

QUEEN, THE ROCK PRESS, AND GENDER

ON THE MARGINS OF THE MAINSTREAM:
Queen, the Rock Press, and Gender

By

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Abstract

This thesis aims to account for the marginalization of the British rock band Queen by the press and in scholarly writing, despite their enormous popular appeal and commercial success. Why have they not been critically acclaimed as part of “mainstream” rock? This thesis proposes that gender issues lie at the center of the band’s marginalization. Lead singer Freddie Mercury’s stage persona, the types of music on which Queen drew, and Brian May’s guitar playing all serve to “feminize” the band and, as such, provoked their critical dismissal.

Chapter One surveys American and British journalistic writing spanning Queen’s twenty year career, revealing a consistently negative reception of the band by the press, despite Queen’s acceptance by audiences worldwide. This lack of critical acclaim may in part account for Queen’s continued absence from the rock canon as it is currently being constructed in historical surveys of rock and in scholarly writings. Chapters Two and Three investigate Queen’s challenge to accepted gender conventions in rock music. An analysis of Mercury’s costumes, physical gestures, and demeanor in performance, and of the classical music appropriations in the bands’ music which, it is argued, worked to feminize their sound, will reveal how Queen resisted the common codes of masculinity that dominate hard rock music. In so doing, they

challenged the foundations of rock which privilege masculine constructions, resulting in their marginalization.

This exploration of Queen's marginalization hinges on the larger issue of what is and is not accepted as mainstream in popular music culture. This is a dubious labeling process, as it devalues the listening experiences of many musical subcultures, situating them as Other in relation to the mainstream. Given that this process can be viewed as an initial step towards the construction of a popular music canon, it becomes vital to scrutinize the ideologies upon which exclusion from the mainstream is being based.

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Introduction

“Students charged with carving anti-gay slur into student’s back”

GREENFIELD, Massachusetts (AP) — Two prep school students are charged with a hate crime for allegedly carving an anti-gay slur into another student’s back because he liked to listen to the British rock band Queen. Jonathan Shapiro, 18, and Matthew Rogers, 20, allegedly used a pocket knife to cut “HOMO” into the back of a 17-year-old student at the Northfield Mount Hermon School. Shapiro was charged Wednesday, a day after Rogers. “There was apparently a disagreement over the style of music he liked,” said Gill Police Chief David Hastings. “Rogers called it a gay band.” Hastings described the wounds as “deep enough to draw blood.” “When I saw them they were three days old and they were still very visible,” he said. “The letters were 4- to 5-inches high and ran all the way across his back.” The victim, a junior, did not require hospitalization, and initially kept quiet about the May 27 incident. He has since left school and returned to his family, Hastings said... The third charge made the incident a hate crime...¹

It was not the fact that a hate crime was committed regarding the sexual orientation of a young man that surprised me when I read this article. The hostility towards gays and lesbians rages on, even as our society heads into a new millennium. However, the fact that a pronouncement of homosexuality was declared upon this young male student based solely on the type of music he chose to listen to was a swift reminder to me as a musicologist of the powerful role that music plays in the construction of social codes, meanings, values, and ideologies. Although the source of this accusation that

¹The Associated Press, “Student’s charged with carving anti-gay slur into student’s back,” web posted June 2, 1999 at 9:01 PM EDT. [ONLINE] Available from <http://cnn.com/us/9906/02/AM-KnifeAttack.ap/> [accessed 3 June 1999].

Queen was “a gay band” was two homophobic young boys, the story is nevertheless symptomatic of how audiences engage in the labeling and categorization of bands. What interested me was how this particular categorization of Queen as “a gay band” was so completely different from my own understanding of and passion for the group. I questioned whether this labeling, complete with the apparent *negative* connotations that the label carried for those instigating the assault, meant that my experience as a Queen fan was to be labeled as well. Am I, too, in my appreciation of Queen, a social Other to be marked as an outcast?

These questions touch on an important aspect of musical taste, the notion of the “mainstream” versus that which is “on the margins.” The mainstream of musical taste is made up of those bands whose image and musical style are in keeping with the ideologies and expectations of the majority of listening audiences. In turn, those bands who in some way do not coherently fit into the conventional codes of the majority run the risk of finding themselves labeled as Other, marginalized from the mainstream as different, or in the words of Dick Hebdige, becoming a “subcultural group.”² The prefix of the term alone imbues it with a negative connotation: a culture which is, according to the dictionary definition of the prefix ‘sub-,’ “under; lower than or inferior to; a smaller division or less important part; with less than the normal amount of a specified substance.”³ Hebdige himself refers to musical subcultures as “those subordinate groups.”⁴

²Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 2.

³Bernard S. Cayne, ed., *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language: Encyclopedic Edition* (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1992).

⁴Hebdige, 1979, p. 2.

The delineation of a musical mainstream constitutes an initial step towards the construction of a canon of popular music, similar to the long-standing tradition of the classical music canon. This is a dubious, if perhaps inevitable, practice that needs to be closely observed and questioned by scholars. For, in the process of privileging a mainstream, the listening practices and preferences of many “subcultures” become persecuted, misunderstood, forgotten by the history books and, as in the case of the above newspaper article, feared.

This thesis strives to reveal the mechanisms of marginalization that are at work in our society’s on-going construction of a popular music canon, an investigation that is carried out through a detailed analysis of the imagery and musical style of the rock group Queen. In addition to my desire to achieve greater insight into this band with which I have long been enamoured, my choice of Queen was calculated to provide an example of a musical group which has been marginalized.

Chapter One will examine the role that media plays in the process of marginalization. Critics, as guardians of public taste, wield a great power—and a great responsibility—in determining that which is considered mainstream and accepted. As discussed in Chapter One, Queen were consistently well received by the public. Their commercial success and longevity would indicate that they *were* mainstream, however, it appears that many critics felt otherwise. Consistently negative and, at times, dismissive reaction to Queen persisted throughout the band’s career. Despite their public success, Queen were unable to gain critical acclaim, an exclusion that

troubled the band.⁵ The long term effects that such efforts to marginalize a band has on the production of rock history will also be explored in Chapter One. This will be accomplished by investigating how histories of rock are writing Queen out of the popular music canon, either through their misrepresentations of the group or by not representing them at all.

Chapters Two and Three will investigate why Queen were viewed as a subcultural group by the media, and hence a subversive, noncoherent musical force that could only be categorized as Other. What accepted conventions did Queen challenge that were contrary to the mainstream ideologies of popular music? In answering this question, we in turn uncover answers to what is perhaps a more important question at this time in popular musicology: what type of listening experiences *are* being privileged, by critics and ultimately in our production of a rock canon, as conventional, as “normal,” as belonging to the majority? Chapter Two will take a close look at the image of the band, particularly as portrayed by Queen’s lead singer, Freddie Mercury. Mercury’s costuming and physical movements on-stage displayed an *over-sexed* body, one that calls into question the traditional binary relationship of male/female. Mercury’s sexual orientation remained a question throughout his career, further adding to the confusion that surrounded the identity of this performer. Finally, the camp aesthetic that Mercury embodied, while contributing to his theatrical nature, was disturbing

⁵In many interviews, Mercury and May allude to being hurt by the negative press criticism. The band quickly acquired a deep mistrust of the press, which Brian May explained in a 1983 interview: “We have never really got on with the press and have a lot of enemies there...just about everyone in the press was against us and quite blatantly so.” (Mark Hodkinson, *Queen: The Early Years* [London: Omnibus Press, 1995], p. 176).

to the critics. I propose that these characteristics of Mercury's performance aesthetic contributed in part to Queen's negative critical reception.

Chapter Three will analyze Queen's unique musical sound. Although a rock band, Queen's sound largely appropriates from European art music traditions. This is evidenced by their use of diatonic keys and common-practice period harmonic structures, the vocal chorus, and Mercury's vocal and piano style. Brian May's guitar orchestrations also reflect these European art music appropriations. Additionally, Queen's sound reflects a "vocal virtuosity" that is manifested both through the singing voices of the group and the distinctive tone of May's guitar. As such, their sound deviates from the conventions of rock music, resistant to the masculine coding that the rock style typically embodies. In this way, Queen's music is atypical to the rock genre and unfamiliar to the critics, resulting in further resistance and marginalization.

The continuity that surfaces in the analysis to follow is the underlying *effeminacy* of Queen. Their image and musical style resist the common coding of being "masculine" and, as such, challenged the foundations of rock which privilege masculine constructions. This thesis proposes that it is this break with convention that is a primary factor underlying Queen's marginalization from the mainstream.

Chapter 1

On the Margins of the Mainstream

Introduction

The entry entitled “Queen” in *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music* provides the curious reader with a summary of the band’s career, followed by a comprehensive list of their 18 albums, 4 compilation recordings, and 15 available video recordings (both live concerts and music video compilations). Additionally, the entry suggests 17 book titles which may be consulted for further reading on Queen. It would seem from these numbers that Queen had a prolific career, a statement that is echoed by the opening sentence of the entry, which comments that Queen is “arguably Britain’s most consistently successful group of the past two decades.”¹

The key word in the above quotation is “arguably,” for Queen’s level of success is, indeed, a debatable issue. The band’s commercial prosperity and longevity in the rock world reflect the overwhelming popularity that Queen has had with the public, suggesting that Queen should be counted as a mainstream band. However, the lukewarm reception they received from the press throughout their career, and continue to receive in academic writings on popular music, would indicate otherwise.

¹Colin Larkin, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 3rd Ed., Vol. 6* (London: Muzeuk Ltd., 1998), p. 4380.

As a result Queen have been, and continue to be, marginalized from the mainstream and ultimately from the popular music canon.

“Queen” of the People

The definition of mainstream, as found in *Webster's Dictionary*, is “the dominant trend in thought, culture, fashion, etc.”² The concept of mainstream is an abstract notion that is seemingly understood and defined only through its antithetical position to the widely discussed notion of subcultures. Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, does not ever use the term mainstream,³ and yet its unspoken presence is necessarily felt. As Sarah Thornton states in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Hebdige is “heavily dependent on the mainstream as the yardstick against which youth’s ‘resistance through rituals’ and subversion through style is measured.”⁴ Clearly, the notion of mainstream is widely invoked and widely accepted, even if it is not directly addressed in theoretical writings.

It would seem, then, that a definition of mainstream is most easily inferred from discussions on subcultures. Mike Brake in his book, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures*, describes the presence of subculture by saying:

In any complex society culture is divisive, because by definition a complex society involves various subgroups and subcultures in a struggle for the

²Bernard Cayne, ed., *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language: Encyclopedic Edition* (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1992).

³Hebdige invokes terms like dominant group, dominant discourse, dominant ideology, natural order, and hegemony to describe that position which is, through the identification of subcultures, being subverted.

⁴Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Cultural Capital* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 93.

legitimacy of their behaviour, values and life-style against the dominant culture of the dominant class. A dominant class uses culture to legitimize its control of subordinate strata.⁵

Here, dominant class equates with mainstream, and is described as a singular *controlling* force over multiple diverse subcultural groupings. Brake continues, "Subcultures also have a relationship to the overall dominant culture which, because of its pervasiveness, in particular its transmission through the mass media, is unavoidable."⁶ This quote alludes to the *power* of the mainstream, in that it is a pervasive force. It also implicates the media as transmitters of mainstream cultural trends and, in that sense, as authoritative voices in determining what *is* mainstream. Dick Hebdige discusses the term hegemony, and how it "refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups... by winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural."⁷ Here again lurks the elusive mainstream, defined in a "majority rules" mode of winning and shaping consent.

We can infer from the above discussion that a particular musical style becomes mainstream when a large majority of listeners, the dominant culture, find it to be in keeping with their ideologies regarding "behaviour, values and life-style." However, the notion of mainstream is not a rigid one, as it is defined by fluid boundaries which are "a matter of degrees and situated judgments."⁸ Thus there is also the possibility

⁵Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures: Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1980), p. 6.

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁷Hebdige, 1979, p. 16.

⁸Thornton, 1996, p. 97.

for a group to contribute something new with their music to what is conventional taste, causing a shift in the boundaries of the mainstream. In order for this to occur, they must win the favour of the masses. This dominant culture/subculture binary opposition inevitably leaves a number of artists, styles and their listeners, who are not in keeping with the conventional taste, on the outside of the mainstream, creating subcultural groups in relation to the dominant class. It is also important to recognize that mainstream is a relative term. In music, there are multiple mainstream cultures (such as the mainstream of country and western music, the mainstream of R&B music, the mainstream of heavy metal music, etc.), under which can be found multiple subcultures. Mainstream thus becomes a slippery notion, as it is not a singular entity, but could actually be interpreted as its own subculture among the many musical cultures that exist, albeit one supported by a majority of listeners.

Given this understanding of mainstream culture, it becomes possible to determine whether Queen belonged to the mainstream of popular taste, or existed primarily as a subculture, subversive to the dominant taste of the masses. One way to determine mainstream trends in popular music is to follow popular music sales charts. *Billboard Magazine* is one widely read source that tracks top albums and singles, as does *New Musical Express* in the U.K. These types of charts base their rankings on sales figures—whatever album or single sells the most copies in a given week is ranked first, etc. This is in keeping with the above quote from Hebdige, which has the dominant group “winning and shaping consent.” In this case, the charts become a reflection

of public demand, determined through the commercial success of an album or single. The dominant class exhibits and legitimizes its control through its spending dollar, and the media further entrenches their position through the publication of music charts, “Top 10” radio broadcasts, and marketing support.

Often a single, or album, will experience phenomenal sales upon first being released, and hence will “make the charts.” However, as time passes the large numbers who initially supported the group seem to disappear—sales figures go down, and eventually the single or album falls into obscurity. “One-hit wonders,” as they are sometimes called, commonly occur. At this juncture, another benchmark of the “mainstream” comes into play—that of *longevity*, or a band’s popularity over time. The length of time a single or album is on the charts, or the number of times a group “makes the charts,” are all indications of success over the long-term. The book “Who’s Who in Rock & Roll,” compiled by the *New Musical Express*, explains that in determining who would be in the book, “longevity as regards artistic credibility is more important than pure chart success, although each act’s Number One hits are listed - thus novelty acts and five-minute wonders have mainly been omitted.”⁹

It is clear that Queen have proven themselves to be a mainstream band in the eyes of the public, as demonstrated by their continued commercial success that spans 20 years. Queen had a large following in their home country, the U.K. Out of the 22 albums (including compilations and live recordings) that Queen released from 1973

⁹John Tobler, ed., *NME’s Who’s Who in Rock & Roll* (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1991), p. 4.

to 1995, 20 have achieved a Top 10 position on the *NME* charts. Of these 20, 10 peaked at the #1 position.¹⁰ The singles that Queen released prior to each album fared equally well, with 14 singles reaching the Top 10 on the *NME* charts.¹¹ As mentioned earlier, these chart positions are based on volume of sales per week, and as such it is important to note Queen's duration on the charts as a marker of their continued success in the U.K. The *Greatest Hits* album spent a resounding 406 weeks on the charts (Top 100 Albums), with the majority of Queen's albums spending on average 20 to 40 weeks on the charts. Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" is by far their most successful single. It placed second on *NME*'s list of "Britain's 100 Best Selling Singles (1952-1992)," and third on *NME*'s "Longest Stays at #1" list.¹²

These albums and singles were released over a 22 year span and, as such, the numbers also reflect Queen's consistent success in the U.K. Their popularity with the public was reinforced when, in December of 1991, "Bohemian Rhapsody" was featured in the hit film, *Wayne's World*. The revival of the song introduced Queen to a new generation of fans worldwide. "Bohemian Rhapsody," backed by "These are the Days of our Lives," was subsequently re-released and went straight into the *NME* charts at #1 which is, at least in part, a testament to Queen's continued prominence in the hearts of the public.¹³

¹⁰Statistics retrieved from *The Complete NME Album Charts*, Michael Gray and Barry Lazell, eds. (London: Boxtree Ltd., 1995).

¹¹Statistics on singles retrieved from *40 Years of NME Charts*, Dafydd Rees, et al., eds. (London: Boxtree Ltd., 1992).

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

Queen were considered mainstream music in the U.K., but what of their success overseas in the U.S.? Queen's album success in terms of chart positions was not quite equal to that achieved in the U.K.¹⁴ Only 6 of their albums made it into *Billboard's* Top 10, with *The Game* being the only album to reach #1, where it remained for 5 consecutive weeks. The consistent, long-running presence of their albums on the *Billboard* charts, however, was fairly evenly matched with their *NME* success. For example, Queen's 1992 release of their *Greatest Hits* album saw a run of 206 weeks on the charts, again reinforcing their longevity as a group—the *Greatest Hits* being a compilation of 20 years worth of music making.¹⁵

Another marker of success in the U.S. music industry, which is again determined by sales, is the issuing of Gold and Platinum awards.¹⁶ Eight of Queen's records achieved Gold standing in the U.S., six of which continued on to reach Platinum. *Classic Queen*, released in 1992 after the death of Freddie Mercury and the dissolution of the band, achieved double Platinum success.¹⁷

¹⁴Queen certainly maintained a stronger following in the U.K. than in the U.S. One explanation for this could be that Queen's music possessed strong stylistic overtones which echoed that of the British Music Hall tradition. Thus their music was more easily accessible to the British public, who readily related to and understood these musical conventions, as opposed to U.S. audiences. This issue will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁵Statistics taken from *Billboard Top Pop Albums: 1955-1996*, Joel Whitburn, (Wisconsin: Record Research Inc., 1996).

