

Queen's Tragic Rhapsody

Theatrical, brilliant, excessive and doomed – there had never been another band like Queen or a frontman like Freddie Mercury

By Mikal Gilmore



IT WAS AN UTTERLY UNEXPECTED REBIRTH. FROM THE MOMENT FREDDIE Mercury and the other members of Queen – guitarist Brian May, drummer Roger Taylor and bassist John Deacon – took the stage at London's Wembley Stadium, on July 13th, 1985, at the historic Live Aid concert, the group captured the day. Mercury began by sitting at the piano, playing Queen's most famous song, the strange and gorgeous "Bohemian Rhapsody," with the band storming in behind him in majestic stride, and an audience of 72,000 singing the lyrics from a seemingly deep-rooted memory, as if

this was what they had waited for all day. Things built from there. Mercury grabbed his sawed-off microphone stand as the band swayed into the rapturous "Radio Ga Ga," and the crowd responded with a collective gesture, slapping hands overhead and pumping fists as the singer pushed them on with his sonorous roar. Some people found the sight of that multitude acting in spontaneous accord, like a human tide, scary: that much power, all at the beckon of one band and one voice.

That it was Queen accomplishing this came as a wonder to nearly everybody. They seemed to have run their course. After their epic 1975 album *A Night at the Opera*, they had piled up hit after hit in a stylistically diverse range: from baroque pop to hard rock, disco, rockabilly and funk. Then, by the mid-1980s, their fates had shifted—in part because many fans had trouble accepting Mercury's perceived homosexuality. After a mind-stopping error of judgment in 1984, when Queen elected to play a series of shows in apartheid South Africa, the band appeared to be pariahs even in its native England. But then, after the Live Aid performance—which exemplified everything extraordinary about Queen, their scope, their virtuosity, their command of a stage—all anybody wanted was more. Years later, May would say, "That was entirely down to Freddie. The rest of us played OK, but Freddie was out there and took it to another level."

Today, nearly 23 years after Freddie Mercury died of bronchopneumonia related to AIDS, Queen's legacy—as one of rock's biggest and most controversial bands—is still inseparable from him, whatever the success May and Taylor might achieve in the next few months on tour with Adam Lambert. When Taylor and May have talked about the Mercury years (Deacon refuses to talk about the experience at all), it's sometimes as if they're still mystified by how wonderful and horrible it all was. "We were very close as a group," Taylor said days after Mercury's death. "But even we didn't know a lot of things about Freddie." Years later, May said, "It fucked us up in the way only an out-of-world experience can do. Queen were the biggest thing in the world.... You're adored—surrounded by people who love you, yet utterly lonely.... The excess leaked from the music into life."

QUeen begins and ends with Freddie Mercury. He embodied the band's identity, its triumphs and failings, and he was the psyche whose loss it couldn't survive. But in the beginning, there was no Freddie Mercury.

MIKAL GILMORE interviewed author George R.R. Martin in May.

He was Farrokh Bulsara, born on September 9th, 1946, in the British protectorate of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa to a Parsee family that practiced Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. Farrokh's father, Bomi, was a high-court cashier for the British government, which meant that he, his wife, Jer, and Farrokh—and later Farrokh's sister, Kashmira—lived in cultural privilege, compared to much of the island's population. In 1954, when Farrokh was eight, the Bulsaras sent him to St. Peter's Church of England School, in Panchgani, India. Located 150 miles from Bombay (now Mumbai), St. Peter's had been regarded for years as the best boys boarding school in that part of the world. Farrokh arrived as a terribly shy boy, self-conscious about the prominent upper teeth that immediately earned him the nickname "Bucky." (He would remain sensitive about his teeth the rest of his life, covering his mouth with his hand whenever he smiled. At the same time, he realized that the pronounced overbite—caused by four extra teeth at the back of his mouth—may have been his greatest blessing, giving his voice its distinctive resonant embouchure.)

Many remembered Farrokh seeming lonesome at St. Peter's. "I learnt to look after myself," he said years later, "and I grew up quickly." When some schoolteachers began calling him Freddie as an affectionate term, he seized the name instantly. He also cultivated his own tastes. Freddie's family had steeped him in opera, but he was also developing a love for Western pop sounds—especially the boisterous piano-based rock & roll of Little Richard and the virtuosic R&B of Fats Domino. After Freddie's aunt Sheroo noted that he could hear a tune once, then sit down at the piano and play it, his parents paid for a private music tuition. In 1958, he formed a band, the Hectics, with some other St. Peter's students. In *Freddie Mercury: The Definitive Biography*, a student at a neigh-

boring girls school, Gita Choksi, said that when he was onstage, Freddie was no longer a shy boy: "He was quite the flamboyant performer," she said, "and he was absolutely in his element onstage."

