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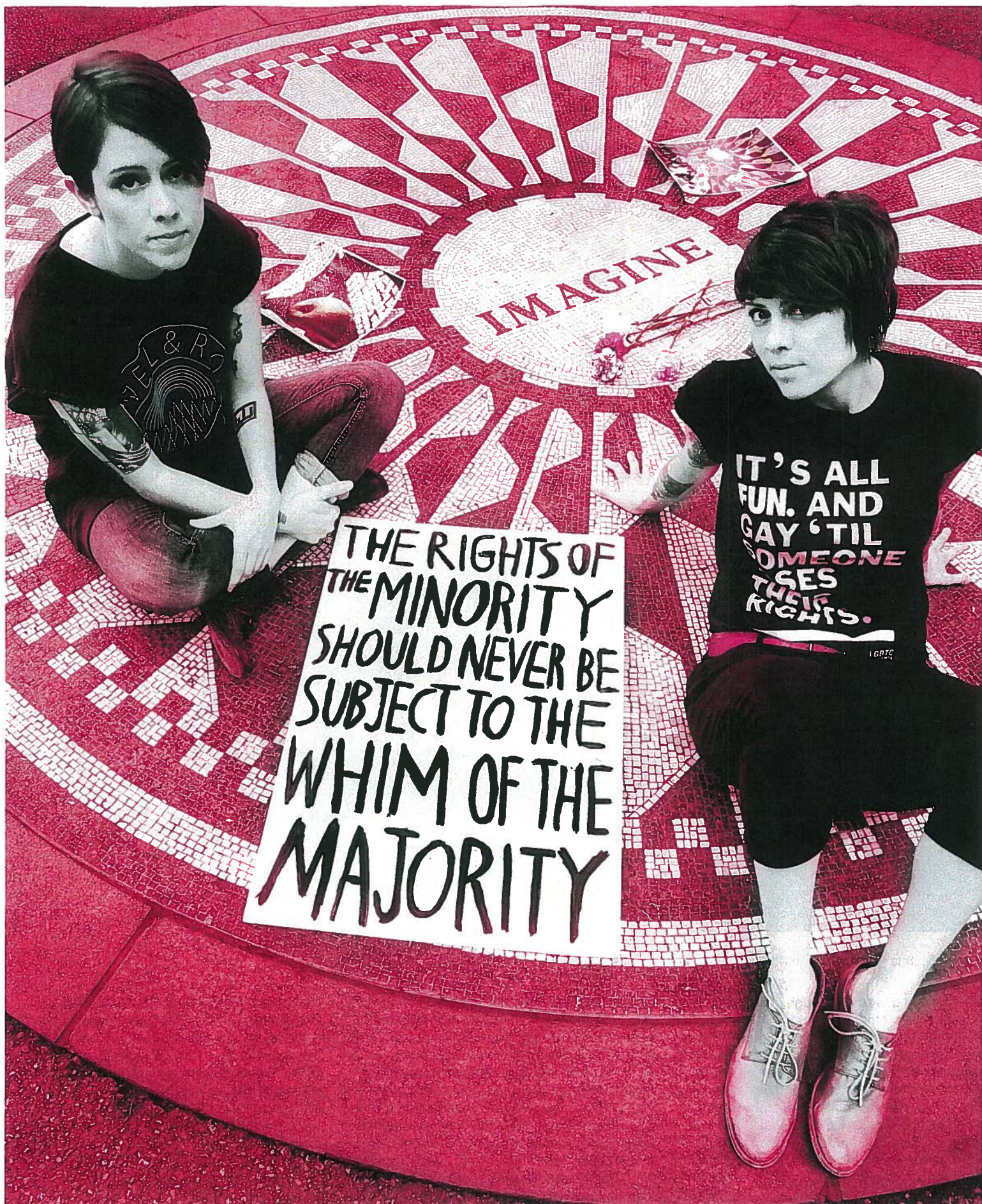
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Tegan and Sara ★ Photo by Tommy Kearns