¹⁶The criteria for an album to be certified Gold in the U.S. is a minimum sale of 500,000 copies of the album, totaling at least one million dollars in wholesale value. The platinum standard is based on authenticated sales of one million albums and two million dollars in wholesale value. These figures were quoted in *The Billboard Book of Gold & Platinum Records*.

¹⁷Adam White, *The Billboard Book of Gold and Platinum Records* (New York: Billboard Publications Inc., 1990).

Perhaps the most convincing figure that demonstrates Queen's mainstream position in the eyes of U.S. listeners is their overall ranking on *Billboard's Top 500*. Queen holds the 53rd position out of the Top 500 bands listed, as "compiled from *Billboard* magazine's pop album charts."¹⁸ This ranking is based on a point system that takes into account not only chart positions achieved by each artist throughout their career, but also the number of weeks that albums have been on the chart—again, volume of sales and longevity determine success.¹⁹ To put this ranking in perspective, a look at the positions of other bands who were contemporaries of Queen finds them behind Elton John (#7), Eric Clapton (#25), David Bowie (#34), and Jimi Hendrix (#50). However, at 53rd out of 500, their ranking places them in front of Led Zeppelin (#66), and The Who (#75).²⁰

Clearly these figures reflect a high level of audience support for Queen throughout their career. Award recognition in the form of Ivor Novellos, Britannias, and *Billboards*, as well as two Grammy nominations, reinforce, although in a less tangible manner than sales figures, the popularity that this group achieved in the music industry. Queen's live concert statistics also reflect the support Queen received from the public. In 1981, Queen played for 131,000 people at the Morumbi stadium in São Paulo, Brazil, which has since been recorded as the largest paying audience for one act anywhere in the world.²¹ In 1986, on their "Magic Tour," Queen sold-out two perfor-

¹⁸Whitburn, 1996, p. 1018.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰The Top 500 chart was compiled using weekly *Billboard* chart information from Jan. 1955-Sept. 1996. Rankings taken from Whitburn, 1996, p. 1019.

²¹Lesley-Ann Jones, *Freddie Mercury: The Definitive Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton,

mances at Wembley Stadium, one at Newcastle St. James's Park, one at Manchester Maine Road and yet another at Knebworth Park—a total of 400,000 people, which set an all-time U.K. attendance record.²² Sell-out concerts were common for Queen, not just in the U.K. and U.S., but in Canada, Australia, Japan, Europe—even during their controversial concerts in Sun City, South Africa in 1984.²³ Queen were a world wide success, and were certainly mainstream in terms of public popularity.

“Disrobed” by the Press

Despite the resounding worldwide audience approval that Queen gained throughout their 20 year career, they were for the most part negatively received by the critical establishment—one might even say despised by some critics. Concert reviews, album reviews and articles published throughout Queen's career provide a retrospective look at how Queen were marginalized by the rock press.²⁴ This is particularly true of the U.S. publication, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, which regularly wrote scathing record reviews of the band. Queen were accepted somewhat more readily by the popular press in Britain, particularly by *Melody Maker*. However, the negative response found in *New Musical Express* indicates that Queen were still faced with a certain amount of skepticism even in the U.K.²⁵

1997), p. 262. This record was still standing as of 1997, but I have been unable to confirm whether the record has remained past this date.

²²Ibid., extracted from Queen Chronology, pp. 445-449.

²³Queen encountered political problems when they agreed to perform 12 shows at the then controversial South African resort, the Sun City Superbowl. The resort was a Vegas-style gambling complex partly financed by the government while apartheid was still firmly in place. The outside world regarded this as a shameful act on the part of the privileged white minority in South Africa against the poverty-stricken black inhabitants of the country.

²⁴The term “rock press” as used in this thesis constitutes journalistic magazines that are devoted to rock criticism.

The more favourable response of British critics in comparison to the American press may be attributed to the ability of British critics to relate to Queen and their musical style more readily. American critic Bart Testa had the following response to Queen's *News of the World* album:

Queen makes elaborate music from shards of nostalgia for the British Empire. They push boys' public-school chorales and English martial music through the funnel of hard rock, aiming carefully at romantic crescendos embellished with heavy echo. Apparently the intention is that the long-tarnished glories of "tradition" will be repolished on the band's hard pumice.²⁶

It would seem that this American critic is missing Queen's form of humour, as his interpretation that they are trying to "repolish" tradition could not be more wrong. Queen's approach to tradition is intended to be a form of tongue-in-cheek humour, their appropriations of "chorale" styles and mimicking of "English martial music" being more of an irreverent laugh at how ludicrous tradition is, than a form of homage to the British Empire.

Although missing the humour inherent in their work, Testa is correct in identifying the influence of British musical traditions in Queen's sound. In part, this influence can be interpreted as deriving from the popular British Music Hall traditions of the late-19th and early-20th centuries. This would naturally put the British critics in a better position to receive Queen's music in a positive light. Further, the campy

²⁵ A comprehensive look at the British publications *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* was, unfortunately, not possible due to the restricted availability of these sources. Certain issues of *Melody Maker* were accessible via library holdings, while the few *New Musical Express* sources were located using on-line searches. *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, both U.S. publications, were more readily available and are thus more widely represented in the analysis to follow.

²⁶ Bart Testa, "News of the World," *Rolling Stone* (Feb. 9, 1978), p. 96.

humour²⁷ that Queen incorporated into their musical style and in their live shows is yet another tradition with which British fans and press are more-familiar than American audiences. American critic Mark Coleman of *Rolling Stone* reviewed *A Kind of Magic*, saying “the slapdash quality of these songs makes [Mercury] seem monumentally insincere: he ends the inspirational “One Vision” with a silly plea for fried chicken and a one-night stand.”²⁸ The nature of such humour, prevalent in Queen’s music and in Mercury’s performing style, is common to British culture, calling to mind the witty, off-the-wall, and at times “silly” comedy of Britain’s *Monty Python* comedy troupe or any one of numerous British television comedies. Even so, Queen experienced some harsh criticism from the British press, particularly in the early years of their career.

Queen’s relation with the press was tense from the beginning. In 1973, recording company EMI exposed Queen to the national stage with a heavily-promoted gig at the Marquee theatre, and a massive £5,000 advertising campaign for the band’s debut album. This marked a beginning to the accusations of “hype” which Queen faced throughout their career. In fact, Queen’s first appearance in *Melody Maker* was as the subject of an article called “Pop in the Supermarket” which questioned whether Queen were simply a “manufactured band.”

It may be unfair to associate Queen with the pop supermarket. The group themselves were apprehensive about appearing on *Top of the Pops* and the prospect of a hit record. They have always regarded themselves as an album band and were concerned about being connected with the chart

²⁷A discussion on Queen and the camp aesthetic can be found in Chapter Two.

²⁸Mark Coleman, “A Kind of Magic,” *Rolling Stone* (Aug. 2, 1986), p. 108.

groups. The fact remains that they have been on the receiving end of a giant campaign to create a best selling single and album...big business still remains one of the sadder aspects of the music industry today.²⁹

Julie Webb alludes to the fact that Queen may simply be a commercially-driven group in her article, "Just a Regular Kinda Guy." "It's been suggested that, initially, Queen had sat down and clinically worked out what was commercially needed in the music business."³⁰ She leaves this suggestion hanging, with no attempt to vindicate the band of this accusation.

Although public acceptance can be charted by sales figures, critics frowned upon such success, as if promotional campaigns and outstanding sales figures somehow reflect a lack of true artistic integrity. The critics betray this opinion through their words, as evidenced in the following quotations from two separate critics:

Late sons of the Empire though they may be, Queen has nothing to fear, or to do. In their moneyed superiority, they are indeed champions. Such are the salient fictions of which today's Top Ten albums are made.³¹

The rampant response of their subjects suggests that Queen need not be concerned with perfection...Like I said, blind allegiance is the stuff of '74.³²

British critic Chris Welch, in defense of Queen, pointed quite directly at his colleague's distaste of commercial success:

Like any band achieving success too quickly for the media's liking, they are under fire...The whole situation is an exact replica of Led Zeppelin back in 1969, when they were first deluged with self-righteous cries of abuse.³³

²⁹Chris Welch, "Pop in the Supermarket," *Melody Maker* (Mar. 23, 1974), p. 33.

³⁰Julie Webb, "Just A Regular Kinda Guy," *New Musical Express*, (Apr. 4, 1974). [ONLINE] Available from <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/5025/NME2.html>, [accessed 05 May 1999].

³¹Testa, 1978, p. 96

³²Geoff Brown, "Queen Rule - OK!" *Melody Maker* (Nov. 30, 1974), p. 16.

³³Chris Welch, "Queen: A Seventies Bombshell," *Melody Maker* (Nov.9, 1974), p. 32.

When interviewed by Welch, Mercury commented on the criticism Queen had received concerning their commercial success:

They've [journalists] certainly been under a misconception about us. We've been called *supermarket hype*. But if you see us up on stage, that's what we're all about... I think we are good writers—and we want to play good music, no matter how much of a slagging we get.³⁴

Critic Dave Marsh also appeared to be dismayed at Queen's commercial success. He criticized Queen for exhibiting a contemptible arrogance and an overly dominating control over their audiences:

The guiding principle of these arrogant brats seems to be that anything Freddie & Company want, Freddie & Company get. What's most disconcerting about their arrogance is that it's so unfounded... the only thing Queen does better than anyone else is express contempt... Queen isn't here just to entertain. This group has come to make it clear exactly who is superior and who is inferior. Its anthem, "We Will Rock You," is a marching order: you *will not* rock us, we *will* rock you. Indeed, Queen may be the first truly fascist rock band. The whole thing makes me wonder why anyone would indulge these creeps and their polluting ideas.³⁵

What is underlying these criticisms is the notion of selling out, of creating music for the sake of "moneyed superiority," resulting in the "blind allegiance" of the masses. In his 1941 essay, "On Popular Music," Theodore Adorno discusses the mass marketing of popular music, or what he terms "plugging."³⁶ Adorno disapproves of popular music, stating that it is produced as a commodity to be consumed by the masses, and thus possesses no true artistic merit. Simon Frith expands on this notion in his discussion of Adorno: "art has become entertainment, cultural response has become

³⁴Ibid., p. 33. Emphasis added.™

³⁵Dave Marsh, "Queen's Arrogance, Contempt," *Rolling Stone* (Feb. 8, 1979), p. 58.

³⁶Theodor Adorno, *On Popular Music* as contained in *Literary Taste, Culture and Mass Communication Volume 8: Theatre and Song*, Peter Davison, et al., eds. (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey Ltd., 1978), p. 209.

selection in the marketplace, popular creation has become the commercial attempt to attract the largest possible number of consumers.”³⁷ The critics, in their perception of Queen, reflect Adornian beliefs. They view the commercial success of the band, their acceptance by the masses, as an indication that their music cannot be of any artistic value. It is not an autonomous act of creative individual expression, but is instead a standardized *product*, a ‘pre-digested’ form fit for the masses... but *not* the discerning ear of the critics.³⁸ Thus Queen’s music was viewed from the beginning as being rooted in commercialism, *not* artistic integrity.

Perhaps the accusation that Queen were commercially driven explains the critic’s continual perception that Queen’s music lacks substance. Critic Daisann McLane commented, “Queen is a band with a cleverly constructed veneer: on the surface their music sounds profound and resonant, but underneath there’s no substance,”³⁹ while Kris Nicholson of *Creem* spoke of Queen’s “incessant use of gimmickry” as growing “like a small malignant cancer” in their music (due to their use of the ukulele or toy koto), hinting that the gimmickry is really meant to distract from a lack of musical sophistication.⁴⁰ Critic Chuck Eddy had the following to say about *Innuendo*, “the album is so lightweight you’ll forget it as soon as it’s over—which, with this band, should go without saying anyway.”⁴¹ And Michael Watts, in discussing Queen’s compositional innovations, stated, “it’s music by numbers, we think.”⁴²

³⁷Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1983), p. 43.

³⁸Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), pp. 34-45.

³⁹Daisann McLane, “Queen’s Disrobing,” *Rolling Stone* (Jan. 25, 1979), p. 115.

⁴⁰Kris Nicholson, “A Night at the Garden,” *Creem* (May 1977), pp. 46, 76.

⁴¹Chuck Eddy, “Innuendo,” *Rolling Stone* (Mar. 7, 1991), p. 81.

The reviews are filled with criticisms that betray a general dislike for Queen and their music, to the extent that it would seem that the press must hold some prejudice against the band. Ken Barnes, in a review of *Queen II*, explains that “the album remains a floundering and sadly unoriginal affair,” due to its “histrionic vocals, abrupt and pointless compositional complexity, and a dearth of melody.”⁴³ Steve Pond reviews Queen in terms of degrees of obnoxiousness, stating, “certainly, *The Game* is less obnoxious than Queen’s last few outings, simply because it’s harder to get annoyed with a group that’s plugging away at bad rockabilly than with one blasting out crypto-Nazi marching tunes.”⁴⁴ In “Flogging a Dead Pantomime Horse,” Paul Du Noyer reviews Queen’s *The Game* alongside another band that Queen was often compared to, Kiss:

Abandon Hope: all ye who enter here... Between them, Quiss and Keen [*sic*] represented everything that was depressing about music in the '70's - like emotional emptiness dressed up as spectacle, like irrelevance to anyone's life, like the mega-success brought by corporate push and a new market of almost Pavlovian docility. They represented the elevation of mediocrity. Given half the chance they'll carry on the same way straight through the '80's as well.⁴⁵

The band members were often slammed as being incompetent players. Paul Nelson in his scathing article, “Pomp Without Circumstance,” takes a sarcastic stab at Brian May:

Best of all was May's big moment: an immensely likeable, totally silly “virtuoso” guitar solo which somehow managed to suggest the filigreed

⁴²Michael Watts, “Made in Britain,” *Melody Maker* (Jul. 6, 1974), p. 9.

⁴³Ken Barnes, “Queen II,” *Rolling Stone* (June 20, 1974), p. 52.

⁴⁴Steve Pond, “The Game,” *Rolling Stone* (Sept. 18, 1980), p. 50.

⁴⁵Paul Du Noyer, “Flogging a Dead Pantomime Horse,” *New Musical Express* (July 19, 1980).

fussiness of “Flight of the Bumblebee” being played by somebody who’d just fallen in love with feedback. In spite of its goofiness, it was an oddly moving moment.⁴⁶

Curiously, Nelson concedes to liking the solo, despite dismissing May’s playing as “goofy.” The all-important word *virtuoso* is contained in quotes, serving to set May apart from the true guitar virtuosos of the time—May is but a silly “boy” looking up to the technically skilled “men.” In yet another *Rolling Stone* review, David Fricke states that, on the *Live Killers* album, “the tumultuous ‘Brighton Rock’ is bogged down by Roger Taylor’s overlong kettle drum solo and Brian May’s tedious technical display of how to play three-part-harmony guitar with a double echo.”⁴⁷ Clearly, in Fricke’s opinion, the band were uninteresting as instrumentalists. A review by Steve Pond began as a refreshingly positive article, but quickly turned negative:

It’s nice to hear a Queen album with songs, not “anthems.” Yet this doesn’t mean they can actually *play* the stuff. Stiffness was the most distinctive characteristic of “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” . . . the band can merely plod through material that demands some sloppiness. Even “Need Your Loving Tonight” keeps tripping over its sluggish power chords.⁴⁸

Regarding Mercury’s musicianship, *People* magazine referred to the lead singer as a “poseur-composer” who is a “musical illiterate,” a “singer-pianist who can’t sight-read,” as if this somehow marks him as musically inept.⁴⁹

Another point of contention for the press was that Queen were merely copyists, appropriating their musical style from that of other bands, and thus lacking any

⁴⁶Paul Nelson, “Queen: Pomp Without Circumstance,” *Rolling Stone* (Apr. 24, 1975), p. 78.

⁴⁷David Fricke, “Live Killers,” *Rolling Stone* (Sept. 6, 1979), p. 48.

⁴⁸Pond, 1980, p. 50.

⁴⁹Fred Hauptfuhrer, “For a Song,” *People* (Dec. 5, 1977). [ONLINE] Available from <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/5025/4asong.html> [accessed 05 May 1999].

innovative qualities of their own. Julie Webb noted, "Queen seem ultra-touchy about being accused of jumping on the Glam Rock bandwagon. . . ." ⁵⁰ Paul Nelson summed up the general critical perception regarding this point in his review, "Queen: Pomp Without Circumstance:"

Queen gave us Yes, Uriah Heep, the most leaden of Led Zeppelin, even the Beatles. During "Father to Son" they went from heaviest metal into a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young harmony riff, capping that with a Pete Townshend-like leap by guitarist Brian May. ⁵¹

Webb herself had them pegged as being a mixture of "Beach Boys, early Beatles and 1920's music-hall." ⁵² *Rolling Stone* even had them copying the punk rock style, "'Sheer Heart Attack' makes Queen the first major band to attempt a demonstration of superiority over punk rock by marching onto its stylistic turf." ⁵³

Clearly, Queen's eclecticism presented a *challenge* to the press in terms categorizing the band's music. Mercury himself recognized this issue: "The thing I hate is trying to pinpoint everything for everybody. . . The one thing the British press has been trying to do for years is to pinpoint and categorize. It really annoys us. . . It's not up to us to come out with a product and label it." ⁵⁴ The fact that the press could not find a stylistic category in which to place the band seemingly frustrated them, resulting in the interpretation of Queen as a mere synthesis of many other band's styles. This issue will be addressed further in Chapter Three.