Some students at St. Peter's believed Farrokh had a crush on Gita, but she said she was never aware of it. Others thought it was already plain Farrokh was gay, though there is little evidence of him being sexually active. Janet Smith, now a teacher at the girls school, remembered him as "an extremely thin, intense boy, who had this habit of calling one 'darling,' which I must say seemed a little fey. It simply wasn't something boys did in those days.... It was accepted that Freddie was homosexual when he was here. Normally it would have been 'Oh, God, you know, it's just ghastly.' But with Freddie somehow it wasn't. It was OK."

In 1963, Freddie returned to Zanzibar and his family. British colonial rule ended that same year; then, in 1964, the island erupted in revolution and slaughters, and the Bulsaras fled to Feltham, Middlesex, in England, near London. The weather was rough and the income not as good, and Freddie began changing in ways they didn't get. "I was quite rebellious, and my parents hated it," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1981. "I grew out of living at home at an early age. But I just wanted the best. I wanted to be my own boss."

Whatever he had left behind in Zanzibar and Bombay, Freddie Bulsara would never claim it as a past that he was willing to talk about. He was just in time for the era of Swinging London, the time of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Life was opening up for him, and he intended to revel in every moment of its future.

LIKE BULSARA, THE two other men who initiated Queen, Brian May and Roger Taylor, were attending London colleges in the late 1960s. May was tall, lean, soft-spoken, erudite and developing into a visionary guitarist. What most informed his sensibilities, he later said, was the range of harmony-steeped music he had been hearing since the 1950s: the vocal blends of Buddy Holly and the Crickets, the layered strings of popular Italian concertmaster Mantovani and then, in the 1960s, the innovative methods of the Beatles. In late 1963, May and his father built him an electric guitar with mahogany parts taken from a fireplace. (Known as the Red Special, it is the guitar that May still plays.) May and a friend, bassist Tim Staffell, were playing in a cover band called 1984 when both started college careers in the mid-Sixties. May attended Imperial College, studying math, physics and astronomy; in 1968, he and Staffell started a new band, Smile, which would be

"If you listen to 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' who can you compare it to?" said Mercury. "I can't think of anybody."

DON'T STOP ME NOW

(1) Mercury with his girlfriend and confidante Mary London in 1977. (2) A young Farrokh Bulsara at St. Peter's, Panchgani, India. (3) Mercury backstage circa 1978. (4) With Michael Jackson in Los Angeles, 1980. (5) Before a 1977 concert. (6) Queen circa 1973 (clockwise from top: Roger Taylor, John Deacon, Freddie Mercury, Brian May).

Roger set his kit up at Imperial College," May told *Mojo* in 1999. "Just the sound of him tuning his drums was better than I'd heard from anyone before." Smile's trio were now in place.

Staffell also shared musical interests with Freddie Bulsara, who by then was attending Ealing College of Art, where both were students. By this point, Bulsara was less reserved. He had long hair, was exotically handsome, even dangerous-looking, and had a sinuous way of moving. Staffell took Bulsara to meet Taylor and May in early 1969. Bulsara struck them as a little peculiar – he painted his fingernails black, he could be effeminate – but he was endearing. He could also be imperious. "At that stage," said May, "he's just kind of an enthusiast. He says, 'This is really good – it's great how...you're aware of building up atmospheres and bringing them down. But you're not dressing right, you're

not addressing the audience properly. There's always opportunity to connect.'"

Bulsara was in and out of a couple of groups himself during this period, and he tended to remodel everything about them. He liked singing blues – most bands demanded it – but his influences were much broader: the compositions of British composer and singer Noel Coward; the instrumental voicings of Chopin and Mozart; the singing of Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Robert Plant and Aretha Franklin; and the histrionics of his two favorite stars, Jimi Hendrix and Liza Minnelli. After he saw

Smile, though, his ambition was to be the band's lead singer. Sometimes at Smile shows, he would yell, "If I was your singer, I'd show you how it was done." In early 1970, after too many false hopes, Staffell announced he was leaving Smile. May, Taylor and Bulsara were sharing an apartment by this time. The others were well aware that Bulsara was a nimble and well-schooled pianist and was developing into an exceptional singer. So in April 1970, the three formed a new band. They went through a handful of bassists – at least one of whom had difficulty with Bulsara's over-the-top style – before meeting John Deacon in early 1971. Deacon was another exemplary student (he had a master of science in acoustics and vibration technology) and struck everybody as extremely reserved. ("He hardly spoke to us at all," May recalled of the first meeting.) But he learned quickly, and in his audition he "plugged a gap and didn't drop a fucking beat," in the words of a musician present that day. Deacon was hired on the spot.

