

Early days of Queen / Killer Queen / Musical influences By Sean O'Hagan

If truth be told, the four members of Queen - Freddie, drummer, Roger Taylor, guitarist, Brian May and bass player, John Deacon - weren't certain what they wanted to be, and seemed to be touching all the bases from pomp to proto-punk in an effort to find out what they did best, where they fitted in. Later, of course, they would find out that, like all great pop bands, they did not fit in at all. That dawning realisation must have occurred around the time of the next single, Killer Queen, which I would humbly suggest, was the first fully fledged Queen record proper: that is, a single that possessed a definite and, with hindsight, immediately identifiable signature. Killer Queen, a mini magnum opus, if such a thing can be said to exist, was more even sculpted and sleek than its predecessors, and less frenetic. It was also much more ambitious. Freddie claims to have written the lyrics "in a night", but, perhaps because of the song's quite complex lyrical and musical structure, the latter fitting the former like a glove, it sounds painstakingly crafted. The first thing that grabbed my attention were the lyrics, the tone of which is best summed up by the opening quartet:

She keeps Mœt et Chandon
In her pretty cabinet
'Let them eat cake' she says
Just like Marie Antoinette...

Not, then, the regular subject of a rock and roll record, though both Mick Jagger and Bryan Ferry were, in their very different ways, indulging in what might be called posh-rock lyricism at roughly the same time. I has always assumed that Killer Queen was about a high class transvestite - the monarch of the title being a drag rather than a regal queen. Instead, it was, as Freddie would later admit, somewhat reluctantly, "about a high class call girl", adding, no doubt self-mockingly. "I'm trying to say that classy people can be whores as well". Once the lyrical sophistication had sunk in, there was Freddie's high-camp, mock-operatic delivery - part Gilbert & Sullivan, part male diva - to absorb; intimations of what was to come. Then, in and around the words, were woven the multi-tracked vocal harmonies, and Brian May's harmonic guitar stylings, which would, from this moment on, remain a constant, defining feature of all Queen's subsequent great records. With Killer Queen, the group had arrived at a sound that was all their own. A sound that was not quite prog-rock, though it possessed identifiable traces of that inflated genre, not least the last vestiges of Freddie's Tolkein obsession; and not quite glam-rock, though it dallied near the same subject matter and dressed itself up in the same sequins and spangles. Back then, Freddie mostly wore satin and silk, his finger nails varnished blood red or jet black. He looked exotic, even slightly menacing at times, stalking the stage like he had to territorially claim it, make it his own.