

# VARIETY

FREE TIME

## MOVIES

'Behind Enemy Lines' is the first real 21st-century war movie **E13**



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FRIDAY

November 30, 2001

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Story by Jon Bream - Photo by Tom Wallace

His silver brocade Santa suit hangs in front of a shelf full of ant-and-roach killer. His headgear — a crown, a sombrero and a fur hat — sits on a table next to an arsenal of vacuum cleaners. On this night, Robert Robinson's dressing room is a custodian's oversized closet.

A custodian's closet?

It hardly befits his status as perhaps Minnesota's master male vocalist. This is the man whom the Timberwolves call each year to sing the national anthem at their season opener, whom Prince asked to sing at his birthday party, whom one local critic dubbed the Pavarotti of gospel.

Robinson doesn't fuss. He'll go anywhere to heal and lift people with his music, he said the other night while waiting to go onstage with Lorie Line at the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn. He sings at prisons, breakfasts for bankers and the Billy Graham Crusade.

**ROBINSON continues on E24:**

—He's 'God's canary' who can sing with anybody.

# Earth angel

Singer **Robert Robinson** has a God-given gift. If he only had a career to match.

## IF YOU GO

### Lorie Line Holiday Concert

Featuring: Robert Robinson.

When: 8 p.m. today, 3 & 8 p.m. Sat., 3 & 7 p.m. Sun., 7:30 p.m. Mon-Wed., 8 p.m. Thu.-next Fri., 3 & 8 p.m. Dec. 8.

Where: Historic State Theatre, 805 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$33.50-\$43.50. Limited availability. 651-989-5151.

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## MUSIC



**Luciano Pavarotti**

comes to Xcel tonight **E5**

## ONSTAGE



Real-life DJ **Alex Cole**

takes on 'Talk Radio' at Acadia Theater

**E10**

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the world's leading textile designer **E20**

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Jazzing array of **plidazzle** eating opportunities **E12**



## COVER STORY

## ROBINSON from E1

For 'God's canary,'  
music is ministry

"He starts softly and just builds and takes you to heaven with him," says Marlys Weber, a fan who sells Robinson CDs at her Special Memories gift shop in Alexandria, Minn.

"He can sing with anybody," says Sounds of Blackness' Grammy-winning director Gary Hines, who accompanied Robinson at a recent funeral.

"He's God's canary," says Line, borrowing a line from one of her musicians.

Despite his spellbinding abilities, Robinson, at age 41, has become a magnificent voice in search of a career.

For Robinson, music is a ministry. His full-time job is artistic and executive director of the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, which he founded 12 years ago. His meal ticket is singing with Line, which he does for about four months a year.

But he would like a solo career. Despite being booked for several performances a week, he hasn't been consistently successful. Singing "The Star Spangled Banner" doesn't pay, except at Vikings games (\$500). After taking too many \$50 gigs, he's thinking of raising his fees. Robinson is concerned about putting away money for his autumnal years.

"I have never made a phone call in my life asking somebody to 'Please, let me sing,'" he said recently in the choir's spartan office in a downtown St. Paul warehouse. "I get calls from people who see me doing things that I never thought I could do. I'm a church person. That's all I do."

He doesn't have a recording contract or a distribution deal for his self-produced discs. That surprises many. "Given that level of talent, everyone must be thinking surely" he has a deal, Hines said.

His four solo recordings have sold a modest 20,000 copies combined. His new collaboration with Line, "The Show Stoppers," released on her label, has sold that many in a mere four months.

## Secret weapon

The title of "The Show Stoppers" reflects what happens when Robinson steps onstage.

"He's my weapon when I need to take the show to a different level," said Line, who begins a 12-show engagement tonight at the Historic State Theatre in Minneapolis. "He has a presence without opening his mouth. He walks up to the mike, and you're interested in him. It's just the way he looks at you. And when he opens that mouth, you'd better buckle up."

Standing ovations greet his performances in mid-concert, whether he's singing "The Lord's Prayer," "God Bless America" or "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." The 75-voiced group gratefully nods to acknowledge the applause and then waddles regally offstage to sit in the wings, like Buddha wearing Princely clothes.

Arranged and produced by Line, "The Show Stoppers" — a mix of standards with rock, religious and holiday selections — is aimed at her Middle America audience. "It's peaceful, beautiful, listenable music — not over-the-top," said Line, whose name is bigger than Robinson's on the CD cover.

Although he's known for more robust gospel fervor, he isn't complaining. "I hope it would show people that I am a little broader than just a

church singer," he said. He praises Line for giving him opportunities to stretch artistically and to perform in front of tens of thousands of people.

He didn't know "Moon River" until she asked him to record it for "Show Stoppers." He learned "Danny Boy" in the recording studio.

He never had ridden a motorcycle, either, until Line asked him to make his entrance as Santa on a Harley Davidson during last year's holiday show. This year, Santa arrives on a snowmobile — another first for Robinson.

His speaking voice is soft, but he has a deep belly laugh. The outsized singer with the overpowering voice seems comfortable with who he is. He's even comfortable with — well, at least tolerant of — the colorful costumes that make him look like a massive Christmas ornament.

"He's the easiest person I work with," Line said. "He never has a meltdown or temper tantrum."

Occasionally, however, he draws the line. As a devout person, he asked not to perform the newly popular "Lady Marmalade" this year because of its provocative lyrics.

Twin Cities choreographer/dancer Cathy Young spent more than a year collaborating with him on the gospel musical "Journey/Sanctuary," which recently concluded a sold-out run at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis.

It was risky to present live gospel music with modern dancers in skimpy outfits, but he was willing to take the chance to reach new audiences. (It wasn't his first theater experience — Robinson made his stage debut in 1991 in the unlikely title role of "The Nightingale" for Theatre de la Jeune Lune.)