closer to the fierce improvisational spirit then gaining ground in British rock being made by Cream and others. They posted a note on an Imperial College bulletin board, seeking a drummer who could play like Ginger Baker and Mitch Mitchell. Taylor, who was preparing for a dentistry

career but hated studying, answered the ad. Taylor was pretty-faced, a bit rowdy, and could play what Smile was looking for, though he was closer to the spacious style of the Who's Keith Moon, and, like Moon, he had an instinctive sense of tonality. "I remember being flabbergasted when

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: FREDDIE MERCURY; ANDREA PRESTI/ARND BRONKHORST; GUY WATSON; JIMMY HARRISON; JIMMY HARRISON; JIMMY HARRISON



Right away Bulsara began to exert his sway, persuading the others to dress more dramatically, more dandyish. He also insisted he had come upon the perfect title for the band. May and Taylor suggested names such as the Rich Kids and the Grand Dance, but Mercury insisted on Queen. "It's ever so regal," he said. "It was a strong name, very universal and very immediate," he added years later. "It had a lot of visual potential and was open to all sorts of interpretations, but that was just one facet of it."

And crucially, Queen's lead singer was no longer Freddie Bulsara. He was now Freddie Mercury – the new name a reference to the Roman messenger of the gods. "I think changing his name was part of him assuming this different skin," said May in a 2000 documentary. "I think it helped him to be this person that he wanted to be. The Bulsara person was still there, but for the public he was going to be this different character, this god."

IN QUEEN'S EARLY years, a legend persisted that the band had spent a year or two mapping out the stratagems of its success before anybody ever heard the music. (Deacon once boasted to friends that the group had a "10-year

KILLER QUEEN

Mercury at Wembley Stadium, 1986. "I think we are probably the best live band in the world at the moment," said Roger Taylor that year. "And we are going to prove it."

plan.") For the music press, this sort of ambition showed guile rather than any true passion for the meaning or social possibilities of music. It was an image that Queen didn't escape for most of their career. In truth, Queen's rise was beset by questionable business deals and serious health problems (at one point May almost lost an arm to gangrene, and was later hospitalized with hepatitis, then an ulcer). But for Mercury, there was no fallback. May, Taylor and Deacon could all resort to their original academic-bred careers: May kept working toward his Ph.D. thesis in astrophysics in the band's early years, and Deacon later admitted that he wasn't convinced Queen were truly viable until after their third LP. Mercury eventually persuaded the band that it was worth abandoning any other careers. "If we were going to abandon all the qualifications we had got in other fields to take the plunge into rock," May later said, "we weren't prepared to settle for second-best."

By the time the group released its debut, *Queen*, in July 1973, the material already

felt dated to the bandmates. Mercury didn't have the patience for jams or fantasias. He believed that carefully crafted song forms with strong, focused melodies were radical enough; if you wanted people to hear your work, strive for memorable performances. He also finally convinced the others that how a band looked – how to dress, how a lead singer moved and commanded a stage – was equally important. With his black nails, and his harlequin bodysuits and angel-wing cloaks that heightened his athletic, roundelay-like movements onstage, Mercury reveled in an androgynous splendor – albeit one with an ominous edge about it. These attributes seemed akin to the styles being forged at the time by David Bowie, T. Rex, Roxy Music and Mott the Hoople, which was a concern. "We were into glam rock before the Sweet and Bowie," May said at the time, "and we're worried now, because we might have come too late."

With their next two albums, *Queen II* and *Sheer Heart Attack* (both from 1974), Queen successfully caught up with themselves. *Queen II*'s lavish sound and *Sheer Heart Attack*'s harder and more propulsive approach laid the groundwork for the extravagant and complex sound that marked Queen's first triumphant period. Onstage, though, it was Mercury who was the focal point. The British press largely hated what it saw as his campy, theatrical

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mannerisms. But he was steadily building a powerful, uncommon bond between the band and its audience, often engaging fans in singalongs. "What you must understand," he once told another singer, "is that my voice comes from the energy of the audience. The better they are, the better I get."

Recording their fourth album, 1975's *A Night at the Opera*, Queen felt that their time had come. May recalled thinking, "This is our canvas, we will paint on it at our leisure." Mercury had ideas for a ludicrously epic track. Producer Roy Thomas Baker, who had worked with Queen on their music up to this point, has told the story of the first time he heard "Bohemian Rhapsody": "Freddie was sitting in his apartment, and he said, 'I've got this idea for a song.' So he started playing it on the piano.... Then he suddenly stopped and said, 'Now, dears, this is where the opera section comes in.'" From the opening ballad section, the song soared into operetta form, then into battering rock & roll, finally back to a ballad. Said May, "It was [Freddie's] baby." Queen and Baker worked on the track for weeks. The band overdubbed some 180 vocal parts for the song, fashioning its famous cathedral-like choral sound. At one point, there were so many tracks that the audio tape wore down to transparency and would have evaporated with any more recording.