⁵⁰Webb, 1974.

⁵¹Nelson, 1975, p. 78.

⁵²Julie Webb, "The contents of Freddie Mercury's pants are his alone. . ." *New Musical Express*, (Nov., 1974). [ONLINE] Available from www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/5025/NME1.html [accessed 05 May 1999].

⁵³Testa, 1978, p. 96.

⁵⁴Justin Pierce, "Killer Queen Slay America," *Melody Maker* (Apr. 26, 1975), p. 17.

Critics have the power to pronounce judgments, both good and bad, through the words they write. However, an absence of words can potentially have an even stronger effect than a negative review. Such is the case with *Rolling Stone* magazine. Although the magazine reviewed most of Queen's albums, there were only two articles printed throughout Queen's 20 year career which discussed the band to any large extent, and there were no cover stories on the band. The first was an article introducing the band in 1974. The second appeared seventeen years later, after Mercury died, primarily motivated, apparently, by the sensational nature of his death. The headline read that Mercury was, "rock's first major AIDS casualty."⁵⁵ This absence of critical commentary is felt most strongly in the *Rolling Stone* articles regarding the 1986 famine relief concert *Live Aid*. Concert organizer Bob Geldof has been quoted as saying:

Queen were absolutely the best band of the day. Whatever your personal taste was irrelevant. When the day came, they played the best, they had the best sound, they used their time to the full. They understood the idea *exactly* - that it was a global jukebox, as I'd described it. They just went and smashed out one hit after the other. It was just unbelievable. . . .⁵⁶

Yet despite Queen's resounding success at Live Aid, there is but *one* mention in *Rolling Stone* that indicates that the band were ever there at all: "Sting offered us his critique of the show. 'I liked Queen best of all,' he said, grabbing passing Queen guitarist Brian May to tell him as much. (Freddie Mercury, for his part, later clapped a comradely arm around the shoulders of a slightly bemused Bono)."⁵⁷ This

⁵⁵Jeffrey Ressler, "Freddie Mercury: 1946-1991 — Queen singer is rock's first major AIDS casualty," *Rolling Stone* (Jan. 9, 1992), pp. 13-14, 17.

⁵⁶Jones, 1997, p. 348.

⁵⁷David Fricke, "Aid for Africa," *Rolling Stone* (Aug. 15, 1985), p. 34.

brief mention of Queen arises almost in passing, their presence at *Live Aid* revealed indirectly through comments made by Sting. This absence from the *Live Aid* critiques further betray *Rolling Stone's* rejection of Queen.

Clearly, the press found a large number of reasons to dismiss Queen, despite the resounding public acceptance that surrounded the band. On the surface of these writings, the press reveal many reasons why they dislike the band: lack of musical substance, lack of technical skill as instrumentalists, a "fascist" dominance over the public, all of which is underlined by a perception of Queen's overly commercial attitude. However, it appears that there must be more to the critical dismissal than meets the eye, particularly when a band attracts such emphatic negative attention. For, it would seem that a band couldn't possibly get a worse reception than that contained in a 1976 *Creem* article, which ended with the following paragraph:

A man stumbles and falls on the tundra in the deep gloom of the Alaskan ever-night. He stretches forth a hand from this prone position towards an igloo a scant 30 yards away. The wind blows daggers. In a moment the man will be frozen to death. Suddenly... he strains his ears... 'Galileo, Galileo...' He withdraws his hand and milliseconds later the deep-freeze sleep overtakes him. His last thought: "Maybe it's better..."⁵⁸

The apparent implication in his last thought, after hearing the song playing in the distance, is that it's better that he die than have to listen to Queen.

⁵⁸Robert Duncan, "Bugs Bunny Superstar: Queen Take on the Eskimos," *Creem* (May 1976), p. 86. The sound of "Galileo, Galileo" that the man hears coming from the igloo are lyrics from Queen's hit single "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Queen and the Construction of the Popular Music Canon

Thus Queen have been met with a mixed reception. On the one hand, they have attracted millions of fans worldwide for over 20 years. Yet, over the same period, Queen have had to contend with a very skeptical reception on the part much of the critical press. Where does this leave Queen, nine years after the dissolution of the band, in the popular music history books?

Library shelves contain many general rock histories that claim to offer concise summations of the development of rock & roll. David Szatmary, in the preface to *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll*, states that his book "will guide the reader through American history from roughly 1950-86, using rock music as a prism through which the many-faceted American experience hopefully will become more apparent."⁵⁹ Joe Stuessy's *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development* is another example of a general rock history, similar to Szatmary's. In *producing* a history of rock, these authors are actively creating a canon of popular music, and reinforcing the notions of mainstream and subculture. As Stuessy states in his introduction:

We have attempted to determine major trends and primary influential performers, thus painting the history of rock and roll in broad brush strokes. The result is that many performers in the history of rock are only briefly mentioned in these pages, or not mentioned at all.⁶⁰

Szatmary's preface states:

⁵⁹David Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. ix.

⁶⁰Joe Stuessy, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 2.

No attempt has been made to review, photograph, document, or discographize the thousands of well-known and obscure bands that have existed throughout the years. Some of my favorites... have been omitted from these pages because they are sidelights to the main show.⁶¹

It would be impossible for any one source to account for every artist or musical trend that has made up the last 40 years of rock history. However, these histories demonstrate their privileging of only those trends that make up the “main show” of the mainstream, or are considered to be significantly innovative to the development of rock music. As a reference for any reader, these books paint a necessarily skewed picture of rock history, as their contents are naturally determined based in part on the author’s perception of what is popular, consequential, or innovative, and what is not. The danger, however, is that such perceptions then become entrenched in rock history, and may well remain unchallenged, the judgments of the authors standing as authoritative truths. The histories lend authority to the bands discussed, immortalizing their music by virtue of being included in the history books, in effect erasing those bands which did not hit the mainstream mark.

Where does Queen fit into this process of constructing a rock canon? Their 20 years as a prominent band with a worldwide following of fans would suggest that they qualify as part of the mainstream, and hence deserve a place in these histories of rock. Surprisingly, Queen are *not* mentioned in either of the aforementioned sources. In fact, throughout my research, I have found it difficult to turn up a single general reference in which Queen was mentioned.⁶² In many cases the mention is only a brief

⁶¹Szatmary, 1991, p. x.

⁶²Among the rock histories consulted were Paul Friedlander’s *Rock and Roll: A Social History*

one in passing, as is the case with *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*,⁶³ and Reebee Garofalo's popular music textbook, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.*⁶⁴ Both of these histories make a single reference to Queen, attributing their 1975 "Bohemian Rhapsody" film clip as marking the beginning of music videos.

Two sources that did mention Queen briefly were Charles Brown's *The Art of Rock and Roll* and Katherine Charlton's *Rock Music Styles: A History*. Each book was written in textbook style, intended for college-level use. Brown's short paragraph on Queen states, "This band is referred to as 'pomp' rock by British critics, and they do use theatricality to the hilt; they are also popular with heavy metal fans... They could be discussed as a progressive metal band."⁶⁵ Labeling Queen as a "pomp" rock group provides a very narrow scope of understanding about the band. Pomp rock refers to elaborate theatricality in performance: stage setups, smoke bombs, flash pots, and highly produced music.⁶⁶ More importantly, it carries with it negative associations, as "pomp" generally implies that a group possesses a pompous attitude. Partly responsible for this perception of a pompous attitude is the fact that "pomp" rock groups are known for their excessive theatrics on-stage, particularly reflected

(Colorado: Westview Press, 1996); Lloyd Grossman's *A Social History of Rock Music: From the Greasers to Glitter Rock* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976); and Robert Palmer's *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History* (New York: Harmony Books, 1995). Queen were not mentioned in any of these sources.

⁶³Anthony DeCurtis, et al., eds., *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), p. 641.

⁶⁴Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), p. 356.

⁶⁵Charles Brown, *The Art of Rock and Roll* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 189.

⁶⁶Jon Pareles, *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1983), p. 451.

in their use of special effects and outlandish costuming. Such an overly-theatrical presentation is thus interpreted as pretentious, as if this type of display reflects an unbecoming air of self-importance. In this way, the label “pomp rock” can also be seen as carrying further negative connotations, as excessive use of theatrics on-stage is commonly interpreted as a form of flashy cover-up for poor song writing. Brown also states that Queen are popular with heavy metal fans. This is misleading, for in its exclusive mentioning of heavy metal fans, it excludes the possibility for other audiences. Overall, this brief mention of Queen by Brown presents a limited understanding of the band, which could be a deterrent to any reader who has never before encountered Queen.

Katherine Charlton’s *Rock Music Styles: A History* provides the longest discussion of Queen that I have come across in a rock history. However, similar to Brown, Charlton presents a very limited interpretation of the group. Her opening alone is cause for concern: “The British group Queen placed itself in the glitter category by virtue of the androgynous implications of its name...”⁶⁷ Although the term glitter has been used to describe Queen, it is an overly simplistic choice of category. Glitter as a term refers to a band’s “look” and “act,” and does not provide enough insight for the reader into the group’s musical style. As well, the fact that Charlton has based this classification solely on the virtue of the band’s name demonstrates a very superficial judgment of the band.

⁶⁷Katherine Charlton, *Rock Music Styles: A History* (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1990), p. 169.

The reductionist labels found in the aforementioned sources are somewhat disconcerting, particularly since these sources are intended as teaching materials. Labeling of this nature acts as a form of segmentation and categorization which limits a broader understanding of the group, and the opportunity for a polysemous interpretation. In particular, when the authoritative voices of textbook authors or scholars make use of such labels, the terms become accepted and entrenched in the discourse surrounding the band. The result is a representation of Queen that diminishes the experience of fans who are invested in the music, and acts to dismiss the band through its oversimplification.

There has been little academic work to date on Queen, which is not surprising given how recently musicologists have undertaken any serious research into popular music. Queen's name has, on occasion, been cited in passing by popular music scholars, given to the reader as exemplary of a style or genre. However, the mention is always fleeting, and no elaboration on the band, or their music, is ever given—their name is simply evoked. For instance, Allan Moore's work, *Rock: The Primary Text*, uses Queen's name on five separate occasions (primarily in the footnotes) to help illustrate issues of stylistic diversity. He doesn't ever discuss the band, or their music, but simply invokes their name. He does acknowledge in his final chapter that, "there is much scope for work from musicologists. This study is by no means exhaustive with respect to rock styles. There are many more consistently 'mainstream' U.K. artists I

have barely mentioned (Queen, Elton John, Dire Straits, the Rolling Stones)..."⁶⁸ This suggests that Moore does recognize Queen as a mainstream group deserving of study, despite their absence from his book. Edward Macan's *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* also makes passing mention of the band. Speaking of progressive rock's love of spectacle, Macan states, "one can see the same tendencies in such diverse seventies styles as heavy metal, glam-rock (here I would lump a whole spectrum of acts from David Bowie to Alice Cooper to Queen and Elton John)..."⁶⁹ And in *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith mentions Queen only briefly, stating that, "the best version of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," is Fuzzbox's a cappella reading, which translates all the instrumental bits into half-heard words too,"⁷⁰ a statement which seemingly implies that Queen's version of their *own* song is somehow weaker than the Fuzzbox cover version which followed it.

Queen does appear briefly in Frith's 1983 book *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*. Interestingly, they are mentioned in the context of a discussion entitled "Deciding What Reaches the Public." The discussion opens by explaining the notion of a "commercial" sound, one that places "studio emphasis on the single, a track aimed explicitly at radio station playlists."⁷¹ He then quotes an article from *Melody Maker* that discusses the promotion process, the subject of which is Queen

⁶⁸Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 186.

⁶⁹Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 177.

⁷⁰Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 159.

⁷¹Frith, 1983, p. 114.

and their “publicity machine.” What is unfortunate is that this is the *only* context in which Queen appears in Frith’s book and, in light of the previous discussion regarding the negative connotations of commercialism in rock music, it necessarily inscribes a negative association onto the band. Regardless of negative connotations, such fleeting appearances demonstrate that Queen is not completely forgotten. They remain on the periphery of the minds of popular music academics, despite the fact that, as of yet, they are not receiving any substantial critical attention.

Thus Queen remain for the most part completely absent from discussions of rock history, putting them in the precarious position of becoming completely excluded from canon of popular music. Yet, concurrent to this construction of rock history, the band has continued to maintain a forceful presence in the rock world. “Bohemian Rhapsody” experienced an unprecedented comeback in 1992 after being featured in the hit movie *Wayne’s World*, an event that introduced the band to an entirely new generation of fans. The recorded version of “We Will Rock You” continues to be played as a defiant anthem in sports stadiums. Most recently, Dwight Yokam recorded a cover version of “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” that has been featured in a series of commercials for *The Gap* clothing stores. Even the shocking newspaper article with which this thesis began demonstrates Queen’s continued presence in the hearts of fans. Though nine years have passed since Freddie Mercury died and the band broke-up, a 17-year old boy in the U.S. continues to listen to the music of Queen, a band who’s career was already half-over when he was born. These are all

indications of just how deeply entrenched this music has become in our culture—a fact which is difficult to reconcile against their negative critical reception, and their relative absence from current scholarly writings and historical retrospectives.

Chapter 2

Flamboyant Freddie...

Introduction

Queen's commercial and chart success, along with their appeal to audiences worldwide, indicates that Queen were indeed a mainstream band. Nevertheless, critics demonstrated a clear resistance to the group, their continual negative response acting as a marginalizing force against Queen. Reasons for this critical dismissal have been discussed in Chapter One, including the perception that Queen were merely commercially driven, lacking in musical innovation and technical skill as players. However, there are likely other motivating factors behind the critic's resistance.

An early review of a Queen concert published in *Melody Maker* commented, "Singles and album hits in Britain. America is within their grasp and beckoning seductively. Yet their image may be served to confuse and sow seeds of suspicion."¹ I would argue that it is specifically the flamboyant and dramatic presence of Queen's lead singer, Freddie Mercury, that challenged the critics, evoking the feelings of confusion and suspicion to which Welch alludes. Mercury was the focal point of the group, most sought after for interviews by the press, and most outrageous in his lifestyle.

¹Chris Welch, "Queen: A Seventies Bombshell," *Melody Maker* (November 9, 1974).

In performance, he took command of the spotlight, prancing about the stage and interacting directly with the audience by talking to them, and engaging in call-and-response vocals. Given that Roger Taylor was somewhat hidden behind his drum set, with John Deacon and Brian May remaining relatively stationary at the left and right of the stage respectively, Mercury naturally emerged as a focal point and, as such, personifies a very large part of Queen's image.

This chapter will investigate how Mercury's appearance and physical presence on-stage challenges our accepted notions of gender identity, creating a confusing, ambiguous image. This confusion is further compounded by Mercury's elusive sexuality, which remained a debatable subject in the press throughout the first half of his career. Finally, the following discussion will also address how the camp aesthetic plays a role in Mercury's unique theatrical manner as a performer.

Playing With Gender and Sexual Identities

Mercury's identity as a performer is surrounded by issues regarding his sexuality, as well as his *gender* identity. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler problematizes the concept of "identity" as a normative ideal. She states that the coherence and continuity of the person are not logical features of personhood, but are socially constructed norms of intelligibility. Butler comments:

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of the "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.²

²Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge,

Thus, a person who does not conform to societal norms regarding gender³ presents an incongruence in our society. The discontinuous person disrupts comfortable identity constructs, calling into question our own accepted notions regarding the categories of male and female. In so doing, the discontinuous, incoherent identity challenges our very personhood, that which is beyond the constructed identities of “male” and “female” by which we allow ourselves to be defined. Through his performance image, Mercury engaged in the decentering of heterosexuality and masculinity as norms in rock performance, engaging instead in the formation of an ambiguous sexual presence, a magnetic, flamboyant, and dramatic persona. As such, Mercury’s unique persona strikes at the heart of coherence that many rock journalists and critics strive to construct and maintain.

Singer k.d.lang has been quoted as saying that in performance, an artist is “making [their] sexuality available, through [their] art, to everyone. Like Elvis, like Mick Jagger, like Annie Lennox or Marlene Dietrich—using the power of both male and female.”⁴ Freddie Mercury followed this performance aesthetic, bringing issues of sexuality to the fore in his performing style. One way in which Mercury achieved this is through challenging the notion of a male/female binary, “putting into question the categories of “female” and “male,” whether they are considered essential

1990), p. 17.

