

I SEE A LITTLE SILHOUETTO OF A MAN

It would be boring to be 70. If I'm dead tomorrow, I don't give a damn. I've lived a full life. I love the fact I make people happy — even if it's just for half an hour —
Freddie Mercury

I didn't know Freddie Mercury was gay when I was a teenager. Born in 1969, I missed his androgynous look of the pre-MTV '70s—painted fingernails, eyeliner, his lithe physique working a black and white body suit with balletic bombast, fondling a sawed-off mic stand as if he were John Holmes. By the time MTV became every teenager's go-to channel in the early '80s, Freddie had traded in body suits and long hair for a chic cropped cut and biker dude leathers in Queen's video for "Crazy Little Thing Called Love." He may not have swaggered with the same testosterone-fueled coolness of the Fonz, but he was surrounded by a chorus of half-naked women, one of whom practically rips off his white t-shirt in a wanton frenzy. To a naive young girl from a small Southern town, that image screamed hyper-masculinity with a red-hot capital H, in spite of his trademark protruding front teeth. The "Radio Ga Ga" video, shot a few years later, shows a buff, brooding Freddie, oozing machismo, throwing punches at the camera as if he were pummeling his prior persona back into the '70s. "I think at this point in time if I had long hair and fingernails and wearing the things [I used to wear], I would look ridiculous," Freddie told a reporter in 1984. "I mean I looked ridiculous then, but it worked," he added with a self-deprecating snicker.

Androgyny was out and uber-masculinity was in. Bare-chested virility was far safer for gay artists in the AIDS-phobic America of the early to mid-'80s, and much more viewer-friendly.

That's the Freddie I watched front Queen's triumphant Live Aid performance in 1985, Freddie shuffling and gyrating across the stage, sporting white Adidas Samba sneakers, a wife beater, tight jeans, leather band around his bicep, and a moustache that made him look like a member of the Village People. (That probably should have been a tip-off, but then, at the time, I didn't even know the Village People were gay, and I certainly didn't get the wink-wink nudge-nudge of the band name Queen.)

In all fairness to me, my friends were none the wiser. Very few people at that time knew anyone who was openly gay—*openly* being the operative word. School bullies hurling gay slurs at effeminate classmates was one thing, but the idea that celebrities like everyone's favorite TV dad, Mike Brady, might be gay was unfathomable. And Rock stars, even those who sang "I Want to Break Free" in a pink sweater, black leather miniskirt, stuffed bra, and bouffant wig in a music video, were above reproach or conjecture altogether. Hadn't KISS, Twisted Sister, and a whole slew of heavy metal bands worn makeup? Didn't David Lee Roth preen for the camera in spandex and moussed hair as if he were en route to a Fire Island orgy? Of course, there was Boy George, who was gay, but most kids weren't savvy to his sexual orientation during the height of his fame. We just accepted our heroes' quirks and wrote them off as part of the hedonistic world of sex, drugs, and Rock N Roll. Besides, the "I Want to Be Free" video was firmly tongue in cheek. The whole band was in drag. Freddie didn't even write that song, which would become a gay anthem; Queen's bass player, John Deacon, a very married family man, did. In those

days, as far as we were concerned, Freddie was as straight as every other male musician, except Liberace, and dug hot groupies, whose clothes and eye shadow he and his mates may have occasionally purloined for a laugh, and nobody gave a shit.

Except a lot of people did. Especially in 1985, after the sexy aging actor Rock Hudson shockingly succumbed to AIDS. Few people outside his circle of friends and acquaintances knew he was gay. Nancy Reagan was part of the coterie in the know yet refused to help while he lay dying in a Paris hospital. It wasn't until 1987 that President Ronald Reagan finally confronted the epidemic that the general public assumed was just a gay disease that only afflicted the New York City bathhouse crowd and San Francisco Castro clubbers. Those guys were *the other*, the *deviates* whom Sunday school teachers said were reaping God's retribution for their immoral lifestyle and Reagan thought too politically parlous to enact policies that might benefit them. Straight, Christian folks need not worry. But suddenly, *the other* crept beyond those geographic boundaries into the heartland and touched a white straight teenager named Ryan White, who was prohibited from attending school once his AIDS diagnosis became public. A hemophiliac, Ryan contracted the disease through blood transfusions, but that didn't stop bigots from hurling gay slurs at him and chanting, "We know you're a homo!" whenever he had the temerity to leave his house.