THE RAINBOW CONNECTION

GAY & LESBIAN ARTISTS ON MARRIAGE & MORE

A Conversation with Rostam Batmanglij, Mike Hadreas, Bob Mould, Nico Muhly, Jonny Pierce, JD Samson, and Tegan and Sara Quin

Words by John Norris

Is it the best of times for LGBT Americans? Or just the most confusing? Poll after poll indicates the country is “evolving” on gay issues at a speed unanticipated only a decade ago. Never have gay and lesbian concerns been more a part of the national conversation than in this election year. Barack Obama’s already unprecedented record on gay rights—including, at long last, ending the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy—added a historic chapter on May 9, when he publicly endorsed marriage equality. And yet, the federal government still bars same-sex unions, as do more than 40 states. Christian mullahs call for the penning of gay people, and notwithstanding the best efforts of *Glee* and Gaga, queer kids are statistically more likely to be victims of bullying, and too many of those victims kill themselves. *Under the Radar* spoke to eight of indie rock’s most compelling LGBT artists about marriage, pride, protest, and more.

“I have a lot of friends whose politics are maybe a little less passionate than mine and I hear a lot of this ‘we have to be patient,’” says Sara Quin of Tegan and Sara, the Canadian pop-rock duo whose twin sisters have been out lesbians for more than a decade. “And I’m like—the

to feel enraged.” And yet, Quin says that rage turns to “thrilled” when something positive happens, especially something as historic as the president’s approval of same-sex marriage.

Obama’s words didn’t come as a great surprise to JD Samson, who’s a little

“I always say to my friends, ‘Can you imagine if we were asking our Jewish friends, ‘Just be patient, you’ll be allowed to get married one day too?’” It takes a great deal of restraint not to feel enraged.”
— Tegan and Sara’s Sara Quin

idea that I have to be patient even one day longer feels like an eternity, it feels offensive.” Quin is worked up. Five minutes into our conversation, and she’s going off about the right to marry. “I always say to my friends, ‘Can you imagine if we were asking our Jewish friends, ‘Just be patient, you’ll be allowed to get married one day too?’” It takes a great deal of restraint not

under the weather after a recent bout with Montezuma’s Revenge in Mexico, but is spirited when talking politics. A dance punk vet of the playful but fiercely political *Le Tigre* and *MEN*, Samson is as respected a gender queer (those who don’t identify with traditionally prescribed gender “norms”) artist as there is in music. She admits she may live in something of a “bubble” but



The Drums ★ Photo by Tommy Kearns

says the president's words "just offer some sort of legitimacy to what we've been fighting for, for so long. And I think now people in my community, if anything, support Obama more. Which I think was probably part of the tactic."

Political motives on the president's part—shoring up a key constituency in an election year to boost Democratic turnout—have been widely suspected, but Bob Mould, for one,

doesn't care. "At the end of the day, what happened, happened," says Mould, who spent the first chapter of his professional life fronting the seminal Minnesota trio Hüsker Dü. These days he lives in San Francisco and DJs at gay parties with his electro duo Blowoff, in addition to releasing solo records and touring Sugar's *Copper Blue* this year, to mark the album's 20th anniversary. Since

the early 2000s, Mould has lent his voice to the fight for marriage equality. "This is one of those moments where what was happening out there in the field was actually confirmed by this one proclamation," he says, referring to the president's thumbs-up on marriage. "And as for people saying he just did it to get votes, well, maybe. But it's not changing what happened."

"I'm ready for gay pride parades to end. I'm ready for big, flamboyant prideful events to go away forever."

— *The Drums'* Jonny Pierce

Pierce is in a relationship with a young Dutch photographer. As residents of New York, which legalized same-sex marriage last year, the couple could marry. But thanks to Section 3 of DOMA, which among other things prevents lesbian and gay U.S. citizens from sponsoring their spouses for permanent residency, that wouldn't do Jasper much good. "His visa runs out in 2015," explains Pierce, "and if he was a girl, we could get married, and he would be issued a green card. But we've met a mover and shaker in D.C. who also happens to be gay. We're heading down there to see what we can do."

