

INTERVIEW

A FUNKY FAMILY THANG

A Pointer Sister reflects on the singing group's queer following and the challenge of Ain't Misbehavin'

by Rupert Kinnard

Four tall, talented and deeply-tanned siblings from Oakland, Calif., called The Pointer Sisters, vamped and camped their way onto the international music scene in 1973 with their first hit, "Yes We Can Can." Since then they have taken their place among the most successful female vocal groups in history, with 16 Top-40 hits that include "Fire," "Slow Hand," "Jump (For My Love)" and "I'm So Excited." Touring the country in a new production of

Theater

Ain't Misbehavin', the bubbly revue based on the music of Fats Waller, the sisters are in Portland for the show's April 10-14 run at the Civic Auditorium. I recently spoke with Ruth Pointer about *Ain't Misbehavin'*, the movie *Car Wash*, her sisters, and the musical divas that came before them.

What has it been like performing the music of Fats Waller in the new version of *Ain't Misbehavin'*?

It has been quite an experience, an education and very different. It's one of the most rewarding things we have ever done. It has been a real challenge physically, emotionally, musically and professionally. We've been having a really good time with it—it's just another bit of variety that we have added to our repertoire.

This move seems to be another step in The Pointer Sisters' attempts to conquer stage, screen and television—especially when I think of the part you played in the film *Car Wash*. What are some of your memories working with people like Richard Pryor and former Motown music producer Norman Whitfield?

Oh my God. Those are memories that will never leave my consciousness. It was like a big old high school reunion every day. There were so many talents that came together in that one movie.... Richard [Pryor] was hysterical. Richard has always been hysterical. There were so many things we used to do during those times. We were very young, crazy and experimental. One of my fondest memories of Richard and us [in *Car Wash*] had to do with our ride in that limousine. If people only knew what went on in that car—honest to God. First of all we had an urn that was full of Remy Martin! We were just totally out to lunch...it was just fun, that's all I can say. We had quite the time keeping the cast and crew on track, because we would start having so much fun that Michael [Schulz, the director] would just join in with us.

How familiar were you with the songs featured in *Ain't Misbehavin'*? Were you familiar with the original cast album?

We had heard some of the songs—"Ain't Misbehavin'", "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter," "Honeysuckle Rose"...you know, those were some songs that

we had heard at one point or another, unaware that Fats Waller had anything to do with the actual songs. Within my musical career as a Pointer Sister [the show has] given me more of an education of my own history than school ever gave me. Not just musical, but in pride. I would encourage young black people to experience this type of history.

Are you aware that The Pointer Sisters have a large lesbian and gay following?

Oh, yes...definitely, but it was something that was a part of our lifestyle before we became who we are. We started off singing background, and Sylvester was one of the first performers we worked with. As



The cast of *Ain't Misbehavin'*: (from left) Ruth Pointer, Michael-Leon Wooley, June Pointer, Eugene Barry-Hill and Anita Pointer

a matter of fact, the first time that I ever sang professionally on stage with my sisters I was filling in for June, who had become sick when we were to sing in San Francisco, and we sang behind Sylvester. He dressed me up and put some of his minks on me, spruced me up and it was a good time. So our experience goes way back, and of course living in the Bay Area with San Francisco right there [the gay community] was always a part of our following from the very beginning.

I think of the term "girl group" as specifically referring to a group of young women of the '60s who sang with a light sound. How would you describe your place in the tradition of the girl groups? To be honest with you, I don't think of The Pointer Sisters as part of...

[Laughs] That lighter sound?

Yes, and in fact when The Pointer Sisters hit the scene in '73 and LaBelle hit it big a couple of years later, what was impressive was the strength of the individual voices blending in together as opposed to the one lead singer and the others oohing and ahing in the background. What part do you think The Pointer Sisters played in the changing of the girl group sound?

