



IT'S NOT ONLY ROCK AND ROLL

Tom Robinson talks to *ITT*

By Bruce Dancis

About a year ago, over 80,000 people attended a march and rally in London to protest the increase in British racism and the growing neo-fascist movement. It was the largest anti-fascist rally the country had witnessed since the '30s. The staid *LONDON TIMES* wrote that the event was "notable for the participation of many thousands of teenagers in punk rock styles."

The rally, co-sponsored by Rock Against Racism, featured one of Britain's leading new rock groups, the Tom Robinson Band, also known as TRB. Robinson is an activist and musician who combines hard-driving rock'n'roll with a commitment to socialism and gay liberation. The band's first album, *POWER IN THE DARKNESS*, came out last year on Capitol Records' Harvest label (Capitol itself is a subsidiary of the British-based EMI Records), and has been followed up with the nearly released *TRB TWO*.

Both albums have been filled with up-tempo rockers, with a bit of British music hall thrown in, about a wide variety of political and social issues. With other left wing British bands like the Clash, X-Ray Spex, and Stiff Little Fingers, TRB represents a turn away from a folky emphasis within left music.

Robinson is currently involved in planning London's Gay Pride Week, slated for the late June commemoration of the tenth anniversary of New York's Stonewall riots; the band regularly distributes agit-prop "bulletins" at all their concerts.

Tom Robinson met in San Francisco with *IN THESE TIMES* rock critic Bruce Dancis shortly after a concert on the first part of his band's current American tour.

In San Francisco, a year ago, somebody asked you how a socialist could be on the label of a multinational corporation. You answered in part by quoting Hans Magnus Enzensberger about the need for the left to break out of its own circles.

Right. No refuge really exists.

What are your feelings about your two years with a multinational corporation?

You learn at first hand what that involves. When we signed to EMI we weren't aware that there was a weapons division that makes armaments—it makes guided missile radar and anti-personnel mines. There's an anti-personnel thing called the "EMI Ranger." I got hold of a brochure for this and we produced some of it in one of our news bulletins.

So what do you do?

We're contracted to that company for five years. There are individuals within the company who work with us, trapped by the same dilemma. Jobs are getting scarcer, and when it comes down to the bottom line—paying the rent, feeding yourself, and putting gasoline in your car—you don't have an awful lot of choice. You can leave the job on the grounds of conscience, but somebody else will gladly fill the place. It won't prevent weapons divisions from existing. So you end up having to somehow live with that contradiction. You can't resolve it; you can only be open about it.

As Enzensberger said, you have to use the capitalist media to reach the people. And I do feel that pop music is the way to reach the people. Ideally, I'd like to be played on AM stations rather than FM stations, rather than the rarefied atmosphere. I'd rather be played in taxis, in factories, for housewives working at home.

How do you think Capitol Records is doing by you in this country?

No band ever likes its record company. It always complains and bitches and moans. No record company is ever pleased by the way a band responds to it. But give credit where credit's due. They've put the album out and it's got its sleeve notes on it and they are uncensored. It took a month extra to get it out because they had to have legal clearance on everything. But they put it out. They've got behind the tour and they've done promotions.

Capitol has been slow to bring over some EMI acts to the U.S., but they seem to have decided they can sell TRB in the U.S.

It's interesting that the first album came out without any problems, because it was much more narrowly defined as to what the band was about. It was very much about issues specific to England. Definitely, as one's horizons have expanded, the writing on the second album has gotten much wider in its scope. We've tried to keep the out-and-out "propaganda" more to the liner notes. We've tried to keep the music wide in appeal, so that people can relate to it in terms of a general rather than a specific struggle—say, gays in England at this moment.

