



GREG DAY

Tom Robinson at the 1981 San Francisco Gay Pride celebration.

CHRONICLE OF A COMMITTED LIFE

It took nearly 25 years from the birth of rock 'n' roll before a pop singer emerged who said pointblank that he was gay and sang about it. After the apparition that was Little Richard in the '50s, the specter of the Rolling Stones in drag in the '60s, and David Bowie's challenging androgyny in the '70s, Tom Robinson arrived with England's iconoclastic punk explosion: outspoken, political and with a Top Ten hit.

In 1977, Robinson was the toast of the British press, but by 1981 he couldn't even get his new single played on the radio. Now, four years later, and with a new record label, Robinson may, as *Rolling Stone* suggested, "become one of the most important artists of the 1980s." (The following biography/discography overlooks certain obscure and anthology appearances by Robinson.)

1951—Robinson born in Cambridge, England.

1968—Robinson sent to Finchden Manor, a home for maladjusted boys, where he stayed until 1972.

1973—Robinson forms folkie/cabaret act, Cafe Society. Group signed by Kinks' leader Ray Davies to Konk Records.

1975—Davies produces Cafe Society LP, released to no one's satisfaction.

1976—Robinson leaves Cafe Society with a dippy folk-anthem, "Sing If You're Glad to Be Gay," in his kit.

1977—Under the influence of punk and his own astute rage at injustice, "Glad to Be Gay" is transformed into a rocking, embittered attack on homophobia and gay complacency. Robinson forms the Tom Robinson Band. Their first release, "2-4-6-8 Motorway," a catchy sing-along, becomes a Top Ten hit.

1978—*Rising Free* EP, with "Glad to Be Gay," is released in U.K. Suddenly Robinson is a celebrated pop rebel, signed to mega-group Pink Floyd's management. . . . *Power in the Darkness* (Harvest) released in the U.S., with *Rising Free* EP included as a bonus: pop, passion, and politics from an earnest folkie playing rocker. The work is stiff and valiant, generating more press than record sales.

1979—*TRB 2* (Harvest), the follow-up LP, is produced by Yankee whiz-kid Todd Rundgren, but polemics get the better of pop. The record sleeve features a broadside of reading lists and a roster of gay and left-wing organizations. With sales weak, TRB disbands. . . . Robinson stakes his convictions and pocketbook on an independent/benefit single for London's Gay Switchboard: "Never Fall in Love . . . (Again)," b/w "Getting Tighter." The A-side, with music by Elton John, is meant to be disco. Try to imagine a dance hit with the lyric, "You know I hate to be salacious—but lechery can be such fun," as black girls chant, "Sexist/sexist." The public couldn't.

1980—Robinson withdraws into misguided bid for anonymity with band Sector 27 and debut LP *Sector 27* (IRS). The strongest cut, "Can't Keep Away," is about compulsive tea-room sex. Sloganeering it's not. A hit it wasn't. . . . Robinson writes lyrics for Elton John, most notably "Elton's Song," which chronicles a gay high school obsession; released on *The Fox* (Geffen), 1981.

1981—Sector 27 single, "Martin's Gone" (Panic), released. No airplay. No U.S. release. . . . Robinson plays San Francisco Gay Pride Day celebration. . . . Sector 27 splits up. . . . Robinson moves to Germany, working for producer Richard Mazda, and playing cabaret. . . . *TRB 3* (EMI-UK) released in England: a greatest-hits package.

1982—Robinson releases *North by Northwest* (IRS); bare bones production by Mazda with a new version of "Martin's Gone" and two winning collaborations with Peter Gabriel. The songs are personal and claustrophobic, not political exhortations. *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden: "The lyrics are powerful personal expressions of dealing with sex in society . . . as good as anyone has done in any kind of music." . . . Independently, Robinson issues *Tom Robinson Band (The Rest of the Best)* (Fame Records), collecting his most effective earlier cuts, and *Cabaret '79* (Panic), a live recording featuring his delightful version of "Mad About the Boy." (Send SASE to: Panic Productions, 75 Colombo Rd., Ilford, Essex, England.)

1983—Robinson releases "War Baby" (Panic-UK), a wry angry ballad about an infatuation that persists after the boy is gone; a lyric that speaks equally to gays and nongays, and his first U.K. hit in five years.

1984—Robinson releases new single, "Back in the Old Country," with LP due in the fall. Geffen Records announces it will distribute Robinson's LP in the U.S.

—Adam Block