With the exception of Mould, all eight of the artists that were interviewed for this piece are within a few years of 30. While most of them are in relationships—ranging in duration from several months to six and a half years—the majority of them are in no particular hurry to get married, for different reasons. Yet they are in unanimous agreement on wanting the choice. Samson, who admits she may be a "poster queer for many of the radical queers of the world," is more of a traditionalist than you might think, and imagines "wearing a tuxedo to my wedding."

Perfume Genius' Mike Hadreas, whose home state of Washington is currently in the same-sex marriage crosshairs with a voter referendum on the ballot in November, says if it does pass, he and his boyfriend and bandmate Alan Wyffels won't necessarily take advantage of it right away. He adds, "Still, it's important to us to have the option." Because he never thought marriage would be possible, Hadreas hasn't really considered it. "It's not like I had pictures of bridal gowns and a notebook, you know what I mean? I haven't really thought about it too much."

For four years, Tegan Quin has been in a relationship with L.A.-based photographer Lindsey Byrnes, and even though the two would like to marry (and could, in Quin's native Canada), they've postponed the idea indefinitely, abstaining until it's a right enjoyed by all. "I just don't feel it's fair, and it makes me feel so sad," she explains. "I don't feel like I should benefit. And while I will fight to have that right in America, I absolutely do not feel I *have* to get married right now, no."

And for Vampire Weekend keyboardist Rostam Batmanglij, who also is one-half of the synth duo Discovery and releases solo music

as both Boys Like Us and Rostam, it may well be the decision to start a family that plays a role in whether he ties the knot. "I do have the desire to have kids one day," he says. "And as far as finding a partner in life, I think it would be important to find someone who also feels that same way." Batmanglij has fond memories of attending the Massachusetts wedding of Grizzly Bear's Ed Droste and his partner Chad McPhail last fall. "There were tons of kids there," Batmanglij recalls, "and it just made me feel so good to know that these young kids were going to grow up in a world where they would have experiences of gay weddings from a young age, and it would just be part of their life, that the stigma would be removed from being gay and married. That made me feel really good."