When "Bohemian Rhapsody" was done, the band wanted it to be *A Night at the Opera*'s first single. Queen's manager at the time, John Reid—who was also Elton John's manager—said that it could never happen without the nearly-six-minute-long track being edited. Deacon felt the same way, but Taylor and May shared Mercury's resolve. Whatever doubts remained were dispelled when Mercury and Taylor played the finished recording for BBC DJ Kenny Everett. "It could be half an hour," Everett told them, "it's going to be Number One for centuries." As it developed, "Bohemian Rhapsody" became Queen's first Number One British single, and it hit the Top 10 in America. In the years since, the song has routinely headed British lists of all-time best and worst singles. That never daunted Mercury. "A lot of people slammed 'Bohemian Rhapsody,'" he said, "but who can you compare it to?"

Mercury wasn't patient with those who asked him about the song's meanings. "Fuck them, darling," he said. "I'll say no more than what any decent poet would tell you if you dared ask him to analyze his work: 'If you see it, dear, then it's there.'" It's possible, though, that the song had meanings Mercury simply wasn't ready to divulge. "Freddie's stuff was so heavily cloaked lyrically," May later said. "But you could find out, just from little insights, that a lot of his private thoughts were in there." Indeed, "Rhapsody" may have held the key

to Mercury's still-secret life. "The song," critic Anthony DeCurtis has said, "is about a secret transgression—'I'm being punished'—at the same time that there's this desire for freedom."

MERCURY GUARDED HIS depths closely because he felt he had to. Some thought his effete behavior was largely an affectation. Photographer Mick Rock remembers Mercury "dabbling" in relationships with women ("I do know of one or two names!" Rock said). Also, Mercury sustained a passionate relationship with his partner of many years, Mary Austin, a glamorous young woman he met at Biba, a London fashion house.

"He thought he liked women," an art-college associate of Mercury's told biographer Lesley-Ann Jones. "It took him quite a while to realize he was gay.... I don't think he could face up to the feelings it caused inside him." By the time of Queen's 1976 album, *A Day at the Races*, Mercury had been acting strangely with girlfriend Austin for some time. "I could see that he was feeling bad about something," she said in the documentary *Freddie Mercury: The Untold Story*. Finally, Mercury told Austin about his new comprehension of himself. "It was a relief to actually hear it from him," she said. Mercury would remain close to Austin for the rest of his life, employing her as his personal secretary and adviser, and despite his numerous subsequent relationships, he referred to her as his common-law wife. From that point on, Austin said, Mercury felt no obligation to explain his sexuality to anybody.

Nor did he tolerate cheap defamations. In *Queen: The Early Years*, there's a story from somebody who had worked with Queen at a show in Manchester: "Queen had just taken the stage, and this bloke shouted to Freddie, 'You fucking poof.'... Freddie demanded that the crew

turn the spotlight on the crowd and find this fella. He then said to him, 'Say that again, darling,' and the bloke didn't know what to do.... I saw him literally shrink this six-foot bloke down to an inch."

If Mercury's homosexuality was ever an issue for Queen's members, it never played out in public. There were more than enough other judgments beginning to bear down. In 1976, around the time *A Day at the Races* appeared, the punk movement began to draw divisions in rock, and harshly disparaged the music of bands like Queen. "A rock gig is no longer the ceremonial idolization of a star by fans," declared *New Music Express*. "That whole illusion, still perpetuated by Queen, is quickly being destroyed." (When Queen found themselves recording at a studio adjacent to the Sex Pistols, Sid Vicious reportedly asked Mercury, "So you're this Freddie Platinum bloke that's supposed to be bringing ballet to the masses?" Mercury replied, "Ah, Mr. Ferocious. We're doing our best, dear.") Whatever the reasons, Queen's sound changed dramatically with their 1977 album, *News of the World*: This was much starker music; lush orchestrations and harmonies had been replaced with odd and novel constructions. May said, "We'd already decided that we had saturated ourselves in multilayered production before the Sex Pistols came along, so we deliberately made *News of the World* to go back to the basics and find some vitality again."