³Such constructed norms are wide ranging and can include characteristics of appearance, discourse, and behavioral codes.

⁴Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 139.

or constructed, biological or cultural.”⁵ In what might be construed as a form of cross-dressing, Mercury’s image formed “a complex interplay, slippage and parodic recontextualization of gender markers and gender categories.”⁶

For those who were witness to a Queen concert, or took note of the publicity photos and images of the band on album covers, Mercury’s appearance during the first decade of the band’s career served as a site of gender unintelligibility. If we take *sex* to be a *biological* binary, albeit a large assumption but nevertheless understood by many to be a true correspondence, audiences would likely consider Freddie Mercury to be a man. But the binary equation of “man = masculine gender” that we so often assume, breaks down upon encountering the *visual* Freddie Mercury.⁷ As Angela McRobbie commented in her essay, “Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique,” “If we speak through our clothes, then we do so in the accents of our sex.”⁸ Here, McRobbie alludes to one way in which gender categories come to be determined from a subjective point of view—through our clothing. In the case of Mercury, his clothing often did speak a message of effeminacy. In the early days of Queen, Mercury could be seen with long hair, dressed in flowing gowns, sequined body suits and pastel coloured, checkered tights, all accessorized with necklaces and bangles. His lips were

⁵Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992), p. 10.

⁶Ibid., p. 134.

⁷For a discussion on how gender cannot be viewed to be in a mimetic relation to sex, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

⁸Angela McRobbie, “Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Account,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 74.

accentuated with gloss, his piercing eyes smudged with dark eye makeup, and his manicured nails covered in jet black polish.

On the surface, this form of costuming could be seen as keeping with the times, as many rock stars donned long hair, eye makeup and necklaces.⁹ As well, the wearing of long, flowing capes was not uncommon. Rick Wakeman from *Yes* would costume himself in this fashion; however its implications had more to do with references to fantasy world magic and mysticism, Wakeman taking on the personification of “wizard” over the keyboards, rather than a conscious attempt to appropriate feminine characteristics. Yet somehow, Mercury *was* claiming a feminine side in an overt fashion. His was a carefully considered ensemble of what Garber refers to as “detachable parts” (hair, makeup, jewelry), which together form a “deliberately disconcerting mélange of stylistic tropes.”¹⁰ In subcultural theory, Mercury’s ensemble would be termed a “bricolage:” “Elements are drawn from the synthetic manufactured culture of popular music and artifacts, but these are relocated and transformed.”¹¹ With Mercury, the wearing of long hair, which for many rock stars carried connotations of liberation from the dominant culture, is re-defined. When taken in conjunction with the entire bricolage of necklaces, eye liner, lip gloss, and elaborate costuming, the long hair regains its associations with effeminacy.¹²

⁹To name only two examples, Mick Jagger of the *Rolling Stones* and Peter Gabriel of *Genesis* certainly engaged in the appropriation of what is generally coded as a ‘feminine’ appearance.

¹⁰Garber, 1992, p. 140.

¹¹Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures: Sex and Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll?* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 158.

¹²For a similar analogy of how bricolage can redefine the meaning of objects, consult Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, pp. 104-105. Hebdige explains how the conventional insignia of

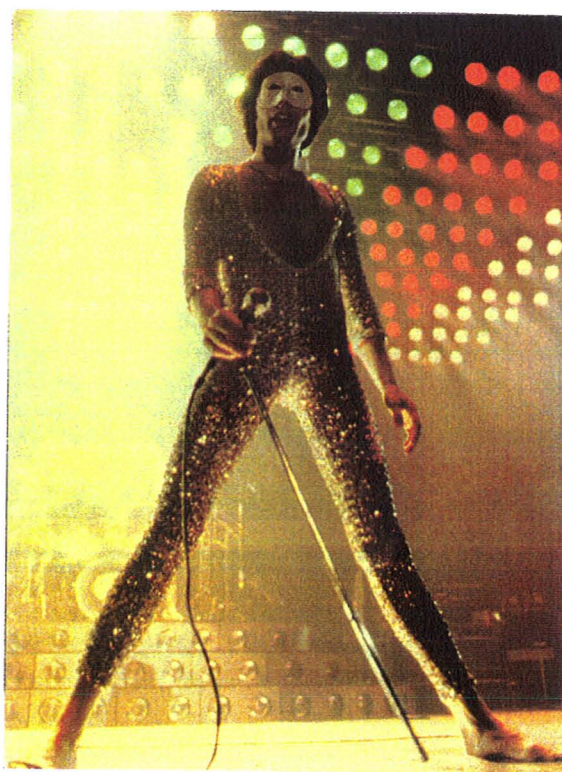


Figure 1: Mercury in his sequined suit

A favourite in Mercury's early costuming were his spandex body suits. These bodysuits varied in appearance from solid white or black, to being covered in shimmering sequins from head to toe (see Figure 1). One image that was a favourite of Mercury's during the early days of Queen was to appear as Harlequin, a character whose reference stems from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* genre¹³ of the 17th and 18th centuries (see Figure 2). Wearing a mask across his eyes and dressed in motley coloured tights, the Harlequin was a stock pantomime character of *commedia dell'arte*,

the business world—the suit, collar and tie—were stripped of their connotations by the Mods of the 1960's.

¹³There is also a *commedia dell'arte* reference to be found in "Bohemian Rhapsody" from *A Night at the Opera*. The lyric "Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango" references the stock-character Scaramouch, whose character in *commedia dell'arte* was similar to that of the Harlequin.

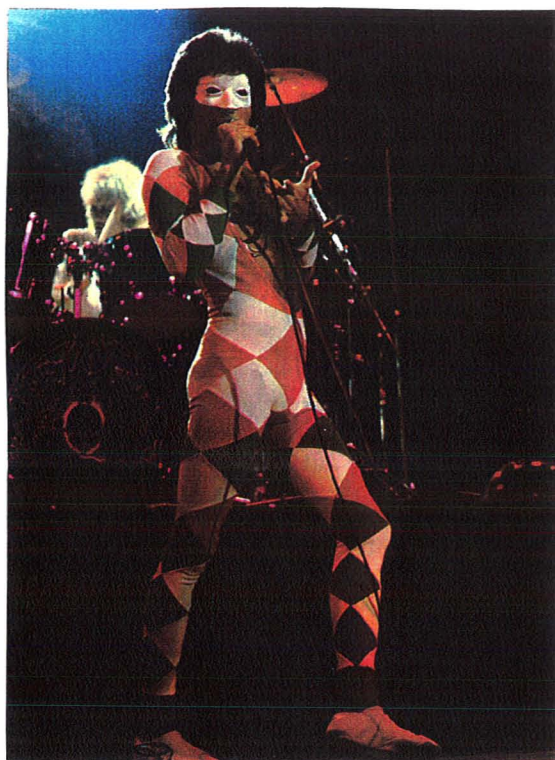


Figure 2: Mercury as Harlequin

a clownish servant known for possessing acrobatic skill and a conniving, witty character. Such references from classical theatre demonstrate Mercury's desire to bring the "high" culture of art and theatre into Queen's shows, despite the fact that Queen were a rock band.

These bodysuits that Mercury wore fit him skin tight, leaving nothing of his physique to the imagination. The contours of his legs and arms were very prominent in the body-hugging spandex, as was his genital area. One critic, commenting on Mercury in his skin-tight red and white striped shorts and suspenders, stated that Mercury looked "like a kid at the beach, or maybe like a player in *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. Except for that dick. They would *never* allow that dick to



Figure 3: Mercury, dressed in a chest-flaunting bodysuit

show in the Charlie Brown show.”¹⁴ Mercury “the man” was undeniably present in this revealing outfit. Even the cutaway semi-circle at the chest area, which extended from his shoulders to his navel, displays an abundant growth of masculine chest hair (see Figure 3).

Bare-chested in this fashion, Mercury’s appearance is similar to that of many masculine icons of rock who strutted on the stage with their shirts enticingly hanging open. One writer, commenting on the “bare-chested, masculine icons, such as Robert Plant, Paul Rodgers, and Roger Daltrey,” characterized these rock icons as “hybrids of Lord Byron and Tarzan...” who were undoubtedly flaunting their unmistakable

¹⁴Robert Duncan, *Bugs Bunny Superstar: Queen Take On The Eskimos Creem* (May 1976), p. 36.

masculinity.¹⁵ However, Mercury's masculinity remains elusive. The semi-circle cut-away in the bodysuit frames his chest in much the same manner that a plunging neckline does in low-cut women's clothing. It offsets his breast in a revealing fashion, similar to that of a woman exposing cleavage. This is enhanced by Mercury's mannerisms on stage, in which he often thrusts his chest forward proudly, like a peacock. The result is an ambiguous body: the chest hair is undoubtedly male, yet the costume and his peacock-like movement stylizes the body in such a way that Mercury's chest demands an unusual attention for a male body—an attention which is reminiscent of that given to women's breasts, an area of sexual enticement and attraction. The overall effect is made particularly strong when accented by the long necklaces and his hair and makeup. There is a slippage of genders on the surface of Mercury's body, the strong male chest emerging is decentered by the visual associations of woman.

It is clear that Mercury was *costuming* himself in outfits that transgress traditional concepts of masculine dress. His costume was not the casual, machismo appearance of a shirt, unbuttoned, enticingly revealing a little chest hair, or a rugged pair of torn blue jeans. Instead, Mercury demonstrated meticulous care and concern when it came to his costuming, a behaviour that can be seen as belonging to the "cult of femininity." Sociologist Mike Brake explains how the "cult of femininity" places a strong emphasis on the importance of fashion to women. It enables a woman to "care for her beauty; to dress up is a kind of work that enables her to take possession of her

¹⁵Mark Paytress, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), p. 46

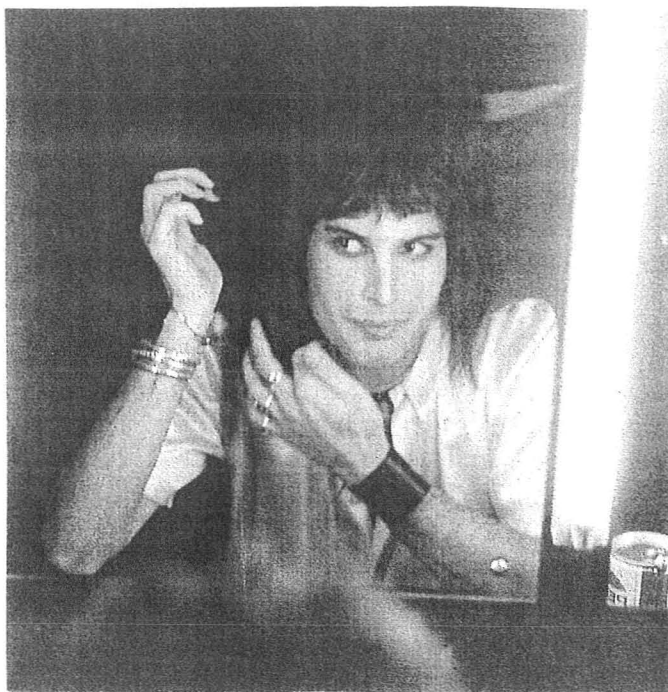


Figure 4: Preening in front of the mirror

person.”¹⁶ Mercury was also famous for his endless preening in front of the mirror, which was captured by photographer Mick Rock in 1974 (see Figure 4). Mercury consciously put his person on display through his flamboyant, meticulous attention to costuming and accessorizing, a practice that is largely associated with women.

As stated above in my description of his spandex bodysuits, Mercury’s costuming did display his masculinity, yet simultaneously appropriated aspects of femininity. In this sense, Mercury presents himself through his costuming as over-sexed. My use of this term is in relation to gender, rather than libido. The over-sexed body is one that calls into question the traditional binary relationship of male/female by

¹⁶Brake, 1980, p. 140.

enhancing both terms of the binary simultaneously. In this way, the over-sexed body can be understood as oppositional to an androgynous body. Garber labels this type over-sexed theatricality as an exploration of the opposition between construction and essence of the individual. "The statement being made [by the performer] can be read as 'I (still) have a man's voice, a penis, a flat chest,' though I can play at having—and therefore in a sense 'really' have—what women have *as well*."¹⁷ Mercury subverts our assumptions about his gender identity, challenging us to view his person through some ambiguous conflation of both the masculine and feminine. As one writer described Mercury's appearance during a performance, "long-haired Freddie is flamboyant in black and white floral jacket and tight black satin pants, heavy jet choker, chain mail hand jewelry and belt. He bangs a tambourine against his thigh and smolders about, macho and sultry, simultaneously masculine and feminine."¹⁸ The resultant image is what Garber calls a "category crisis," that is "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another..."¹⁹ I will return to this point in considering why the press was so resistant to Mercury's image.

Other aspects which are central to Freddie Mercury's performance magnetism, and participate in Mercury's bricolage as a hybrid of the male/female binary, are his physical movements and posturing. Mercury's on-stage physical presence has

¹⁷Garber, 1992, p. 152.

¹⁸Lesley-Ann Jones, *Freddie Mercury: The Definitive Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), p. 149

¹⁹Garber, 1992, p. 16.

always succeeded in capturing the attention of audiences and critics. In many cases, the response has been negative. Paul Nelson of *Rolling Stone Magazine* commented that a “highlight” of Queen’s live show was the “generally inept posturing of lead singer Freddie Mercury, who looks like a swarthy cross between Mick Jagger and Vic Damone.”²⁰ Kris Nicholson of *Creem* quipped that “the five basic postures in Freddie’s crude ballet are amateur still life.”²¹ Nicholson’s description of Mercury’s performance as a “crude ballet” is particularly interesting. In a sense, Mercury’s body *is* dancing for his audience using his own assemblage of steps and movements. However, to call it crude overlooks the fact that these gestures are in fact loaded with meanings. Journalist David Thomas shed a different light on Mercury’s posturing in his retrospective look at Queen’s last-ever concert, held at Knebworth Stadium in 1986. Thomas commented:

I saw a show that was as powerful an exercise in enormo-rock as has ever been staged. Mercury’s stage manner could look ridiculous on film or TV. He did not dance and strut like Jagger, or shimmy like Bowie. Instead, he threw a series of extravagant shapes, one pose following another. But on a mammoth stage this stylized motion made sense, reaching right to the back of the crowd.²²

Grand gesture became increasingly important as rock groups performed to larger audiences of thousands of fans at stadium concerts. Clearly Mercury understood this, adapting a form of movement that would most effectively enable him to communicate to the audience.

²⁰Paul Nelson, “Queen: Pomp Without Circumstance,” *Rolling Stone* (April 24, 1975), p. 78.

²¹Kris Nicholson, “A Night at the Garden,” *Creem* (May 1977), p. 42.

²²David Thomas, “Their Britannic Majesties Request,” *Mojo: The Music Magazine* (August 1999), p. 75.

There are two theoretical models which have proven useful in understanding Mercury's bodily presence on stage. Eugenio Barba's writings in *The Paper Canoe* provide an interesting framework through which to view Mercury's effectiveness and magnetism as a performer. Barba's theory holds that effective performers possess a quality of energy that is able to rivet the attention of audiences. He attributes this ability to the performer's use of "extra-daily techniques," which "put the body into form, rendering it artificial/artistic but *believable*."²³ Central to this extra-daily technique is the concept that, as opposed to "daily body techniques" (those routine, functional actions that bodies perform in daily life), "extra-daily techniques" are based on the wasting of energy, "the principle of maximum commitment of energy for a minimal result."²⁴ In particular, Barba explains that extra-daily techniques involve:

... a deformation of the daily technique of walking, of moving in space, and of keeping the body immobile. This extra-daily technique is based on an alteration of balance. The aim is permanently unstable balance. Rejecting 'natural' balance, the performer intervenes in space with a 'luxury' balance: complex, seemingly superfluous and costing excessive energy."²⁵

Barba goes on to explain, "When we amplify our movements—by taking longer steps, or by holding our heads more forwards or backwards than usual—our balance is threatened. A whole series of tensions is then set in action to keep us from falling."²⁶ Barba cites many performance environments in which this may apply, including ballet, opera, mime, and acting. The theory is also applicable to Mercury's performance as a

²³Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 16.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶*Ibid.*

rock singer. My analysis of Mercury's posture and motion on-stage will evoke Barba's theory of unstable balance and excessive energy to help codify the energetic presence of this performer. As well, Barba's theory is useful in explaining how Mercury is able to speak to a crowd of thousands through his bodily movements.

The field of kinesiology has also proven useful in understanding the sexual ambiguity that, in addition to being present in Mercury's costuming as discussed above, is also manifested in Mercury's body and movement. Kinesiologist Ray Birdwhistell, in his study "Masculinity and Femininity as Display," discusses aspects of gender display and recognition as understood at the level of position, movement, and expression in the body. Of particular interest is Birdwhistell's conclusions regarding "tertiary sexual characteristics," those that are "patterned social-behavioral in form."²⁷ After studying subjects from seven different societies of people world-wide, Birdwhistell's article brings to light two common conventions of human posture that act as gender identification signals or markers. As Birdwhistell demonstrates in his own work,²⁸ the field of kinesics understands motion as systems of gestures and postures—a series of abstracted units which form a cohesive motion.²⁹ Thus we can employ these *static* markers of standing posture, as revealed by Birdwhistell, to analyse the overall motion of Mercury's body in performance.

