

## Freddie's personality and character / Relationship with Mary Austin / Sexuality

By Sean O'Hagan

The term mercurial is defined in my Oxford English Dictionary as "sprightly, ready-witted and volatile". It would not be overstating the case to suggest that Freddie Mercury, the man as well as the pop chameleon, lived up to his adopted surname, and then some. He lived a complex life, one characterised by seeming contradictions. Though he was Britain's first Indian pop star, he was secretive to the point of paranoid about his roots in Zanzibar and India - his first publicist never even knew his real name. Looking at Farrokh Bulsara in some of those early teenage photographs, it is not difficult to see where his insecurity, and his attendant longing to be accepted, to be loved - which Freudian psychoanalysts would say is the key determinant, rather than ambition, of the will to succeed - stemmed from. He looks, even dressed up like a Gatsby hero and lounging on a summer seat, gauche and slightly ill at ease with himself. His prominent teeth, which earned him the nick name 'Bucky' at St. Peter's School, were a lifelong source of unease, but he feared that cosmetically altering them might affect the timbre of his singing voice.

In a world where England and America provided the predominant physical role models for the rock and roll look, from Presley onwards, his otherness, ethnic and cultural, must initially have seemed like a burden, and perhaps one he never totally transcended. Of such a deep rooted sense of otherness, though, is the star born. And, because it is an arena which encourages, which celebrates otherness, because it is a place where the outsider can not just find a home, but a huge empathetic audience, the pop life is nearly always a complex, contradictory one. In all of his contradictions, then, in his almost total self-belief and his attendant insecurity, Freddie Mercury was not unique. And yet his life, particularly after his initial success, was a uniquely complex one. His first important, and enduring, romantic relationship was with a woman, Mary Austin. They lived together as boyfriend and girlfriend, albeit he the attention-seeking extrovert, and her the quiet, reflective introvert. It is difficult to imagine a more diametrically opposed significant other for Freddie than Mary Austin. And yet...and yet, their friendship, their love endured.

Mary met Freddie before he was famous, when Queen were still in the embryonic stage, meeting and rehearsing, trying to fit together the beginnings of a sound. Initially, she saw him as "a kaleidoscope personality", someone "who opened my eyes to a lot of colour...he would see the irony in life, he looked for the humour. He did not like the darker side". Later, as his fame increased, and his once suppressed sexuality blossomed, their love affair, in Freddie's own words, "ended in tears". To both their credits, they remained close, as close as it is possible to be between a man and a woman without a physical element in the relationship. "A deep bond grew out of it (our love affair) and nobody can take that away from us. It's unreachable." he once admitted, adding, as if we hadn't got the message, "All my lovers asked me why they couldn't replace Mary, but it's simply impossible".

This is complex stuff. A gay man, who would confess to having "had more lovers than Liz Taylor", holds on to a profoundly heterosexual ideal of enduring romantic love. Perhaps, in love, as in life, Freddie simply wanted it all, and, in Mary Austin, he came as close as he could to the romantic ideal of perfect coupledness that, despite his bouts of promiscuity, obviously attracted him. Writing about him in *The Sunday Times* in November 1996, to mark a photographic exhibition of Freddie's life at the Albert Hall in London, the broadcaster and cultural commentator, Waldemar Januszczak, noted that: "Although he was outrageously camp in private, Freddie had always been coy in public about his sexuality. No, not coy: misleading. He certainly kept it hidden from his parents. In all the photos I see of the many Bulsara gatherings he attended, he is accompanied by Mary Austin, the former boutique owner whom he dearly loved, with whom he once lived, and to whom he left the bulk of his estate. Jim Hutton, the live-in lover who nursed Freddie through the worst years of his illness, is nowhere to be seen."

After he had broken up, at least physically, with Mary Austin, and his success grew, he surrounded himself with a retinue of real friends and admirers, as well as would-be suitors and hangers-on. It became known as the court of King - though surely that should have been Queen - Freddie. He threw extravagant parties in Munich, New York and, most notably, in Garden Lodge, his London home. For a while, he was, off stage as well as on, the epicentre of attention, a living, breathing, larger-than-life illustration of the term, party animal. It inevitably took its toll, emotionally as well as physically. "My affairs never seemed to last", he once noted, ruefully, "There must be a destructive element in me, because I try very hard to build up relationships, but somehow I drive people away...Love is Russian roulette for me. No one loves the real me, they're all in love with my fame and my stardom".

Love is Russian roulette for me. Boy! For a while back there, though, as he admitted more than once, Freddie literally played Russian roulette in the wilder gay clubs of New York and Munich, rather than London where he was simply too well known not to attract the attention of well meaning fans and the not so well meaning paparazzi. As far back as the second Queen tour of America in 1976, he told tabloid journalist, Rick Sky, that "Excess is part of my nature. To me, dullness is a disease. I really need danger and excitement...I am definitely a sexual person...I love to surround myself with strange and interesting people because they make me feel more alive. Extremely straight people bore me stiff. I love freaky people around me".

To this end, he delved deep into a subterranean world where casual sex was not so much an option as a given. In his sexual life, he was, as with almost everything else, a risk taker. But, as we now know, in the eighties, the stakes were high; the gamble was literally a life and death one. "He went where angels feared to tread," Rick Sky told Freddie's biographer, Lesley-Ann Jones, "He was that classic refined person who loved to slum it. His ultimate fantasy would be to take a rent boy to the opera." Instead, in 1987, having settled down somewhat in London, following a wild, hedonistic period living in Munich, he took himself to the opera, and brought home a diva. It was the last, and most unlikely, of all the great projects that Freddie Mercury undertook in his relatively short, totally incident packed, lifetime.