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## **On Being a Queen Fan: The Days Before the Day the Music Changed the World**

*By Joe Pagetta*

I discovered the rock band Queen when I was nine years-old. I came to them younger than most, but at the same time, later than those who knew better. Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor and John Deacon came to me through the airways of WNEW on a summer afternoon in 1980, while hanging out with my sister Mary in my brother Nick's room. I say I came to them late because in 1980, Queen had just released their album, *The Game*. "Another One Bites the Dust" was the single that I heard on the radio, and it was my first introduction to the band. While the song remains one of their biggest and most recognizable hits, anyone who knew anything about rock music at the time knew that the band's work on 1975's *A Night at the Opera*, or '74's *Sheer Heart Attack* or even 1978's *Jazz* was far superior. By the time I discovered them, they had already released a live record, 1979's *Live Killers*, a sure sign that a band had been around awhile.

When I heard "Another One Bites the Dust," I jumped up on my brother's bed and started dancing.

"Who is that?" I shouted over the funky bass line to my sister.

"It's Queen," she coolly replied.

"I LOVE IT," I shouted back.

"Nicky has their album," she said and pulled the eight-track from my brother's shelf.

And that was it. The combination of Mercury's soaring vocals and May's guitar solos were unlike anything I had ever heard before. I was a Queen fan. I lived and breathed the band from that point on, and had plenty of work to do. Once I absorbed *The Game*, down to knowing exactly when the eight-track would cut off mid-song, I had to track down everything else they had ever recorded.

There was a record store in the same mall in Jersey City where my Dad managed a men's clothing store and did tailoring work. So on the days I'd go to the store to help him out, I'd take my breaks at WOW Records in search of Queen music.. Right off the bat, I discovered 1974's *Queen II*, a drastically different sounding record than *The Game*. While on *The Game*, the band looked tough and cool in black leather framed by a blue-silver border, *Queen II* had their four faces on the cover. Their hair was longer and it looked like they were wearing make-up. The inside picture had them sitting together, very close to one another, dressed all in white. Was this the same band? The music offered further complications, as the songs were full of massive choral harmonies and epic song-structures, with lyrics that referenced ogres and white queens and the seven seas of Rhye. *What the hell were the seven seas of Rhye?* Had the liner notes not stated the names of the band members, there was no way you could have convinced me this was the same band.

Despite the confusion, I loved the songs on *Queen II* just as much as *The Game*. More discovery came soon after. I bought *A Night at the Opera* on cassette, *Sheer Heart Attack* and *News of the World* on vinyl. For Christmas I asked for Queen's *Jazz* record, and freaked my family out by blasting the hymn "Mustapha" throughout the house. If that wasn't enough to

disturb my parents, *Jazz* came with a poster featuring hundreds of naked women riding bicycles.

At the same time that I was trying to make sense of the progression of this band that I had just become the biggest fan of, my mom and dad were surely trying to make sense of what was happening to their son. It was quite clear, though. Their son had discovered rock n roll.

It wasn't easy being a Queen fan in the early 80's, especially in the Jersey City Heights neighborhood where I grew up. I quickly learned that among my friends who were also devouring rock n roll, Queen didn't demand much respect.

"Whadda'ya a fag?" my friend Jamie asked me once.

"No," I replied. "Why?"

"Freddie's a fuckin' flamer"

"No, he's not."

"Whadda'ya kiddin' me? Look at him. He's a fuckin' fag."

"So what?! He's da best singer in da world. Who's betta?"

"David Lee Roth's a dousan' times betta' den Queen. AC/DC...Black Sabbath...the Stones...why don't ya' listen ta some real music ya' fuckin' fag?"

It's true, of course, that Freddie Mercury was gay. I knew it and everyone else knew it. But I didn't care. If my friends couldn't get past it, that was their problem. They were MY band. And while they weren't as cool of a band as AC/DC or Van Halen or The Who in those peoples' eyes, I was certain they were better than all those bands combined.

But the hardest thing about being a Queen fan in the early 80's wasn't even the criticism from my

friends, it was the lack of memorabilia with which to outwardly express my allegiance. There were no Queen T-shirts, or posters or hats to wear and tell the world I was Queen fan. At the local bazaar at St. Nicholas Church, there was a booth where you could win T-shirts, and there were plenty of Iron Maiden, or Van Halen or Rolling Stone shirts, but nothing with Queen on it. I had to resort to getting a T-shirt made at an airbrush painting booth on the Jersey Shore. Call it homemade fan appreciation. I was sad.

1982 and the release of Queen's *Hot Space* album seems to have been one of the big reasons for the lack of readily available merchandise. The album was the band's foray into music that was more disco or dance oriented, and America categorically rejected it. While it delivered the hit single "Body Language," clearly the worst song the band ever recorded, its mix of sexual innuendo and genre-busting songs only added to the public's already mixed feelings. To make matters worse, a video for the song "I Want to Break Free" featured the guys in drag. My friend Jamie had a field day with that one. It turned out that the band was mocking a British sitcom. America didn't get it.