²⁷Ray Birdwhistell, "Masculinity and Femininity as Display," *Nonverbal Communication: Readings with Commentary*, edited by Shirley Weitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 146.

²⁸The chapter entitled "Body Motion" from *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication*, exemplifies the levels of complexity which exist when analyzing a "communicative system without words," ie. body *motion* as communication.

²⁹Ray Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 176.

One easily recognizable signal that Birdwhistell found is the tendency for the legs of females to be more often held together, while the legs of men are more frequently positioned apart:

...females, when sending gender signals and/or as a reciprocal to male gender signals, bring the legs together, at times to the point that the upper legs cross, either in a full leg cross with feet still together, the lateral aspects of the two feet parallel to each other, or in standing knee over knee. In contrast, the American male position is one in which the intrafemoral [upper legs] index ranges up to a 10- or 15-degree angle.³⁰

Further, this tendency is mirrored in the arms of a female, which tend to be kept close to the body, as opposed to the greater arm/body distance of a male. Another key body region which presented distinguishing characteristics in Birdwhistell's study is the position of the pelvis. According to Birdwhistell, the male "tends to carry his pelvis rolled slightly back as contrasted with the female anterior roll."³¹

Further exploration of the concept of gender identification symbols can be found in Nancy Henley's *Body Politics: Power, Sex & Nonverbal Communication*. In her section on women's movement, Henley notes various acts that are common to women in terms of posture, gesture, and body movement. Of particular consequence to this study is her mention of women's tendency to roll the pelvis and protrude the breast area while in motion.³²

Armed with this kinesthetic understanding of gender identification symbols as coded in male and female bodily movement and posture, we turn to Freddie Mercury.

³⁰Birdwhistell, 1974, p. 147.

³¹Ibid.

³²Nancy Henley, *Body Politics: Power, Sex & Nonverbal Communication* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 164.

Watching Mercury's body in performance on-stage reveals a conflation of bodily gender symbols, the result of which is an interesting hybrid of motion: at times his body seems to be invoking a more feminine movement, at others it is clear that Mercury's body exudes a strong masculine stance. Herein lies yet another site of gender playfulness and unintelligibility for this unique performer. In both cases, the energy of his movement demands attention.

In order to interpret Mercury's physical presence, it is useful to look at live concert footage of Freddie Mercury on-stage. For the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to analyze portions of a 1981 performance of the song "Dragon Attack," filmed in Montreal and released on the concert video *We Will Rock You*.³³ "Dragon Attack" is an excellent illustration of the range of poses, postures, and movements that have contributed to this performer's transgressive hybrid of motion. My reasons for focusing on this particular clip is that Mercury's various postures appear in an easily segmented fashion, his body clearly moving from one posture to the next, allowing me to readily access and define the movements and use of balance that make up Mercury's physical performance. It should be noted, however, that Mercury's motions are not always as separated—more often the contradictions of "masculine" and "feminine" postures appear fluidly in Mercury's movements, aspects of each emerging to different degrees, clearly present, yet not in as blatant a fashion as with the "Dragon Attack" example.³⁴

³³Queen, *We Will Rock You*, Vestron MusicVideo Incorporated, MA1015, 1986.

³⁴Two additional videos have been very useful in studying Mercury's physical performance. For

quarter-note bass line and the increasingly strong presence of the drums helps to build excitement and lay down a fast paced tempo. Mercury's movements are very powerful, even somewhat aggressive in this section, as he yells out to the audience, encouraging a response with exaggerated waves of his fist through the air. His physical presence reaches out to the audience, demanding their participation by virtue of his posture. Mercury stands, left leg behind the right, with both knees bent. The energy of his stance is created by the awkward balance of this posture—despite its apparent naturalness. Mercury taps his right toe to the beat. Even in his tapping, extra-daily energy is involved, as the tapping to the beat is converted into a highly visible pounding of the entire lower leg. Due to this aggressive tapping, in which he is continually picking up his right foot, all of Mercury's weight is necessarily carried on his rear left foot. This balance is not awkward in itself, until one considers that Mercury is simultaneously leaning *forward* with his torso from the waist up, *into* the audience. Here is a perfect example of how a simple alteration in balance can bring the body alive in performance.

When the instruments join in the mix, increasing the tempo, Mercury approaches Roger Taylor's drum set. He stands facing the drums in one of his standard postures: legs planted solidly shoulder-width apart, right leg pulsing firmly to the beat, his chest thrust proudly forward. An example of this pose is shown in Figure 5, although the photo is not from the concert being analyzed here. In this stance, Mercury taps into the long tradition of male "cock" rockers who stand this way, performers who,



Figure 5: Mercury in his aggressive “masculine” stance

as defined by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie in “Rock and Sexuality,” are “aggressive, dominating, and boastful” and who “constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control.”³⁶ The rigidity of his stance exudes the masculine strength and power that is so culturally familiar in male rockers. When facing the drums, as in this example, it is as if Mercury commands the music, or indulges in the power of it, letting the intense drum riffs wash over his body. However, Mercury often assumes this stance facing the audience, as is the case with his performance during the song “Tie Your Mother Down” during the same concert. Mercury delivers the the second statement of the chorus and the second verse of “Tie Your Mother Down”

³⁶Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, S. Frith and A. Goodwin, eds. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 374.

from an elevated stage, taking on the “cock rock” pose. His feet are held firmly apart, right leg pulsing aggressively to the beat, his exaggerated waves of his fist in the air emphasizing his command to the audience to “tie your mother down...”

After the drum solo by Taylor in “Dragon Attack,” the tempo having reached a frenzied pace, the groove suddenly breaks and the bass and guitar enter with the riff that drives “Dragon Attack.” The riff is heard first on the bass, and is subsequently joined in unison by the electric guitar. It is a driving riff, percussive and aggressive in nature. Instantly, we see a transformation in Mercury’s powerful stance, and his movements change radically. To the delight of the screaming crowd, Mercury engages in one of his characteristic walks. He glides, or rather slinks across the stage, walking in a fashion which is uncharacteristic for a male rock singer. Mercury rolls his body forward through his pelvis with each step, leading very purposefully from his protruding chest. Rolling his shoulders sensually, Mercury holds his arms close in against his upper body as he pumps his arms forward in a fluid, circular motion, as if they were propelling him ahead. The length of his microphone stand moves with him, emphasizing this fluid, circular motion. His legs move languidly from the hips, easing him forward, his pelvis thrusting with each step. As he places his left foot forward, rolling from the heel through to the toes, Mercury’s back foot drags sensually behind him with toes pointed and leg extended, exaggerating the walk and increasing the sensation that he is actually gliding across the stage. Although he is perhaps driven in his walk by the incessant riff, the smooth, gliding nature of his

movement goes against the percussive nature of the riff. His movement calls to mind aspects of Birdwhistell's theory on female movement, as Mercury's legs throughout this motion remain together, his thighs crossing tightly with each step, his back foot pointed in parallel alignment laterally with his front foot.

This languid, gliding walk of Mercury's can be further interpreted through Barba's theory regarding balance. To watch Mercury's walk frame by frame, the exaggeration of his movement becomes extremely clear. Not only are his steps very long, but his hips and chest are awkwardly thrust forward in such a manner that his upper body is often positioned completely *in front of* both his feet. This is accommodated by an even greater bend in his knees that would not usually accompany the simple act of walking, as well as a greater arch through his back. This shift in balance involves Barba's *principle of opposition*, which states that in a performer's body, "every action must begin from the direction opposite to that which will be carried out."³⁷ In his walk, Mercury engages this tension of opposing forces—one cannot tell if his feet pull the body ahead when they step forward, push the body ahead from their position behind the body, or if it is instead the torso which pulls the body along in its 'thrust forward' position. All these motions come together to form the very pointed, intentional act of walking across the stage. The exaggeration which causes so much attention to be drawn to this motion is a result of the excessive energy and alteration in balance as proposed by Barba—it turns the everyday act of walking into an eye catching spectacle.

³⁷Barba, 1995, p. 24.

As Mercury begins singing the second verse, he again places his feet firmly apart in a powerful stance, knees slightly bent in a left-facing lunge. Again, the excessive energy of the body and alteration of balance is felt through his tension in the upper body, as his chest is still held forward, an unnatural arch in the back, slightly deforming a normal posture. As he continues to sing, his stance remains firm, the only motion in his body coming from the pronounced tapping of his foot. Having settled into this solid, seemingly aggressive stance, a characteristic pose for male rock performers, we next witness an elision of motion, as Mercury suddenly arches his back, rolling up onto the tips of his toes, and slides his body forward, leading from the chest and the pelvis, again crossing his legs sensually as he moves forward. Again, his microphone stand serves to exaggerate the motion as he thrusts the length of it upwards into the air, accentuating the upward roll of his body. This motion is punctuated by the beginning of May's guitar solo. Mercury's body embraces a sensuality of movement, as his entire torso gyrates in a very sexual, inviting fashion, his head and shoulders rolling pleasurably to the music.

To underline the fact that these movements are characteristic of Mercury, independent of the musical accompaniment, I should like to direct the reader to two alternate, contrasting examples of video performances. In "Somebody to Love," from the *We Will Rock You* video, aspects of the aforementioned movements are present throughout. Towards the end of the song, Taylor begins pounding out an aggressive 3/8 rhythm, emphasizing the downbeat, which is accompanied by the bass emphasiz-

ing each beat. At this point in the song, Mercury leaves the piano, and the gliding walk appears briefly on his way to the center of the stage. Again, his chest is thrust forward, leg dragging behind him. He pauses to sing a defiant, “Find me!... Find me!...” and assumes the crouched off-balance position defined at the beginning of ‘Dragon Attack.’ Each statement of “Find me!” is accompanied by a defiant punch of his fist in the air. The next camera shot is of Mercury from behind, and provides a clear view of his next motion—he takes two steps forward, but in his “feminine walk.” The arch in his back is very evident as is the exaggerated crossing of his legs, one in front of the other. Yet the femininity in his lower body is matched by the aggressive pounding of his fist in the air—again, a contradictory motion. The lead-in to May’s guitar solo also provides a good example of Mercury’s motions in a fluid sequence with each other, “feminine” and “masculine” motions strung together over the same musical background of aggressive drums, heavy bass, and the sporadic interjection of slightly distorted chords from May’s guitar.

Turning to the *Live at Wembley ‘86* video, the performance of “Another One Bites the Dust,” a funk-inspired tune, also demonstrates Mercury’s gender-blurring motions. This is particularly true in the middle of the song. Mercury takes off his military-style jacket and struts towards May, again with a roll of the chest and shoulders. Although his arms are held wide apart from his body, Mercury shakes his chest area back and forth with some vigor, sashaying his hips as he walks. Clips of Mercury’s “languid” walk are also sporadically present throughout Mercury’s physical

display in this video clip, although the motion is, in this case, predominated by aggressive masculine stances and a more masculine walk.

Mercury's on-stage motions approach a transgressive area that brings together "masculine" and "feminine" gestures. His movements often appear unnatural, as contradictory postures and movements weave in and out of his physical performance. One moment he is aggressively masculine, feet wide apart in a solid stance, waving his fist powerfully through the air. But as he arches his back, thrusting his chest forward, sliding across the stage with his torso gyrating in all directions, his movements become sensual and echo the gender identification characteristics of female bodies, as observed in Birdwhistell's and Henley's studies. Thus Mercury is engaging in a discontinuity of motion, a motion which appropriates socially constructed norms of gender identification symbols belonging to both male *and* female concepts of body movement and sexuality. In doing so, Mercury approaches Butler's definition of an incoherent gendered being, and constructs an image that has attracted audiences for over two decades.

Further, Mercury's body becomes a focal point in his obviously pointed, intentional performance movements, which can be readily understood as engaging at the level of Barba's "extra-daily" technique. The excessive energy that Mercury emits through his exaggerated physical performance, one that reflects such a high level of body consciousness, serves to evoke sensations of sensuality and sexuality, subtle yet effective in attracting audiences and driving them wild.

The descriptive language employed by critics reinforces my position that Mercury blurred gender boundaries through his movements and costuming. Critic Julie Webb, in her 1974 article "Just a Regular Kinda Guy," says that Mercury, "describes himself as being 'sluttish' on stage and it's true—just the way he slinks around the place spells out 'street-walker, whore, tart.'"³⁸ In her review titled "Crazy Teens and Killer Queen," Cynthia Dagnal describes Mercury during the encore, "...they did 'Hey Big Spender' out of *Sweet Charity*, complete with playful bumps and grinds a la Shirley MacLaine."³⁹ And Mercury's campy gender-blurring is alluded to in a 1976 article by Robert Duncan:

But Freddie knows what's happening. He treats 'em all like they're in kindergarten, which is a safe bet if you're aiming at the lowest common denominator. "*Every-body!* Come on! You and you and you and you," he points exaggeratedly into the audience from the edge of the stage, "*every-body* join in!" Well, even if you were the only black kid in a suburban school you'd feel welcome when Miss Freddie called on you like *that*. Especially when she's so pretty and classy like she is.⁴⁰

Clearly Mercury's over-sexed body did not go unnoticed by the critics. "Whore" and "tart" are negative descriptive terms most often applied to women, and carrying connotations of sexual promiscuity. As well, the reference to Mercury as "Miss Freddie" feminizes Mercury, the critic referring to him as "she."

Mercury's performances engaged in an exploration of gender positions through both visual and physical imagery. This may have been disconcerting to the rock

³⁸Julie Webb, "Just A Regular Kinda Guy," *New Musical Express* (April 4, 1974). [ONLINE] Available from <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/5025/NME2.html>, [accessed on 05 May 1999].

³⁹Cynthia Dagnal, "Crazy Teens and Killer Queen," *Creem* (July 1975), p. 70.

⁴⁰Robert Duncan, "Bugs Bunny Superstar: Queen Take on the Eskimos", *Creem* (May 1976), p. 86.

critics, who were themselves entrenched in a very masculine, very male dominated rock world. As well, it may explain their need to marginalize the band. For, as Norma Coates explains in “(R)Evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender,” masculinity in rock music is constructed on a false foundation, a foundation which, in attempting to maintain its stability, must expel any threat to its power.⁴¹ Coates poses in her argument that this threat is women. In Mercury we have a form of dissension in the ranks—not woman, but a figure who moves beyond the solidly drawn markers of masculinity.

This resistance must be further contextualized, since Freddie Mercury was by no means the first rock performer to engage with issues of gender ambiguity in their performance image and style. David Bowie led the field of glam-rock with his androgynous appearance that *was* readily accepted by critics. As one who “won over the critics as the innovative changeling of rock,”⁴² and who was a widely successful contemporary to Mercury, Bowie provides an interesting persona against which we can compare Mercury’s performance image and gain a somewhat more contextualized understanding of what made him different in the eyes of the press. In both cases, the artist challenged our understanding of a male/female binary. And in both cases, the critique resulted in the emergence of what Garber has referred to as a “third sex:” “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility,” which interrupts the,

⁴¹Coates, 1997, p. 56.

⁴²Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, eds., *The Bowie Companion* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1996), p. xvii.

“original, stable, unchallengeable, grounded and ‘known’ binary.”⁴³ However, Bowie’s challenge to the binary took the form of androgyny, which can be interpreted as a withdrawal from the terms of the binary, into a new space of non-gendered possibility. Opposite to this, Mercury overtly enhanced both terms of the binary in his performance, simultaneously absorbing symbols of “male” and “female” into his persona in an easily identifiable fashion.

Part of what sets Mercury’s gendered performance apart from Bowie’s is that the artifice of Mercury’s gender play has been more easily *read* by the critics, and as such is interpreted as an ambivalent act, and is not recognized as artistically innovative.

Judith Butler discusses this notion of ‘reading’ in performance:

What determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. . . this is a performance that works, that effects realness, to the extent that it *cannot* be read. For “reading” means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, insulting or deriding someone. For a performance to work, then, means that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide. On the contrary, when what appears and how it is “read” diverge, the artifice of the performance can be read as artifice; the ideal splits off from its appropriation. But the impossibility of reading means that the artifice works, the approximation of realness appears to be achieved, the body performing and the ideal performed appear indistinguishable.⁴⁴

David Bowie’s gender appropriation must have struck a level of realness in the eyes of critics that made his image easier to accept—for it was not easily read on any level. For instance, the distinction between David Bowie the man, and Ziggy Stardust the

⁴³Garber, 1992, p. 13.

⁴⁴Butler, 1993, p. 129.

character became very obscure, as artifice and the natural body converged.⁴⁵ As well, a review of *Aladdin Sane* (1973) by Ben Gerson states that Bowie's "programme" on the album "involves the elimination of gender differences,"⁴⁶ constructing a new ideal, a new standard with his body. Mercury moved in an opposite direction to Bowie, playing up gender stereotypes in his performances, reiterating the norms of both male and female onto a single body. These norms are easily identified by viewing Mercury's body and hence easily read as an artificial merging—the ideal Mercury splits from his appropriations with ease, and we see through the performance. Simon Frith in a 1981 article, "The Art of Posing," commented on Bowie's image, "Bowie wasn't sexy like most pop idols. His voice and body were aesthetic not sensual objects; he expressed semi-detached bedroom fantasies, boys' arty dreams..."⁴⁷ In contrast, Mercury's gender-play is aimed at *increasing* the sensuality of his performance, reveling in the sexuality of the body, rather than expressing a distant, detached, aesthetic exploration of sexuality and sensuality.

