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ENTERTAINMENT

How an LGBTQ+ concert band is making 'queer history in Cincinnati'

Grace Tucker
Cincinnati Enquirer

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Video: Queen City Freedom Band is home to LGBTQ+ musicians
Two UC doctoral students started the Queen City Freedom Band in 2018. Now, the LGBTQ+ group is using its music to make a statement.

- Key Points**
- The Queen City Freedom Band is a Cincinnati-based concert band specifically for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies.
 - The band, which started with 13 members, now boasts 50-60 musicians and performs three concert cycles annually.
 - The Freedom Band's repertoire includes a mix of lighthearted themes and music with political undertones, reflecting the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

This story is the third and final installment of a feature series called Pride in 2025: Grassroot groups serving LGBTQ+ Cincinnatians, which seeks to highlight local groups that support the LGBTQ+ community in honor of Pride Month. Check out the first feature on Thrive Empowerment Center in Covington [here](#) and the second on Transform Cincy in Silverton [here](#).

Jon Noworyta's conducting skills have landed him at Chicago's Symphony Center, the Kennedy Center, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Carnegie Hall.

He's served as the band director at the University of Indianapolis and as assistant conductor of the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra. He's trained among the best and brightest in Northwestern University's masters of music program and UC's College-Conservatory of Music doctor of musical arts program.

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And across his decades of experience conducting ensembles of every kind, he says one type of band makes music that swells differently than the rest: Pride bands, or groups made for and by the LGBTQ+ community.

"As wonderful as run-of-the-mill community bands are, Pride bands are beautifully different," Noworyta said. "Being queer and playing music creates a connection like no other. Sitting in a group of people who are like you ... gives one a sense of belonging that simply cannot be duplicated elsewhere."

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"That is true of any community of like-minded people," Noworyta said. "But once you add the power of music, band isn't just a safe space anymore."

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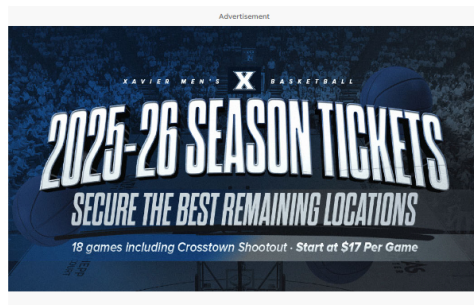
But once you add the power of music, band isn't just a safe space anymore — it's freedom."



Conductor Jon Noworyta leads a Queen City Freedom Band practice. Albert Cesare/The Enquirer

This belief led Noworyta to create the [Queen City Freedom Band](#), a Cincinnati-based concert band for the LGBTQ+ community and its allies. The idea came about in 2018 when he was pursuing his doctor of musical arts degree at UC.

"Another doctoral student named Russ Zokaites, he's also gay, and we were joking saying 'there's a lot of queers here at CCM. We should start a gay band,'" Noworyta said.



To their surprise, a gay band called the Queen City Rainbow Band once existed but had been inactive for about two years. So, the pair got to work relaunching the band, contacting original members to create something new.

"The rest was queer history in Cincinnati," the conductor said.



The Queen City Freedom Band now features 50-60 musicians. Albert Cesare/The Enquirer

What once consisted of 13 people making music in a local rental space has blossomed into the 50-60 musicians who come together in three concert cycles per year. In the spirit of inclusivity, the group maintains a no-auditions-required policy.

"If we're going to say that everyone is welcome, then that means everyone who's conservatory-trained to someone who hasn't played since high school," Noworyta said.

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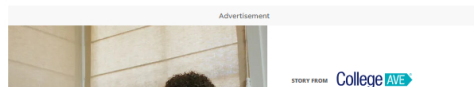
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Laura Sink, who serves as a Freedom Band board member, found the ensemble about a year and a half ago while looking to play the flute again — an instrument they played in high school and throughout college.

"I found a lot of different community bands throughout Cincinnati, but this one specifically being a queer group, I was really interested in just being part of a group of people who are just like me," Sink said.





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'Pride isn't just June parties and parades'

On June 21, the band hosted its fourth annual Pride concert at Walnut Hills High School auditorium, featuring a repertoire of notable songs from The Simpsons, The Flintstones and other animated shows under the theme "Animania: An Exuberant Look at Pride."

Each year's Pride Month concert tends to have lighter material than the rest of the year's programming, Noworyta said. But the message they deliver each June doesn't simply boil down to "Pride Month is about having fun."

"Many people need to understand that Pride isn't just June parties and parades ... it's a daily fight for recognition, so we use our music to express that collectively," he said.



Laura Sink, right, plays the flute during a Queen City Freedom Band practice. *Albert Cesare/The Enquirer*

It's a fight that extends far beyond the month of June, the conductor added. Each concert cycle, the Freedom Band makes an effort to play music by LGBTQ+ composers and music with political undertones. In past concerts, the group performed a piece about gun violence in schools and, amid the Trump Administration's efforts to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border during the president's first term, the band played Mexico's national march song.

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These sorts of issues are woven into the fabric of what makes the Freedom Band special, Noworyta explained.

"To me, we let down generations of people who had to be silent if we are also silent, if we do not take up the fight," he said. "If we can bring awareness to our community by making beautiful music, what harm is that doing?"



Each year's Pride Month concert by the Freedom Band tends to have lighter material than the rest of the year's programming. *Albert Cesare/The Enquirer*

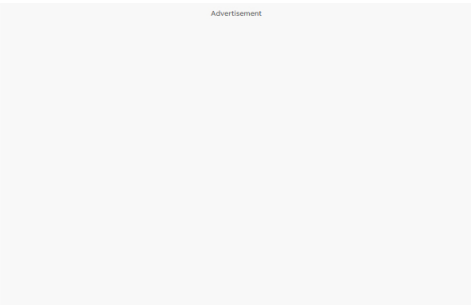
Making music during a second Trump presidency

Noworyta remembers the rehearsal after Trump was elected for a second

term last year being particularly quiet. And in the weeks after Trump was inaugurated in January, the Freedom Band began rehearsing for its March concert called Homecoming.

During that time, Noworyta said he assured his musicians that, "every time you have a rehearsal, this is your home and you are safe here."

Included in the program for Homecoming was a new piece titled "John and Jim" celebrating Ohioans Jim Obergefell and John Arthur, the couple behind the landmark Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized same-sex marriage.



During a time he says that was marked by fear and uncertainty, Noworyta stood in front of his band and said, "If we as queer people in Cincinnati back down now, we are letting John and Jim down."

When the night of the concert came, Obergefell was in the audience.

"We were all (thinking) 'the fight is not over,'" Noworyta said.



Matt Gardner plays the trombone during a Queen City Freedom Band practice. Albert Cesaro/The Enquirer

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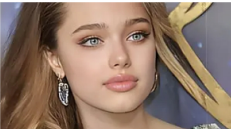


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