

Edinburgh Fringe 2023: Tom Robinson in Conversation

Tom Robinson shot to fame in the late 1970s when the ('modestly named') Tom Robinson Band had hits with 2-4-6-8 *Motorway* and *Glad to Be Gay*.

Over 40 years later he's still going strong, still performing and now also broadcasting on BBC Radio 6. Three weeks ago he had long overdue knee replacement surgery, but he's still here at The Stand New Town Theatre to talk to Graham Spiers about his career in music. Of course he's here; he's a trooper, and as someone who not only danced to both songs back in the day, but danced to them again at Cropreddy a few years ago, I am thrilled to see him. And so is the audience, most of whom are probably of the same vintage, and no less enthusiastic for that.

Spiers opens by mentioning his own nostalgia for the days of his youth; does Robinson feel the same?

He most certainly does not. He may have found success in the 70s, but that's all he found

'Despite everything, the UK is an infinitely kinder set of islands now; the 70s were horrible. I really do not miss the National Front skinheads trying to disrupt all our gigs.'

The Met Police were, he says, completely out of control. They started by beating up people of colour in areas like Brixton and Notting Hill, then turned to the gay community in Earls Court. The notorious 'sus' (suspected person) laws gave them almost unfettered agency. Every minority group was facing the

same struggle

'We did not live in a fair society.'

Growing up gay back then in a small Essex town can't have been easy, says Spiers. Robinson says it's never easy for LGBT+ children growing up with straight parents; they have to find their own identity. At the age of 13 he realised that;

'I was the very person my parents had been warning me about.'

He was taunted at school, felt guilty all the time, and thought he was the only gay boy in the school, in Saffron Walden and most probably in the entire world.

Then along came David Bowie.

Hunky Dory and *Ziggy Stardust* hit Robinson like a benevolent bolt of lightning

'That's my life! He's talking about me! Suddenly I had affirmation, and from the very best music there was. He made it cool to be queer.'

Robinson swore that if he ever had a mass audience himself he'd do the same for those 'different' young people as Bowie had done for him. Ten years later, along came punk rock.

At the 100 Club he saw the Sex Pistols before they were famous; they hadn't yet written most of their own songs, and were instead doing covers of stuff Robinson recognised from school – 'they were terrible!' But Johnny Rotten was screaming out the lyrics, and Robinson's eyes were opened

'I realised what you needed to be was confrontational and real.'

Robinson says there are so many stars that simply could not

have done what they did without punk rock; Elvis Costello, Ian Dury, Sting and Robinson himself all felt its influence. More importantly though, punk broke the record industry's iron grip on success

'They kicked down the door of EMI and we all piled in behind them; "we can be famous too!"'

Before punk the industry made all the choices and decided who was, and who was not, going to be a star. In 1976 bands like The Clash and the Pistols made records that were immediately banned on radio and in all the shops; their notoriety alone made them famous. People wanted more, and nothing – and certainly neither the BBC nor EMI – was going to stop them getting it.

in 1977 the Tom Robinson Band released *2-4-6-8 Motorway*, a song about driving back to London at night after gigs. The chorus is based on a Gay Liberation chant. EMI rejected it so Tom and his band took it round the clubs; they polished it up, expanded the riffs and gave it more energy. When EMI came back six months later they couldn't get into the gig

'They saw a huge audience singing along and they thought 'there's money in this'. And there was.'

The song went on to reach No 5 in the charts.

A year later the band released a live EP that included what was to become its most famous song. Robinson wrote *Glad to Be Gay* for the 1976 Gay Pride march in London. The Met was persecuting the LGBT community; he wanted to write a song about it. He'd noticed that although people would wear *Glad to Be Gay* badges in clubs, they took them off as they left; the message of the song's chorus is, sing even when all these bad things are happening. In other words, don't hide; be loud and proud.

Although the song was only written for that one afternoon, Robinson decided to sing it in the punk clubs anyway. The band ended up performing it in places as diverse as prisons and public schools.

So if Robinson is glad to be gay, how is it, asks Spiers, that he's been married to a woman for 35 years (Sue Brearley; together they have two children)?

His answer is simple; he always liked both sexes, he just liked men better

'"Sing if you're glad to be bisexual" didn't sound right, and anyway, our enemies don't differentiate.'

In the early 80s he went along to a Gay Switchboard benefit and met Brearley;

'the one person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.'

It was a slow burner; two years passed before they finally clicked. When he realised how things were going he spoke to the queer community about it

'They said "why are you even telling us this? We all have interesting sex lives'.

It didn't end there of course. *The Sunday People* pursued him (and Brearley, Robinson's parents, and even his neighbours) relentlessly. When no-one would speak to them, the journalists simply made it up; a two page spread appeared under the banner headline

'Britain's Number One Gay In Love with Girl Biker: My Passion for Blond, by Rocker Robinson.'