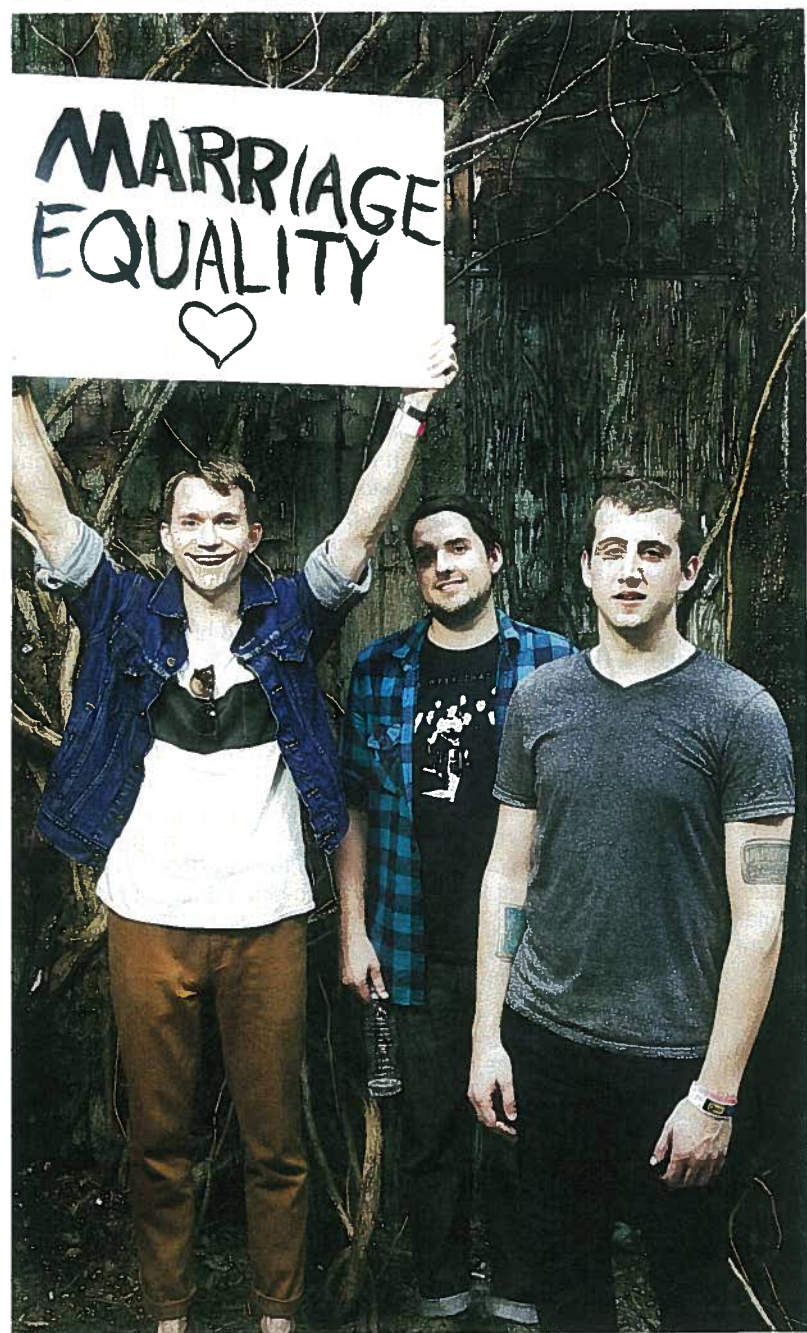
When same-sex marriage became reality last year in New York, Nico Muhly says he turned to his boyfriend of three years and warned, "Don't even think about it!" Never one to mince words, the classical composer and indie rock collaborator (Jónsi, Grizzly Bear) jokes that his man might not want to take on Muhly's considerable student loan debt, and calls marriage something of a "complicated" issue. "For me, the fight is less that I want to do it than that I think people should be allowed to do it," he explains. "I feel like a lot of the older gay role models I had growing up were like, 'Fuck gay marriage! Forget that. Why do you want to get married? That's like straight people's thing to do.' You know what I mean? That it's like something that belongs to another culture."

Plenty of people know what Muhly means, and his point gives rise to a broader question: When did equality come to mean assimilation? As the ability has increased to take part in once-heteronormative, apple-pie conventions as marriage, adoption, and military service, has the "otherness" of being gay and lesbian been diminished? Or as Mould asks, "What happens to that gay identity—in a sense, the gay community—once it's woven into the hetero community? What do we have left at that point? That's what I feel as a 51-year-old gay man living in San Francisco where I look around and go, 'Of course, it's right in front of me.' But when I go to Minneapolis, or Portland, or Asheville, it's woven. That's a big thing that I think about. What is the future of the LGBT identity?"

Hadreas isn't so sure. "I think people just



It's remember what the
ocrat in the White House
do in his reelection year of
Clinton signed into law the
of Marriage Act, a despi-
se of legislation codifying
tion at the federal level,
cting, among countless
nnny Pierce of The Drums.



als Eat Guitars ★ Photo by Wendy Lynch Redfern

want to lose the specialness of gay, or the respect of being different," he says. "Which to be honest, I agree with. I don't think gay lose those qualities." is it defensive to wonder whether product of the right to marry will be expectation to marry—the notion a gay man or lesbian, particularly a certain age, isn't married with in, that there's something *wrong* with them? "To me it's the same issue either way," asserts n. "Pro-choice means you want to have the choice to be able to do what they want."