Two of the album's tracks, "We Will Rock You" and "We Are the Champions," are Queen's most widely known songs, and their most contentious. "Rock You," written by May, opened with crashing stomps and a lyric that seemed to warn any doubters to clear way—"Somebody better put you back into your place"—and was taken by some as a refutation of punk. "We Are the Champions," by Mercury, proved controversial even within the band. May was afraid it might be taken as oversized arrogance, and told Mercury, "You can't do this." Mercury said, "Yes, we can." The two songs proved massively popular—and off-putting to some, helping inspire one *ROLLING STONE* critic to scorn Queen as "the first truly fascist rock band." Both songs, May has said, were designed to be stadium chants, "with audience participation in mind." In both songs, Taylor has said, "It's meant to be a collective 'we'—meaning us, the audience, whoever's listening. It's not meant to say, 'We are the best fucking group, so up you'—more a sort of general bonhomie." Some listeners have also heard "Champions" as Mercury's sly, subversive avowal of gay forbearance, though all these interpretations have been upended by how the songs became the universal bully chants of victors at sporting events.

News was perhaps the best album Queen ever made. Most of their remaining al-

"You bastards," Elton John told the band backstage at 1985's Live Aid. "You stole the show!"

bums – including *Jazz* (1978), *The Game* (1980), *The Works* (1984) and *A Kind of Magic* (1986) – never again aimed for stylistic cohesion, but nonetheless produced a steady series of hits (among them “Under Pressure,” with David Bowie; “Radio Ga Ga,” by Taylor; “Crazy Little Thing Called Love,” by Mercury; and “Another One Bites the Dust,” by Deacon) that helped Queen attract larger and larger concert audiences. Parts of those crowds, however, may have got more than they anticipated. By the early 1980s, Mercury had grown weary of his ornate 1970s look. He cut his hair, slicked it back, wore either leathers or trim athletic outfits, and grew a bushy mustache. It was exemplary of what was known as the late-1970s muscled “gay clone” look – a demeanor that the rock world was wholly unaccustomed to. By taking it onstage – in particular during a Queen performance of “Another One Bites the Dust,” when Mercury pranced across the stage in tight shorts, firing out phrases like “bite it” and “bite it hard, baby” – he seemed to come as close as he ever would to a public admission of his sexuality. At some shows on the band’s 1980 American tour, fans tossed disposable razor blades onstage: They didn’t like this identity of Mercury – what they perceived as a brazenly gay rock & roll hero – and they wanted him to shed it.

Queen would not tour the U.S. again after 1982. There were rumors that some in the band held Mercury’s image to blame for alienating that huge audience. “Some of us hate it,” Deacon told RS in 1981. “But that’s him and you can’t stop it.” May, though, makes it sound like the band was unconcerned about the U.S. market: “There was always someplace where we were shit-hot and we could go and be ourselves and not worry.”

QUEEN REMAINED A touring juggernaut, filling stadiums and arenas internationally through much of the 1980s. The tours were so big, the shows so spectacular, that it all became another aspect that worked against the band: To some observers, Queen was industry, not art. What’s more, judging by a couple of awful occasions, a perhaps heartless industry at that. In early 1981, Queen undertook their first brief but eventful tour of South America. It seemed a worthy ambition – no major rock bands had yet taken that continent’s audiences seriously enough to mount such a major effort. The first concert was to take place in Buenos Aires, and would be the country’s largest to date. A military dictator-

ship was running Argentina at the time, waging a “dirty war” on leftists and common citizens, killing up to 30,000 during its reign. Queen tried to rationalize the visit. “We were playing for the people,” Taylor said. “We didn’t go there with the wool pulled over our eyes. However,



LAST FLIGHT

Mercury at Queen’s final performance, at Knebworth Park outside London, August 9th, 1986. They played to 200,000 people, and then Mercury departed quickly.

their reputation was damaged. The image grew even worse when Queen agreed to play 12 performances in Bophuthatswana, South Africa, at the Sun City Super Bowl in October 1984. South Africa was still in the vicious grip of apartheid, and the United Nations was asking entertainers to boycott the country. In addition, Britain’s Musicians’ Union banned any of its members from performing in Sun City. Queen played anyway, despite passionate controversy beforehand in England, but had to cancel several shows after Mercury’s voice gave out on opening night.

By playing in these nations, it appeared as if Queen were on the side of power. “I don’t like to write message songs,” Mercury said around that time. They were entertainers, he asserted – an apolitical band that didn’t sanction the government of a country simply by playing for its citizens. But the backlash remained strong. At the end of 1984, when nobody from Queen was invited to participate in the Band Aid charity recording of “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” – which had been organized by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure to raise money to alleviate famine in Ethi-

opia – Mercury was genuinely hurt. The group hit a collective depression around this time, and several accounts claim that it considered disbanding, or at least taking a long sabbatical. Mercury would later say, “I don’t know what Queen stand for.”

