

Rip-Roaring Robbie Williams

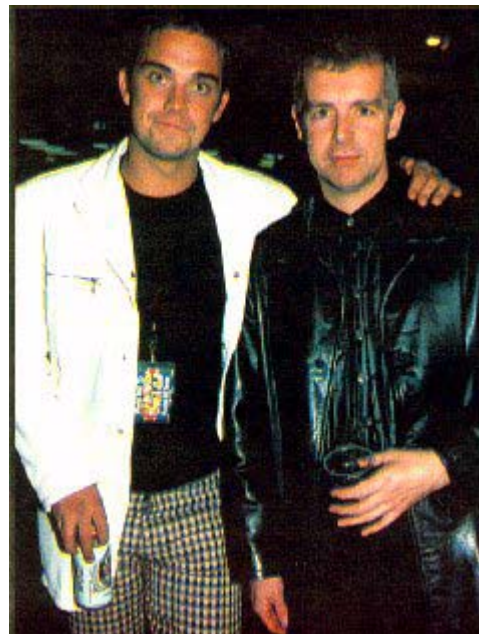
By Ray Rogers

Robbie Williams swears he can't sing - or maybe that's just part of his vaudeville act. The flamboyant singer has risen from the ashes of Take That to become the darling of British pop. Is Robbie Williams pop's new poster boy or just another rock 'n' roll swindle? Perhaps both. By his own admission, the former Take That vocalist is talent-impaired on the musical front. But when it comes to showmanship, his wild card antics have given him a winning hand. Having swept the year-end polls in Britain - he scored a record six Brit Award nominations - and throughout Europe, where he was named MTV's best male performer, the twenty-five-year-old winking prankster from the industrial town of Stoke-on-Trent is setting his sights on American soil. His U.S. debut, a combination of his two multiplatinum U.K. albums, is due out in May. Its smartly self-conscious pop songs could well reach fans of all the boys: Pet Shop, Backstreet, maybe even the Beasties.

It's the flint time Williams will be introduced to American audiences. By the time his former group Take That had its flint and only U.S. hit, "Back for Good," Williams had already been booted from the fresh-scrubbed teen act for his rebelliousness. Rather than play the role of the boy next door, Williams was more of the juvenile delinquent down the street: His substance abuse and romantic shenanigans became constant fodder for the London tabloids.

After focusing his energy and emerging as a solo artist, Williams recaptured public attention as the endearingly naughty boy of Britpop. And while he doesn't take himself seriously, he has gotten the stamp of approval from adoring pop fans, not to mention the rock 'n' roll set (he parties with the likes

of Oasis and Metallica), the old-timers (his hip-shaking duet with Tom Jones on a British awards ceremony was a showstopper), and some of Britain's most celebrated songwriters - Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys and Neil Hannon of the Divine Comedy collaborated with Williams on "No Regrets," a bittersweet song about his breakup with Take That. Can he conquer the rest of the world next? Ready or not, here he comes.



RAY ROGERS: Hello, Robbie. How are you?

ROBBIE WILLIAMS: I'm good. I'm sat right next to a pool. Is this called a cabana? I'm in a cabana, and a shag long - a chaise lounge.

RR: Congratulations on your nominations.

RW: Thank you very much. I've been nominated for six things, I don't know what they are. I think it's everything apart from anything to do with female. That will be next year; we're working on it. I'm thinking of having a sex change. I keep winning all the best

male categories. It's getting boring now, so what I'm gonna do is just have the snip. Me and Alan Morissette - she's gonna go male next year.

RR: Can you recall the first show you ever put on, or when you realized you were meant to perform?

RW: Me mum tells this story about when I was three and we were on holiday in Spain and she lost me. She was worried and she went around the hotel looking for me. She eventually found me and I'd entered myself into a competition. I came onstage singing "Summer Nights" from Grease as John Travolta. That's when she first realized that I was gonna do something. After that I got a hat; I passed it around the pool and started singing for potato chips.



RR: And that's at age three? Are you putting me on?

RW: No, no, I'm not. For two years I did nothing at all.

RR: When you were in Take That, was being a pop star the goal, or were you interested in being taken seriously musically?

RW: [laughs] I was never gonna be taken seriously in Take That.

RR: I mean, for you, inside, did you want to be taken seriously?

RW: No. To tell you the honest truth I got into music by mistake, completely and utterly by mistake. I started acting when I was eight - I did a lot of theater. My mother wanted me to go to college but I wanted to be an actor. When my exam results came through I was just shitting myself because my mother was going to throw me out of the house. So I auditioned for everything I could - every TV and theater thing that came up - and one of these auditions was for a band called Take That. So, now I've got the most interesting hobby anybody could ever have, but I'm an actor, really.

RR: IS being a pop star all about acting?

RW: Oh, most definitely. And I'm getting away with it, which is the funniest thing. I can't really sing.

RR: You don't think so?

RW: No, not really. I'm just having a whale of a time. For somebody who doesn't really sing - just writes a few lyrics and sings a few melodies - I've sold four million albums. That's the biggest laugh of the last decade.

RR: IS there any part of you that does long for credibility as a singer-songwriter?

