

Freddie's legacy

By Sean O'Hagan

Like Madonna or Elton John or, even Maria Callas, Freddie Mercury ultimately became, through the sheer size and ubiquity of his celebrity, one of those stars whose fame ultimately transcends their work. That is, he entered the popular pantheon, a celebrity who was no longer primarily famous for what he did - write, record and perform songs - but, simply, for who he was - Freddie Mercury, mega-star. That, of course, has always, to an extent, been the self-serving, self-perpetuating nature of fame: you eventually are famous simply for being famous.

These days, though, we live in an age where celebrity has colonised the public consciousness like never before, where the minutiae of famous, and increasingly, semi-famous lives, relayed in detail through a voracious media, exercises our imagination to an at times unsettling degree. The endless passing parade of second and third division faux stars whose dull gaze, repeated ad infinitum from the pages of the tabloids and lifestyle mags, reflects our own jaded interest, and has debased the value, the currency of celebrity. We have become, in the process, almost inured to the appeal of the real star, the true star. Almost. Freddie Mercury, I contend, was a true star.

Sometimes we didn't see it, particularly us critics who increasingly look for meaning beyond the obvious, but it was there all along, staring us in the face. Freddie Mercury had star quality, charisma, presence - call it what you will - in spades. For a start, he had an intuitive understanding of the contract between the celebrity and his adoring public that was old-style, almost vintage Hollywood, in its application. He was, for instance, both offstage and on, more Liza Minnelli than Mick Jagger. He was showbiz and he was rock and roll, but, ultimately, he was a lot more showbiz than rock and roll. (I'm talking old school showbiz here - Garland, Astaire, even Valentino, to whom Freddie, only half-jokingly, often compared himself - "I'm a true romantic, just like Rudolph Valentino".)

He had an old school professionalism, and, from day one, a precocious grasp of the contract that even rock and roll demanded: "These days, music and talent is not enough. You have to be able to do more than write a good song. You have to deliver it, and package it... You must learn to push yourself, and learn how to deal with the business side right from the start...Go out there and grab it, utilise it, and make it work for you...You have to feed it to the masses...It's called Hard Sell".

Had he been around during the first golden age of Hollywood, or the dawning of the rock and roll era, or had he blossomed during the psychedelic sixties, you get the feeling Freddie Mercury would have applied himself to the task in hand with ambition, wit and style, would have made it big. That's simply the way he was; he thought, acted, lived BIG. He knew, too, how to maintain a sense of mystery, and a sense of privacy. He knew how much to give his fans, and how much to hold back for himself and his intimate circle. He was an inveterate party thrower, and a present giver, showering his true friends and intimates with well chosen, often extravagant, gifts at every opportunity. He lived life to the full in the manner of a true diva.

With hindsight, then, it is possible to place Freddie Mercury in a lineage, or a tradition, that is even more outside pop and rock and roll than we might like to think. His penchant for mock opera - Bohemian Rhapsody, of course, and a dozen or so other songs which, though not as outré, betray a certain impatience with the constrictions of mere rock and roll - is one clue to the myriad forces that shaped him. Likewise, his late flowering love of real opera and ballet, both of which betray a mind in thrall to aestheticism and exotica, to older, more colourful, and - this is perhaps revealing - more demanding entertainments than the rock performance.

You can also, without delving too deep, detect traces of Music Hall and old style Variety in some of Freddie Mercury's lyrics, and in his delivery of them, particularly during his more camp moments, both live and on record. In his costumes and stage presence, his myriad personas, and, most of all, in that strutting, preening, posturing commitment to all things over-the-top, he recalls, too, the older magic of nights at the circus, the carnival, and, of course, the opera. (Remember that tight fitting body suited decorated with huge false eyes? Pure circus surrealism.)

Which is to say that there was always, right from the start, when he was tarted up in satin, chiffon and black nail varnish, something exotic, something other-worldly about Freddie Mercury. Those Zandra Rhodes costumes, for God's sake. I mean, what other rock group, save maybe the Stones in the early seventies, or the misunderstood, much under-rated New York Dolls, would have gone to such lengths to look so willfully effeminate so early in their career. (Interestingly, Freddie's image became less other-worldly, less outré, as he accepted and embraced his sexuality, his costumes pared down to almost caricatured expressions of gayness - the moustached macho man, the leather clone, the drag queen, the body narcissist in tight black hot-pants and Flash t-shirt. But, always, the self-deprecating humour: the leather clone outfit was spot-on save for the ballet slippers and socks. It was as if he had to poke fun at himself, at his own sartorial outrageousness before someone else did. What, I ask you, would Freud have made of that?)

On the occasion of the Freddie Mercury Photographic Exhibition, the posthumous celebration of his life which opened at the Albert Hall in London (Since then it has toured the world visiting many cities including Bombay, Cologne, Montreux, Timisoara and Paris) - no half measures even in death - Waldemar Januszczak, wrote "Transplanting levels of fantasy that belong in 1001 Arabian Nights - that was Freddie's achievement". For a self-styled simple entertainer, that was no mean feat. He was, ultimately, I believe, then, a weaver of spells, a creator of personas, masks, mythologies, a fantasist. "A lot of my songs are fantasy. Really, they are just little fairy stories. I can dream up all sorts of things because that's the world I live in". He was, we can see with hindsight, someone who literally willed his fantasies, onstage and off, to come through - and, perhaps more crucially, to come true.

To this end, his life was lived in the glare of the spotlight and the flash gun, but neither stole his soul, nor, as the events of his final years proved, compromised his dignity. He remained a showman, an illusionist, and a chameleon right to the end; both a diva who played to the gallery right up to his final curtain call, and an intensely private individual who, even in death, did it his way. As elusive and mercurial as his adopted name, Freddie Mercury was a one-off, and the pop world is a less glamorous, less outrageous place without him. Of one thing we can be certain: we will not see his like again.