Alongside this was a photo of David Bowie – 'stars who go straight'.

You can see why he'd rather live in the 2020s; forty years ago this kind of thing sold newspapers. Would it still sell them today?

At least, Robinson says, young LGBT+ people now have Queer role models – and not just pop stars either. They can also look to the internet for information; forty years ago it was much more difficult to find.

By 1982 the band had split up and Robinson was horribly in debt to HMRC. He moved to Hamburg, and after getting 'completely smashed' one night on a super-strong joint he'd acquired at a dinner party, he drove around the city for four hours, went home and scribbled down eight pages of stream of consciousness writing. In the morning he looked at this magnum opus again

'I thought "That's not my comeback hit." But it was.'

War Baby was released in 1983 and reached No 6 in the charts. It remains one of his most popular songs. What's it about?

'I'm still trying to figure that out myself. The best songs come from the unconscious brain, you have no control over it.'

Drugs, he says, are often accused of having had a pernicious effect on pop, but he's not sure – they inspired punk, they inspired *War Baby*. In his 30s he spent some years in psychotherapy, during which he was offered a trip of LSD

'It was the turning point for me; in the therapeutic setting it was amazing, like putting a stick of dynamite into the rock face. I spent the next six months picking up and examining the pieces.'

He'd had a difficult relationship with his father, but now he

was able to stop fighting with him. He wrote to his Dad apologising for all the trouble he'd caused him; his Dad wrote back telling him not to worry about it and that he boasted about Tom to all his friends.

'LSD: don't underestimate it.'

Nevertheless, he advocates caution with modern day drugs

'Cannabis has a wide range of strengths; skunk now has psychotic properties; you have to be very careful.'

Not knowing what *War Baby* is about leads Robinson into another story, this time about his collaboration with Elton John. Bernie Taupin, he says, admits that he too often has no idea what his songs are about. In 1979 Taupin and John had a 'slight separation.' Robinson met John completely by chance as they both made their way to a photoshoot for the *Guinness Book of Hit Singles*. Robinson was on his Honda 125; John rolled up alongside him in his Bugatti and asked for directions. The result was *Elton's Song*, for which John already had the music but no words. Robinson decided to write a song about their lives. (He still doesn't like the title. John, however, loved it.)

Robinson now hosts three BBC Radio 6 programmes, and also stood in for Johnny Walker when the presenter of *Sounds of the 70s* was having surgery ('I even interviewed Mike Batt from *The Wombles!*') He sees plenty of connections between his broadcasting and performing careers

'It's all about communication. It's putting something from your heart into other people's hearts. Broadcasting behind a microphone you still have stuff you want to share. It's the same game, sharing it on radio; it doesn't have to be your own thing.'

He's very excited about new music

*'You have to listen to a lot of sh*t songs to find the good ones, but they're there. Out of maybe 200 songs I find 18 for the show; they could be from young people, they could be from 50 year olds making music in their bedroom in Hull. I want that OMFG moment.'*

He has a tip for us, and it's a band from Edinburgh

'Waverley,...jumped out of the pile. Vic Galloway (on Radio Scotland) and I have been playing their new single 'Rest and Be Thankful' – young people playing for the fun of it, with zest and energy and joy for life.'

Streaming, and all the other changes in the industry, have changed music; for his generation it had a different place in their lives

'Music was a bush telegraph that told you what was going on...a way to show ideas. The music was very important to us as a product. Now music is no longer product, it's content; you can turn it on and off instantly.'

But success, he says, still goes back to the songs

'If you have killer songs people will listen. You have to play at the grass roots and not trust the record companies; don't let them come between you as creatives and your audience as consumers. Your relationship with that audience is still what matters.'



Robinson himself has made a new album *Only The Now*, with guests including Ian McKellen, Billy Bragg, TV Smith, Nitin Sawhney and Colin Firth; he'll be touring it from October. For tonight's gig he'll play some songs from that

'When you play solo your 'gang' is the audience not the band. We'll have some fun.'

And with that our time is up; it's flown by. Tom Robinson is one of the genuine greats in British music and activism, and this hour has been such a pleasure, not just for me but for the everyone in the room; the applause is real. Robinson does indeed have a relationship with the audience, he always has and he always will.

The Stand's *In Conversation* events continue at The New Town

Theatre in George Street with Tam Cowan (21 August) Andy Burnham (22 August), Ken Loach (23 August), Jeremy Corbyn (24 August) and Anas Sarwar (25 August.)

Tom Robinson's website is [here](#) and includes full details of his upcoming tour. Waverley will play at The Mash House in Guthrie Street on 24 November 2023. Find out more about them [here](#).