unattainable, or just plain stale and overworked, since the era when the Stones splashed around Montauk with Lee Radziwill, and Bianca Jagger trotted into Studio 54 on a horse.

The Scissor Sisters have the effect of making those on the indie side of the rock spectrum seem self-obsessed, guarded and boring. Like Studio, theirs is a party to which everyone's invited. The uninhibited results have proven heady tonic for legions overseas.

Much like the U.K. taking over American air-



waves in the mid-1960s by reintroducing the U.S. to its long-neglected black blues heritage, the Scissor Sisters have returned the favor, essentially by giving the Brits back the same stimulating mix of attitude and substance they've worked at perfecting since the early '70s, with added disco flavor.

But here's how one popular theory goes regarding the disparity of the band's success at home and abroad: The Scissor Sisters pull off the kind of saucy, head-turning ambiguity and androgyny that Brits crave, and embrace—or, less fear—than the average Americans.

The Scissor Sisters' eponymous debut has sold over 2.4 million in Britain alone, hit number one on the U.K. charts, and was the best-selling record there for 2004. The album spawned four singles: *Laura, Mary, Filthy/Gorgeous*, and breakout hit *Take Your Mama*, which garnered the band the most attention and radio play they've mustered so far in the States. Still, the album would only peak at number 102 here on the Billboard 200.

Regardless, the disc, with its "Octopus's Garden"-like guitar refrains, Ziggy Stardust acoustics, ascending bass lines and synthetic wails

and catcalls, endeared the Scissor Sisters to a fan base that includes luminaries from U2's Bono to Elton John.

It is the latter's sound, songwriting and vocal style that the Scissor Sisters most naturally and closely evoke, via primary songwriters Jake Shears (vocals) and Babydaddy (guitars, bass, keyboards). John co-penned and played piano on *I Don't Feel Like Dancin'*, a standout track off the Scissor Sisters' rollicking, Honky Chateau-like sophomore effort, *Ta-Dah*.

The chug, bounce, boogie punch and falsetto vocal belies a melancholy sentiment from an informed, likely road-weary party guest, who seems to pine for lost elegance: "Cities come and cities go just like the old empires/when all you do is change your clothes and call that versatile... You'd think that I could muster up, a little soft-shoe gentle sway/But I don't feel like dancin'/No sir, no dancin' today."

Shears says the song largely catalogues the exhaustion and pressure the band felt upon returning home to New York to face writing a new record, following a fever-dream year, in which platinum U.K. success kept the band on the road on a prolonged overseas jaunt, where they worked hard to solidify the traction they'd found.

"It gave us renewed hope in ourselves," Shears told his label Universal Motown last year in bio materials promoting the new record. "Singing about not feeling like dancing...was the only way to write a dance song that was fun, but still came from an honest place. There's a lot of anxiety and self-censorship that happens when you're dealing with this kind of pressure. But we realized...we've got something amazing going on. It was extremely liberating."

They decided to rearrange the backdrop for their creative process, moving from the front room of Babydaddy's Brooklyn apartment where they recorded their fame-inducing debut to a rented space nearby, which they painted silver and blue, and dubbed the Discoball Jazzfest. Ana Matronic, the Scissor Sisters' percussionist, sometimes lead vocalist, and self-described drag queen in a female body, said the room looked like a barn from "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

The band kept much of how they lived prior to gaining an audience the same. "We still live in little apartments in New York, hang out with the same friends, and go to the café every morning," said Paddy Boom, the Scissor Sisters' drummer.

The results, what guitarist Del Marquis calls a "fuller... thicker" sound, are intriguing. "She's My Man" is an image-rich, paean to New Orleans and one of its outsized characters, Annie Christ-

mas — a legendary, murderous, thieving keelboat captain who stalked the docks passing as a man.

"I'm completely fascinated by New Orleans," says Shears. "I'm very inspired by the music that's come out of the city; I think you can hear that on the record."

"Intermission" is a melancholy pub rag with dark lyrics: "When the night wind starts to turn/into the ocean breeze/and the dew drops sting and burn/like angry honey bees..."

Pure disco nectar for funk-junkies that could equally move the sedentary abounds on "Ohh" and "Paul McCartney," while "The Other Side" rides a space groove, Beck-like production of processed guitar and staccato rhythm, with bellowing synth and piano riffs.

The music makes it obvious the band has tried hard to balance the substance with the glam, sexual aspect of its performance and oeuvre. All are on record about being much more interested

in upending expectations, rather than converting the rigid. But while seeming to accept that people want to know who in the band is gay and who isn't—Matronic and Boom are straight—one gets the impression they feel upbraided that listeners would be basal or dismal enough to let sexuality upstage their work. Two impressive albums which merge talented songwriting with hip-shaking beats should convince all except the most inhibited, tin-eared and inchoate, otherwise. This band is anything but a novelty act.

What we have in the Scissor Sisters is a burgeoning, boundless rock-pop-dance machine that speaks to the universal desire for dream fulfillment, understanding that, essentially, as Shears sings on the last song on *Ta-Dah*, which reached number 19 on the U.S. album charts, "No trading places on the chain gang/It doesn't matter how you swing it/Everybody wants the same thing."

