

## The Fairy-Fella's Master-Stroke

Kris King – November 28<sup>th</sup> 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/11/the-fairy-fellas-master-stroke/>

This week, on a couple of occasions, I found myself locked in a bathroom, crying like a girl who had just seen her favourite dolly viciously decapitated by the razor-sharp jaws of the family dog. I make no apologies for that, just as I make none for the fact that I shall again be talking a little about myself in this post (it is after all, the subject I know best). What prompted these highly-emotional sabbaticals to the nearest toilet was the fact that, on Thursday, it had been twenty years since Freddie Mercury, one of my all-time heroes, had been lost to AIDS. So, in honour of this anniversary, and its patron, this week's post will have a bit of everything; some ranting, some religion, a little bit of love and joy, obviously some music, drama, and celebration of life, and perhaps a tiny *hint* of self-analysis. Oh, and I'm afraid to say there'll be a bit of Ben Elton as well ... sorry.

Queen have been an important part of my life for as long as I can remember. I've tried a number of times to work out exactly when it was I first heard a Queen song (and which one it might have been), but the truth is I'm not *entirely* sure. The closest I can get is in being able to recall the first time I was consciously aware of the group and their music, but even that is a little hazy. Sometime in 1981, my dad and his new wife (my parents having split up the year before) bought for me a shiny new 7" vinyl copy of the single "Flash" (with "Football Fight" on the B-side; remember them?). I don't recall the occasion, or if even if there was one – the date, written on the label underneath, "To Kris, from Daddy and Liz", was the 11th of July and, therefore, a good five or so months away from both my birthday and christmas. In all probability it was simply that I'd heard it on the radio and had been pestering the living shit out of my entire family until someone got it for me.

With our parents divorcing in 1980, my sister and I would spend every other christmas with my Dad and Liz, and it was during one such festive stay at my dad's house (I believe it was 1981, but I'm not 100% sure) that I would be introduced to Queen *properly*. Like me, my dad has always had some nerdy, creative project to occupy him, and will frequently go that little bit further with such things than most people. His weekly shopping list, for example, is printed from his computer, and sorted by the order in which those items will be encountered as one journeys through the supermarket. With a couple of Liz's relatives also gracing the christmas table that year, my dad decided to up the ante and give the usual excitement of board games and dinner-related stomach cramps a much-needed boost by devising a christmas quiz. He had spent literally weeks putting it together, having manually produced multiple copies of question sheets on his typewriter.

One round involved a mix tape he'd done that included brief snippets of various songs, and we had to write down both the song and the artist who recorded it. My sister and I didn't recognise half of them, so we wrote down either a bunch of random nonsense, or whatever lyrics we could recognise in the hope we'd get lucky and stumble across the song title. One of these was, "Is this the real life?" – we had no idea who it was by. When my dad revealed the answers to the quiz (during which, I'm sure, he felt moderately pleased with himself for every family member his questions outwitted), I was surprised to learn that the song was, in fact, by Queen, the band who did that ace Flash Gordon song I liked. Curious, I asked my dad if I could hear the rest of it, and he happily obliged. Over the course of six minutes, my tiny, seven-year old mind was well and truly blown. It was the loudest, most insanely awesome thing I had ever heard in my life – I felt like I'd just had a thousand people singing right in my face, and making guitar noises that could shatter a cathedral from the other side of town ... and I fucking **loved** it.

From that moment, I was a Queen fan for life; I bought every album, every single, and every poster I could find to cover the walls of my room – if I couldn't find a poster I'd instead pin up pictures that I'd cut out of every magazine or newspaper I could get my hands on. I became hopelessly addicted to the sound of Freddie Mercury's voice, tearing through notes I never knew existed. I watched every video, and every live performance, transfixed by the legendary front-man's ability to hold an audience in the palm of his hand with his peacock-like strutting. I fell totally in love with the noises coming out of Brian May's guitar, amazed that it was even possible to create anything so rich in tone,

so layered, so complex and emotive. I learned every word, listened for every nuance; I found myself captivated by John Deacon's intricate bass runs, and I was compelled, almost against my will, to air-drum Roger Taylor's thunderous examples of driving rhythm. I was hooked, I was devoted, I was in love, and that was without even knowing much about the lives of the individual band members themselves.

