

I Want To Break Free video by Sean O'Hagan

I Want To Break Free was made at a time when the pop video form had become, in certain instances, more important than the music it was meant to promote. The cost, too, had spiralled accordingly, with the likes of Duran Duran and Michael Jackson making their promo-videos for budgets that could have funded small feature films. Queen's, of course, were not impervious to this kind of extravagance; in fact they positively thrived on it. Their previous single, Radio Ga Ga, a Roger Taylor composition that mocked the increasing blandness of pop radio, had employed 500 extras, dressed in silver boiler suits, to clap in time to the chorus. It had been their most expensive video to date, and it had worked: the single hit the number one position in 19 countries across the globe. Given all this, and the fact that the group were now huge in middle-America, an important market that had proved stubbornly resistant to various British invasions since the hey-day of Led Zeppelin's all conquering cock-rock, I Want To Break Free was a brave move. Some might say, a suicidal one. Written, like Another One Bites The Dust, by John Deacon, the song was tailor made for Freddie, who obviously saw it as another moment to come leaping out of the closet once more on video, though this time in the most blatant way imaginable - even by his outrageous standards.

The first image is of a hairy, bangled arm pushing an old, fifties' Hoover. Then, a be-wigged Freddie emerges, clad in a pink sleeveless top that strains to cover the most outrageous pair of falsies, a vinyl micro-mini skirt, stockings, suspenders and stilettos. He hoovers around John Deacon, nestling in drag on a sofa, reading the Daily Mirror, looking for all the world like that weird old lady that Terry Jones used to play in all those cross-dressing Monty Python sketches. In a suburban living room, filled to the brim with period kitsch, including three china ducks flying in formation, Freddie hoovers up and pouts and sings about how (s)he wants to break free. Around him, Roger Taylor poses by the cooker every inch the sexy schoolgirl, and Brian May scurries past to root in the fridge, resplendent in a pink night gown. I can still recall the first time I saw the video: the initial shock - what the hell is going on here, exactly? - turning to delight, then to admiration at the sheer cheek and the sheer hilarity of it all. A hilarity Freddie revels in - that collusive wink to the camera as he starts singing the opening lines, then that regal toss of the head as he banishes a stray lock of hair from in front of his eyes. Priceless.

Then, when you think it simply cannot get any more outrageously camp, Freddie pushes the living room door open to reveal a whole other planet of camp. The suburban house gives way to a set that would not look out of place in the English National Opera, as Freddie, in black and white body suit pays homage to Nijinsky in Debussy's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*. He blows on a horn, rolls across the prone, outstretched bodies of the extras, and leaps off a rock into their adoring arms. Mad! Hilarious! Knowingly, brilliantly, totally camp. Pure Freddie Mercury.

In the living rooms of middle America, though, this was a leap too far into irony and campness, two concepts that remain relatively alien to the transatlantic blue collar rock audience. "I remember being there when the video for I Want To Break Free came out," recalled Brian May years later, "and there was universal hatred and shock and horror. It was, 'they dressed up as women! How could they do it?' It was not a rock and roll thing to do and it wasn't something that was accepted - cross dressing in videos if you please! It was a really big shock. I think the mid west of America suddenly perceived that Freddie might actually be gay. That was shocking. That was not allowed. It was a bit scary..."