



Mercury, Freddie (1946-1991)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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For two decades, Freddie Mercury was the front man of one of the world's most popular rock groups, Queen. That he was able to maintain this status in spite of continued critical hostility, his flamboyant gender-bending androgyny, and questions about his sexuality is one of the more impressive accomplishments in the history of popular culture. He was also, arguably, the first Indian international rock star.

Freddie Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara in the British colony of Zanzibar, East Africa (now part of Tanzania) on September 5, 1946. His parents were Parsees (Zoroastrian Indians of Persian descent), and his father was employed in the British civil service.

From the age of six, he attended boarding school near Bombay, India, and showed a considerable aptitude for art and music. It was here that he was first called "Freddie" by his classmates.

In 1964, the Bulsara family moved to England, where Freddie completed his education, graduating in 1969 from the Ealing College of Art with a diploma in art and design. Around this time he adopted the surname Mercury, naming himself after the messenger of the gods.

After college, he sold second-hand clothes in trendy flea-markets, where he met future bandmate Roger Taylor, and joined Ibex, a local London group, as a vocalist and keyboard player.

In 1970, he formed a group with Taylor and Brian May (joined in 1971 by John Deacon) for which he chose the provocative name Queen. Even in its earliest days the band was notable for its stage performances, replete with light shows, flamboyant costumes, theatrics, and loudness.

The group's first album, *Queen* (1973), was greeted with critical hostility, as were its early live performances, a result, no doubt, of the implied queerness of its name and Mercury's effeminate, long-haired, heavily made-up stage persona.

The group's breakthrough came the following year with the album *Queen II*, and the first big hit single, "Killer Queen," a tribute to a fabulous individual "just like Marie Antoinette" who may or may not have been female.

Within a year Queen was one of the most popular bands in the world and began a series of world tours that drew crowds often in the hundreds of thousands. From 1975 until 1983, Queen enjoyed a long string of successful best-selling recordings.

These include "Bohemian Rhapsody" from the album *A Night at the Opera* (1975), "Somebody to Love" from *A Day at the Races* (1976), "We Will Rock You" and "We Are the Champions" from *News of the World* (1977), "Bicycle Races" and "Fat-Bottomed Girls" from *Jazz* (1978), "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" and "Another One Bites the Dust" from *The Game* (1979), and "Under Pressure" (with David Bowie, 1981).



Freddie Mercury performing in Hannover, Germany in 1984. Photograph by Thomas Steffan. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

In 1980, Mercury underwent a drastic image change that demonstrated his talent as a gender shape-shifter. Gone was the flaming, campy, "queeny" persona, replaced by a macho one, mustachioed, muscular, short-haired, and attired in an undershirt and tight-fitting jeans.

The new image was not without its own camp elements, which many fans took at face value. Mercury nevertheless continued to confound gender assumptions, performing with the rest of the band in complete drag in the video *I Want to Break Free* (1984).

By the mid-1980s, Queen's popularity had peaked, and Mercury pursued a number of solo interests. His remake of the Platters' oldie "The Great Pretender" (1987), which suggestively begged the ongoing question of who or what was the "real" Freddie Mercury, proved a success, as did his compelling if unlikely collaboration with Spanish opera diva Montserrat Caballé, which produced the international hit "Barcelona" (1987).

During his lifetime, Mercury made no definitive statements about his private life or sexuality, leaving the interpretation of his public image up to the individual imagination; accordingly, many fans were shocked when events made some sort of revelation inevitable.

In Queen's early years, Mercury lived with a woman, Mary Austin, with whom he subsequently maintained a significant friendship; in 1980, however, they separated, and he lived thereafter until his death with Jim Hutton, supposedly his gardener.

On November 23, 1991, Freddie Mercury released a statement confirming that he suffered from AIDS, as had long been rumored. He died the following day.

Since Mercury's death, many tributes, including an AIDS benefit concert and a ballet choreographed by Maurice Béjart, have honored him. In 2001, he was posthumously inducted as a member of Queen into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He has left a large and devoted following of fans.

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