Critical resistance to Mercury's image is hardly surprising. The category crisis, brought about through the male/female contradictions in both Mercury's costuming and physical posturing, disrupts society's pursuit of "realness," of the "natural" ideal of "masculine" and "feminine" that we often strive to maintain. As Butler explains in *Bodies That Matter*, Mercury's resignification of symbolic terms of dress, movement,

⁴⁵Paytress, 1998, p. 90.

⁴⁶Ben Gerson, "Aladdin Sane," *Rolling Stone*, July 19, 1973, as printed in *The Bowie Companion*, Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, eds. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), p. 101.

⁴⁷Simon Frith, "The Art of Posing," as re-printed in *The Bowie Companion*, p. 176.

and language in his performances demonstrates “how the apparently static nature of the symbolic order can be made vulnerable when confronted with subversive repetition and resignification.”⁴⁸ Mercury’s form of drag (in costume and in movement) *is* subversive, as it “reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”⁴⁹ Regardless of their own sexual orientation, the critics, in resisting Mercury, adopt the critical gaze regarding what is generally understood in society as “safe:” “the heterosexual economy must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness.”⁵⁰

Mercury’s performance, which presents itself as innocent entertainment more than as a political or aesthetic statement, does not actually displace the dominant norms of the male/female binary. Instead, it “becomes the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects.”⁵¹ In this way, Mercury and Queen subject the critics and audience to a form of self-reflection upon their own constructed natures.⁵² Mercury’s marginalization is a reflection of the place of the critics in relation to the rock community which they serve. The “critical gaze” (similar to notions of the “cinematic gaze”⁵³) writes the

⁴⁸Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 138.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³The notion of the cinematic gaze is discussed by Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16/3 (1975), p. 6-18.

perspective of the privileged position of “white heterosexual male” into each review and article, regardless of the sexual orientation, race, or gender of the critic. This privileged position is one of hegemonic power which stands in the centre of what is “normal” historically in terms of gender binarisms.

Turning again to David Bowie’s acceptance by the press, there is another important way in which Bowie’s performance was easily read—it was clearly political in its intent. The alien nature of his character allowed Bowie’s gender discontinuity to become an issue of aesthetic inquiry, somehow less dangerous to our own personhood as this was an *alien* figure, distant enough from our own norms to be safe. Further, Bowie’s choice to reveal his bisexuality to *Melody Maker* in June 1972 brought the issue of his *own* sexuality into the limelight in a decisive manner. As well as being a dramatic piece of rock theatre, this action brought a more direct discussion of gender and homosexuality to the fore with Bowie as an admitted homosexual.

This cannot be said of Mercury’s elusive sexuality, which kept audiences and the press guessing.⁵⁴ It is not only the standard binaries of sex (male/female) and gender (masculine/feminine) that Mercury blurred in his costuming, but also the binary that society constructs in relation to *sexuality* (heterosexual/homosexual). As Queen’s first decade together drew to a close, Mercury adopted a new look in the summer of 1979, which coincided with the release of their 14th single, “Crazy Little Thing Called Love,” backed by “We Will Rock You.” His flowing gowns, sequined

⁵⁴Paytress, 1998, p. 96.



Figure 6: Mercury's Leather Look

body suits, jet black nails and glossy lips were replaced by what has been referred to as the "leather" look (see Figure 6).⁵⁵ Often seen wearing tight black or red leather pants, sometimes accompanied by a red leather necktie and suspenders worn over his bare chest and a leather cap, Freddie seemed to be emulating a look taken from the disco group *The Village People*. In fact, Mercury's switch has been attributed to the singer's first encounter with the band. Biographer Lesley-Ann Jones recounts the first time Mercury attended a Village People concert in New York's Greenwich Village, known during the late 1970's for its gay clubs and bars:

Freddie first clapped eyes on one of the Village People, the late-seventies "YMCA" send-up group which toyed with macho gay fantasy stereotypes:

⁵⁵Jones, 1997, p. 239.

the cowboy, the policeman, the building site labourer, the biker. Freddie was said to be utterly mesmerized, along with a roomful of gay “clones,” by the sight of Glenn Hughes [the biker], “the leather guy” dancing on the bar, and in photographer Mick Rock’s words, “was never the same again.”⁵⁶

This was a much harder, more aggressive image for Mercury, but was undoubtedly camp in nature. As well, it carried with it stereotypical gay associations, the leather look being one that was closely associated in those days with gay men’s clubs,⁵⁷ hence its presence in the campy send-up act of the Village People. In this way, Mercury was aligning his image and, by extension, his person with that marginalized segment of society, yet another reason for critics to feel uncomfortable with this performer.

Mercury’s leather look was short lived, but served as a bridge to the image that would stay with him throughout his remaining years as a performer. In June of 1980, Queen released their ninth album, *The Game*, the cover photo of which revealed a new look for Mercury. He wore closely-cropped hair and a bushy moustache, his physique emphasized in short leather jackets and tight T-shirts, accompanied by tight jeans, or white pants with a military stripe down the side (see Figure 7). Lesley-Ann Jones explains that this new image came to be called Mercury’s “clone” look, due to its similarities to the “Castro Clone” image originating in San Francisco:

The “clone” look, in fact, had originated in San Francisco, and was referred to as the “Castro Clone” image after the Castro district, a central, formerly dilapidated Irish neighbourhood of San Francisco which had once served the Haight-Ashbury hippies. It later became Gay Main Street, USA, thanks to a massive influx of homosexual refugees, housing the “highest per capita population of gays in the world.” Most of these

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 199.

⁵⁷Laura Jackson, *Queen & I: The Brian May Story* (London: Smith Gryphon Ltd., 1994), p. 103.

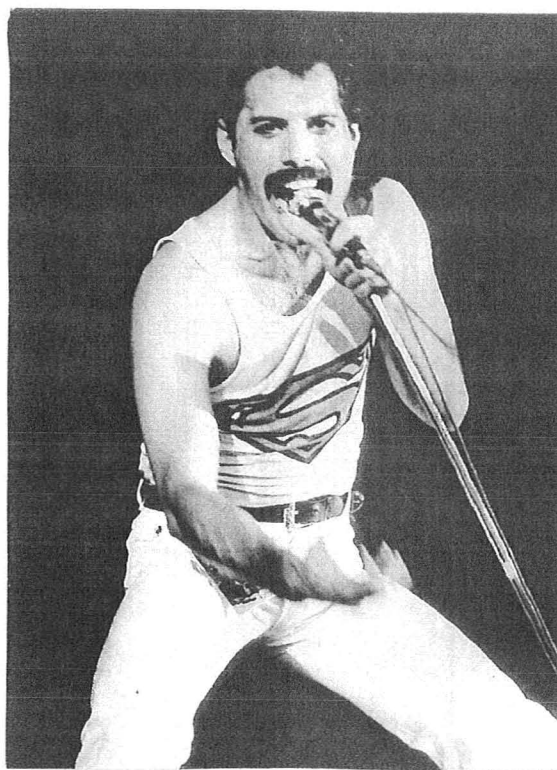


Figure 7: Mercury's Clone Look

men were white middle-class, and they adopted their own conformist look to replace the outgoing flowing robe/long beads/hairy hippy style. A distinct new strain of gay male could now be identified, quickly dubbed "The Castro Street Clone."⁵⁸

This change in appearance did not go unnoticed by the loyal fan base that Queen had established, as some fans began to throw razor blades onto the stage during concerts to protest the new look. As well, the band's offices were inundated with razor blades sent in by fans, intended as a sign that Mercury should shave off the offensive moustache.⁵⁹ The image represented to many a clear appropriation of cultural markers of homosexuality. The discontinuity of Mercury's image had shifted into an area of continuity—but on the wrong side of the fence in terms of his sexuality for many heterosexual fans.

⁵⁸Jones, 1997, p. 199-200.

⁵⁹Peter Hogan, *Queen* (London: Omnibus Press, 1994), p. 58.

Although Mercury's clone image would appear to convey a very clear message of homosexuality, given the context from which it was appropriated, Mercury's sexuality remained a questionable issue due to his own efforts to preserve his privacy. Mercury was particularly guarded about his personal life, which only contributed to the mystery surrounding this enigmatic performer. In the early days of Queen, Mercury fell in love and had an intimate relationship with a young woman named Mary Austin. The romance faded, however, and he allegedly began engaging in frequent homosexual relations. According to biographer Lesley-Ann Jones, Mercury's friendship with Mary Austin continued throughout his career and, "screened by this outwardly conventional heterosexual liaison, Freddie was able to indulge his homosexual promiscuity."⁶⁰ Privately, then, Mercury's sexual orientation placed him as a deviant to the norm of heterosexuality, a fact which, despite the eventual clone look, remained a disjunctive feature of his identity to the majority of the rock world of the 1970's and 1980's.

Was he heterosexual? Was he homosexual? Mercury managed, throughout his career, to avoid fully revealing his sexuality to the public and press. As such, his identity resisted any straightforward categorization, which only served to further distance him from the critics.⁶¹ Mercury's sexuality remained a point of fixation and curiosity in the press, however, which was continually left guessing—despite their attempts to

⁶⁰Jones, 1997, p. 9.

⁶¹Blurring his sexuality was also a transgressive and provocative act, a notion we shall return to in the next section in relation to Mercury's camp aesthetic.

pin Mercury down, as in a 1977 *People* magazine article:

The British are strongminded, out-spoken people who are ambivalent about very little except possibly the monarchy and sex. So it was inevitable that out of the rock rebellion would come a group with the exploitative impudence to crown themselves Queen... But that was seven long years ago, and now at a time of preternaturally primitive punks like the Sex Pistols, Queen has entered the Establishment, and Mercury has himself, at 31, emerged from the closet. The bloke, it turns out, is a mere heterosexual. "If I told you," the King of Queen used to dissemble, "it would destroy the mystery." But this month... Freddie acknowledged there was a bird in hand. She is Mary Austin..."⁶²

It is hard to tell if the writer is relieved to have finally resolved this issue, or slightly disappointed by his conclusion of "normalcy" on the part of Mercury. Regardless, this was but a momentary pause in the author's guesswork, as Mercury succeeded in maintaining the "mystery."

The Theatrical Mercury

An additional layer of interpretation is needed to understand more completely this performer. The discussion thus far regarding Mercury has situated his image as discontinuous, his failure to conform to the norms of gender codes associated with either the female or male leading to a blurring of gender identity. But Mercury's engagement with this type of blurring appears to be only one aspect contributing to his unique sense of *theatrical presentation*. As a driving force within Queen, and certainly as the main point of fixation for audiences and critics alike, Freddie Mercury was clearly motivated by an overwhelming desire to engage with his public in the most *theatrical* manner possible, both in his music and performances.

⁶²Fred Hauptfuhrer, "For A Song," *People* (Dec. 5, 1977).

The verse lyrics to the Queen song, "Let Me Entertain You" appear to manifest

Mercury's creed as a performer:

*Let me welcome you ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say hello
Are you ready for some entertainment? Are you ready for a show?
Gonna rock you, gonna roll you, get you dancing in the aisles
Jazz and razzamatzz you, with a little bit of style...
...I've come here to sell you my body, I can show you some good merchandise
I'll pull you and I'll pill you, I'll crueladeville you
And to thrill you I'll use any device (ha ha ha!)...
... Just take a look at the menu, we give you rock a la carte
We'll breakfast at Tiffany's, we'll sing to you in Japanese,
We're only here to entertain you!*⁶³

These lyrics, sung at the opening of many concerts, contain some tantalizing invitations from Mercury to his audience. Most importantly, they are laced with the distinctive camp overtones that form the backbone of much of this artist's attraction as a performer. It is precisely this camp sensibility that Mercury brought to Queen, both in their live shows and their albums, that is a site of precarious power for Mercury. For, as much as the camp attitude may have won him and the band many adoring fans, rock critics did not find this form of humour to be appealing: yet another reason to marginalize Mercury and Queen.

Mercury's form of theatrical exploration can be best understood as a manifestation of "camp sensibility."⁶⁴ The notion of camp is a complex idea that carries with it a number of definitions and interpretations. Susan Sontag's 1969 essay, "Notes on Camp," provides a lengthy list of factors, each of which could be seen as contributing

⁶³Excerpted from the lyrics to "Let Me Entertain You," written by Freddie Mercury, off the *Jazz* album, 1978.

⁶⁴Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), p. 277.

to a definition of camp as a sensibility, however it would seem that there are three key components that scholars have come to agree upon as constituting the basis of a camp aesthetic. The first component is *irony* or *double-entendre*, that is, an incongruous contrast between an individual or object and its context. Examples of ironic juxtapositions often drawn upon in camp performatives are contrasts between high and low cultural status, youth and old age, the profane and the sacred, and the contrast between cheap and expensive objects. However, the most common irony to be found in camp is the incongruous juxtaposition between the masculine and the feminine.⁶⁵ The second component defining camp is its heightened awareness and presence of *theatricality*. To expand, those who invoke the camp aesthetic engage with the notion of *life-as-theatre*, through which they demonstrate an interest in deviating from and manipulating the conventional roles that people and objects play in the theatre of everyday life. Essentially, camp understands our “being” as simply “playing a role.” Further to this is a heightened awareness of *style*. As Esther Newton states in her essay, “Role Models,” “importance tends to shift from what a thing is to how it *looks*, from *what* is done to *how* it is done.”⁶⁶ This results in an overwhelming presence of *excess* and *exaggeration* in camp performatives.

It is the combination of these first two characteristics that results in the third component of the camp aesthetic, that of *humour*. Essentially, the humour is “in-

⁶⁵One source which investigates this aspect of camp in depth is Ester Newton’s book, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972).

⁶⁶Esther Newton, “Role Models” in *Camp Grounds*, David Bergman, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 47.

herent in the formal properties of irony,"⁶⁷ which, when acted out in the theatrical approach of camp, result in the "knowing chuckle" at the incongruous contrasts being enacted. Further to this point is the importance of realizing that camp's humour stems from the "invisible wink" with which it is presented, as Kate Davy points out in his essay, "Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp." Davy quotes the entry on "Camp" from the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, which states, "the wink of camp (re)assures its audience of the ultimate harmlessness of its play, its palatability for bourgeois sensibilities."⁶⁸

This chapter has already considered Mercury's costuming and physical movements in performance, both of which, I have concluded, contributed to his expression of a persona which is resistant to normative categorization due to his blurring of both masculine and feminine coding. This conclusion takes on an added dimension when viewed as a primary component of Mercury's campy theatrical nature. Here we are witness to the principle irony that belongs to a camp aesthetic: the incongruous contrasts between masculine and feminine as juxtaposed in a single role player, Freddie Mercury, who in turn becomes a site of fascination, bemusement, theatricality, and power for the audience. But why *power* for the audience? This concept can be best understood if we consider Mercury's use of the camp aesthetic as embodying certain political overtones. According to David Bergman in his introduction to the book

⁶⁷Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Camp Grounds*, 1993, p. 24.

⁶⁸Kate Davy, "Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, eds. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1992).

Camp Grounds, “at best camp can be a strategy to win room, freedom for different ways of conducting one’s life.”⁶⁹ Mercury’s sexual freedom, as projected by his blurred image, sends a suggestive, sexually liberating wink to his audiences. In the spirit of Thomas Geyrhalter’s line of questioning in his article “Effeminacy, camp and sexual subversion in rock: the Cure and Suede,”⁷⁰ I too question whether this gender-blurring, this campy contradiction, is a form of claiming and celebrating of *deviancy* by Mercury, for what is principally a heterosexual-identified music scene and audience. Where does this leave the rock press and pop music scholars? Before addressing this question, we should consider the wide range of other ways in which Mercury embraced a camp performative, welcoming audiences with an “invisible wink.”

Mercury’s camp aesthetic strongly influenced Queen from the start, beginning with the selection of the band’s name in April of 1970. Mercury felt that “Queen” was most appropriate for the group, as he later reflected:

It’s just a name, but it’s very regal obviously, and it sounds splendid. It’s a strong name, very universal and immediate. It had a lot of visual potential and was open to all sorts of interpretations. I was certainly aware of the gay connotations, but that was just one facet of it.⁷¹

The choice of name made the other members of the band uneasy. As Mark Hodgkinson explains in his book, *Queen: The Early Years*:

In the early Seventies the word “gay” was rarely used to describe homosexuality. “Queen,” though now largely archaic, was a more usual colloquialism. Several of Freddie’s friends called him affectionately “the old

⁶⁹David Bergman, “Introduction” in *Camp Grounds*, 1993, p. 15.

⁷⁰Thomas Geyrhalter, “Effeminacy, camp and sexual subversion in rock: the Cure and Suede,” *Popular Music* 15/2 (1996), p. 217-218.

