

Robbie and a Death Wish

Saturday, this summer, almost midnight, at an Italian restaurant called Casa Frattini on Chepstow Road in the centre of Notting Hill, West London. Suddenly the door crashes open and a disheveled figure lurches in; a young man, dark-haired, wild, dilated eyes, unsteady on his feet. One can't help noticing that he appears to be clutching a silver football trophy.

'Whose Porsche is that outside?' the arrival bellows, slurrily. The room falls silent, all faces turning towards the door. 'Whose is that Porsche then?' he demands again, sweaty-faced, gesturing into the street. 'Someone's done a POO on your Porsche!' There are a few nervous smiles, but the uncomfortable silence is unbroken except by him. 'Don't you care?' the man raves at his unwilling audience, voice rising. 'Someone's done a.....'. At this point an elegant young woman enters. She leads the apparent lunatic, stumbling, back into the night. There is no Porsche outside, only the woman and Robbie Williams - once again, all too publicly in the grip of his addictions. This morning, Britain's most successful young pop star is on an open-ended 'holiday' in Barbados. In truth, he is dispatched there by his management to detox after another episode, this time in Stockholm. At the MTV Awards held in the Swedish capital last Thursday week, Williams, 26, had a fight with another music business personality. He was later seen in a state of almost paralytic intoxication. There was even an eye witness report, denied by his record company, that he was carried away, foaming at the mouth. His spokespeople cited 'exhaustion'. Two days later a newspaper claimed that he was receiving treatment for 'sex addiction' (again vehemently denied by his people). Whatever the details of the matter, it did not look good, or sound convincing. 'Robbie has been very difficult to be around recently' one friend told The Mail this week. 'He's a total pain.' Another added: 'Robbie is a very sweet person. But when he's drinking or on cocaine he's not very nice at all.'

Certainly, Williams refuses to make life easy, not only for those around him but also for himself. The apparent crisis in his well-being comes in a week when his professional career is reaching a new peak of success. Williams's third album, *Sing When You're Winning*, received both critical acclaim and public approval; it's about to go quadruple platinum, having sold more than a million copies. The title has an ironic ambiguity. For several years now, Williams has been battling his love of both drink and drugs. And yes, earlier this year (and at periods before that) he did seem to be making a fight of it, if not being completely victorious. But it's been a badly kept music industry secret that the past months have seen him lapse. And in the environs of his Notting Hill home, and on the London party circuit, the latest downward roll of his extraordinary rollercoaster decade is no secret at all.

When acrimoniously in 1995, Williams left Take That, the boy-band whose eight number one hits had made him famous, he was earmarked for the scrapheap. Rumours had long abounded that he was out of sync with the management's strict rules or no drink or drugs. A member since 16 and the baby of the group, Williams grew up to resent the strictures laid down by manager Nigel Martin-Smith. Such resentment, was fueled by what he perceived to be his designated role as backing singer and dancer - a lesser role, if you like, to the songwriting talents of Gary Barlow and the prettier Jason Orange and Mark Owen.

'We were never allowed an opinion,' he complained later. But when he left, he was in no state to cope on his own. 'It was like I'd been protected from the world and suddenly someone threw me from a 200ft building and said: "See how you get on when you land."' He famously 'outed' himself as a party animal at the Glastonbury Festival in the year he left. Williams drove to Somerset with a boot full of champagne and joined the bad boy group, Oasis, on stage. Ironically, given their current mutual hatred - more of which later - he wanted to be Liam

Gallagher.

That was the very public start of a year of self-abuse. Drink, cocaine and even a brief dabble with heroin saw his weight balloon. He became one of the most ridiculed losers on the B-list party circuit. It came to a temporary halt when Elton John suggested that professional help was needed, fast. In 1996 he underwent therapy. It helped, but only for a while. The following year he spent several weeks in detox at the Clouds Clinic in Wiltshire. But with his solo career faltering amid bad publicity and indifferent material, he was miraculously resurrected by a new management team and songwriting partnership with the older, less volatile Guy Chambers. The new team recognised that within Williams were qualities which had been well masked by the bingeing and idiot behaviour: underneath the fat drunk there was a witty, bright and intensely charismatic 22 year old. What is more, he was able to write strong lyrics, drawing on his own experiences and failings (he later to win three Ivor Novello Awards including one for Songwriting of The Year). His comeback was assured when the ballad, Angels, reached number one.

But new success, did not banish the old Williams's problem. He was still, as he recently admitted 'out of control...a time bomb'. Was it the lack of a male role model in his life? His father Pete, a pub entertainer, had left his mother Jan, when Robbie was 18 months old, though his parents remain relatively close. Whatever the reasons for his troubles, last year he admitted that cocaine abuse had bought him to the brink of suicide. Once again, the performer and the private person were at odds. The televised open-air gig at Slane Castle, near Dublin, in August 1999 was a case in point. That day he performed to 80,000 adoring fans, mixing comedy and maniacal energy. But behind the scenes Williams had been in a drug-induced turmoil, according to a friend who spoke to the Mail.