"He's the absolute opposite of a diva," Young said. "There's no artifice. So many times I'd call him and say, 'I'm in despair; we can't raise enough money.' He'd say: 'Just believe in it,' with such a sense of calm and belief."

## Preacher's kid

The son of a choir vocalist and a minister, Robinson grew up singing.

"He would go to bed singing, get up singing, sing on the bus to school," recalled his older brother, the Rev. Stan Robinson, pastor of He Is Risen Church of God in Christ in north Minneapolis.

"That was his calling. It was inevitable that he'd do this."

At 6, Robinson — known as Eddie to the congregation because his father also is a Robert — started performing at religious functions with his brother and two sisters. At 15, he was directing a church choir. In 1990, he started a choir of all races at Minneapolis Community College to sing black gospel music.

"His ear doesn't miss a thing — it's scary," said 12-year choir member Lara Norkus Crampton, leader of the soprano section.

He soon quit his day job as a data-processing expert as the choir's budget grew from \$10,000 to nearly \$230,000 a year. The 75-voiced group does about 45 performances yearly, so he's always busy with choir work. On the road with Line, he logs onto his laptop computer between numbers. He's busy preparing an "Old Tyme Gospel" concert for January and a Mother's Day program.

The choir is as diverse as the songs he sings with Line.

"We have religious and nonreligious people, Jewish people, fundamentalist people, gay couples," said Crampton, who is white and doesn't belong to a church.

Robinson has a strong sense of mission, she said. "He's ambitious artistically and spiritually in expanding the reach of gospel music and not getting hung up between secular and religion."

In July, for instance, he staged three workshops at the Hennepin County workhouse and then gave a concert with 14 inmates and some choir members. He invited the inmates to join his choir when their sentences were served. So far, three have expressed interest.

"The residents so connected with him," said Sue Bangert, coordinator of volunteer services for the workhouse. "One resident said it touched his heart and lifted his spirit. Another resident thanked me for the experience. Robert was not here just to entertain; he had a message about making better choices in life."

## Large and in charge

Besides his voice, the thing people notice about Robinson is his size. He's 5 feet 5 — and as large as a football nose tackle.

He says he comes from a big-bodied family but doesn't use that as an excuse. As a diabetic, he watches what he eats but admits to keeping odd hours and, as a child, developing the bad habit of singing at night and then having a dinner of fried food before going to bed.

Sipping a diet Coke in his dressing room, he joked about food when a friend stopped by. Line said it's no laughing matter — she's had fans offer to pay for surgery for Robinson.

Although he and Line often sit together on the tour bus, certain topics aren't discussed. For one thing, Robinson never has asked her for business advice, even though Line's marketing skills might overshadow her piano prowess. He's too humble. Still, "I've watched how she puts things together," he said.

He's not certain how, but he wants to take his career to the next level. He is bothered that some nationally known gospel veterans have been forced to hold benefit concerts to pay rent and hospital bills. He doesn't want that to happen to him.

His brother feels the next step should be a major recording contract. "I think it's overdue. I don't think he's sought it. He needs someone to invest in him and his music. I believe some day he should be up there with Yolanda Adams and Bobby Jones Gospel."

The singer himself is typically modest. "This is about something bigger than Robert Robinson could have ever imagined," he said.

"In 1980, I could not have conceived where I'm at in 2001. In 2001, I have absolutely no concept what God has for me five or 10 years from now."

His eyes looked skyward. "I have visions and dreams and hopes to record and to travel and to do all these wonderful things. But it's never really about me."

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Star Tribune photos by Tom Wallace

"He has a presence without opening his mouth," said piano star Lorie Line, who enlists Robert Robinson to sing with her. As for him doing "The Star Spangled Banner," Timberwolves coach Flip Saunders said: "He, by far, is one of the best who sings it with us. No question, he does a great job."

## LINKS

## Listen to Robert Robinson

In addition to recording three albums with the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, Robert Robinson has made five solo albums — four with Minnesota keyboardist/arranger the Rev. Henry Wiens and the latest with Lorie Line. To hear samples, go to <http://startribune.com/freetime/music> or phone 612-673-9000 and, after the main greeting, say "local info." Then press the four-digit number listed at the end of each item below. — Jon Bream

"From the Heart," Robinson and Wiens, 1994. This collection of spirituals, hymns and traditional gospel songs is fairly understated. Choice cut: the extended and deeply soulful "Elijah Rock." 7163

"From the Heart, Volume 2," Robinson and Wiens, 1996. Similar to the aforementioned disc, with some fervent testifying. Choice cut: "Glory (Be) to his Name." 7164

"Make Me an Instrument," Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, 1996. This live CD by Robinson's choir is inspirational and relevant — plus you can dance to it. Choice cut: "The Star Spangled Banner." 7165

"Christmas From the Heart," Robinson and Wiens, 1997. The opening "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" shows Robinson's range — from gentle gospel to Latin jazz to stirring soul. These Christmas favorites run from the elegantly formal to the rollickingly gospel. Choice cut: "Go, Tell It on the Mountain." 7166

"Praise From the Heart," Robinson and Wiens, 1998. This disc is contemporary gospel, both in sound and in selection. Choice cut: "Come, Thou Fount." 7167

"Thank Ya!" Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir, 2001. Released in September, this diverse disc features Robinson on several tracks, including . . . Choice cut: The title song. 7168

"The Show Stoppers," Robinson and Line, 2001. Her arrangements showcase plenty of Line's piano as well as Robinson's versatile voice on an eclectic mix of songs from her shows including "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll," "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Silent Night." Choice cut: "How Sweet It Is." 7169

## Web sites:

<http://www.robertrobinsonmusic.com/>

<http://www.tccgospel.org/>