⁷¹Stephen Rider, *Queen: These Are the Days of our Lives* (Surrey: Kingsfleet Publications, 1992), p. 50.

queen” and this reversal of gender terminology was often used in an ironic way. Elton John, who became a close friend and confidant, invariably said “she” or “her” when talking of Freddie.⁷²

There is no doubt that “Queen,” a campy name to be sure, instantly put the band on delicate ground. True to the camp aesthetic, the word is multi-faceted, a “switch-word” which Garber defines as “ambiguous terms that conflate two or more meanings, allow[ing] the mind to change tracks.”⁷³ This form of play, which Garber notes is historically *not* regarded as serious, is very suggestive, if not sexy:

When the doubleness of double meanings in jokes and wordplay is sexual, it is often referred to as a double entendre—the equivalent of an auditory, sexualized double-take... switch-words suggest the possibility of operating in more than one direction...⁷⁴

Even in selecting the band’s name, Mercury was testing the boundaries of binarisms.

Taking advantage of the visual potential, Mercury was the ringleader of incorporating what could be viewed as an irreverent spectacle during the band’s stage shows. On occasion at the end of concerts, Mercury would appear under the bright stage lights, draped in a floor length, fur-trimmed, red velvet robe and a jeweled crown (see Figure 8). Accompanied by Brian May’s orchestrated electric guitar rendition of “God Save the Queen,” Mercury would regally cross the stage, head raised high, as if he were the Royal King (or Queen?) himself. This is a clear example of the camp sensibility present in Mercury as a performer, an irony of “sacred” juxtaposed against the “profane,” “low society meets high society” being played out in front of the eyes of millions of fans.

⁷²Mark Hodgkinson, *Queen: The Early Years* (London: Omnibus Press, 1995), p. 128.

⁷³Garber, 1995, p. 57.

⁷⁴Ibid.

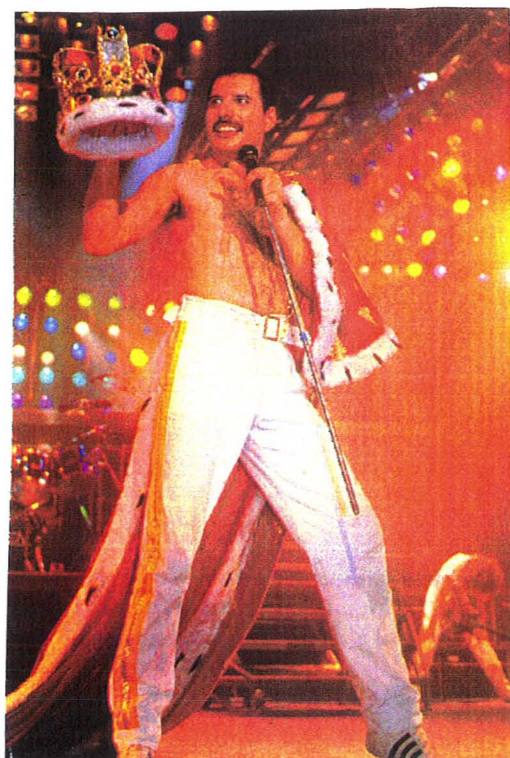


Figure 8: Mercury, the Queen

This political wink at the Queen of England and at royalty must have been humorous to the band's many British fans, particularly in the wake of The Sex Pistols' anarchic music that rocked Britain in the late 1970's. The punk group's 1977 hit, "God Save the Queen," is helpful in further defining the subtleties of camp, and Queen's engagement with this aesthetic. Both the Sex Pistols' original composition, "God Save the Queen," and Queen's appropriation of the traditional anthem by the same name, engage in a form of ridicule and mockery of Queen Elizabeth and British Royalty. However, it is the *intent* behind the ridicule that remains disparate. The Sex Pistols' scathing "God Save the Queen," described by one writer as "one Molotov

cocktail tied to a stopwatch,”⁷⁵ was intended to be an all-out anarchic assault, the political implications in the lyrics being “not about a woman called Elizabeth Windsor but about asserting a right to a future that a redundant establishment... seemed determined to deny.”⁷⁶ The rage and disgust in Johnny Rotten’s voice displays little humour or subtlety in its delivery of an overtly political message. The timing of the song’s release to coincide with Queen Elizabeth’s Silver Jubilee celebrations as Queen of Great Britain served to entrench the song further in youth rebellion, as “God Save the Queen” became the anti-Jubilee protest song, “the only rallying call for those who didn’t agree with the Jubilee.”⁷⁷ The controversy which followed resulted in the banning of the song from the air waves, marking the Sex Pistols “ringleaders of a ‘sick,’ ‘sinister’ conspiracy against the English way of life.”⁷⁸

Queen’s appropriation of the traditional anthem, “God Save the Queen,” involving May’s guitar orchestration and Mercury’s flamboyant showmanship, conveys a more subtle message which is not weighed down by the heavy political implications that the Sex Pistols intended. The irony is played out on the surface of the performance, the humour resulting from what is *not* being stated explicitly, yet what is present in the “knowing-wink” between audience and performer. How audacious, and humourous that a rock vocalist should dress in such a manner, and that a rock band, a most

⁷⁵Clinton Heylin, *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here’s the Sex Pistols* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), p. 70.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistol’s and Punk Rock* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1991), p. 352.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 365.

irreverent part of popular culture, should name themselves after the head of high society, the Queen herself!

There are other instances that clearly reflect the nature of Mercury's camp performance aesthetic. For instance, Mercury had a particular penchant for toasting his audiences with champagne during a concert. One reviewer notes that at a 1975 concert, Mercury threw white roses out to the fans. Here again, we see the irony and humour of the camp aesthetic as the champagne and roses commonly associated with high culture are transplanted into the low culture of a stadium rock concert. Additionally, as Mercury throws roses out to his fans, he engages in a humorous reversal of classical music performance rituals, as the roses which would commonly be presented to the opera diva in congratulations at the end of a performance are instead being thrown out by this campy "diva" of rock to his audience.

Mercury always insisted on pulling out all the stops at a show to ensure the entertainment of the audience. "People want art, they want showbiz. They want to see you rush off in your limousine..."⁷⁹ Much to the dismay of music journalists, Mercury persisted in an extravagant and glamorous lifestyle. Regarding costuming, Mercury is quoted as saying, "I have fun with my clothes on-stage; it's not a concert you're seeing, it's a fashion show. I dress to kill, but *tastefully*. My nail polish? I used to use Biba, now I use Miners. One coat goes on really smooth."⁸⁰ This brings to mind Esther Newton's words, as quoted earlier, that in camp the importance shifts

⁷⁹Rider, 1992, p. 130.

⁸⁰Don Rush, "Queen's Freddie Mercury," *Circus Magazine* (March 17, 1977).

from what a thing *is* to how it *looks*. Mercury's obsession with looks, as reflected in the earlier discussion regarding his make-up and costume, is all-a part of the entertainment of the audience, all part of his extravagant show.

Music critic Julie Webb in her article "Just a Regular Kinda Guy," notes that Mercury was a "self-confessed poseur and dandy," and describes what I imagine would have been a particularly humorous moment at a Queen concert, "...when he [Mercury] sings their encore 'Big Spender' and yells 'I don't pop my cork for everyone,' you'd better believe him."⁸¹ This form of sexual innuendo was all part of Mercury's interactions with audiences. Along with his addressing of the crowd as "my darlings" or "my dears," Mercury somehow possessed a coy playfulness which, in yet another irony, allowed Mercury to feign an air of innocence while being so obviously over-sexed. In the same article Webb, who comments "Freddie's not bent, just camp," quotes Mercury on a recent stage idea he had, "I'd like to be carried on stage by six nubile slaves with palms and all."⁸² A definite image of decadence, one that was realized (in a slightly different manner however) during their U.S. tour in late 1978, which featured Mercury's arrival on stage each night astride the shoulders of two muscle men in full spandex "Superman" costumes. Incidentally, the entire band camped it up during this concert tour, arranging for dozens of naked women to circle the stage on bicycles—a visual supplement for their newly released double A-side "Bicycle Race/Fat Bottomed Girls."

⁸¹ Julie Webb, "Just a Regular Kinda Guy," *New Musical Express* (April 4, 1974).

⁸² Ibid.

Mercury brought his love of ballet to the band in their performances and videos, a contradiction to be sure for a rock band. In fact, in October 1979 he was invited to dance with The Royal Ballet for a charity gala at the London Coliseum. This must have been a dream come true for the flamboyant Mercury, particularly considering the music he danced to: specially orchestrated versions of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” “Crazy Little Thing Called Love,” and “Killer Queen.” Answering questions about his big premiere, Mercury was quoted as saying, “Yes, dear, I did this leap. A wonderful leap which brought the house down and then they all caught me and I just carried on singing.”⁸³ This is another example of the camp aesthetic—the high culture of ballet, an art form which requires years of intense training, is juxtaposed with the low culture of the rock scene as Mercury, completely untrained in this form of dance, leaps off the stage in tights while accompanied by orchestrated arrangements of rock songs. Even in his own comment, Mercury’s tone of address (“Yes, dear...”) and his dramatic recounting of the event paints him as a prima donna rather than a male rock vocalist. This ballet influence was also felt in the video for “I Want to Break Free.” In addition to the opening and closing segments, which featured the entire band dressed in drag as various characters from the British TV show “Coronation Street,” the video also incorporated a 45-second ballet sequence, inspired by Debussy’s *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*, for which Mercury rehearsed endlessly with The Royal Ballet.

⁸³Jones, 1997, p. 233.

We return to the question, if this camp aesthetic was found to be entertaining and enticing to the droves of fans that Queen amassed over the years, why would its presence be disconcerting to rock critics? Although Susan Sontag's enumerated list of camp characteristics is viewed by current scholars as an oversimplification, they are nonetheless useful as a starting point and helpful to the present discussion. Sontag notes that the essence of camp is love of the *unnatural*: of artifice and exaggeration, which converts the serious into the frivolous.⁸⁴ Drawing attention to her list, there are select items which deserve mentioning in this paper:

5) Camp art is often decorative art... emphasizing texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content...

7) All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of *artifice*.

20)[there is a] delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp... Successful Camp... even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love.

25) The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance.

27) Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much."

48)The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves.⁸⁵

These selected elements from Sontag's discussion on camp are revealing when considering Mercury's theatrics as a performer. They shed further light on why Mercury and, by extension Queen, have been consistently excluded from serious discourse surrounding rock and pop music—why this particular form of humour was poorly received by some, resulting in further exclusion and dismissal by the press.

⁸⁴Sontag, 1969, p. 277.

⁸⁵Sontag, 1969, excerpts from p. 279-291. Numbers correspond to those provided by Sontag in her original enumerated list on Camp.

The underlying message that many of Sontag's definitions of camp imply is that it is artificial, and that objects and persons possessing such a sensibility lack *serious* intent. Items five and seven give the impression that anything camp is merely surface, lacking in depth. The question this brings to the fore is one of *worth* and *quality*—how can art which embraces a camp sensibility, an empty, artificial approach, be worthy of serious discussion and consideration? Certainly if the term camp in our society is imbued with these notions of artifice and lack of content, it becomes even clearer why Queen and Mercury have been excluded from “serious” rock discourse—particularly since “seriousness” and “depth,” equalling “authenticity,” were the touchstones for critics and musicians of 1970's rock. Items 25 and 27, as defined by Sontag, strike at the heart of another major component of the Mercury image: his need for extravagance, both on stage, off stage, and in his music.⁸⁶ This, too, is linked to Sontag's items 20 and 48. Mercury's indulgence of himself, his obsession, noted in many biographies, for preening in front of a mirror for hours before performances, and his temperamental prima-donna nature, did not go unnoticed by the press. Although this can all be viewed as part of the camp performative, it was understood as overly self-indulgent and excessive by rock critics.

Andrew Ross points out in his essay “Uses of Camp” that, commonly, the use of the camp aesthetic is viewed as simply being “bad taste” or as “failed taste.”⁸⁷ This

⁸⁶Extravagance and excess, as well as issues of camp as found in Queen's music will be fully explored in Chapter 3.

⁸⁷Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” in *Camp Grounds*, David Bergman, ed. (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 68.

common interpretation of camp further weakens its subversive power and purpose—as does Sontag's accusation regarding “lack of content.” It fails to recognize that camp is a creation of a “specialized taste” among a subculture, which is a powerful force for Mercury. For as much as Mercury's camp performances may have worked against him and the band in the eyes of the music critics, for the fans who found it entertaining and intriguing, camp becomes part of a private code, acting as a “badge of identity.”⁸⁸ In this way, it would be appropriate to consider Mercury as engaging within a center of power, dangerous to the rock scene of the day, one of his own creating. If we invoke Julia Kristeva's idea, that calls for women to embrace their Otherness as a subversive force,⁸⁹ we can understand how Mercury, too, takes possession of his Otherness, claiming it as a strength, reveling in it and using it as a creative force which drives his production as an artist.

Freddie Mercury's outlandish presence as the lead singer of Queen contributed a great amount to the band's appeal. One writer commented that he was:

...one of the most flamboyant frontmen in rock (so much so that the others faded into the background whether they wanted to or not). Freddie Mercury was a consummate showman, a purveyor of flash camp so outrageous that all you could do was laugh... But if Freddie was larger than life, so too were his ambitions: he wanted Queen to be the biggest group ever and constantly pushed for them to break new territories, and face new challenges.⁹⁰

Such a determined artist would be an asset to any band, and in terms of audience

⁸⁸Sontag, 1969, p. 277.

⁸⁹Toril Moi, “Introduction” in *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 10-11.

⁹⁰Hogan, 1994, p. vi.

support there is no doubt that Mercury fulfilled his ambitions for success. However, as the preceding analysis has uncovered, aspects of Mercury's presentation may have been partly responsible for Queen's lack of critical acclaim. The gender play in which Mercury's costume and movements engaged posed a threat to the masculine foundations on which rock music is constructed. Mercury was an unfamiliar, discontinuous persona, difficult to reconcile and understand. Additionally, the camp humour Mercury embodied that became such a rich component of Queen's performance, both on record and on the stage, may have led critics to interpret Queen's music as feigning sophistication for non-serious ends. The absence of weighty seriousness in their approach served to lessen the value of Queen's music in the eyes of rock critics. For these reasons, Mercury impeded the band from receiving critical acceptance, becoming a focal point of marginalization for the critics.

Chapter 3

Queen's Music as a Site of Marginalization

Introduction

Although Freddie Mercury became a point of fixation for the press, the entire band were equally subjected to harsh criticism and resistance by critics. Queen's creative output in the studio was challenged from the beginning, and their live performances were often rejected as overly showy and musically weak when compared to their studio albums. Again, the band was faced with strong negative responses by the press throughout their career as musicians. This chapter theorizes that what gave rise to such harsh criticism, and ultimately contributed to their marginalization from mainstream rock, was the divergent nature of Queen's *sound* from the majority of rock music.

A myriad of factors come together to make up any band's musical style and sound. This combination results in what could be seen as a sonic fingerprint—that which sets one band apart from the others, attracting some fans and, as is the case between Queen and the press, repelling others. In this chapter I will undertake an exploration of the varied attributes which I feel constitute Queen's sonic fingerprint. Such a study of Queen's music is important because, contrary to what has been written,

their musical approach was, indeed, innovative, and it was a powerful marker of their otherness.

Similar to the gender issues surrounding Mercury's performance image and style as evidenced in Chapter Two, Queen's sound can be interpreted as yet another area where gender conventions were challenged. Queen's sound exhibits a tendency towards theatre, manifested in their borrowings from operatically inspired vocal styles, and aided by their extensive use of recording studio effects. As well, Mercury's vocal style and piano playing reflect qualities that are valued in classical music traditions,¹ atypical of sounds privileged in the rock tradition. As Chapter Three will discuss, the similarities of Queen's sound to these classical traditions implicates it as being effeminate—a sound which existed against the gendered conventions of rock music at the time. Additionally, this chapter will investigate how the eclecticism of Queen's music, a characteristic rooted in the British Music Hall tradition, furthered their marginalization by the press. Finally, I will examine the guitar style of Brian May, which is of fundamental importance to Queen's music. This analysis will further demonstrate how, similar to the image and performative style of Freddie Mercury, Queen's music instigated discomfort and confusion among rock critics.

¹Classical music is, of course, not a monolith and does embrace a variety of musical styles; my use of the term here refers primarily to common practice period harmonies and forms.

Queen's Sonic-Fingerprint

What is most intriguing about Queen's music, setting them apart from other bands, is their unmistakable "sound." Paul Théberge explores the relatively recent idea of a unique, identifiable "sound" in his book *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*. He argues that it has only been with the rise of the electronic reproduction of music that a band's effort to strive for a particular "sound" has become commonplace. Théberge states:

Indeed, musicians today (as well as critics and audiences) often speak of having a unique and personal "sound" in the same manner in which another generation of musicians might have spoken of having developed a particular "style" of playing or composing. The term "sound" has taken on a peculiar material character that cannot be separated either from the "music" or, more importantly, from the sound recording as the dominant medium of reproduction.²

Théberge notes that public awareness of this new notion of a particular "sound" was clearly in place by the early 1960's. He cites record producer Phil Spector as one of the first to be known for his unique "sound," which has since been referred to as the Spector "wall of sound." Further, Théberge comments that the notion of a unique and identifiable "sound," or what I would term sonic-fingerprint, has come to play an important part in our understanding of musical genres. As early as the 1960's, musicians, record producers, and audiences would categorize music according to its "sound"—the concepts of the early "Nashville Sound" and later the "Motown Sound" still remain today in our understanding of various musical genres. Théberge

²Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), pp. 190-91.

