



[John Barrowman](#) at [Liverpool Philharmonic](#)
Reviewed by [Fat Roland](#) November 2011

Two mostly-naked male dancers bend over to show the business end of their hot-pants whilst John Barrowman's septuagenarian parents dress up for a comedy skit on sexual domination.

I'm not sure how I got here, but it all seems to make sense. I was expecting a teeth-whitened Torchwood show tune extravaganza, but here, at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall on John Barrowman's 27-date tour to promote his latest album ***The Best Of John Barrowman***, there is so much more going on.

Firstly, we have a dominating whiff of cruise ship cabaret. The evening opens with Barrowman's leaden take on ***Celebrate***, followed by a statement of intent from the Doobie Brothers' ***Listen To The Music***: "What the people need is a way to make 'em smile."

That's what the evening is all about. Making 'em smile. The audience are mostly women of a certain age and higher – much higher – and they coo and wow as Barrowman reveals a backdrop of a massive Barrowman making jazz-hands on a starry night. He is granny's favourite gay, and boy doesn't he know it.

That's the second element. This is a massively gay affair, in both senses of the word. Barrowman starts off in a blue sequinned jacket, which then turns emerald, then purple, then red in a series of costume changes that would give Kylie a run for her pink pound. The songs include a Eurovision medley which has a Bucks Fizz strip moment for the girls *and* the boys, a track from Disney's musical *Enchanted*, and a barn-busting finale of *I Am What I Am* which lacks none of the tender pathos of the *La Cage Aux Folles* original.

This is homosexuality for a Daily Mail audience. Careful innuendo for the family: nothing to put granny off. It's a far cry from the exuberant homoeroticism of Kylie's live show, the Dolce & Gabbana porn fest *Aphrodite* (out this month, fellow Dorothys).

That doesn't stop Barrowman dragging out his father – 79 on the night – and dressing him up as

a builder with an inappropriately-placed crotch chain only to have him make barely-disguised sexual advances to his mother, dolled up like as S&M policewoman, before launching into YMCA. Too much? Probably not. His mum calms any sexual tension by thwacking him in the privates with her truncheon.

We are treated to a series of popular tunes, such as ***Mandy*** (preceded by a picture of John meeting Barry Manilow), ***Downtown*** (preceded by a picture of John meeting Petula Clark) and... you get the idea. We also see John meeting Bob Hope and John meeting '50s film goddess June Allyson.

We see Barrowman meeting a lot of people. Which leads me to the third element of the evening. The whole night is an extensive trawl through his family photos. With the declaration "like to time travel with me? Let me take you back to the 1970s", we are treated to the striped orange skirts, high waistlines and pigtails of his family's youth. Here's John and his partner Scott. Here's John as a seven year old. Here's John and his niece. Here's John and his partner Scott again. Here's John and Gwen Cooper from Torchwood. Here's John and Scott again. Who needs Facebook?

It's this atmosphere of sharing and inclusivity that lends the concert its fourth element: a strong feeling of honesty. He's gay, get over it. We become part of his family as he talks at length about school in Chicago, and shows us a photograph of his niece who is one of twins but is pictured on her own because the other twin died before she could grow up.

This tenderness – a real surprise from one of television’s cheesiest personalities – is evident in a spellbinding version of ***The Winner Takes It All***. The song prompts a standing ovation, and is one of the evening’s best musical successes along with a soaring rendition of Take That’s

Greatest Day

and a delicate

Fields Of Gold

courtesy of I’d Do Anything winner Jodie Prenger (one of several guest songs by the reality TV winner: think Dolly Parton meets Sue Pollard).

I said this evening was all about making ‘em smile. Scrub that. Scratch off the gold dust and there’s something more at work here. The fifth element is something more fundamental, something uncomfortable that played on my mind as I made the tedious journey back from Liverpool to Manchester.

In between skits by his sexy dancers J4 and a cheerful introduction to his JBs backing band, there’s a force of gravity at play. And it’s bearing down on our wallets and purses. He shows us a pic of his business partner Gavin. He mentions his doctorate in musical theatre (“Doctor? Who! Couldn’t resist!”). And suddenly, there’s his HIM skincare line, which is sold on QVC, which has, to the audience’s thundering delight, its call centre in Liverpool.

Following a clunky take on Katy Perry’s ***Firework***, nicely segued from a mobile phone video of the song on the Torchwood set, he’s talking about his Tonight’s The Night telly show. “Now selling worldwide,” he says as he shows us pictures of him in foreign countries and pictures of him drinking champagne on a jet plane.

John Barrowman is at pains to point out that we're in recessionary times and he's grateful for every penny of the £40 tickets people have forked out for tonight. He says he's giving back, but pre-recorded backing vocals in ***You Raise Me Up*** and a promise of a call centre job don't seem enough. Not when he's showing you dozens of photos of his globe-trotting, plonk-glugging lifestyle.

I didn't mention that the picture of his niece linked into a commercial for his cookbook and all those honest, open holiday snaps gave an excuse for an early advert for his forthcoming fiction book for 8-13 year olds. As he takes to the stage for the finale, looking super pink and sparkly in his last outfit of the evening, you can't help feeling sold to. The winner took it all. And yet...

John Barrowman is a better singer than he is an actor (he's note perfect in Mandy). His mum thumping him in the balls with her truncheon during the S&M skit was genuinely funny. YMCA had the audience dancing in the aisles. And his smile was infectious, as was the cheap, old-fashioned humour (a routine about Spain for Madonna's song Holiday had him nuzzling inflated breasts flanked by mostly naked male dancers). Even his cultural references, such as Kenny Rogers' Grand Old Opry, were tailored with care for the elderly contingent in the audience.

It's hard not to love this Stonewall campaigner who does what he says on his pink sequinned tin. He farts sparkles (a repeated joke from tonight) and seems to lack depth, but it's all very safe. Some people need this entertainment. They need a place a long way away from Little Britain and Ricky Gervais. For that reason alone, John Barrowman triumphed in the gig. He is what he is: he is his own, Barrowman-branded special creation.