

Freddie's illness and last months

By Sean O'Hagan

Freddie Mercury was officially diagnosed HIV positive in 1987, one year before the Barcelona album. His final years were spent in London and Montreux, among a close circle of friends that included his personal assistants, Peter Freestone and Joe Fanelli, his manager Jim Beach, and the second great love of his life, Jim Hutton. "He took on board and accepted the inevitability," Mary Austin remembers, "I saw a man become incredibly brave". He told each of his immediate circle in turn, and the band, all of whom had expected the worst for some time, instructing each of them not to speak of the matter again. "He accepted," says Peter 'Phoebe' Freestone, "that he was one of the unlucky ones. He had no regrets. Well, maybe one - that he had so much music left in him". To this end, he recorded with Queen for as long as he could. When the other band members officially found about his illness they, "clustered around him like a protective shell", as Brian May memorably put it. Queen made a further two critically acclaimed albums, *The Miracle* in 1989, and *Innuendo* in 1991, the singer, to the end, insisting on what were now physically exacting standards of quality control.

In his second last video appearance, dolled up like a deranged Lord Byron, Freddie sang *I'm Going Slightly Mad*. The man had style, and attitude to burn. In the last Queen video, *These Are The Days of Our Lives*, he looks fragile, ethereal, as if he could be borne away on the wind at any moment. Gone are the extravagant gestures, the constant movement, replaced by a fragile, still dignity. His last words on film were, "I still love you", whispered intimately to his adoring public. A diva until the end.

One of the last characteristically extravagant things Freddie Mercury did was buy an apartment in Montreux, near Queen's recording studio, and decorate it in grand style, knowing that he would never live there. A final act of defiance against encroaching mortality. Likewise, his insistence that he should dine out to the end, often spending days in bed so that he could have the energy to entertain his friends at an exclusive restaurant. Pure style, pure class. Amid the picture post card serenity of Montreux, which he once would have found boring in the extreme, he seemed to find a sense of peace and solitude, the very things he had spent much of his life running from. He spent days looking out on the lake, lost in private reveries. He wrote two final sad songs, *A Winter's Tale* - the title said it all - and, with Brian May, the elliptically biographical *Mother Love*, a song about returning to the womb. A song about safety, comfort, spiritual, emotional and physical solace.

Back in London, he began to paint and draw for the first time since leaving Ealing College of Art. Propped up on his in bed, he drew his cats, painted abstract watercolours. Queen's fortieth single was released in October 1991, entitled *The Show Must Go On*. Pure bravado, pure Freddie, pure Queen. The b-side was *Keep Yourself Alive*. On 23 November, a statement, approved by Freddie, was issued to the press, confirming what many had suspected, that Freddie Mercury had Aids. He died the following day. A statement was issued at midnight: "Freddie Mercury died peacefully this evening at his home in Kensington, London", it stated, simply, "His death was a result of bronchial pneumonia, brought on by Aids".

At his cremation, the music was a recording of *You've Got A Friend* sung by Aretha Franklin. As the oak coffin disappeared into the flames, the recorded voice of Montserrat Caballé sang *D'Amor sull'ali rosee*, the aria from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, Freddie Mercury's all time favourite piece of music. Even in death, he had a talent to surprise.

Made In Heaven, a Queen album that employed digital technology to bring all four members of Queen together again, even in Freddie's absence, was a fitting epitaph, though, ironically, it was, in tone and content, the least Queenly album the group ever released - stately and reflective, heartfelt and tender. Finally, the many masks that had hidden the true face of Freddie Mercury, seemed to have slipped during the writing and recording of these last valedictory songs. "My make-up may be fading but my smile stays on", he sang gamely, but there was an honesty, a vulnerability on display here that was touching, and touchingly unfamiliar.

On 20 April, 1992, the other three members of Queen hosted a Freddie Mercury tribute concert at Wembley Stadium, featuring an array of guest vocalists singing what amounted to Queen's greatest hits live. George Michael, David Bowie, Annie Lennox, Liza Minnelli, Axl Rose and, of course, his great friend Elton John, were among the stellar line-up, with Elizabeth Taylor, tireless Aids campaigner and celluloid diva incarnate, making a speech in Freddie's honour. His absence though, was felt keenly on that Wembley stage, as artist after artist gave full vent to those anthems and love songs and epics; every performance, ironically, calling to mind the master. Where Queen's back catalogue of hits is concerned, nobody, but nobody, does it better than Freddie Mercury. The Mercury Phoenix Trust was also established that year, and continues to raise money for Aids related causes. In 1991, *Bohemian Rhapsody* was re-released, and once again, went straight to Number One, raising over a million pounds for the Terence Higgins' Trust.

No one knows where Freddie Mercury's ashes are scattered, bar those that were closest to him. There is no monument to Freddie Mercury in Britain, save his musical back catalogue. On his birthday, and on the anniversary of his death, fans congregate at Garden Lodge, where Mary Austin now lives, surrounded by Freddie's cultured legacy - the fine art, the artifacts, the Empire furniture, all the expensive and aesthetically pleasing fragments he shored up against his final departing. Every year, Mary reads them a short statement, a prayer of remembrance. I am reminded, even in the nature of his death, and the mourning that still attends it, not of a mere pop star, but of Valentino, of Callas. Freddie, I'm sure, would approve of the comparisons.

He would surely approve, too, of the eight foot tall statue of him in full-on performance mode, that looks out from a plinth on the Montreux shore line across Lake Geneva. Sculpted by Irena Sedlecka, a Czech monumentalist best known for the heroic reliefs that decorate the entrance to the Lenin museum. Fist raised, biceps taut, Freddie stands in stadium rock pose, facing the sunset across the lake, his back to the curious and the faithful who flock to the site. "If I had known he would have his back to the people", Irena remarked afterwards, "I would have spent more time on his bum".