

Freddie's early years / Jimi Hendrix By Sean O'Hagan

Though born in Zanzibar, Freddie Mercury, né Farrokh Bulsara was emphatically Indian: he was educated at St. Peter's boarding school near Bombay for ten years, and did not arrive in England until he was 17. Though he played down his ethnic origins, he should be remembered, and celebrated, as, among other things Britain's first and biggest Indian pop star. (The Parsees, intriguingly, still see themselves as Persian rather than Indian, though they fled Persia over 1000 years ago. Freddie's family, too, though born British-Indian, consider themselves a part of the Parsee race, a distinction that highlights subtle but often deeply felt difference between citizenship and roots.)

It was in India that the seeds of Freddie's showmanship were sown. In the early photographs included here, you can see him making an impression as a sportsman - Best All Rounder and medal winner, and as a performer - acting in a school play, at St. Peter's Boarding School, India, looking hammy but holding centre stage. Slightly older, he poses, dead centre, in a line up of the all-Indian combo, The Hectics, his first group, in which he played piano and sang tentative vocals on Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley songs. Older still, he lounges on a summer seat in the school grounds in 1962, looking like some self-styled Gatsby-type hero, in shades, crisp white shirt, pressed pants and matching shoes. It is the following photograph, taken six years and a whole continent later, that is the most intriguing, though. Beneath a dandyish velvet hat, the hair has grown and is no longer brushed back. In jeans, t-shirt and bare feet, he nestles a Fender Stratocaster guitar in a distinctly Jimi Hendrix-style pose. He looks very different, altered, on his way to somewhere else, somewhere far from St. Peter's Boarding School and the Hectics; far, too, from this spartanly furnished living room in Feltham, not far from Heathrow, Britain's gateway to the world.

The Bulsara family moved to England in 1964, fleeing the revolution that brought independence from British rule. As an adolescent pitched from one culture into another, Freddie seems, revealingly, to have had little trouble adapting to his new life. He went to Ealing College of Art in 1966, following in the footsteps of Pete Townshend of The Who and Ron Wood, guitarist with the Faces and later The Rolling Stones, and graduating with a Diploma in Graphic Art & Design in 1969.

In those three years, while Freddie studied art, the pop world shifted off its axis, and, from a rented flat in trendy Kensington, Freddie Bulsara dipped tentatively into London's burgeoning psychedelic counter culture. He shopped in Biba, swinging London's hippest emporium, and at Kensington Market, dressing in silks and velvets in homage to his hero, Jimi Hendrix. He later manned a stall there, alongside his new friend, Roger Taylor, selling Edwardian silk scarves, fur coats, exotic fabrics, alongside the graduate art work of Freddie and his more interesting fellow students from Ealing Art College. "We even sold Freddie's thesis", Taylor told Mojo magazine, "which was all based on Hendrix. There were some beautiful things - there was a Planetscape and he'd written the lyrics of Third Stone from the Sun..." Freddie, who alongside Taylor, was now also a fully fledged member of Queen, confessed to having seen Hendrix "play live on nine consecutive nights - one show after the other." One imagines, given all that was to follow, that it was the image of Hendrix as much as the man's explosive music that held him rapt.