It was obvious to me, even from a young age, that Freddie was not like other guys – in all fairness, even Helen Keller could have figured that out – his sexuality was never a mystery to me, even if, at the time, my own was. I knew that he had a girlfriend, Mary Austin, but I also knew that that didn't really mean all that much. Even though it was no longer entirely necessary by the 1980's for gay men to hide their true selves behind a heterosexual mask (although such façades are still quite prevalent today, especially with men whose fame or career is felt, in some way, to be contingent on appearing to be the world's biggest fanny hounds), sexuality is never black and white. Ultimately, I never concerned myself very much with whether Freddie was gay, straight, or bisexual, because all that mattered to me was his music; who he fucked wasn't particularly important. What was, however, was that it wasn't all that important to anyone else either.

As I became more aware of my own sexuality, and how it had suddenly forced me to deal with all the doubts, insecurities, and fears that are intrinsic to such discoveries, I began to see Freddie Mercury as more than just an outrageous, energetic ball of barely contained lust with a moustache and a killer voice; with my family, friends, and most of the civilised world being Queen fans at that point (and certainly more so after Live Aid), I started, subconsciously, to see Freddie as a kind of psychological "shield" that I could hide behind. I didn't realise it until many years later, but the way I approached my bisexuality (which could, [as I've mentioned before](#), be best summed up with the phrase, "we'll have the discussion when I bring a guy home") had been to figure that if they could look past it with Freddie, enough to love his music and have it never be an issue, then they've got no reason why they couldn't do the same with me. It was as though I had unwittingly set a "hypocrite trap" for someone to fall in to (thankfully, it was a trap that was never sprung).

This is not to say that I compare myself to Freddie Mercury in anyway, far from it. It was actually Brian May that I found myself having more in common with (I was particularly obsessed with the universe and all things space-related when I was a kid – still am). In a fit of late teenage lameness, I chose to grow my hair long, knowing that it got curly after an inch or so, in a brief, but deeply misguided, attempt to ape my favourite guitarist's infamous barnet. Fortunately, I very quickly realised that the corkscrew perm look doesn't really work on *anyone* (Brian only just about gets away with it because it's his natural hair and he has no choice), and it certainly wasn't going to look right on a gimpy, specky twat like me. Not only that, but my natural curl would have required significant chemical assistance in order to get anywhere close, and I wasn't willing to take it that far. Dismissing suggestions that I was going for the Brian-look to impress a girl at school (I wasn't – it was more effort than I was prepared to put in, to be honest), I settled for simply growing my hair long.

Another thing I did in my rather feeble, and retrospectively embarrassing, attempts to advance my May-ness was that I took to wearing waistcoats (or "vest" if you're American) during my university years, after having worn one with my smart shirt and tie to Droitwich High School's first sixth-form leaver's prom (a curious evening which featured, firstly, my friend Dean lying across three chairs, chewing tinsel, and quoting Hannibal Lecter, and secondly a rather unexpected visit from the local plod when a couple of students figured the best place to smoke weed was in the toilets, rather than in the many, discreet wooded areas outside the school). It did take a good few years for me to figure out that wearing a shirt and waistcoat every day looks a bit wanky (especially when going to the shops), and that Brian May only got away with it because, whenever I saw him wearing one, it was because he was being *interviewed*; not buying tea bags. Also, the Queen guitarist was never seen wearing a Taz waistcoat ... ever.

Possibly the biggest impact that Queen had on my life, at least in terms that were visible, measurable, and nothing to do with my sexuality or dress-sense, was that they were directly responsible for my meeting my first love. In January 1995, I was subscribed to a Queen email list – if you're too young to remember what these are, forgive me while I go cry in the toilet again for a few hours. Out of the blue, I received a reply to an email of mine from a young American woman, Shannon; it wasn't the subject of the email (I'll be buggered if I can remember what that was, by the way) that she was replying to, but my signature, which contained a few lines from "Touch The Sky", my favourite track off Roger Taylor's "Happiness?" album. Within a week or two, we were emailing each other every day; by March, we were "together" (insofar as we were still 3,500 miles apart); and

by September, we were unofficially engaged. It wasn't until May the following year that I could afford to fly out to the States so that we could actually meet each other for the first time.