A few months later, though, Geldof extended an invitation for the band to play at the July 1985 Live Aid London concert (an American concert took place simultaneously in Philadelphia). Queen hesitated at first. They would be performing in daylight, which they didn’t like to do, and they worried about sound quality. Also, there would be some significant competition playing that same occasion in London – Paul McCartney, U2, Elton John, Bowie, the Who, and Sting with Phil Collins – and Queen probably knew they would be seen as the odd fit of the event, given their political blunders in recent years. But Geldof prevailed, and 22 minutes after Queen had walked onstage at Wembley in the early evening of July 13th, during Live Aid’s worldwide broadcast, they walked off as unexpected heroes. Elton John found the bandmates backstage in their trailer. “You bastards, you stole the show!” he told them. “It was the greatest day of our lives,” said May.

The performance immediately revived the band. In September, Queen began work in Munich on *A Kind of Magic*, and also made preparations for a 1986 summer tour. “I think we are probably the best live band in the world at the moment,” said Taylor, “and we are going to prove it.... It’ll make *Ben-Hur* look like the Muppets.” The shows seemed to live up to the propaganda: This was Queen at their peak in every regard. But Mercury was also having dramatic and unpredictable swings in temperament. During an argument in Spain, he told Deacon, “I’m not going to be doing this forever. This is probably the last time.” The band, said May, felt jolted.

At tour’s end, ticket demand for the concerts was enormous, and Queen added a new final date at Knebworth Park on August 9th, 1986, playing for an audience of about 200,000. Then, that was it. At the show’s end, Mercury left the concert site hurriedly. It was apparent something was on his mind. He would no longer want to be seen by the audiences that had loved him. Queen had played their last show.

IN THE EARLY 1980s, AIDS began to take its steady toll in America – initially centered in New York, where roughly half the infections were first recorded. There were some who referred to the deadly illness as the “gay plague,” but it

soon became apparent that AIDS wasn't discriminating: It was caused by a virus - HIV - that debilitated the immune system, and it was transmitted by infected bodily fluids, including semen and blood. It was most widely spread by drug users who shared hypodermic needles and by people who had unprotected sex, particularly those with multiple partners. Freddie Mercury fell into this latter category. "I'm just an old slag who gets up every morning, scratches his head and wonders what he wants to fuck," he once said.

In the late 1970s and through much of the 1980s, Queen came to consider Munich their home away from home, later to their regret. The city had an active and diverse sex culture, and the place seemed to prove both a heaven and a hell for Mercury. May later said that the singer could hardly bear being in the studio sometimes - "He'd want to do his bit and get out" - preferring to spend evenings in Munich's discos and clubs. One evening he met actress Barbara Valentin, who had appeared in some of Rainer Fassbinder's films. Mercury entered into a passionate romance with Valentin, while carrying on intense, sometimes tempestuous affairs with various male lovers (including a rumored one with ballet star Rudolf Nureyev). He also used drugs and drank heavily in this period, and a few times experienced blackouts, unable to recall what he had done the night before. Valentin told Lesley-Ann Jones about finding Mercury on an apartment balcony naked, singing "We Are the Champions" to some construction workers below, then shouting, "Whoever has the biggest dick, come on up!"

There are varying accounts about how Mercury coped with the risk of contracting AIDS. Some thought it was why he was never anxious for Queen to tour America after 1982. But BBC DJ Paul Gambaccini recounted running into Mercury one night in 1984, at a London club called Heaven. Gambaccini asked Mercury if AIDS had changed his attitude about free-ranging sex. Mercury replied, "Darling, my attitude is 'fuck it.' I'm doing everything with everybody." Gambaccini said, "I had that literal sinking feeling. I'd seen enough in New York to know that Freddie was going to die." Mercury once said to journalist Rick Sky, "By nature, I'm very restless and highly strung... a person of real extremes, and often that's destructive to myself and others." At some point, Mercury clearly reconsidered. In late 1985, he had an AIDS test - the results were negative. He abandoned the Munich club scene, as well as his affair with Valentin, and settled into a mansion in Kensington; former girlfriend Mary Austin, who was now his secretary, had found it for him in 1980. "I lived for sex," he would later say. "I was extremely promiscuous, but AIDS changed my life."



Lambert and May last year

Queen Find Life After Freddie

Inside May and Taylor's new tour with Adam Lambert

Like a lot of fans under a certain age, Adam Lambert first learned about Queen when he saw the "Bohemian Rhapsody" scene in *Wayne's World* in 1992. "I said to my dad, 'Who are these guys?'" Lambert says. He would go on to become a full-on Freddie Mercury fanboy, to the point where, 17 years later, he wowed the judges at *American Idol* with an a cappella rendition of the song at his audition.

Now he's living the dream of any Queen superfan: In June, he kicked off a world tour as the group's new frontman. "I've always identified with Freddie," Lambert says. "Like me, there were parts of his life where he felt like an outsider or outcast. Then he got to heal that feeling onstage."