RW: Not really. I enjoy having a laugh. I take that very seriously. I don't claim to be a Thom Yorke, a Noel Gallagher, a Jarvis Cocker, or a Marilyn whatever-his-name-is. I'm not them. I don't do that. I'm vaudeville, and I'm doing it in a '90s fashion.

RR: DO you think the line from your song "Millennium" - "Get up and see the sarcasm In my eyes" - helps to explain why so many people are relating to what you're doing? That they get the sarcasm?

RW: I'd like to think so, that they can see the sarcasm in my eyes, but I think why people get into it so much is so many people these days are taking themselves ultra, ultra seriously. That's

great if you're in the sort of band that lives and dies for music - "This is what I do and it's my art." That's fine. But I have a laugh, and I think people relate to that. People might be sick of seeing somebody taking themselves so bloody seriously; they want to see somebody make an idiot of themselves, and that's me.

RR: How far do you think you can take that, though?

RW: Well, I tried to wear a dress last year and that didn't work.

RR: So what's next?

RW: I don't know, really. Donkey sex?

RR: Do you want to grow as a musician or a lyricist, or is it all about entertainment?

RW: It is all about entertainment, but I love it when people come up to me and say, "I really like the lyric in that song, it's very clever." That doesn't mean I want to mature as a musician; that means my hobby makes me money and people like it. It's like collecting the best stamps in the world and people who are into that come up to you and go, "That's a really nice stamp. I wish I'd got it."

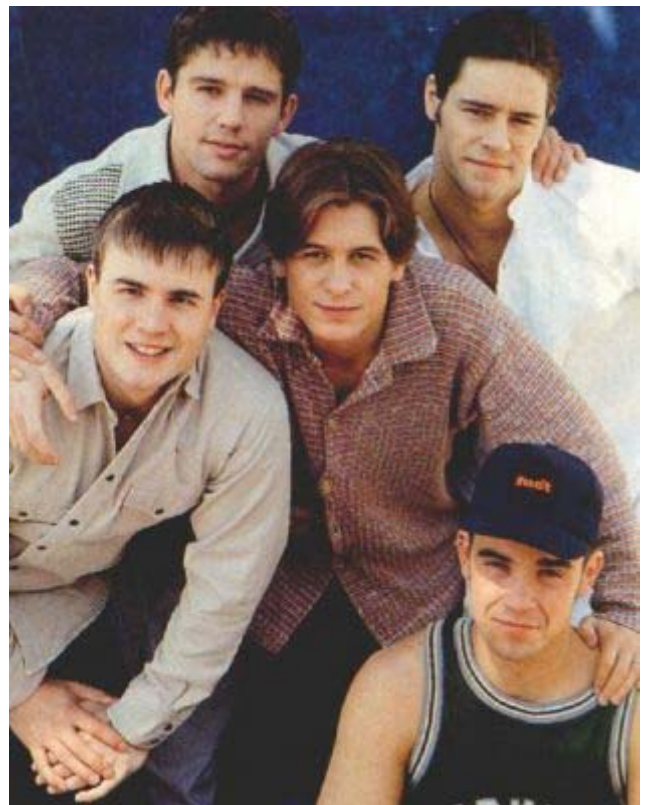
RR: Do you think you'll stick with music, or would you like to cross over into more straight-ahead acting?

RW: I'm writing a film at the minute, which I'm very excited about, and I'm writing a book. The basic thing is, I've got a name now and with that name I can go off and do other things. If I hadn't got a name, I wouldn't think in a million years that I could write a book or a song - I wouldn't have the confidence. But because I've got up onstage and performed in front of so many people and they've bought my album, it gives me this confidence to try anything. Perhaps it's delusions of grandeur, or delusions of adequacy. But I've got this brilliant thing where I go, "I'm Robbie Williams," and people are interested in what I want to say - which is amazing because I'm just an idiot from Stoke-on-Trent.

RR: Well, what do you want to say?

RW: I don't really know. I want to wake up in the morning and be able to go and buy five pairs of sneakers, and to be able to eat sushi whenever I want to, and to treat my mother to a car every now and again. But that's not saying anything - that's doing. I think I want to do things more than say things.

RR: You're very self-deprecating about your talents as a musician, but people are now more than, ever interested in what you're doing, even those who despised Take That. Were the critical hammerings of Take That fuel for your fire?



RW: Yeah, basically. I'm not a boy-band member. I never was. I didn't know what I could do or who I was creatively, but I knew it wasn't being a part of a boy band. I know what my friends think of boy bands and that's exactly what I think of them - and I was in one. It was pretty embarrassing.

RR: How did you break out of that?

RW: They sacked me and then I took lots of drags.

RR: But how did you turn around people's perceptions of you, from being a boy-band member to who you are now?

RW: I've done something honestly, something with sincerity, and I think I've done something that has a lot of entertainment value. I think that's what people want now. How long that will last, I don't know. But while I'm here I'm going to have a good time. I don't know how I changed people's perceptions; I wrote some good songs, I think.

RR: Were you not able to in Take That?

