



Tom Robinson.
Courtesy Office of Tom Robinson.

Robinson, Tom (b. 1950)

by Linda Rapp

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Rock musician Tom Robinson was embraced by the gay rights movement when he sang "Glad to Be Gay" in the late 1970s, but found himself the subject of controversy in the 1990s when he chose to live with a woman and become a father.

Robinson was born into a middle-class family in Cambridge, England on June 1, 1950. His first musical experience was as a choirboy.

Robinson realized at the age of thirteen that he was gay, a frightening thought for the boy given that penalties in England for same-sex sexual activity included prison terms at the time. He had a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide when he was sixteen and spent the next six years in a therapeutic community facility.

Robinson moved to London in 1973 and founded the trio Café Society. The group recorded an album, but it sold only six hundred copies.

In London Robinson became involved in the gay rights movement and in combating sexism and racism, causes that he continues to champion.

He left Café Society in 1976 and founded the more political Tom Robinson Band. The following year the group put out the hit single "2-4-6-8 Motorway," which alludes obliquely to a gay truck driver, and "Glad to Be Gay," which was embraced by gay audiences and banned by the BBC.

The band recorded an extremely successful first album, *Power in the Darkness* (1978), but the follow-up was a failure, and the group soon broke up.

Robinson organized a new band, Sector 27, that produced a well-reviewed but not particularly successful album. The band nevertheless received an enthusiastic reception at a Madison Square Garden concert with The Police. In short order, however, their management company went bankrupt, the band disintegrated, and Robinson suffered another nervous breakdown. Desolate and in debt, Robinson moved to Germany, cadging music work in East Berlin.

In 1982 Robinson penned the song "War Baby" about divisions between East and West. It spent nine weeks on the Top Ten charts in the United Kingdom and revived his career.

Upon returning to the British Isles, Robinson began performing in cabarets in Scotland. A producer from the BBC soon tapped him to become the host of a BBC World Service radio show. He continues to host music programs and occasional special features, including *Surviving Suicide*, which he wrote and presented in 1994.

Robinson, a longtime supporter of and former volunteer for London's Gay Switchboard help-line, was

attending a 1982 benefit for the organization when he met the woman with whom he would eventually live and have two children.

In the mid-1990s, when Robinson became a father, the tabloid press had a field day, blaring the news with the headline "Britain's Number One Gay in Love with Girl Biker!" The gay press reviled him, but Robinson continued to identify as a gay man, telling an interviewer for the *Manchester Guardian*, "I have much more sympathy with bisexuals now, but I am absolutely not one." He added that "our enemies do not draw the distinction between gay and bisexual."

In a 1994 interview with the *Boston Globe*, Robinson asserted, "We've been fighting for tolerance for the last 20 years, and I've campaigned for people to be able to love whoever the hell they want. That's what we're talking about: tolerance and freedom and liberty—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So if somebody won't grant me the same tolerance I've been fighting for for them, hey, they've got a problem, not me."

Robinson has indeed been a strong advocate of liberty for all. He is a steadfast supporter of Amnesty International and Peter Tatchell's Outrage! human rights organization and a leader in the Rock Against Racism campaign in England.

Over his career Robinson has put out more than twenty albums either as a solo performer or as a member of a group. Among the best known are *Love over Rage* (1994) and *Having It Both Ways* (1996).

In addition to doing radio work, he continues to tour. He has moved to a more mellow sound, playing acoustic guitar in his concerts, and even includes some spoken-word pieces in his performances. He knows, however, that his fans turn out to hear his classic songs, and so his signature tune, "Glad to Be Gay," remains in his repertoire, although he updates it to reflect current events.

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