

FREDDIE MERCURY

(FARROKH BULSARA)
BRONCHIAL PNEUMONIA
BROUGHT ON BY AIDS

Born: September 5, 1946

Died: November 24, 1991



"When I go on stage," Freddie Mercury told *Melody Maker* in 1981, "whether I'm rich or starving, I want to give my all. I want to go on there and die for the show!"

Some stars are celebrated because of their early death. Freddie Mercury is no such star. Queen made him famous, Live Aid made him a legend, and death made him immortal.

Farrokh Bulsara first made music in his native Zanzibar, in school band The Hectics. Relocating to Britain, he joined guitarist Brian May and drummer Roger Taylor in Smile in 1970. His stage name paid tribute to the messenger of the gods, but Mercury was also, in astrological terms, his rising planet. With bassist John Deacon, Smile became Queen—whose triumphs like "Bohemian Rhapsody" obscure a discography packed with gems.

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Mercury's solo career is less celebrated. In 1973, he adopted the Gary Glitter-spoofing pseudonym Larry Lurex and, with May and Taylor, recorded a flop cover of the Ronettes' "I Can Hear Music." A decade later, with the argumentative Queen at daggers drawn, he resumed a solo career with 1984's "Love Kills" and 1985's "I Was Born To Love You." On the solo album *Mr Bad Guy* (1985), Mercury thanks his band-mates "for not interfering." Its "Made In Heaven"—a flop single at the time—was later resurrected as the title track of a Queen album.

A much more memorable 1985 event was a little show called Live Aid. Initially wary, Queen were talked into it by Bob Geldof: "I said tell the old faggot it's going to be the biggest thing that ever

fokkin' happened!" Though America remained unswayed, Europe remembered that it loved Queen. "It was the perfect stage for Freddie," said Geldof. "He could ponce about in front of the whole world."

The band's subsequent *Magic* shows of 1986 proved them masters of stadium rock. The tour ended—as did Mercury's touring history—with a spectacular performance at Knebworth in England's Hertfordshire, in front of 120,000 fans.

Mercury's solo career ticked over with a cover of the Platters' "The Great Pretender" in 1987 and a titanic team-up with opera singer Montserrat Caballe on the splendidly silly "Barcelona." Mercury's final solo single in his lifetime was 1989's forgotten "How Can I Go On?"

Meanwhile, Queen resolved some of their squabbles by crediting songs to the group rather than individual writers. "It's got to the point where we're all actually too old to break up," said Mercury. "Can you imagine forming a new band at 40? Be a bit silly, wouldn't it?" Among the results of this rediscovered sense of purpose was 1991's *Innuendo*—Mercury's last album in his lifetime.

The singer had long led a self-confessedly "extremely promiscuous" life, fueled by fine wine and cocaine. "It's like you never grow up," Brian May told *Mojo*. "We've all suffered... Freddie, obviously, went completely AWOL, which is why he got that terrible disease. He wasn't a bad person, but he was utterly out of control for a while." In 1983, Mercury met Jim Hutton, his only long-term lover except for early girlfriend and lifelong confidante Mary Austin. Of his excesses, he said: "I stopped all that and started growing tulips." However, in 1990, the man who once said he "lived for sex" told his family he was HIV positive and had AIDS.

RIGHT Freddie Mercury in full flow onstage in the 1980s.





ABOVE Tributes from Queen fans on the doors of Mountain Studios, Montreux, Switzerland, where Queen recorded their final albums.

RIGHT Onstage at the Milton Keynes Bowl, England, in 1982.

“We were sitting in his bedroom having coffee,” recalled his brother-in-law, “when he said suddenly, ‘What you have to understand... is that what I have is terminal. I’m going to die.’ We saw these marks on his ankles and knew he was ill. After that, we talked no more about it.”

Among his final recordings were Roger Taylor’s “These Are The Days Of Our Lives” and “The Show Must Go On” by May. Recalled the guitarist, “I said, ‘Do you think that’s okay? Can you sing that?’ And he went, ‘Darling, I can sing that and I will give it my all.’ Because he knew what it was all about and it didn’t need to be said.” In a heartbreaking video for Taylor’s song, an almost-ghostlike Mercury mouths “I still love you” to the camera.

“He chose the time to die,” Mary Austin told the *Daily Mail*. “He knew it was coming, that it was closer than it had ever been before. Then he suddenly said, ‘I’ve decided that I’ve got to go!’ The quality of his life had changed so dramatically and he was in more and more pain every day... One day he decided enough was enough and stopped all the medical supplements that were keeping him going... He looked death in the face and said, ‘Fine, I’ll accept it now—I’ll go.’”

Mercury died of bronchial pneumonia in London’s Kensington, on November 24, 1991. He was 45. He was cremated at a modest service in west London, attended by Elton John; a single red rose adorned his coffin. Wreaths came from Ringo Starr, Boy George, U2, and David Bowie.

Mercury won even greater adoration after his passing. “Bohemian Rhapsody” topped the British chart again. A star-studded Wembley Stadium tribute concert in 1992 saw the crowd join in his videotaped audience participation routine as lustily as if he had been physically present.

Posthumous albums included 1995’s *Made In Heaven*, whose poignant “Mother Love” was the last song Mercury recorded. The musical *We Will Rock You* plays to packed houses, and May and Taylor even revived the Queen name for tours with singer Paul Rodgers. A statue of Mercury stands in Montreux, Switzerland, where Queen recorded their last albums.

Doubtless Mercury would relish the fuss. But, as he said in 1981, “I’ve never been one to analyze myself too much. Sometimes it’s best to leave well alone, dear.”