RW: Take That was a divide-and-conquer situation with a certain member of the band and the manager. It was definitely a setup for a solo career other than mine, and anything that got in the way or showed any bit of talent was swept under the carpet. That was pretty suppressive, so I didn't bother until I left the band.

RR: You're talking about Gary Barlow?

RW: Yeah.

RR: Is there still animosity between the two of you?

RW: I think the animosity now is: I hate him because of what he stands for and what he used to be when I knew him, and he hates me because I've sold millions more records than he has.

RR: Not too many people have come out of a teenybop band situation and made it big. Are there any people who've made that leap before whom you admire?

RW: I admire George Michael. I think he's the only one, really. He's had a fantastic career. I'd like his career. I'm not really into his music, I like some of it, but him as a person - and his career - I admire a lot.

RR: Tell me about life in Stoke-on-Trent. What was it like to grow up there?

RW: It's like bum-fuck anywhere else in America. It's a very industrial town. We were a town raised on the pottery

industry. There're a lot of coal mines there, and that all fell flat on its face, so it's a very broke town. My father's a comedian. My mother was a business lady, and she's a drug and alcohol counselor now, funnily enough. So I was raised with my father's entertainment side. I didn't take any of my mother's business sense with me, that's for sure, with all the money I've lost. But growing up as a kid, I played soccer, sang, did theater stuff, went to school, was an average student.

RR: What did you think you'd be doing back then?

RW: Exactly this. Not sitting at a hotel pool in L.A. talking to you on the phone - I didn't know that was going to happen. But when me grandmother said to me, "What you gonna do when you get older?" I said, "Nana, I don't know how it's gonna happen, but by the time I'm twenty-one I'm gonna be internationally famous and I'm gonna be a millionaire." So I had a bit of faith.

RR: Did you always have confidence in yourself?

RW: No. I'm as insecure and neurotic as everybody else. I don't think it was confidence; it was just a feeling. I don't really think I was any good at anything, but I knew that I was gonna be famous and I was gonna earn money.

RR: You have a very camp sensibility. What draws you to that?

RW: I think any entertainer you look at, even the butch entertainers, are camp. If you're an entertainer, and you use your hands when you sing, you're camp. And I like that, I like camping around.

RR: All artists pick up on what other artists are doing or have done. Which artists play into your particular image?

RW: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Gene Kelly, Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Bette Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Tom Jones, the Beatles, Michael Caine, Chuck D. All the greats.

RR: I saw a video clip of your duet with Tom Jones. It was quite a hoot.

RW: It was - working with an old pro.

RR: Was it spontaneous?

RW: Yeah! Tom Jones has got my favorite voice, and I knew he was going to blow me away onstage for singing, so I just thought, Well, I better dance well. And I think I did.



RR: Is it all by the seat of your pants?

RW: I'm white-knuckling it all the way. I just feel the fear and throw myself at it. I haven't got a fucking clue. I just keep writing songs and singing them. There's no set plan.

RR: Do you think what you're doing will translate to American audiences?

RW: I don't know. The way I look at it is like this: I have had the best time in my life in the last seven days, the best time since I've been famous. Because nobody's known who I am, it's been really relaxing, and apart from the fact if I want to get laid that's pretty difficult because no one knows who I am, I've really, really enjoyed having that anonymity. So if it doesn't happen here, then I've still got a holiday place to come to, and if it does happen here, I'll have enough money to go to the moon. I'm a quote a minute, aren't I?

Oh, I got a tattoo! I've got one on my left arm, which is a Maori prayer from New Zealand that protects me from myself, and I went to Sunset Strip opposite the Viper Room last night and got a lion tattooed on my arm.

RR: Why a lion?

RW: Protection. And I've got a Celtic cross on my leg as well, and that's protection.

RR: Why do you need to be protected?

RW: Because I've got the devil in me.

RR: Why are you afraid of yourself?

RW: I don't know if it's abnormal, or if it's just what twenty-five-year-olds feel right now, but I can't trust myself.

RR: Are you talking about substance-abuse problems?

RW: Substance abuse. Drinking. Sex. Or throwing myself off balconies. You know, just the normal stuff.

RR: I understand you got engaged this past year to Nicole Appleton of All Saints.

RW: Yeah.

RR: Have the paparazzi gone crazy on the two of you?

RW: I'm the most expensive paparazzi picture in England, You might think I sound proud of that, but I'm not. I just find it very interesting.

RR: How much would a photo of the two of you go for?



RW: Well, we're not going out with each other anymore.

RR: I'm sorry to hear that.

RW: Yeah, me too. It's one of those things. When you're twenty-five, commitment's a miracle.

RR: What happened?

RW: I'm as fickle as anyone my age, I think. People want security from me and I'm not of a right mind to give it at the minute, especially in the world I live in.

RR: When you accepted your MTV Europe award, you just said, "Damn right, too," and walked off. Why?

RW: I was very scared. I was very emotional. My mother was in the audience. I'm always very cocky and I've always got something to say, but I had nothing to say that night. I was so overwhelmed and I thought, If I start thanking people I'm going to cry, so I'll say something really cocky and walk off. It was the first time in my life that I was actually speechless.