Well, I think you really described it. We brought more of an element of power, and I think it had a lot to do with our environment. When we came out, and LaBelle was up there, too, it was during a time when women were just starting to exert their power. We had a lot to sing about. I guess women had felt suppressed for such a long time that there was a

certain urgency to be heard in our voices and in our delivery of lyrics; we were going to be heard if we had to scream at you. And we did, [laughs] you know? I don't think we really started all of that. I remember, as a kid, hearing individual women—they weren't part of groups—like Bessie Smith, of course, and women like Nina Simone, who had that rich voice. Oh, I used to

love imitating her singing [music from] *Porgy and Bess*, and I found those women had such fabulous voices and they were never really accepted the way I thought they should be. I think it was partially because they didn't sound weak enough for a man to dominate. I think their strength was always a bit intimidating. I can remember, in the studio, having producers say to me, "We'd rather have one of your other sisters," because I'm the one who has the deep voice. I've had it said to me in the studio, "I think Anita or June should sing this song, because of that lighter sound. I don't think the public would accept your voice quality on this lyric." But now I hear it more and more. TLC, you know...there's a deep voice in there, and I love it. I'm so happy now that women don't have to sound like mice or some little bird. They can now sound like lionesses. I just love it! It's acceptable now.

Even as good as they were, it's a shame that groups like Diana Ross and the Supremes became the model for the girl groups. But when you think of the female vocal groups of today, they really are powerful singers.

Yes, Mary J. Blige...I mean, it's down and dirty [laughs]. Yes, I love it. There are some [rappers] that I don't like, but I can't think of any female at this point. I'm not a big rap fan, but I love uniqueness, I don't care where it comes from. I love the collaboration between Salt 'n' Peppa and En Vogue on "Whatta Man." I think that's beautiful.

When The Pointer Sisters started out, there were four of you and you were known for your '40s retro choices in music and clothing. Then your sister Bonnie left the group, you went to a new record label, and had a number of hits under the direction of record producer Richard Perry. Now that you're entering this new *Ain't Misbehavin'* phase, how to you sum up this progression in your careers?

I think that we have been very, very fortunate that we were able to maintain such versatility, because it was something that we always wanted to keep. When we started there were always those people who wanted to put us in a category, sort of as a comparison of the female groups that had gone before us. We would always want to defy that. We like all types of music. People would ask, "How do you describe your music?" and we would say, "Versatility," because we like everything. We always wanted the freedom to try and tap into all types of music. And I think our history has displayed that.

The last time I saw The Pointer Sisters in concert was here in Portland at the Civic Auditorium, and I remember being amazed at the richness of the harmonies coming from just three women. I kept imagining three other women backstage adding to the vocals. It sounded like a wall of sound, and I was so impressed.

You know what? Not to be egotistical, [laughs] but I'm impressed, too. I have more appreciation for our harmony now than I've ever had before, because we all have understudies for the show and we've all had our bouts with our throats. Being on stage with someone filling in for one of my sisters is really not the same. We really are unaware of our qualities until someone else gets up there and fills in for one of us. When that sister who was out comes back, there's a joy we can't even express. Because I don't have to worry when I'm up there with my sisters. I know what to expect, and I know I'm going to get what I expect...and more! I mean, my sisters surprise me with their vocals a lot of the time. It's entertaining just to be up there with them.

Tickets for Ain't Misbehavin' are \$28-\$43, and are available at the Portland Center for the Performing Arts box office, 1111 SW Broadway, and from G.I. Joe's TicketMaster outlets, charge by phone at 790-2787.

THE ALYSON ALMANAC

PRESENTS
APRIL
in gay and lesbian history

April 30, 1972: The United Church of Christ becomes the first major denomination to approve the ordination of an openly gay person. For about an hour, William Johnson fielded questions from delegates at the UCC's San Francisco area Ecclesiastical Council, which then voted 62 to 34 in favor of his ordination.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO Alberta Hunter

(Apr. 1, 1895-Oct. 17, 1984) The great African-American blues star ran away from home at age eleven, met her long-time lover Lottie Tyler thirteen years later; and worked with Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith. Hunter retired from music in 1956 and became a nurse, but resumed singing when she lost her job on account of her age. She once again became a sensation, singing at the Carter White House.



UNDER ATTACK



Forty-seven sailors were killed when a gun turret exploded on the U.S.S. Iowa on April 19, 1989. Navy officials leaked speculation that the explosion was connected to a gay relationship between two sailors. A later investigation found that theory unlikely, and two years later, Admiral Frank Kelso admitted that there was no factual basis for suggesting a gay connection.



Sources: *Members of the Tribe*, by Michael Willhoite; and *The Alyson Almanac*.