The time for AIDS research activism had arrived in a flush of fury and rainbow flags. Thousands of celebrities and openly gay people joined the fight. But just as many, if not more, who were in the closet not only remained there, but also double bolted the door for fear of being outed. Elton John, who with Elizabeth Taylor led the celebrity brigade against AIDS discrimination, was married to a woman in the '80s. He didn't reveal his homosexuality until almost 1990. After playing the straight man on MTV in the '80s,

shaking his ass to such hits as “I Want Your [Female] Sex,” George Michael was outed in 1998 when he was arrested for performing *lewd acts* in a seedy Beverly Hills bathroom.

Freddie Mercury never made any sort of public statement announcing his sexual orientation. In an interview with journalist David Wigg, he gushed, “I’m very happy with my relationship at the moment, and I couldn’t, I really, honestly couldn’t ask for better. I’ve finally found a niche that I was looking for all my life.” When Wigg asked if he could report that the relationship was with a man, Freddie emphatically said, “No, you mustn’t.” He only revealed he had AIDS the day before he died on November 24, 1991.

I was twenty-two by the time that announcement came. The tabloids had been rife with tawdry stories about his suspected illness for a year or so before then, so his death probably didn’t come as a surprise to me. I don’t remember, though. Queen had never been on my playlist. Like most people, I sang “Bohemian Rhapsody” with gusto whenever it came on the radio, heedlessly mangling the lyrics in the operatic section: *Beelzebub has a devil for a cyborg, me*. I liked “We Are the Champions” and stomped my feet with the crowd at football games to “We Will Rock You.” But except for my 45 of “Another One Bites the Dust,” which I ruined, along with my stereo needle, trying to play the record backward in a failed attempt to hear the subliminal message *It’s fun to smoke marijuana* a handful of nutcase evangelical ministers claimed was audible, I didn’t own a Queen record. Recently, I listened to a playback of that song on YouTube. The religious group that posted the video included subtitles, without which I would never have discerned anything beyond what sounded like a mish-mash of John Cage and that backward-talking dwarf from *Twin Peaks*. Apparently, wanting to hear what wasn’t said is grounds for subterfuge, and, occasionally, anger.

Freddie took a lot of shit from the queer community for not officially coming out. My feeling is that a dying man can do whatever the fuck he wants, especially one who was hounded by Fleet Street to the point where he became a virtual prisoner in his own home for the last few months of his life. Why not maintain the mystique of the robust showman leading the 1986 Wembley Stadium audience in a call and response, rather than reveal the textured layers beneath his iconic yellow leather jacket? He was an entertainer, for crissakes, not our dinner guest. Whose business was his sex life and health anyway? If he preferred to be known as Freddie Mercury, the sexually ambiguous English Rock star, instead of Farrokh Bulsara, the gay son of Indian expats, what did it matter?

But then, I wasn't a gay man in the '80s, struggling to balance my sexual identity with societal pressure of what masculinity was supposed to look like. I didn't live with the trepidation of facing persecution in a world where homosexuality was still illegal in many countries and had only been decriminalized in Britain in 1967. As a fifteen-year-old straight white girl, I had the luxury of watching him conquer the planet at Live Aid through my TV screen without questioning whether or not he was queer. It didn't matter to me. My rights weren't in jeopardy based on my sexuality. I didn't need a spokesperson to bring awareness to a cause that didn't affect me. I wasn't suffering from a scourge that had Freddie lived another year or two could have been controlled with medication that wasn't readily available in his lifetime. I wasn't wasting away with lesions on my face and sores on my genitals, like thousands of others who desperately needed that same medication to survive. I didn't need a savior with a four-octave voice to belt out the clarion call that might have hastened AIDS research. I didn't need Freddie Mercury for anything but entertainment.

Now a feature film about Queen and, more explicitly, Freddie, is set for release in the fall of 2018, and the same sort of controversy over straight-washing him has been ignited again. The trailer for *Bohemian Rhapsody*, starring Rami Malek as Freddie, includes flashes of Freddie ogling women like a horny wolf on the hunt for Little Red Riding Hood.

