

Vicky Entwistle
I'm Corrie's
Shirley
Valentine

Robbie tries to calm his jitters before taking to this stage in this exclusive backstage shot taken by Scarlett Paige, daughter of rock legend Jimmy Page



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Robbie does it his way

SEE HIS
AMAZING
ALBERT
HALL
CONCERT
ON BBC1,
SATURDAY

The Prince of Pop is out to prove he's the new King of the Swingers. But can Young Green Eyes really compete with Ol' Blue Eyes? Jane Dimond watches the Rat Pack wannabe in action

Journalists are a cynical old lot. So I know I am experiencing something special when the rows of critics awaiting the arrival of Mr Robbie Williams at London's Royal Albert Hall aren't consumed by a discussion of whether Stokely's most famous son will be able to realise his dream of reinventing himself as a Big Band singer. Instead there is a feverish thrill that they've been granted a 'gold-dust' seat at an event many had tried desperately hard to buy £150 tickets for.

"I think I saw Robbie's mum in the loo!" gushes one broadcast journalist next to me, adding with a reverence rarely

bestowed upon royalty 'but I didn't like to say anything!'

Thousands of neon lights spell out Robbie's initials in a spectacular Las Vegas-style backdrop. Nicole Kidman excitedly leans forward in her box. Then slow hand-claps rise to a thunderous level as the black-tie audience, including Sir Bob Geldof and George Michael, grow increasingly impatient for his arrival, the deafening noise threatening to send the very ceiling of this regal concert hall heaven-bound.

Backstage, it must be enough to make the one-time boy band member,



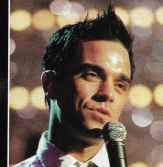
Robbie does it *his way*

plagued by insecurities, shake in his shiny, Sinatra-style shoes. Even host Rupert Everett is talking about Robbie's past 'paranoia'.

But minutes after he makes his entrance by sliding down a pole in a smart tuxedo and dyed, jet black hair, he has the audience in his hands. He finger-clicks his way through a host of classics by Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr and Dean Martin, which are all on his new album *Swing When You're Winning*, released this week.

Surrounded by a troupe of

'The show meant a huge amount to Robbie because it was a new direction. Also he was at the Royal Albert Hall, taking on the songs of his heroes. I think he was pretty daunted by it,' says BBC producer Beatrice Ballard



'I've been to the Albert Hall a lot and seen a whole range of things from The Proms to pop, but I've never seen an atmosphere quite like it before,' adds Beatrice, who first met Robbie as a guest on *Parkinson*



high-heeled dancers, his sophisticated routines are a million miles away from his teen fantasy *Take That* days.

"I was wondering how Frank, Dean and Sammy would be feeling right now, probably they'd be all cool," he says, before squealing excitedly. "But wow! This IS the Royal Albert Hall," as he jumps up and down in sheer, schoolboy joy.

Robbie sings his way with ease through such classics as *One For My Baby, Well Did You Ever?* and *It Was A Very Good Year*, with the help of guests Jane Horrocks, American funnyman Jon Lovitz, his singer flatmate Jonathan Wilkes, and even footage of Ol' Blue Eyes on a giant video screen.

One of the highlights of the evening is a newly-penned song, appropriately called *I Will Talk and Hollywood Will Listen*. "As you know, I've been spending a lot of time in America. Lord knows why I do no business there," he jokes, in the regional accent they apparently find so hard to understand across the Atlantic. Most of the audience probably hope they never will and that we can keep this very British talent all to ourselves.

The morning after the show, which is being shown on BBC1 this Saturday, producer Beatrice Ballard's phones are buzzing "like never before". But the man at the centre of the media frenzy remains tight-lipped. "I spoke to Robbie very briefly last night, and he was absolutely over the moon," she says.

Beatrice is euphoric too. "I've been to the Albert Hall a lot and seen a whole range of things from The Proms to pop, but I've never seen an atmosphere quite like it before.

"It was electric, and one of those amazing moments where you feel you are present at something that will not happen again, something very, very special that people will talk about in years to come."

Beatrice, who persuaded Robbie to do this special for the Beeb after being 'knocked out' by his performance on one of her other shows, *Parkinson*, confirms

Robbie was jittery beforehand. "He was genuinely, incredibly nervous. The show meant a huge amount to him because it was a new direction. Also he was at the Royal Albert Hall, one of the world's most prestigious venues, taking on the songs of his heroes.

"I think he was pretty daunted by it. But the fact is he pulled it off and I think he realised quite soon into the show how excited the audience were, and started to really enjoy it."

The evening was the result of four months of preparation and Robbie insisted on being heavily involved every step of the way. "He was the one who wanted to do something in the 'Vegas style of his Rat Pack heroes, so it was all about capitalising on his enthusiasm for taking on completely new territory," reveals Beatrice.

'He's not just some sort of bland singer who was once in a boy band'

"Robbie's managers said it was the first time they'd actually seen him attend a production meeting for a project, but he sat in on them all and was full of ideas. I think it's because this project was so close to his heart."

Beatrice says Robbie's cheeky sense of humour was never far from the surface throughout. "We had Richard Curtis [writer of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *The Vicar of Dibley*] working on the script with him, which was fantastic, but Robbie had a pretty clear idea of what he wanted to do. He has a wonderful sense of humour and had us laughing all the time.

"He turned up at one production meeting in an opaque mask he'd worn for a video that he'd just shot, joking that it was his disguise for walking down the street to meet us."

Despite all his bravado, Beatrice believes Robbie is quite a reserved person. "A lot goes on his head, but I think he's quite judicious about what he chooses to reveal.

"Robbie's a hell of a character. I think that's why people love him. He has that twinkle in his eye and he's quite complicated, not just some sort of bland singer who was once in a boy band."