I had what would turn out to be my only chance to see the band live that same year, when they visited the Brendan Byrne Arena in East Rutherford, New Jersey on the *Hot Space* tour. My friend John, who lived down the block, was older than I was and did occasional work for ticket scalpers. He told me he had a ticket to the show if I wanted to go. I begged my mother to let me go with him.

"No," she said definitively. "You're too young. They do drugs and drink at those concerts, it's not safe."

"C'mon Ma," I pleaded. "You know John. He said he'll take me and take me home."

Pleeeeeaaaaaase?"

It was useless. I wasn't going. The *Hot Space* tour was the last time Queen ever toured the United States. They continued to release records throughout the 80's, but were never able to break into the American market again. America didn't want a flamboyant lead singer fronting a genre-bending band prone to sexual ambiguity, with a penchant for operatic epics, Elvis-inspired country songs and fleeting forays into funk. It didn't matter that they were the greatest rock n roll band in the world.

My relationship to Queen had always been a personal one since I had discovered them in 1980, and after 1982, it became more so. It was as if I had to go underground with my passion and nurture it in solitude. But what was so interesting was the continuing coverage of the band in magazines like *Hit Parader* and *Creem*, which I read voraciously. There were pictures and stories about the band in Japan, the UK, and all over Europe. It looked like the band was huge everywhere else in the world but America, never mind Jersey City, New Jersey.

I continued to build my Queen music collection in my early teens, now taking the PATH train over to It's Only Rock n Roll and Revolver Records on 8th Street in Greenwich Village, New York to purchase import copies of their records and pieces of memorabilia. I longed to share this passion with others, to be in communion with other Queen fans, wherever they were. But most importantly, I longed to see them live in concert. I came close to achieving those goals one day in the summer of 1985. July 13, 1985, to be exact. The Day the Music Changed the World.

Live Aid was the most ambitious live benefit concert event in history. Broadcast live to millions of homes throughout the world, the concert took place simultaneously at Wembley Stadium in

London and JFK Stadium in Philadelphia. It brought together dozens of the world's greatest bands and artists on two stages to raise money for famine relief for the poor, starving and sick in Ethiopia. Organized by Bob Geldof, who had already done the impossible with his organizing and production of the super group Band-Aid and the single "Do They Know It's Christmas?", the concert event featured The Who, Mick Jagger, Tina Turner, Bob Dylan, Black Sabbath, a young Madonna, Run DMC, Phil Collins, Paul Young, Judas Priest, George Thorogood, Elton John and more. Most importantly, it featured Queen.

On the morning of Live Aid, I woke up early to prepare myself in the living room. I set up a radio with a cassette deck in order to listen to the concert simulcast on WNEW and record performances I wanted to keep. I flipped on the TV, glued myself to the recliner, and sat there for the remainder of the day, waiting for Queen's performance. There was no clear schedule as to when certain bands would be on, so I couldn't risk moving unless I was starving or in desperate need of a bathroom break. At approximately 3:44 pm New York time, Queen hit the stage at Wembley Stadium, forever changing my life and my relationship to the band.

The band opened up with a bizarre move, by playing one of their biggest hits, "Bohemian Rhapsody," first. *Holy shit!. What kind of strange set list is this? Where can they possibly go from here?* It was like they were playing their encore first! They set the bar high, and never set it down. From "Bohemian Rhapsody," they blew right into "Radio Ga Ga," inciting a sea of hands and handclaps through Wembley Stadium instantly. Here was Freddie in complete command, reaching every single person in the stadium to sing along to a song most of America could care less about. It was the most amazing testament to the power of music to move people I had ever seen, and have seen, to this day. Next came "Hammer to Fall," an album cut of their

1984 album *The Works*, driven by Brian May's crunchy and melodic guitar-riff. "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" had Freddie vamping it up rockabilly-style. "We Will Rock You" and "We Are the Champions" closed the set and had an entire stadium swaying back and forth. I sat there dumbfounded. *What did I just see? What just happened?* It was like an apparition. The entire set couldn't have lasted more than 20 minutes. *Had a band ever packed that much power and energy into that small amount of time?* I don't think so.

I saw the power of music and performance that afternoon, and what it means to give to an audience. Freddie and the boys seemed utterly ego-less that day. They had twenty minutes, and rather than start off cool and build from there, they decided to pack that time with their hits, in an almost medley-like fashion, that was unrelenting. I wondered then if they also knew they had twenty minutes of prime airtime on televisions in America, and this was their chance to show them what they were missing. The band was in their prime, and for a moment I had my wish. I was watching the same thing the world was watching, at the same time. I was finally in communion with Queen fans everywhere, who no doubt were wondering if critics and naysayers were finally catching on to what we'd known all along, that Queen were indeed the greatest rock n roll band in the world.

The day after Live Aid, I went around the corner to hang with the rest of the neighborhood kids on the corner of Reservoir Ave. and Lienau Place where we'd play bottle caps, handball, or stick ball.

"Whe'da fuck wha' you yesterday?" Jamie asked.

"I was home watchin' Live Aid," I replied.

"You spent da whole day watchin' a fuckin' conce't on TV?"

"Yeah. Queen wha' on. Dey wha' incredible."

"Yer a fuckin' nerd. C'mon, ya in fa' stick ball?"

"Yeah. D'you pick sides yet?"

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