On the way to rehearsals in June in Los Angeles, Lambert watched a Queen 1986 Wembley Stadium concert to prepare. "Freddie fed off the crowd so beautifully," Lambert says. "He was so versatile. Some of his songs are beautiful lullabies, and then they can flip to something so hardcore and aggressive."

The tour will feature a mix of Queen hits and deep cuts: Lambert says that one surprise includes a radical reworking of "Love Kills," a track that Mercury recorded with Giorgio Moroder in 1984. "The show's not an imitation," says Brian May. "It'll be loud and dangerous and all the things that people look for in us."

In the meantime, Lambert is learning about Queen from the best possible teachers. "I'll ask the guys in the band, 'What was this song about?'" he says. "Take a song like 'The Show Must Go On,' from when his health started to fall apart. Roger Taylor and Brian May talk a lot about how he didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him, which is really beautiful. He didn't want to be a victim. That's so noble and inspiring."

ANDY GREENE

IN 1987, MERCURY submitted to another AIDS test, but then seemed to shrink from learning the results. After trying to reach Mercury on several occasions with no reply, his doctor's office then contacted Austin and shared the urgency of the matter with her: Mercury was now diagnosed as HIV-positive. "I felt my heart fall," Austin said later. Mercury, though, didn't yet tell Queen. "We knew something was going on," May later said, "but it was not talked about." By this time Paul Prenter, Mercury's former personal manager, had already told a U.K. newspaper about the earlier blood test, and the press was starting to put the band under pressure to address the matter. But Mercury insisted that the rumors were false. Some friends conjectured that he had instead developed a liver problem from too much drinking, though in 1987 Valentin had noticed scars on his face and hands: possible signs of Kaposi's sarcoma.

When the band's 13th album, *The Miracle*, was finished in early 1989, the singer wanted to start another LP right away. He hoped to record as much work as he could, and he now realized he would have to tell his bandmates why. "He decided to just invite us all over to the house for a meeting," said Taylor. Mercury told his bandmates, "You probably realize what my problem is. Well, that's it and I don't want it to make a difference. I don't want it to be known. I don't want to talk about it. I just want to get on and work until I fucking well drop. I'd like you to support me in this." May later said that he, Taylor and Deacon were devastated: "We all went off and got quietly sick somewhere, and that was the only conversation directly we had about it."

The knowledge naturally affected the tenor of the new album, *Innuendo*. "That produced a coming-together," said Taylor, "a closing of the ranks." May said that, as writers, Queen knew they were facing their ultimate subject, but the band's customs made it hard to communicate about it. "We didn't speak to each other about lyrics," May told *Mojo* in 2004. "We were just too embarrassed to talk about the words." Even so, *Innuendo* addresses impending death as memorably and gracefully as any work could hope to, and does so without a moment of self-pity. "It was very conscious toward the end," May said. "Sometimes Freddie wasn't able to vocalize [what he wanted to say], and we in a sense - this is going to sound very strange, but I think Roger and I kind of vocalized for him, in writing some of the lyrics. Because he was almost beyond the point where he could put it into words. So songs like 'The Show Must Go On,' [Cont. on 112]

[Cont. from 83] in my case, or 'Days of Our Lives,' in Roger's case, were things that we gave to Freddie as a way of him working through stuff with us. And that wasn't spoken. It was us trying to find the end before we got there." Added Taylor, "And we were determined to stick close to the end."

"There was a lot of joy, strangely enough," says May. "Freddie was in pain...but inside the studio there was a sort of blanket around, and he could be happy and enjoy what he liked doing best.... Sometimes it would only last a couple of hours a day because he would get very tired. But during that couple of hours, boy, would he give a lot. When he couldn't stand up, he used to prop himself up against a desk and down a vodka: 'I'll sing it till I fucking bleed.'"

After *Innuendo*, Mercury again wanted to keep on recording – and complete another album if possible. "Freddie said, 'Write me stuff.... Keep giving me words. I will sing,'" remembers May. (The results were released in 1995 on *Made in Heaven*.) "He carried on because that's what he enjoyed," Austin said. "And working helped him to have the courage to face his illness." Jim Hutton, Mercury's long-term lover who lived with him until the end, concurred: "If he didn't have the music, he wouldn't have lasted."

IN SEPTEMBER 1991, FREDDIE MERCURY had recorded as much as he was ever going to, and he retired to his Kensington home. He remained wary with his parents, wrote Peter Freestone in *Freddie Mercury: An Intimate Memoir*, "as he wanted to protect them from things they would neither understand or would not accept." Years later, his mother, Jer, said, "He didn't want to hurt us, but we knew it all along."

