

TOM ROBINSON

STILL AN OUTLAW

By ADAM BLOCK

In 1978 Tom Robinson was *news*. Not only was he a vocal gay socialist with a Top 10 hit in England, but his ironic, unforgiving attack on homophobia and gay complacency, "Sing if You're Glad to Be Gay," was actually getting airplay. But Robinson never found a mass audience in America, and by 1979 he was a has-been in the U.K. Robinson joined the band Sector 27 — leaving after one dispiriting LP. In 1981 he moved to Berlin; later he released the pained, introspective *North by Northwest*. In 1983, when most had counted him out, he released a single in England, "War Baby," that scaled the Top 10. It was a tough plea for love in the face of certain decay and savage self-doubt, appropriate to Britons' very strained state of mind.

In November 1984, Geffen Records released a new LP, *Hope and Glory*, featuring "War Baby," buoyant new versions of "Atmospherics" and "Looking for a Bonfire" from the *North by Northwest* LP, and a cover of what Robinson calls "the best gay pop song ever released," Steely Dan's "Ricki Don't Lose That Number."

By the fall of '84, after Boy George, Frankie and Bronski Beat, Robinson's homosexuality wasn't such a novelty; in the era of Thatcher's England and Ronnie's landslide, socialism was an unfashionable pop rallying cry. Robinson's response, *Hope and Glory*, was not only his most musically accomplished album, but also his most touching and least didactic. It wasn't a dance album, though, nor a hit.

Robinson is a courageous, resilient artist. And though he hasn't become a major pop success, those he has touched and inspired have been moved in ways beyond what most pop artists even aspire to. The laws of pop insure that if folks don't listen to Robinson now, and don't buy his last album, we may never get the opportunity to hear any subsequent ones. Don't risk that. Believe me, he has a lot more to offer than Donna Summer.

After TRB [Tom Robinson Band] broke up late in 1979, you issued a single, written with Elton John, as a benefit for the Gay Switchboard: "Never Gonna Fall in Love (Again)." It proved a commercial disaster — wasn't that devastating to you?

Well, that failure commercially came on the back of a commercially failed album, and the single that had preceded it, so it wasn't a particularly *crushing* blow. I was already fairly crushed by the time that happened [chuckling].

It was more disillusionment with actually putting my money where my mouth was, because it was quite clear that commitment alone wasn't enough — to really be interesting to the majority, even of committed activists, you had to be commercially successful, which was a *bitter* realization, actually. You think that just being right-hearted is a good enough goal in itself, but it ain't.

Mr. Bowie was able to do quite a lot in breaking down sexual stereotypes by not being too specific, in effect, about it. He found that by doing that, he managed to get his records (unbanned) all over the world. In northern, Presbyterian Scotland you can find a David Bowie album in a shop where you probably wouldn't find "Glad to Be Gay," even now. Similarly, you can do a little gentle subversion for a long time.

Soon after that, you moved to Berlin, and actually toured in East Germany. What was that like?

I was singing the usual songs, and I was having a good time in my time off in the gay bars there. It's legal over 15 in East Germany, and you have to wait to 21 in England, so — what can I tell you?

"War Baby" was a real breakthrough and a Top 10 hit in England. In the official

Geffen Records press pack there are some notes by you, including some background on the song, claiming that the song was inspired by your best friend being called to serve in the East German army and your realization that the West and East might soon be taking shots at one another — an anti-war song. I don't hear that. It sounds to me

like a gay love song. Am I misreading it?

Well, it *was* the fact that I actually knew individuals on the two sides. But we're all war babies. We all live under the horror of war. I can't go into the subconscious motives that may or may not have played a role, but there are two countries — West and East Germany — and the relationship that I was going through at the time; my lover was on the other side

of the wall. I was working over there — living in the West — and the two countries were a metaphor for what we went through; we spoke the same language, but had very different outlooks on things, and those rose up like a barbed-wire wall between us — in the metaphorical sense, in the literal sense — an emotional barbed-wire fence. But it is a song about reconciliation.

You have said that previously you divided your career, politics and personal life into different tracks. With the Tom Robinson Band they all seemed to come together. But now —

Well, I grew up with a great love of music above all else. And it was through a love of music that I got into this crazy business, and because of that had opportunities that involved all the rest of my interests. Now I keep my career of commitment separate from my *career* (which is winning the bread and butter). And I keep my personal life separate again; it is *jealously* guarded against intrusions from my main music career. And that comes *absolutely* first.

The last two years have been the most *stable* and by far the strongest in my life. I'm really very, very settled now. So, I'm not going to tell anybody who any of *these* songs are about.

Taking material from my personal life now is much, much harder to do. It is much harder to write a song like "Old Friend" than something like "Glad to Be Gay," because it requires a certain commitment from yourself and produces a much greater vulnerability. If somebody stands up and says "'Glad to Be Gay' sucks. It's lies. It's untrue," I know they're bullshit. That is a general truth that I hold with all my being to be true: You are *wrong*. I can defend that to the death. Easy.

On the other hand, with a song like "War Baby," an emotional striptease, if somebody says "That really sucks. It's cheap. It's insincere. It's shallow. It's crap." That's — there is no easy defense — because it is you on the line.

I'd like to run down some current groups and ask for your reactions. Frankie Goes to Hollywood?

"Relax" is the greatest sex song ever recorded, for myself. I went out and bought it. I bought the 12-inch, I bought the 7-inch, I bought the remixed version (once the BBC had banned it) to help keep it in the charts. I don't know if I thought it was *liberating* or not. I just thought it was a nice fucking: Fuck You! In *every* sense of the word.

You have cited Boy George as an inspiration. Why?

I think he's a fucking great singer. And the media have put him in an intolerable position. I think the man is just *incredibly* strong, the way he stands up to all that.

Don't you feel that he has enjoyed and built a lot of his career on media manipulation?

Yes, but I don't think George has orchestrated it. I really think that he gets an *unwarranted* amount of intrusion into his *person* — probing — from the absolute scum of the earth, often. The way that he can carry on, and breeze through, being creative, strong and true to his fans. The man is fucking butcher than Sting when it comes down to real guts.

Do you think that what you have described as a "gay sensibility" has become part of the mainstream?

No. I pick up a gay sensibility very strongly, *directly* and *unambiguously* with "Relax." I don't pick that up in The Smiths. If I was going around with a magnifying glass, I would find it there, but I only notice it these days when it comes and hits me over the head, and "Relax" came and you know...

Next, Bronski Beat — an opinion?

Nice chaps. I played with them last week at the Pretty Policeman's Ball, a benefit for the Gay Switchboard (celebrating their 10th anniversary) that raised 10,000 pounds for that charity: Bronskis and myself, and the rest was kind of cabaret.

What projects are you working on?

I've written a soundtrack for a BBC television play. It's called *More Lives Than One*, taken from the quote from Oscar Wilde: "Those who live more lives than one, more deaths than one, must — suffer," something like that. It's been directed by Michael Tarlow, and I've done an electronic soundtrack working with a guy named Kendall Wrightson. It's a story about a married man who goes out for tea room sex, and about police entrapment, based on an actual case.

How did that job come up?

Well, you see, it's the mixed blessing of being a gay artist. The *only* reason that I got approached to do it is that I've got some sort of gay involvement — not because they'd heard that I had any sort of musical ability to write soundtracks or have any particular interest in electronics, which happens to be my consuming passion, and occupies far more of my waking hours than the precepts of gay liberation. But the fact is it has actually given me the opportunity to get involved.

Any other projects?

World domination in '85. Survival in '85 is the main one.

