

'Better Man': The Real-Life Musicians in Robbie Williams's Biopic and the Actors Who Portray Them

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The Take That singer's simian movie features appearances from Oasis, All Saints, Tom Jones, and others



Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures

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This Christmas Day, Robbie Williams and Take That fans can rejoice in the theatrical release of the at-times-controversial singer's biopic, *Better Man*. The film captures Williams's life and career beginning as a small boy growing up in Stoke-on-Trent to a teenager auditioning for Nigel Martin-Smith to join a new boy band, right up to Williams's fame with the band, his subsequent substance abuse issues and eventual rehabilitation.



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Joining the ranks of unconventional biopics, Paramount Pictures presents the story of a pop star through a CGI monkey, an idea conjured up by *Better Man*'s director, Michael Gracey, to represent Williams's own assertions that he felt like a dancing monkey. The film showcases Williams's talents, insecurities and, most importantly, the man beyond the bright lights and flashy costumes.

Throughout Williams's story, several musicians pass through his life, some leaving an indelible mark. Ahead of the film's release, we take a look at the real-life singers portrayed in *Better Man* and the actors who play them.

Robbie Williams as Himself (Sort Of)



TRENDING

After Gracey settled on the idea of Williams being portrayed as a CGI monkey, he cast young actors Asmara Feik and Carter J. Murphy to play young Robbie, and Jonno Davies as the singer in his teenage and adult years. As a first step, a digital scan of Williams was taken while he performed one of his songs to provide the film with reference points for his facial expressions and mannerisms.

With the help of Peter Jackson's groundbreaking visual effects house, Wētā FX, Davies's motion-capture performance and Williams's scan and vocals were combined together to bring a primate version of Robbie Williams to the screen. Davies impressively mimicked Williams's physicality while also bringing his own energy and artistry to create one of the most unique and scintillating biopic performances put to film.

Raechelle Banno as Nicole Appleton



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In the life of a '90s pop star, wild love affairs are part and parcel of the story. For Robbie Williams, the dizzying romance that dominated his life as a young man was with Nicole Appleton of All Saints, a successful girl group who gave us such bops as "I Know Where It's At" and "Never Ever." *Better Man* dives deep into the couple's most intimate and personal moments, grounding the film in a tragic, yet beautiful, love story.

Australian actor Raechelle Banno, who portrays Appleton, admits to not knowing too much about the singer prior to *Better Man*. Banno researched Nicole using interviews and her autobiography as sources, discovering that Nicole was one of the few who saw Robbie Williams as Rob — a person, rather than a mythical celebrity. Banno's real-life sister, Karina, plays Nicole's sister and fellow All Saints member Natalie Appleton.

Jake Simmance as Gary Barlow



Of all the professional relationships and associations Williams has had in his career, his membership with Take That will forever shine the brightest. As the *de facto* leader of the group, Gary Barlow often clashed with Williams, whether over artistic decisions or Williams's perceived unprofessionalism. The two have long since buried the hatchet having recorded together, appeared together on X-Factor, and even gone into business as producers for the West End musical *The Band*. Williams even says today, "If this was a movie about 2009 to present day Robbie Williams, it would be a love story to Gary Barlow."

Aside from the casting of Robbie, Gracey describes casting Gary Barlow and the other band members as his toughest challenge. For Barlow, Gracey cast Jake Simmance, an emerging actor best known for his supporting role on the immensely popular Netflix miniseries *Anatomy of a Scandal*.

Liam Head, Jesse Hyde and Chase Vollenweider as Howard Donald, Mark Owen and Jason Orange of Take That



Although Williams left Take That in 1995 on acrimonious terms, he enjoys a far more positive relationship with them today. Williams reunited with the band in 2010 to record *Progress*, the group's sixth studio album and the last album to feature all five original members (due to Jason Orange's departure in 2014). *Progress* became one of the UK's fastest-selling records of all time, and in support of the record, the five-piece embarked on a sold out UK tour, which culminated in July 2011 with eight nights at Wembley Stadium.

In addition to Simmance's Barlow, Gracey rounds out the band with Liam Head as Howard Donald, Jesse Hyde as Mark Owen and Chase Vollenweider as Jason Orange, respectively. According to Simmance, the five actors (including Jonno Davies) became fast friends, forming a tight bond on set. As a result, Gracey allowed the actors

to improvise, which gave way to plenty of banter among the bandmates.

Leo Harvey-Elledge and Chris Gun as Liam and Noel Gallagher



In *Better Man*, Williams extols his love for Oasis, describing them and their lyrics as provocative — something he desired for himself. A photo of Liam and Williams at Glastonbury in 1995 in the end credits speaks to a friendship that formed in their early careers, but as recently as 2022, the singers appear on the outs with one another. More significantly (and as depicted in *Better Man*), Liam began dating Nicole Appleton a year after she and Williams separated. The two have a son together and, though they married in 2008, they divorced six years later.

While *Better Man* doesn't focus too much on the feud between Williams and the Gallaghers (save for a

reenactment of Robbie challenging Liam to a fight at the 2000 BRIT Awards), their appearance in the film marks poignant moments in Williams's life and career. Playing the two rock stars, Chris Gun and Leo Harvey-Elledge (whose portrayal of Liam in *Better Man* marks his second time as the singer after 2021's *Creation Stories*; the young actor also plays George Harrison in next year's *Midas Man*) don't waste a second of their brief appearance, absolutely nailing the vulgarity and edge of the Oasis frontmen.

Nick Nicolas as Tom Jones



Tom Jones makes the briefest of cameos in *Better Man*, but the crooner has a long history with Williams. Not

only is he one of Williams's musical influences, but the two also collaborated twice on singles: "On My Own" (the B-side to Williams's single "Different") and "Are You Gonna Go My Way" on Jones's 1999 album *Reload*.

Nick Nicolas plays the legendary Welsh singer in *Better Man* during a performance between Robbie and his idol at the BRIT Awards in 1998. With Williams decked out in a black leather suit reminiscent of another of his idols (Elvis Presley in *The '68 Comeback Special*), the two perform a medley of songs from the film *The Full Monty*, including "Make Me Smile," "You Can Leave Your Hat On" and "Resurrection Shuffle."

Better Man arrives in theatres on December 25 through Paramount Pictures.



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