And the demons were pretty obvious to those around him. While sitting backstage at Slane he placed his hand on the thigh of a young woman who was part of his entourage. He began to squeeze it. However, this was no caress,

Williams tightened his grip, until it hurt the girl. As he did so he turned to her and said, with a measured slowness which along with his expression suggested barely controlled hysteria: 'I want some cocaine soooo much. I really crave it.' The young woman was frightened by his intensity. This was just one of several incidents. The Slane Castle episode followed soon after the failure of his relationship with fiancée Nicole Appleton, a member of the girl group All Saints.

She stuck by him for 15 months until April last year. She even attended Narcotics Anonymous and AA meetings with him (meetings which, incidentally, provided the genteel Notting Hill drugs scene with much after-dinner gossip). When he announced that he'd never loved her, she understandably felt betrayed. That she has subsequently become the partner of Liam Gallagher, whose bitter envy of Williams's success became an open, puerile feud this year when he described his rival as 'that fat dancer from Take That', has only added piquancy to the situation. Williams invited Gallagher to box him. Gallagher called Williams 'queer' at the Q Awards earlier this month. Robbie claimed, shabbily, that Nicole thought him better in bed. It was playground stuff and the public sided with Robbie.

But his rampant sexual nature troubles Williams, it seems. 'I want to meet a nice girl,' he will complain to friends after yet another empty one-night stand. He has publicly declared that he wants to find a wife and settle down. It would take a brave woman. Recently voted 'sexiest man in the world' by readers of Cosmopolitan magazine, he's certainly taken full advantage of his allure.

Aside from the legion of unknown young women to whom he's made an habitual and usually successful pass, there is a gallery of female celebrity romances large enough to fill a year's worth of Hello! magazine: actress Anna Friel and Joely Richardson. TV girl Tania Strecker, actress Sam Beckinsale, singers Andrea Corr and Geri Halliwell and Jacqui Hamilton-Smith, the daughter of Lord Conwyn.

Robbie is a 'loves them and leaves them' type, said an acquaintance. 'It does not make him happy. But sometimes it's

better than being alone in a big house.' Certainly, the St Theresa statue, which he has said his Catholic mother Jan (a trained drugs counselor, coincidentally) bought him for his bedroom must have a permanent blush. Sex aside, the Notting Hill pad is like a schoolboy's large bedroom, with state-of-the-art computer games, which Williams sometimes plays for hours each day.

This summer a series of painfully honest heartfelt interviews suggested that he was still in danger from less innocent diversions. Of drink he said: 'I don't drink socially....I drink to get hammered. I can't communicate with anyone when I'm like that. Nothing spontaneous comes out of my mouth apart from 'Have you got any cocaine?'.

Like most addicts battling to reform, Williams seems to live from day to day. Sometimes he is good - he told an audience in New Zealand this year that he'd gone two weeks without a drink - but there are failures. His bizarre appearance at the Notting Hill restaurant followed victory in a celebrity football game. He celebrated by 'getting hammered' once again. The problems became public two weeks ago. A video shoot for his forthcoming single, Supreme, had to be curtailed 24 hours early because of Williams's condition. A few days later his management issued a statement which said the singer was suffering from exhaustion and 'severe gastroenteritis' and had been told by doctors to take substantial time out of his schedule. This was seen by some jaded showbusiness cynics as shorthand for problems not unconnected with Robbie's long standing habits.

Williams was determined, however, to attend the MTV Awards in Stockholm, for which he'd received multiple award nominations. And that's when it came all horribly unstuck. According to eye-witness reports, Williams was at EMI's private party when he came face to face with the English dance music producer Nellee Hooper, who has worked with stars like Madonna. Hooper is not retiring violet and what happened next will not have displeased anyone who has made his acquaintance.

While he used to be friends with

Williams, their relationship has soured considerably over recent years, perhaps because Hooper is now a close pal of Liam Gallagher. The producer's friendship with Jacqui Hamilton-Smith may also have contributed to the frost. On seeing him, Hooper is alleged to have said to Williams: 'You think you are hard don't you? Come on lets have a fight, you ****.' Whereupon Williams punched Hooper in the face. In response, Hooper landed a kick which might have raised Williams's voice an octave or three. They then fell into a floorboard grapple which minders eventually broke up.

But the evening's misbehaviour was not over. Williams later made serious inroads into Stockholm's supply of the liquor sambuca and needed some assistance in retiring to his bedroom.

The next day the damage limitation exercise began. Robbie was whisked off to the Caribbean in the company of songwriter Guy Chambers. And once again, back home in London, his publicity machine has to step in to fudge the affair.

Last night his record company spokeswoman said of the incident with Hooper: 'It was a simple misunderstanding between them, which has been blown all out of proportion.' Some misunderstanding. She denied that he'd been foaming at the mouth. 'But he was exhausted, and unwell. And that's why he's gone on a private holiday.' Furthermore, she was not prepared to comment on record company concerns over his drinking and use of 'recreational drugs'.

But at the moment, it seems Williams can't even have a holiday without dramas. No sooner had he got to the exclusive Glitter Bay Hotel, than he was complaining about his room. This led to him being accommodated in the manager's suite, before checking out altogether. Last night the mail learned that he was now staying in a private residence on the island. A naturally sweet and bouncy personality is displaying the classic and unhappiness and egomania of a person driven by a dependency. Barbados won't cure that. Is rehab beckoning again for pop's biggest star?