Tegan Quin admits she definitely feels the pressure to marry, "People say it to me all the time, like 'when are you going to take it to the next level?'" But sister Sara, for her part, thinks such questions may just be part of what comes with equality, and that gay people may just need to suck it up. "You know what? Then don't get married! My mom and stepdad didn't get married, they were together 14 years. So make decisions, and if you don't want to get married or have kids, don't!"

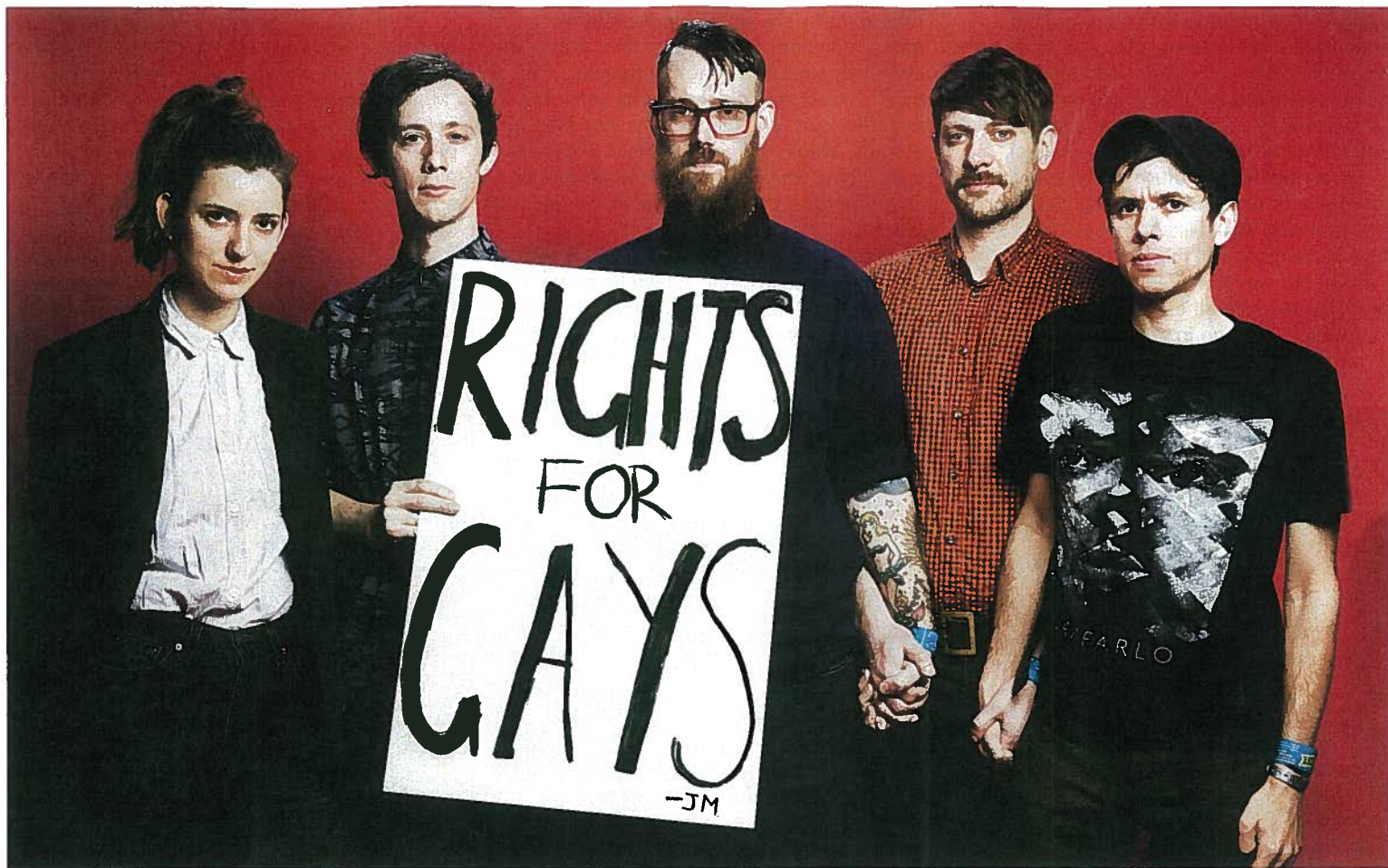
While the political scoreboard is improving for gays and lesbians, how are they faring on the personal front?

