

queen

performers

By Jim
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• CAN YOU
• imagine
• a more
• improbable
• band than
• Queen?



WHO BUT THEY would think it a good idea to sweep high-operatic arias over low-down heavy metal? To plunk an outrageously camp singer in front of a balls-to-the-wall rock & roll band? In short, to take the noble risk of looking ridiculous by mixing the most florid sounds with the most guttural.

And yet it turned out to be a very good idea, indeed. During their more than twenty years together, Queen became England's biggest-selling band since the Beatles and as cherished and integral a part of the British character as Bruce Springsteen is of the American. If, every so often, they took a step too far into silliness, they did so with their own loony kind of integrity.

Queen's music had as much flash as feeling, as much innovation as immediacy. Their records could display great technical wizardry or represent pop simplicity itself. And during their whole history, Queen had the ability to draw on a wealth of styles and talents since each of the four members wrote, sang, played and produced well enough to create hits of his own.

No wonder only the most unforeseeable of tragedies could defeat them. Freddie Mercury's death from AIDS in 1991 necessarily killed the band. But it also gave the disease one of its most recognizable faces and drove home its consequences to a whole new group of people, giving Queen, in death, as much meaning and unlikely poignancy as they had in life.

It all began normally enough. The band's roots go back to 1968, when guitarist Brian May and bassist Tim Staffell, both students at the prescient-sounding Imperial College, formed a group called Smile with drummer Roger Taylor. A singing friend of Staffell's, one Farrokh Bulsara, was a huge Smile fan. So when that band finally, er, frowned and Staffell joined something called Humpy Bong, Bulsara hooked up with May and Taylor. With his usual flair, Bulsara dubbed the new unit Queen; the other members returned the creative favor by suggesting he ditch his exotic given name (of Persian persuasion) and take the fetching moniker Freddie Mercury.

After a round of auditions in early 1971, the threesome found bassist John Deacon. As a spanking new foursome, they gigged at London's Marquee club, got a publishing-and-management deal through Trident Stu-



dios in 1972 and by early 1973 landed a recording deal with EMI in England (Elektra in the States). Keeping up the breathless pace, Queen released their first album in July 1973. The self-titled debut spawned the sputtering single "Keep Yourself Alive." With a charging guitar line barreling under Mercury's clarion-clear vocals, it served as both a tease of the band's prowess and a harbinger of their flair for creating hits. Queen showed equally impressive confidence on their very first U.K. tour, opening for Mott the Hoople in November 1973. Although novices, they already acted like stars, shown in the regal bearing of Freddie Mercury and the lush ambition of Brian May's guitar work.

The band broke through for real, at least in their homeland, with the follow-up LP, *Queen II*, released in March 1974. It went Top Five in Britain, boosted by the late release of

the single "Seven Seas of Rhye" (which had actually appeared on *Queen*). A far artier album than the debut, *Queen II* showed influences ranging from Led Zeppelin's killer riffs to Procol Harum's flounce.

Queen didn't hit U.S. stages until April 1974, when they again opened for Mott the Hoople on what turned out to be that storied band's final tour. But it wasn't until the third Queen album arrived, in November 1974, that they became stars on both sides of the Atlantic. *Sheer Heart Attack* offered as broad a sonic palette as pop fans of the day could imagine, alluding to the Kinks, Zeppelin and Bowie while offering the first flashes of an operatic sensibility in Mercury's high-flying, super-multi-tracked vocals. The production, their first with Roy Thomas Baker, had a sheen and flair few had heard before, highlighted by May's stellar guitar chorales. Hereafter, May would have to use many backup tapes in concert to re-create his sound in the studio. The album's single, "Killer Queen," reached Number Twelve in May 1975, at which point Queen emerged as a major live act with Mercury as rock's ultimate frontman. If Bowie had been flamboyant in his glam days, Mercury was on fire. With his formfitting satin outfits, campy movements and flirty stage patter, Mercury became a prime exponent of glitter rock's closeted gay chic. Although fans ate it up (even homophobic ones, shielded by their naïveté), the press could be cruel. One famous *New Musical Express* headline dared blare IS THIS MAN A PRAT?

But such questions were soon drowned out in the popular mania - and belated respect - that greeted the band's next work, "Bohemian Rhapsody." The song was to become at once one of the most loved, parodied, creative and demented hits in pop history. At nearly six minutes, the piece had movements, time changes, false endings and the flat-out nerve to try to make the word *scaramouch* a part of everyday speech. A son-



Previous: (Clockwise From Front) Brian May, John Deacon, Roger Taylor, Freddie Mercury

ic ten-layer cake, "Bohemian Rhapsody" involved overdubs of no fewer than 180 voices to create its full-on operatic effect and took seven days to record. Brian May's guitar lines shuttled between a head-cracking riff and symphonic flourishes. Not only did the song go to Number One in the U.K. (Number Nine here), but it later became the only single in the history of British music to crack that spot twice. Moreover, the video for the song became the first clip to substantially impact album sales (for the full LP *A Night at the Opera*), presaging MTV's influence by more than six years.

After the "Bohemian Rhapsody" overture, the floodgates of fame opened and Queen ascended to the throne of rock royalty. Scores of great, memorable hits followed, each in a different style. "Somebody to Love" infused rock with the soul fervor of an Aretha Franklin hit, while in 1977 Queen created two of the most fist-pumping, stadium-ready anthems of all time: "We Are the Champions" and "We Will Rock You." In 1979, the group went to Number One with a Fifties-rockabilly nod, "Crazy Little Thing Called Love," and in 1980 made disco rock with "Another One Bites the Dust." The latter's thumping beat became one of the most sampled rhythms in the era of rap. In 1981, Queen's collaboration with David Bowie, "Under Pressure," reached the Top Forty and became one of the most innovative art-pop smashes of all time.

As the Eighties wore on, Queen's luster on the charts began to fade (at least in America), but they remained huge in the rest of the world, as well as a ridiculously large concert draw. By popular consensus, they stole the show at Live Aid in 1985. They remained so beloved, in fact, that Freddie Mercury's death on November 24, 1991, unleashed a new wave of popularity. The rerelease of "Bohemian Rhapsody," earmarked to raise money for AIDS research, went to Number One in Britain, and in March 1992 the song hit Number Two in the United States courtesy of its hysterical placement in the movie send-up of suburban wasteheds, *Wayne's World*.

In May of that year, a host of international stars saluted Mercury, from Elton John and Guns n' Roses to George Michael and Annie Lennox. Even Mercury's favorite singer showed up to belt some bars: Liza Minnelli. And although you'd expect the ascendant grunge movement of the early

Nineties to repudiate the high-living dash of a band like Queen, its biggest icon, Kurt Cobain, admirably alluded to Mercury in his suicide note. Like many others, Cobain recognized the natural star quality of Mercury and the band, as well as their role as groundbreakers.

As a unit, Queen brought together gay images with straight and found a catchy way to combine show tunes, opera and cabaret with rock, metal and pop. Whether silly or stalwart, daring or daft, Queen always epitomized one of the great faiths in rock & roll: the ceaseless will to take things over the top. ●

