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## THE CONVERSATION

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# Freddie Mercury 30 years on – remembering the theatrical, eccentric genius

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There is no doubt that Freddie Mercury was a genius: it's clear in his music, his theatrical performances, and his eccentrically stylised persona. These different art forms constructed a full creative package and made Mercury an icon. As we mark 30 years since his death, we should celebrate the revolutionary lyrics, piano mastery and flamboyant show business style that he brought to rock music.

By the time Mercury was 18 years old he was demonstrating the idiosyncratic style that would later revolutionise the music industry. Alongside his love for classical music and opera, he was also a lover of musical theatre, elements of which we can see in his own music and stage presence. Mercury liked “the cabaret-ish sort of thing”. He said: “one of my early inspirations came from Cabaret. I absolutely adore Liza Minnelli...the way she delivers her songs – the sheer energy”. He also “loved the choreography, fluid sexuality and atmosphere of total excess” in Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

## Queen – Bohemian Rhapsody (Official Video Rema...



Queen's 1975 song, Bohemian Rhapsody, which was written by Mercury, introduced beautiful melodies, operatic elements, and classical storylines into the rock song. This was the seventies, a time when music genres were merging from all areas, fashion influenced music and music influenced fashion. Rock artists were using the new platform of colour television to be more creative than the previous decade of the smartly dressed Beatles. Inspiration came from superstars such as David Bowie for his inventiveness, Elton John for his showmanship and Robert Plant for his voice.

Bowie was always crossing mediums and when Mercury saw him perform in the stage version of The Elephant Man (1980) he was so overwhelmed with the performance it led to a collaboration on Under Pressure (1981) and a lifelong friendship.

## **Fashion and music interlinked**

Mercury's music never faltered during his career, and part of his continuing popularity can be accredited to the reinvention of his stage fashions to suit and illuminate the music. Mercury claimed: "we're not like anyone else. If anything, we have more in common with Liza Minnelli than Led Zeppelin...we're more in the showbiz tradition than the rock'n'roll tradition".

This was exemplified through the 1984 release of "I Want To Break Free", with the band dressed in drag for the accompanying video. This video was banned on MTV in the US. It was considered to promote cross-dressing and transsexualism, demonstrating the manipulative and archaic attitude of an industry that should have supported freedom of expression. Ironically, the ban highlighted the song's presence, which became a worldwide success, recently surpassing 500 million views on YouTube.

Mercury experimented with costumes and looks even before Bohemian Rhapsody, often breaking rules in fashion at the height of the counterculture revolution. Jessica Bumpus from Vogue notes that "from fashion to film and even the John Lewis ad, Freddie Mercury's high-glam, theatrical and barrier-breaking style is having a moment, at just the right moment". Throughout his career, his "costumes" have influenced fashion. Even as recently as summer 2019 Mercury's music was used for the catwalk by both Balmain and Watanabe. The fashion collections featured demonstrated designs resembling some of the legendary sparkles, shoulder pads and provocative costumes Mercury originally wore.

Mercury's onstage persona was probably a demonstration of a man trying to "break free" of his own human limitations. Audience members probably saw the real Mercury on stage, rather than the showman. It's a tragedy that he did not live to witness and benefit from the current openness and understanding of today's society. He is still an ambassador for excellence in music and entertainment, but possibly more importantly as an influencer of change.

### **The wider impact of an icon**

The impact of such bold experimentation has lived on through modern performance. If you look hard enough, you will see some artists donning his proverbial cap in the form of Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, and Mika to name just a few. His influence went far beyond the rock world and crossed the borders into opera and musical theatre, where he eventually worked with the Spanish operatic soprano, Montserrat Caballe, to create the Olympic theme song "Barcelona".

A true tribute to him after his death was made at the opening of the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 as the Olympic flame was lit. Grown men were seen in tears, throwing their expensive dinner jackets into the fountains as a mark of respect during the playing of Barcelona. Caballe and Mercury became very close friends during his last few years and he confided with her concerning his illness – as she explained. "He said, 'it is my duty to tell you this.' And I said, 'no, it is not a duty, but I am very thankful that you told me because it means I have your friendship, and this is most important as anything to me'."

Mercury died of an Aids-related illness on November 24 1991 and in this case, the statement "he did not die in vain" is truly apt. One last Queen album, "Made in Heaven", was released in 1995, recorded just before his death, and his bandmates went on to highlight the growing problem of Aids by raising millions of pounds for Aids-related charities.

Mercury was a true artist who touched the world with his gift. I remember clearly that the day he died I was about to start delivering a lecture, and as the students walked in, I noticed a young man sobbing. I enquired if everything was okay, and he related the news to me. That was the effect Freddie Mercury had on his fan base.

In the early days of writing Phantom of the Opera, Andrew Lloyd Webber had only one person in mind to play the Phantom, and that was Freddie Mercury. He was invited to test for the role but never took it seriously, claiming eight nights a week would not suit his voice. Before Mercury died, however, he told Montserrat Caballe he always wanted to sing the aria from Phantom of the Opera with her. Caballe said “I will record it” - and she recorded it in the studio for him. Perhaps one day we might be able to hear it.