That would seem to depend on whom you ask. On the one hand, life is indisputably, tangibly better for LGBT Americans now than it was when Samson joined *Le Tigre* more than a decade ago, a fact borne out in the mail she gets. "Ten years ago people were writing me saying like, 'My mom is freaking out that I'm gay and I don't know what to do. Can you help me?'" But now, she says, "People write to me and say, 'You helped me so much, and I'm so proud of who I am today.'"

On the other hand, for Hadreas, issues of lingering shame—his own, and that of others—often inform his moving, confessional music, and he still flinches when Wyffels grabs his butt in public, or when kids laugh at them when walking into a small-town Dairy Queen. "I've never really gotten over it, the bullying and stuff," he admits. "Even though the world is changing and those kids may be more open-minded than the ones that I grew up with, I don't feel that way because I still haven't totally gotten over it."

While Batmanglij concedes that we all have, to some extent, "internalized homophobia"—himself included, something he fights against—he says he's noticed that friends who are five or six years younger than him have grown up in a "measurably less homophobic" climate and adds, "I think for straight people to have gay friends in their lives that they respect and love equally to their straight friends is now commonplace." He also echoes a common theme among so-called "post-gay" Gen Y-ers: a determination to not be defined by his sexuality. "When I did the piece where I first came out, it was a *Rolling Stone* profile," he recalls, "and it was very important to me that it not be some big 'announcement' in and of itself. Maybe I was too sensitive about that at the time, but it was important that there be a casual, natural quality to talking about being gay for the first time. And I think this is related to the post-gay mentality—that being gay can be the most normal thing in the world."

Being seen as "normal" is even more of a preoccupation for Jonny Pierce. Unlike some of the artists we spoke to, who hail from families of lefty, live-and-let-live academics, artists, and social workers, Pierce grew up on church grounds in Upstate New York, one of six children of Pentecostal pastors who believe in no uncertain terms that homosexuals go to hell. To this day, his parents lead anti-gay rallies, his mother proudly had the gay and lesbian section removed from a small local bookstore, and they have told their indie pop star son—whose success they view as a separate issue—that they would prefer him to be alone and celibate than in a committed same-sex relationship. But Pierce still holds out hope for a rapprochement. It is against that backdrop that he says only days before the nation's most conspicuous gay event, the New York City Pride parade, "I'm ready for gay pride parades to end. I'm ready for big, flamboyant prideful events to go away forever. I know there's probably a lot of people who think that's disgusting. But every time that I think that my parents might be taking a step in the direction of acceptance of me being gay, there's slight little hints they might be opening up every once in a while, and then the door just slams closed." Pierce believes that in-your-face images of gay pride, with Dykes on Bikes and twinks in glittery Speedos and leather daddies all in celebration is merely counter-



Fanfarlo ★ Photo by Wendy Lynch Redfern

productive. "Why are we 'proud' to be gay and why would straight people be proud to be straight? When we draw attention to these things, whether we're rebuking them or celebrating them, it pulls them out of the realm of being normal. And all I've ever wanted was to be normal." When it's suggested that a 14- or 15-year-old kid for whom life is a daily, bullied hell just might think twice about suicide after witnessing thousands of people in joyful acceptance of who they are, Pierce replies, "Well it's funny, I was that kid. And when I saw the gay pride parade it freaked me out, and I literally ran in the opposite direction. I'm not saying hide or be silent, but I'm saying be who you are and be normal."