During a relationship that lasted six years, we spent a grand total of around six weeks together; some of that time was spent here in the UK and, naturally, I made sure to take Shannon to London so that we could visit Garden Lodge, Freddie's home in Kensington. Scrawled upon every inch of the outer wall were hundreds, maybe thousands, of messages for Freddie, left by fans from all over the world; given how the former resident of this beautiful Georgian house had unknowingly been instrumental in the two of us having met and fallen in love, we felt it more than appropriate to leave our own words of gratitude on the wall. Although our relationship ended more than ten years ago now, Shannon and I are still in touch, and we're still friends, a fact I like to think has more than a little to do with our shared, enduring love for the music and members of the band that brought us together in the first place. I was even able to recently introduce her to Muse through their stunningly Queen-like track, "United States Of Eurasia" (this was much to the chagrin of her husband, apparently, who had been trying to get her to listen to Muse for ages).

I first saw Garden Lodge when the news reported Freddie's death on the morning of November 25th 1991. He'd died the night before, they said, bronchial pneumonia brought on by AIDS – fans had already started gathering at his home, leaving floral tributes and messages of condolence. I remember my mum waking me, earlier than usual, to tell me the news; between that moment and when I had to leave for school, I spent every second I could glued to the TV. I was 17, and I was gobsmacked; my first "hero" was dead. I made myself a promise that, whenever I had the chance to be in London, I would go, and I would always take the opportunity to go and pay my respects at Garden Lodge. And I've kept that promise, as best I can – I've been many times now, and I will continue to go as often as I am able. It seems only right to acknowledge someone who has had a positive impact on my life and I'm lucky that my regular trips with Raven mean that I am barely a mile or two from Kensington several times a year.

I'm sure that I was not the only one who felt a sense of nervous anticipation for the final Queen album, "Made In Heaven", in 1995. The thought of hearing new Queen stuff was always exciting, but this time it was to be coloured by the knowledge that it would likely be the last new material we would ever get to hear from Freddie (barring whatever scraps remained in the archives). It did not disappoint, just as it did not fail to leave some of us emotionally drained simply from having listened to it. "A Winter's Tale" (apparently the last song Freddie wrote) could not have done more to impart a beautiful, bitter-sweet magic to Christmas of that year; and the dark, brooding sweep of "Mother Love" puts a necessarily cold shiver in your spine when you realise these soaring vocals are the last Mercury recorded (while frail, thin, barely able to stand on his own, and knocking back vodka just to get through the recordings). When Brian sings the final verse, it rips your heart in half, knowing that it's because Freddie was never well enough to return to finish the song.

Some people thought the title of the album, "Made In Heaven", was a little bit cheesy, and that's fair *in a way*, but not really worth making a deal out of because it's also the name of a track that had been originally recorded for Freddie's solo album, "Mr. Bad Guy", some years before. I don't recall anyone trying to make anything of whatever religious associations that such a title might have – someone probably did, maybe a fundamentalist who objected to the idea of "a ho-mo-sexyoo-al talkin' 'bout Gahhd", I just didn't hear about it. I never really got a grip on what Mercury's religious beliefs might have been – I know that he and his family were practising Zoroastrians in his youth, and he made many mentions of things religious throughout his songs ("Jesus" and "All God's People" are probably the most full-on), but I've not yet been able to come up with anything less vague than "non-specific (mono?)theist". In the end though, it didn't matter to me, because Freddie never made it the focus of his music; it was *only* and **always** about the music.