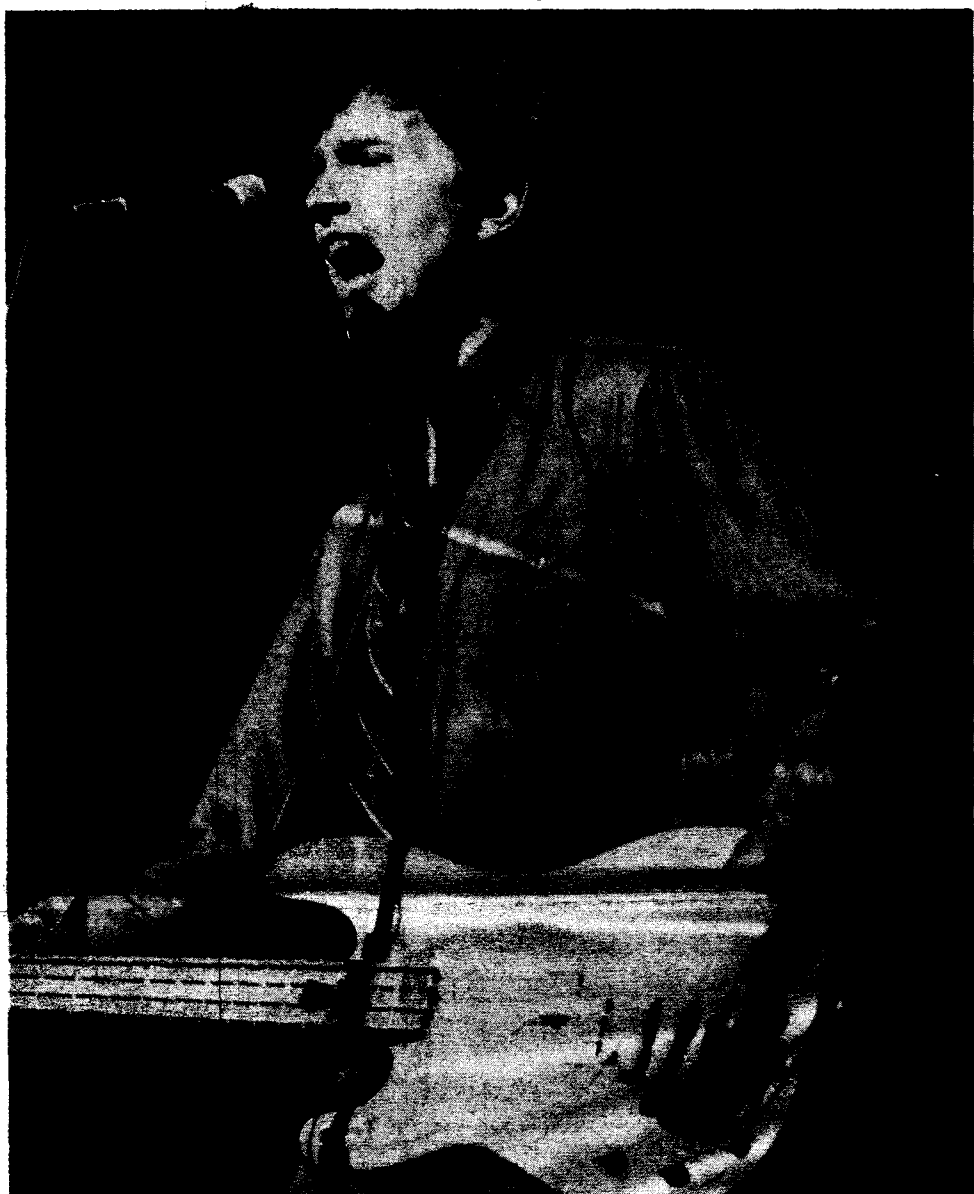
Gay people all over responded to "Glad to Be Gay," despite the particular British references.

They did and they didn't. Gay rock'n'roll fans responded to it, but the vast mass of out gays didn't, which is fair. We're a rock'n'roll group and we're playing to a rock'n'roll audience, whatever the hell their color, or sexual orientation, or class. If they like rock'n'roll, they're our audience. If they don't like rock'n'roll, too fuckin' bad.

The liner notes for your new album list the names and addresses of many progressive organizations in this country. How did you decide on the groups that were listed?

Two friends of mine prepared lists ranging from the basically bourgeois kind of thing like save the seals, save the whale, the kind of things that people can leave covenants to in their wills and get tax relief from subscribing to, like Amnesty International—which isn't to knock them; they do valued stuff and it's all part of the general front—right through to the Panthers and the Anarchist Party [of Canada]. I found the crossover areas and from there on in really had to take their word for it. But it looked good, as far as an uneducated Englishman, unaware of what the situation actually is, could tell.

Buying an album is not a political act. Going to a concert is not a political act. And there's a tendency, because of the way rock'n'roll is geared, for people to be encouraged to feel that simply by going to a concert and raising their fists in the air and singing along the lyrics to a



certain song they're making a strong political gesture, which they aren't. They're making a gesture of fashion and a musical gesture.

There is a feeling of solidarity that comes out of that, that does break down barriers between people. We are purveyors of rock'n'roll. The biggest contribution the band can make is by widening peoples' perception within a rock'n'roll framework.

Do you think more groups ought to be attempting to encourage action, the way your liner notes do?

I feel that if somebody is doing something, even if you disagree with the way they're doing it, if they're basically on your side, you should support them—like the Village People, for instance. They perceive that they're widening the thing for gays—I'm not about to go out there and say that I don't think the Village People are doing it in the right way.

I'm gonna say I do it a different way. If my way proves more successful or more fruitful than theirs, fine. And if theirs proves more fruitful than mine, fine.

What I like about Rock Against Racism is that it is action by the people, for the people, at a grassroots level. It doesn't have a big central office or a bureaucracy. It only has four people in London who work in the office, and they print the posters and the fanzines.

If somebody in the north of Scotland wants to put on a gig, they get in touch with London, London sends them the posters, and then up in the north of Scotland they organize it. They get a local band, and they get lists from London of black bands who are prepared to come up and play. And they put on the first black band to ever play in the north of

Scotland.

Rock Against Racism USA seems to be growing fast. I hope it isn't growing too fast.

What about transplanting something that comes out of specific conditions in Britain, a reaction to Eric Clapton's statement? [Eric Clapton said that he supported Enoch Powell, conservative anti-immigration MP, because he didn't want England to become a "black island."]

Let me misquote Voltaire for a moment. If Eric Clapton had not existed, it would have been necessary to have invented him. He was—let's be honest—an excuse, because the runaway success of Rock Against Racism was far more than just a direct reaction to some stupid, drunken remark by some sopped musician who's made his reputation ripping off black licks.

The remarks themselves were a useful trigger to get a thing going, because there was a need at that time for people to be able to express their dissatisfaction at the growth of racism in a positive way.

You seem more positive towards Rock Against Racism than you were when you were here last year. It was my impression that you had felt a bit burned by sniping on the left. You said you didn't want to be seen just as a "benefit band."

Sure. But that's a different ball game from Rock Against Racism, because they're fully aware of the "benefit band" syndrome. It's a terrible trap. It's the trap that anybody who is committed at all to anything radical falls into. If you're a plumber, a comrade's going to ring you up next week and say, "Can you come and fix the pipes in the party central office, please?" And then soon you find

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