Some might say it's "normal" to throw around the word faggot. Not Sara Quin, who a little more than a year ago was still feeling the blowback from Tylergate. In 2011, Odd Future's Tyler, the Creator received all kinds of accolades for the realness, fearlessness, and hilarious, fantastical darkness of *Yonkers*, an album that extolled many things, among them raping pregnant women, amputating others, with a liberal sprinkling of the other "f-bomb." Quin called out the Emperor's new clothes, using her blog to not only acknowledge the obvious—that Tyler had made a

record packed with virulently misogynistic and homophobic content—but to call out the music industry and media for its silence on or flat-out endorsement of said content.

"I was not even mad, but just disappointed with the industry, with Goldenvoice, with MTV," recalls Quin. "I was profoundly disappointed that if it had been an artist being racist, but who claimed they weren't racist and they were just 'joking,' that they would be absolutely ostracized. And I don't care if he's talented or not. Athletes and politicians and actors are seeing their careers ruined or are having to pay big fines for saying these things, but in the music industry it's like, 'Hey, we believe in free speech.' I believe in free speech. But we don't have to call him a visionary and put him on the cover of every magazine. It's just not acceptable anymore. It doesn't matter if it's good art, if you're talking about raping pregnant women and calling everybody a faggot. You would never read a piece on *Pitchfork* praising a fun, new, joking KKK band, calling them cool or whatever!"

In fairness, Tyler may have done some evolving of his own. When the artist and Odd Future affiliate Frank Ocean recently came out in a moving Tumblr post—no easy move in the hip-hop/R&B world—Tyler voiced his

support, saying he was "proud" of his friend. But in the midst of the Sara-Tyler fracas, the music press—which for the most part consists of hetero white men—proved they *could* jump as far away from the Sara-Tyler fracas as possible, bringing to mind Edmund Burke's timeless words: All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. And predictably, vicious blog commenters came at Quin hard. "A stream of comments: 'Dyke, bitch, fuckface, cunt'—whatever, I don't care," she says. "I wasn't even necessarily speaking to those people, I was speaking to people like you. I was speaking to writers and tastemakers and I wanted my peers to pay attention and hear what I was saying." Maybe most disconcerting was that artists who privately offered Quin their support chose not to do so in public. "I think some people are scared to be political, and scared to ruin their opportunities to connect with the masses," she concludes. "And although I understand it, it makes me sad. But if I have to be one of the only ones that is constantly out there, wagging my finger at people, then for now I'm fine. And hopefully someone will come along behind us to take the torch."

Wagging fingers, marching, banging on pots, and manning the ramparts is one

oach. Another is letting the path to
ptance and equality play out on its own
table. "It's really obvious to me that
is are going to change sooner or later,"

Samson, while Mould sees the "bigots
haters" becoming gradually extinct.
What then is the future of same-sex
riage for the U.S. of A? A long state-
state slog would likely be painfully slow.
Supreme Court might well strike down
1A, but would it overturn the states'
egative to ban the practice, as it did with
racial marriage in 1967? And voter

referendums are simply unacceptable to
many, including Tegan Quin. "You don't put
something like this up to the people," she
says. "You don't hold a majority vote on a
minority right. We should have learned that
already. We've got enough history to know
that. I think whether it's federal law or the
Supreme Court, it will change in the next few
years."

Mould concurs, "The problem with referen-
dums is it always comes down to the people
with the most money and the most to gain by
beating people down with their messages."

To bring around the reddest states on
marriage equality, Nico Muhly has a modest
proposal, a coiffured answer to Rosa Parks.
"Maybe it requires that every hairdresser
in Muscle Shoals, Alabama refuses to give
people those up-do's for their straight wed-
dings until they act right!" he offers. "I mean,
shut down all these weddings and make
straight people throw their own damn party,
and we'll see how good that looks. Can you
imagine? And just tell Preston Bailey to take
the month off. That would be so crazy to
me!"