Mercury turned away most visitors; he didn't want to be seen as his body degenerated. He stopped taking medications, and had bouts of blindness. He nevertheless insisted on denying any reports that he had AIDS until the evening of November 23rd, 1991, when he issued a statement admitting his condition: "Following enormous conjecture in the press, I wish to confirm that I have been tested HIV-positive and have AIDS. I felt it correct to keep this information private in order to protect the privacy of those around me. However, the time has now come for my friends and fans around the world to know the truth, and I hope everyone will join with me, my doctors and all those worldwide in the fight against this terrible disease." Those attending to him said he seemed more restful after that. Early the next evening, Freestone and Hutton were preparing to change the singer's bedclothes

when Hutton saw he was no longer breathing. "He's gone," Hutton told Freestone. Freddie Mercury was 45 years old. Freestone called Taylor, who was on his way to visit Mercury, and told him, "Don't bother coming."

Mercury's funeral took place a few days later, in a Zoroastrian ceremony. Aretha Franklin sang, and soprano Montserrat Caballé performed a Verdi aria. (Caballé worked with Mercury on a semi-operatic album, *Barcelona*.) Mercury's body was cremated, and Mary Austin – the only person Mercury said he truly trusted, and to whom he left his home – placed his ashes in a location she has never disclosed.

The following April, the surviving members of Queen played a tribute to their late singer at Wembley Stadium, and used the event to launch the Mercury Phoenix Trust, which continues to raise money for various AIDS organizations. After the show, the group disbanded.

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ed for 13 years. Deacon retired altogether, except for the sessions that completed 1995's *Made in Heaven*, the quartet's final studio album, which included the recordings Mercury had worked on in his last year. They were all songs about the splendor of love and impermanence.

"I have never got over his death," Taylor later said. "None of us have. I think that we all thought that we could come to terms with it quite quickly, but we underestimated the impact his death had on our lives. I still find it difficult to talk about. For those of us left, it is as though Queen was another lifetime entirely."

PEOPLE HAD TROUBLE WITH HOW Mercury lived and with how he died. There were homophobes who saw his deterioration as a punishment for his sexuality and promiscuity. Others, who had done work combating AIDS, faulted him for not acknowledging his condition until the end. Those judgments will always follow Mercury, but if his music is any key at all, there was an almost prayerful quality about his failings. In song after song he sang about mortality, solitary desolation and hopefulness, but he also implored some unattainable

sanctuary – nowhere so openly as in "Save Me," from *The Game*: "I have no heart, I'm cold inside/I have no real intent..../ Save me/I can't face this life alone." But Mercury often felt he had to stay alone, as he had done in his childhood. "It can be a very lonely life," he said, "but I choose it." (In the early 1970s, when Austin suggested they have a child together, Mercury allegedly responded, "I'd rather have a cat.") Instead of domestic refuge, Mercury sought ecstasy and restlessness for most of his life, and obviously that choice incurred a cost. One of his best songs, "Don't Stop Me Now," set out his ethos with a starkness that was also blissful: "I'm a rocket ship on my way to Mars/ On a collision course/I'm a satellite out of control/I'm a sex machine ready to reload."

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, poet William Blake famously proclaimed, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." It's a maxim often taken to mean that a life of intemperance – pursuing desires without self-restraint – eventually brings one to realize the futility of those indulgences, and to recognize more meaningful purposes. But it could also mean that without taking risks you never discover what's possible, what might illuminate you the most. In *The Miracle*, Mercury faced his excesses without sparing himself, and uncovered his answer: "Was it all worth it all these years?.../It didn't matter if we won – if we lost..../Living, breathing rock & roll/Was it all worth it?/Yes, it was a worthwhile experience/It was worth it." He knew he had little time left when he sang those words. There was no room to bear false witness. "My mistakes," he once said, "are down to me."

The best song Mercury sang in his last years, "These Are the Days of Our Lives," was written for him by Taylor. It is a song about accepting everything you have made of your life and looking toward your departure with a steadfast grace. The song's video contains Mercury's final moments in front of a camera. He is unmistakably a man almost dead – he is painfully emaciated, and those present at the filming said that even the touch of his clothes on his skin caused him agony. But he is fully present in those moments, even luminous. He looks skyward, his arms spread, then fixes his view on the lens as he says everything he has left to say: "Those were the days of our lives – yeah/ The bad things in life were so few/Those days are all gone now, but one thing's still true/When I look and I find/I still love you.... I still love you."

In those moments, he is as justified as he will ever be: He has found his hard-learned wisdom in maybe the only way he could. It is Freddie Mercury's dying that saved him. **Q**

Additional reporting by ALAN LIGHT