

# Tom Robinson

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Thomas Giles Robinson (born 1 June 1950) is a British singer-songwriter, bassist, radio presenter and long-time LGBT rights activist, best known for the hits "Glad to Be Gay", "2-4-6-8 Motorway", and "Don't Take No for an Answer", with his Tom Robinson Band. He later peaked at No. 6 in the UK Singles Chart with his solo single "War Baby".

In 1973, Robinson moved to London and joined the acoustic trio Café Society. They impressed Ray Davies, of The Kinks, enough for him to sign them to his Konk label and produce their debut album. According to Robinson, Davies's other commitments made the recording a lengthy process and, after it sold only 600 copies, he left the band. Subsequently, when the Tom Robinson Band were playing at the Nashville Rooms in London, Robinson saw Davies enter and sarcastically performed The Kinks' hit "Tired of Waiting for You". Davies retaliated with the less-than-complimentary Kinks single "Prince of the Punks", about Robinson.

In London, Robinson became involved in the emerging gay scene and embraced the politics of gay liberation, which linked gay rights to wider issues of social justice. Inspired by an early Sex Pistols gig, he founded the more political Tom Robinson Band in 1976. The following year the group released the single "2-4-6-8 Motorway", which peaked at No. 5 in the UK Singles Chart for two weeks. The song alludes obliquely to a gay truck driver. In February 1978, the band released the live extended play *Rising Free*, which peaked at No. 18 in the UK Singles Chart and included his anthemic song "Glad to Be Gay", originally written for a 1976 London gay pride parade. The song was banned by the BBC. In May 1978, the band released its debut album, *Power in the Darkness*, which was very well received, peaking at No. 4 in the UK Albums Chart, and receiving a gold certification by the BPI. Their second album, *TRB Two* (1979), however, was a commercial and critical failure, and the band broke up four months after its release.

In 1979, Robinson co-wrote several songs with Elton John, including his minor hit "Sartorial Eloquence (Don't Ya Wanna Play This Game No More?)", which peaked at No. 39 in the U.S. *Billboard* Hot 100 and a song about a young boy in boarding school who has a crush on an older student called "Elton's Song". It was recorded, but not released until 1981 on the album *The Fox*. He played two songs live— "Glad to be Gay" and "1967 (So Long Ago)" — during June of that year at The Secret Policeman's Ball (1979).

In 1980, Robinson organised Sector 27, a less political rock band that released a critically acclaimed but unsuccessful album, *Sector 27*, produced by Steve Lillywhite. The band nevertheless received an enthusiastic reception at a Madison Square Garden concert with The Police. However, their management company went bankrupt, the band disintegrated, and Robinson suffered another nervous breakdown. Desolate, in debt, and sorrowing from a breakup with a beau, Robinson fled to Hamburg, Germany, much like his idol David Bowie had escaped to Berlin at a low point in his life. Living in a friend's spare room, he began writing again and ended up working in East Berlin with local band NO55.

In 1982, Robinson penned the song "War Baby" about divisions between East and West Germany, and recorded his first solo album *North by Northwest* with producer Richard Mazda. "War Baby" peaked at No. 6 in the UK Singles Chart and at No. 1 in the UK Indie Chart for three weeks, reviving his career. His following single, "Listen to the Radio: Atmospheric", co-written with Peter Gabriel, peaked at No. 39

in the UK Singles Chart, and provided him further income when it was covered by Pukka Orchestra in 1984. The Pukkas' version was a top 20 hit in Canada under the title "Listen to the Radio".

Robinson's return to Britain led to late-night performances in cabarets at the Edinburgh Fringe, some of which later surfaced on the live album *Midnight at the Fringe* (1988). His career enjoyed a resurgence in the mid-1990s with a trio of albums for the respected folk/roots label Cooking Vinyl a Glastonbury performance in 1994.

In 1986, a BBC producer offered him his own radio show on the BBC World Service. Since then Robinson has, unusually, presented programmes on all the BBC's national stations: Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 4, 5 Live and 6 Music. He presented *The Locker Room*, a long-running series about men and masculinity, for Radio 4 in the early 1990s, and later hosted the *Home Truths* tribute to John Peel a year after his death in 2004.

In 1997, he won a Sony Academy Award for *You've Got to Hide Your Love Away*, a radio documentary about gay music, produced by Benjamin Mepsted. He currently presents his own show on 6 Music on Saturdays between 9 pm and midnight, and on Sundays between 6 pm and 8 pm as "Now Playing @6Music", a show that plays songs based on a certain theme and listeners' input. He also has a show broadcast at 2 am on Monday mornings, which is focused on music by local bands from *BBC Introducing*. In 1994 he wrote and presented *Surviving Suicide*, about his suicide attempt.

Currently, Robinson rarely performs live, apart from two annual free concerts, known as the Castaway Parties, for members of his mailing list. These take place in South London and Belgium every January. In the Belgian Castaway shows, he introduces many songs in Dutch. The Castaway Parties invariably feature a wide variety of established and unknown artists and groups who have included Show of Hands, Philip Jeays, Jan Allain, Jakko Jakszyk, Stoney, Roddy Frame, Martyn Joseph, The Bewley Brothers and Paleday alongside personal friends such as Lee Griffiths and T. V. Smith.

In 2009, Robinson founded "Fresh on the Net", a showcase website for upcoming bands and artists whose aim is "to help independent musicians find new listeners, and independent listeners find new music".

Robinson played "2-4-6-8 Motorway" and "Glad to Be Gay" at the BBC introducing stage on the Friday afternoon of the 2011 Glastonbury Festival, after announcing that The Coral would not be showing as they were 'stuck in the mud'. In July 2013, at the Tabernacle on Powis Square in Notting Hill, a new line-up of TRB performed the entire *Power in the Darkness* album to launch its release on CD. The title track featured a guest appearance by T. V. Smith.

In 2014, he was one of the performers at the opening ceremonies of WorldPride in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, alongside Melissa Etheridge, Deborah Cox and Steve Grand.

In October 2015 he released his first new album in 20 years, "Only The Now". It included contributions from Billy Bragg, Ian McKellen and Lee Forsyth Griffiths. It was made with award-winning producer and multi-instrumentalist Gerry Diver and released on his own Castaway Northwest Recordings. Tom supported the album by playing many festivals that summer including Glastonbury, Latitude, Wickham and Green Man. He also played a showcase at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall in

September and a 15 date tour throughout October and November. Robinson also received a BASCA Gold Badge award in the same month. This was for his exceptional contribution to British music.

In late 2018 and early 2019 Robinson deputised for Radio 2 DJ Johnnie Walker on his Sunday show *Sounds of the Seventies*.

In 2020, Robinson embarked on a four-night solo acoustic tour prior to beginning a 22-date UK "70th Birthday Tour" featuring a 5-piece band.