What big teeth you have.

All the better to eat you with, my dear.

While Freddie did have relationships with women before coming to terms with his homosexuality, the trailer doesn't give any indication that the film will address the latter, which television writer and producer Bryan Fuller noted in an angry Tweet:

ANYONE ELSE MILDLY ANNOYED (enough to tweet about it) THAT THE #BohemianRhapsody TRAILER FEATURES GAY/BI SUPERSTAR FREDDIE MERCURY FLIRTING WITH AND TWIRLING WITH A WOMAN BUT NO INDICATION OF HIS LOVE OF MEN.

He went on to criticize the synopsis 20th Century Fox released, in which Freddie's AIDS is referred to as a life-threatening illness:

DEAR 20TH CENTURY FOX, Yes, it was a life-threatening illness, but more specifically it was AIDS. From having gay sex with men. Do better.

Fuller was hardly the only one to voice concern. Caspar Salmon wrote the following in the *Guardian*:

Not a word of dialogue is spoken in the trailer that doesn't pertain to the music of Queen: nothing of Mercury's love life, no illness, no emotion, nothing dangerous or overtly queer to offend anyone . . . which has removed everything wild and interesting about Mercury. This trailer would appear to presage a film

with no interest in sounding the ambiguities of his life, the abrasive queerness of his perspective, the virulence of the homophobic press in their attacks on him—what, in a word, made him tick.

I had the same reaction when I first saw the trailer. Of course, it's only two minutes long. It can't possibly cover all the ground the film does, but it is curious that the studio marketing team chose to focus on Freddie's heterosexual encounters in the snippets they sewed together. The movie has the power to thrust Freddie Mercury back into the closet or finally set him free.

Were studio execs afraid a trailer that showed a more honest depiction of his life would repel a certain portion of the public, namely the redneck segment who blasts Queen songs at backyard barbecues but would never deign to sit through two hours of homosexual displays of affection by a flamboyant singer decked out in a leotard with a plunging neckline? Did they not realize that unlike my sheltered childhood self in the early '80s, we all know Freddie was gay, and most of us don't give a shit? Did they not consider the fact that the Trump administration is dismantling so many of the LGBTQ rights President Obama fought for and our vice president once supported the use of federal money to treat people seeking to change their sexual behavior? Do they not have the fortitude to speak truth in the face of continued discrimination against the LGBTQ community?

Twenty-seven years after his death at the age of forty-five, Freddie Mercury has the chance to be a full-throated voice of hope and inspiration for a new generation, and this time he needn't do it with innuendo and ambiguous videos and interviews and costumes. The trailer missed the mark, but it did spark my interest in Queen and Freddie and remind

me that complacency and convenience are no excuse for denying someone his authenticity. Maybe that's a start.

My iTunes playlist is now full of Queen songs, and I've finally learned the correct lyrics to "Bohemian Rhapsody": *Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me*. Freddie once said he'd rather go to hell than heaven. "Think of all the interesting people you're going to meet down there." I don't believe in heaven or hell. If they do exist, I don't think he should be condemned to either place. He seemed too capricious to linger anywhere for very long, including here on earth. He was just a few months away from death when he shot the "These Are the Days of Our Lives" video with Queen, and he knew it. In the black and white film he's poignantly frail, a walking cadaver with heavy makeup to cover the obvious ravages of AIDS. At the last verse, he looks directly into the camera and sings his final message to us, and more than likely, his long-time partner, Jim Hutton, the man he implored David Wigg not to reveal:

Those were the days of our lives

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.

Every time I watch that video I'm haunted by his delivery of those lines, the purity of his voice, the sincerity, humanity, generosity, and even tranquility in his face. I wonder if a piece of celluloid, even in Technicolor, can capture that, if it can show the power he possessed to mesmerize an audience, not just with his subharmonic voice, but with his combustible charisma.

A few years before Freddie died, a piece of camera equipment crashed to the floor in the middle of an interview, eliciting a round of giggles from everyone in the room. The reporter composed himself then asked Freddie, "Did you know you were that explosive?"

Freddie looked at him askance, gave a cheeky grin, then quipped, "I can make a bigger bang than that, dear."

Had he watched the movie trailer, I have no doubt he would have said the very same thing.