So with three members of Queen having made an individual impact on my life, what of the fourth member, John Deacon? After the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert in April 1992, and the "Made In Heaven" album in 1995, John pretty much retired, preferring instead to stay out of anything to do with Queen any more. These days I respect John more than I do Brian and Roger, simply for knowing that it was the end of the story, and all that remained for them to do was to close the book. While I have enjoyed the solo work of both Brian and Roger (the former is the only member of Queen I've ever managed to see live in concert), I have found that their behaviour regarding Queen as an entity in the last 15 years has only stoked my ire. I would even go as far as to say that they have, to some extent, been gently pissing away the legacy that the four of them had spent more than 20 years of hard work building.

Within a week of Freddie's death, Roger and Brian appeared on the TV-AM sofa, talking about how they could "never replace Freddie", and that it would be wrong to try. So what the fuck is this "Queen + Paul Rodgers" shit? Or, worse still, "Queen + Five"? I have no problem with the surviving members of the band collaborating with whomever they want, but what thought processes led to them thinking they should call themselves Queen? Only half of the band is present and, even if it were three quarters (as was the case with the single "No One But You"), **it's still not Queen** and should not be referred to as such. Queen were a band whose sound, look, and style was absolutely the product of the four musicians in it; each was quintessential to what the band represented, and the absence of one member was to render the whole deficient. Without Freddie, it's not Queen, just as it would not be without Brian, Roger, or John. To refer to any project as such without all four members present is to insult that for which it has always stood.

I listened to "The Cosmos Rocks", by "Queen + Paul Rodgers", and felt nothing but a sense of hollow betrayal; if it weren't bad enough that the album sounded like the desperate gasp of musicians eager to capture that which never really existed in the first place, they had the cheek to brand it with the "Queen" stamp, as if somehow legitimising it, as if all four members of the band, regardless of whether they still draw breath or have an active involvement, had given it their approval in a way they would their own great works of the past. The album was, and is, a fucking awful piece of crap, a disrespectful artefact of legacy vandalism. Had the band referred to themselves with any other name, I doubt whether I would feel as upset by it ... but they did, and I cannot forgive them for that; I love the solo work of both Brian and Roger, pre and post Mercury's death, but were they to have labelled it "Queen", I would have been equally as appalled as I was by this album (and the tour that accompanied it).

But what was even worse was "We Will Rock You", the West End musical built around Queen's back catalogue, and with a story by hypocrite success-whore Ben Elton. Surely there can be no greater waste of some of the most enduring rock songs of all time than to stitch them together as part of a ludicrous, abomination of a story that would prompt even L. Ron Hubbard to refer to it as culturally bankrupt and completely fucking retarded? Jukebox musicals like this, in which some lazy fuck takes a bunch of songs with which people are already familiar, crowbars in a feeble story to justify charging the public £50 to listen to pale imitations of a band's "Greatest Hits" compilation album (and then having the audacity to call it "theatre"), represent the epitome of cynical, duplicitous hoodwinking of an audience into looking the other way while both their pockets, and their memories of great music, are being shamefully picked by those who were responsible for helping to create that great music to begin with.

I can't speak as to whether or not "Freddie would have loved it", because I did not know him; I can only speak for myself, so that is what I do ... who am I but the grateful recipient of music that has enriched my life? Who am I but someone who simply wishes to protect that which he was given, 20 years of wonderful music, from harm? Maybe I'm romanticising my relationship with the band a little, but I'm not the only one to have so much invested in them – they are part of my childhood, my teenage years, and my adult life ... it's perfectly natural to want the book to be closed before someone starts adding unnecessary chapters that serve only to damage, rather than enhance, the story. In an interview in 1979, while touring in Japan, Roger Taylor said that, "we don't want to become old, rich, and useless"; in all honesty, I'd have preferred that they had done.

At the end of the day, I don't know what Freddie would have thought of *any* of this – I only know what I, and others, thought of Freddie. His master-plan of forging Queen into a three-pronged, simultaneous assault on the world of glam, prog, and classic rock, paid off in spades, and I'll always be grateful that I was at least around to enjoy the ride while it lasted.

Thank you all, but most especially Freddie ... you have no idea the effect you've had on my life, how you helped colour my view of the world ... and, as long as the CDs hold out, I'll do my best to make sure the "four old ladies" will keep rocking away.