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²Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), pp. 190-91.

does caution that, particularly when discussing the early stages in the development of sound technology, the idea of “sound” should not be taken simply as a technical term. Rather, a studio’s or artist’s “sound” embraces the “system” of production that involves “the organization of musical, social, and technical means.”³

In recent musicological studies, the notion of “sound” has taken on an added dimension of inquiry—can musical sound be gendered? Historically, certain sounds have indeed come to be coded either as masculine, or as being more effeminate. Richard Leppert’s book, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* reveals many of these gender binaries that have become engrained in classical music traditions. Leppert notes that, as early as Ancient Greece, a dichotomy existed between stringed instruments, which require a bowing and plucking action to sound, and wind instruments, which require a breathing and exhaling process to sound:

In the first the action is external and public; in the second it is more personal and private. In Greek understanding the music of strings was Apollonian, civilized, in a word, manly, whereas that of winds was internal, sensual, sexual, Dionysian, and potentially *un*manly, that is, excessive, womanly—the unspeakable force encoded in the negative prefix “un-.”⁴

These associations regarding wind instruments can be even more definitively applied to vocal production. The voice is an unmediated instrument of the body. In singing, it gives an external realization to one’s internal, private being. In particular, vocal music is associated with the outward expression of *emotions*.

³Ibid., p. 193.

⁴Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. xxvi.

Emotional display through one's voice is a dangerous area to tread for the male musician. Robert Walser, at the beginning of his chapter "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender" in *Running with the Devil*, explains why this is the case in his discussion of the gendered contradictions contained within the rhetorical powers of Orpheus, the quintessential musician of Greek mythology:

Orpheus must sing in such a way as to demonstrate his rhetorical mastery of the world, yet such elaborate vocal display threatens to undermine Orpheus's masculine identity. Flamboyant display of his emotions is required as evidence of his manipulative powers, but such excess makes him into an object of display himself and suggests a disturbing similarity to the disdained emotional outbursts of women.⁵

Walser's analysis of Orpheus makes clear the link between vocal display and emotional display, yet takes it one step further, attaching notions of *excess* and *flamboyance* to the singing voice. Elaborate, excessive, and flamboyant displays in a vocal performance demonstrate a lack of control over one's inner self—an *over-indulgence* in one's emotions. Such display is antithetical to "masculine" music, for masculinity in music is understood as an *external* experience which is of the mind, reflecting control and reason, "a tool for domination."⁶ Opposite to this, flamboyant vocal display which in its excess reflects a *lack* of control, is an act of submission to one's emotions and has therefore come to carry "feminine" associations.

Thus we have established that excess in vocal production has been coded as "feminine." Taking these associations one step further, such display can also be linked to

⁵Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 108.

⁶Leppert, 1993, p. 65.

theatricality in performance. Vocal flamboyance, manifested through excessive physical display, becomes a very melodramatic act. Such excess in the voice is akin to the notions discussed in Chapter Two concerning *extra-daily* technique. Vocal flamboyance demonstrates a use of excessive energy by the performer to heighten the intensity of their performance, to draw attention to the voice and turn themselves, as Orpheus did, into an object for display. Such overindulgent behaviour reflects a lack of control, in effect a feminizing, theatrical display.

Given the relatively new importance of a band's individual "sound" in current listening practices, and a theoretical basis for understanding how sound reflects gender associations, I now turn to an analysis of Queen's "sound." "Bohemian Rhapsody" from *A Night At The Opera* (1975) was not only the band's biggest hit, but also one of their most theatrical and innovative singles. As such, this song is a particularly appropriate snapshot of Queen's repertoire, a fitting example to analyze the diverse *musical* attributes that come together in many of Queen's songs to produce their unique sonic-fingerprint.

In three distinctive musical sections, with a recapitulation of the first section at the end of the piece, "Bohemian Rhapsody" is a 6 minute mini-opera. The lyrics have multiple interpretations, and are somewhat ambiguous in nature. One interpretation is that the song tells the tortured tale of a young boy who just committed a murder. Others have interpreted the story as being about a young man contemplating suicide. There is a choral introduction, followed by the initial section of the piece which is in

the form of a simple ballad, featuring the verse material sung by Mercury alone, set to a gentle piano accompaniment figure, guitar, bass and drums. This moves into the famous middle section of the piece, which features complex multi-tracked vocals using intricate harmonies, a chorus of voices crying out to “Beelzebub.” The style of the piece, then, changes drastically, moving into a section of “heavy rock.” Finally, the music returns to the softer dynamics of the beginning, a recapitulation that serves as an epilogue to the preceding drama.

The *a capella* opening of “Bohemian Rhapsody” exemplifies the type of harmonic structures upon which much of Queen’s music is centered. Somewhat atypical for a rock band, their music is perhaps most easily understood using the tools of common-practice-period harmonic analysis (see Musical Example 1). The piece opens in Bb major, a key belonging more readily to the diatonic tradition of European Art music than to the blues-based/modal centered conventions of rock songs. Bars 1-5 follow a standard harmonic progression, presented in four-part harmony. Although in a standard meter (4/4 time), it is blurred by the fact that the lyrics are delivered in an expressive rubato style, and by the insertion of a 5/4 measure. The voices are not laying down a steady “groove,” but are acting in a dramatic form of recitative-style of narrative.

Bars 6-7 exemplify the *harmonic* complexity of the piece. Through an extended use of chromaticism, a series of secondary dominant structures unfold which serve to briefly tonicize the Eb chord in bar 7. This chromaticism carries over into bars 10

$\text{♩} = 72$

Lead Vocal

Bg. Vocal

Is this the real life? Is this just fan - ta - sy?

Bb major: $\text{I}^{\text{add } 6}$ V^7/V

3

O - pen your eyes, look

Caught in a land-slide, no es - cape from re - al - i - ty. O - pen your eyes, look

V^7 ii^7 V^7 I vi

6

up to the skys and see. I'm just a poor boy.

up to the skys and see. Ooh, poor

V^7/IV ii^7/IV V^7/IV IV ii^7 (ii^9)

9

I need no sym - pa - thy

boy. Be - cause I'm ea - sy come, ea - sy go, lit - tle high, lit - tle low.

V^7 V^7/IV IV bII I VII I bII I VII I

12

An - y way the wind blows does - n't real - ly mat - ter to

Ooh, the wind blows does - n't real - ly mat - ter to

IV I vii^0/V V^7

14

me to - me

me...

V^7 I

Musical Example 1: Bohemian Rhapsody – Opening

and 11; however, in this instance the chromaticism serves a *melodic* purpose rather than a harmonic one. Having briefly tonicized the subdominant of Bb in bars 6-7, followed by a ii-V movement, the harmonies have drifted away from the Bb tonal centre. However, the chromatic ornamentation of Bb in bars 10-11 (B-Bb-A-Bb-B-Bb-A-Bb) serves to reinforce the tonic once again, providing a strong resolution, embellished and strengthened by the oscillating chromatic chord structures, and the vocal 'swell' which acts to emphasize the Bb chords (*easy come, easy go, little high, little low*). The opening concludes with a standard cadential pattern, enriched further by a secondary leading-tone chord in measure 13 that serves to increase the impetus towards the V7 chord, and finally to a resolution on I in bar 15. Diatonic harmonic progressions, similar to those found in "Bohemian Rhapsody," are apparent in much of Queen's music,⁷ aligning their sound with classical traditions.

These diatonic harmonic progressions are made quite prominent through the presence of the "Queen Chorus," a crucial element of the Queen sound. In many of their songs, the voices of Freddie Mercury, Brian May, and Roger Taylor are brought together through multiple recorded overdubs, making highly integrated group harmonies a focal point of the Queen "sound." These overdubbed lines come together to form tight four-part harmony, akin to that of choral styles in classical music. Each of the four parts is also double-tracked, meaning that the same vocal line is recorded twice by the same voice. Of course, a singer can't reproduce the line exactly each time,

⁷Clear examples of this can be found in "Killer Queen" from *Sheer Heart Attack*, "Somebody to Love" from *A Day at the Races*, and "Bicycle Race" from *Jazz*, to name only a select few.

which results in slight differences in each take. These minor deviances in each discreet line add depth to the sound, giving the impression that an entire chorus of voices is present. This separates their sound from most rock bands: the dense vocals create very rich, functional harmonies similar to the sound of an operatic chorus.

The Queen chorus functions as an integrated part of the texture throughout much of their music, at times enveloping the lead vocal line. I find this to be the case in the opening of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” where the notes that I have come to recognize as constituting the principal “melody” do not strictly coincide with Mercury’s solo line. Instead, the “melody,” as I hear it, is made up of fragments from both Mercury’s vocal line and the vocal lines of the chorus. In this way, the distinction between Mercury and the chorus vocals becomes blurred. This prominent role of the chorus is markedly different from the traditional use of *background* vocals in rock music. For instance, in Doo-wop music (rooted in the harmonies of the gospel tradition), the background vocals are constituted by a series of triadic “oohs” and “ahhs” which act in *support* of the lead vocal line. Similarly, The Beatles, though drawing on diatonic triadic structures, feature the backup vocals as an accent to the lead vocal line, more as a sparse accompaniment to the lead vocalist, rather than as a continual 4-part choral progression. Even compared to a group such as Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, where the four often sang complete songs in 4-part harmony with somewhat of an integrated choral style, Queen’s chorus remains markedly different. With Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, all four voices sing as a unit—there are not distinct characters being created

and the chorus does not comment on the soloist's part. Additionally, the voices are not *theatrical* in nature, given the folk-style of their music.

The Beach Boys were one group who were, in fact, similar to Queen in their unusual experimentations with classical music constructions in their compositions and their foregrounding of vocal virtuosity. Their music often featured "sophisticated a cappella glee-club arrangements containing multiple suspensions, passing formations, complex chords, and both chromatic and enharmonic modulations."⁸ However, even in this case there is a notable difference from Queen, for The Beach Boys still maintained a lead singer/backup voices structure, albeit the lead singer presented a strong falsetto voice, and the background possessed a thick choral texture. This structure was not maintained in much of Queen's music. Instead, Queen's chorus often plays a vital role in creating a theatrical drama. "Bohemian Rhapsody" is a perfect example of this, as the chorus becomes the voice of a character unto itself, actually engaging in what could be considered a dialogue with Mercury. For instance, the voices often reinforce Mercury's phrases, as with their aforementioned echoing of the sentiment "poor boy," sung after Mercury's statement, "I'm just a poor boy." In doing so, they also *comment* on the scene—are they simply echoing Mercury, or are they addressing him with pity, "Poor boy..."? In this sense, the functioning of the Queen chorus is similar to that of the *choros* featured in Ancient Greek tragedy. "Early [Greek] drama

⁸Daniel Harrison, "After Sundown: The Beach Boys' Experimental Music," in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, John Covach & Graeme Boone, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 34.

only featured a single performer—as such, the *choros* would act as narrator...and would often be featured in dialogue with themselves.”⁹ In addition to engaging in a dialogue with Mercury, the Queen chorus intensifies the theatricality of Queen’s music. Massive vocal swoops, dramatic swells in volume, and sudden extremes in range allow the voices to punctuate the drama, picking out moments of climax and intensifying them.

Perhaps an even more pertinent influence on Queen, given their British roots, can be derived from the classical English oratorio tradition. English oratorio flourished under George Frederic Handel in the 18th century, and remained prominent in Britain throughout the 19th century. The oratorio was a sacred form, a dramatic presentation with a libretto based most often on the Old Testament, and divided into three acts or parts.¹⁰ In the oratorio, we find another form of music which, similar to Ancient Greek tragedy, focuses on the use of chorus, itself a “character” at times as the voice of the masses. The chorus would be used in varied ways texturally, from contrapuntal to homophonic arrangements, although the post-Handelian oratorio of the 19th century demonstrated a tendency towards purely chordal textures.¹¹ In a sense the oratorio can be viewed as opera without the sets, costumes and staging:

The oratorio does not impart its “subject matter,” whatever it may be, in such a way that it can be seen, but rather tells it. The form can be lyrical, epic, or dramatic. An opera is made up of three components: text, music, and staging; the oratorio limits itself to the first two.¹²

⁹John G. Landels, *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 14.

¹⁰Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Volume 3: The Oratorio in the Classical Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 238.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 244.

The image shows a musical score for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) in 4/4 time, key of D minor. The score is for the 'Dies Irae' section of Verdi's Requiem. The lyrics are: 'Sol -- vet sae -- clum in fa -- -- vil -- -- la'. The music features a staggered entry of the voices, with the basses entering on the downbeat of the first measure and the other voices entering on the second beat. The score is written in a homophonic style, with the voices moving in parallel motion.

Musical Example 2: Verdi – Messa di Requiem – “Dies Irae”

Queen’s use of chorus mirrors this oratorio form, employing a balanced use of soloist and chorus in order to “tell the story” in a dramatic fashion.

The distribution of the voices in Queen’s typically homophonic arrangements reinforces this chorus effect. The chorus vocals employ a wide range, creating a “Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass” distribution, as with classical vocal music. Before discussing “Bohemian Rhapsody” it is useful to include an excerpt from a classical work, Giuseppe Verdi’s “Messa di Requiem” (1874) to demonstrate the polyphonic voicing that is characteristic in a choral arrangement. The example given (see Musical Example 2) is taken from the end of the “Dies Irae.” This section is very dramatic, in part owing to the way in which the vocal lines interact. The bass voices enter on the downbeat of the measure on the syllable “Sol-” and are immediately answered on the second beat with a call from the tenors, altos, and sopranos singing “Solveth.” This staggered entry continues in the next bar, after which the voices diverge, tenors and basses singing

¹²Kurt Pahlen, *The World of the Oratorio*, Judith Schaefer, trans. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990), p. 9.

“sae-clum” then being joined in a triumphant climax by the altos and sopranos to finish the statement, “in favilla.” There is an independence of the lines, yet they interlock in a way that intensifies the drama of the text. This form of arrangement requires careful consideration by the composer. Such an emphasis on the *composed* nature of the music, with obvious attention given to musical detail in the complex arrangements of the voices, is unusual in rock music.

The drama of the chorus is also in part due to the exaggerated use of range in the voices, particularly at the top end. At climactic moments in the music, the upper voices in the chorus reach falsetto notes that are uncomfortably high, verging on “screeching” in what becomes an ostentatious vocal display. Such extremes in the use of vocal range at climactic moments is often evident in the classical music tradition, as demonstrated by the chorus in the 4th movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (see Example 3). At the line, “und der Cherub steht vor Gott,” the piece builds to a dramatic climax. Restatements of the latter part of the phrase (“steht vor Gott... vor Gott... vor Gott”) are greatly intensified by the stunning high A in the soprano line. In the case of classical music, such extreme use of range in vocal arrangements is effective and most appropriate, given that a chorus generally includes the presence of women singers who possess a high soprano range. What draws particular attention to Queen’s extreme use of the high range is that it is men’s voices that are singing. Such a high tessitura is normally heard from the body of a woman, not from the voices of three men. Choosing to sing in this abnormally high range is effective in

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a vocal ensemble, likely a choir, in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first system consists of four staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with the following lyrics: "und der Cher -- rub steht vor Gott, steht vor". The second system also consists of four staves with the lyrics: "Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott." The music is marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The notation includes various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs. The lyrics are written in German.

und der Cher -- rub steht vor Gott, steht vor

und der Cher -- rub steht vor Gott, steht vor

und der Cher -- rub steht vor Gott steht vor

und der Cher -- rub steht vor Gott steht vor

ff Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott.

ff Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott.

ff Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott.

ff Gott, vor Gott, vor Gott.

Musical Example 3: Beethoven – Symphony No. 9 – 4th movement

sopranos, punctuated by enthusiastic affirmations of “for ever, and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.” With each statement the sopranos ascend higher into their range, the tension building until the unison statement and tonal resolution at the end of the passage on “and Lord of Lords” (see Musical Example 4). Many of Handel’s choruses, including the “Hallelujah” chorus, have been characterized as “ceremonial” and “anthem-like,” characteristics that I feel Queen aspired to and achieved in much of their choral writing.¹³

The middle section of “Bohemian Rhapsody” demonstrates this SATB arrangement (see Musical Example 5). Notice the range that is covered in the first phrase, “Bismillah! No! We will not let you go. Let him go...” There are clearly three voices—three character groups—emerging from this texture. The first exclamation of “Bismillah!” is given in the low bass, which is joined/answered by the tenor/alto range of voices (in 4 part harmony) singing “No! We will not let you go.” This statement is returned with a plea from the soprano range, “Let him go,” which trails off on an extremely high Eb, hovering in a tight vibrato over the next bass entry of “Bismillah!” This pattern repeats, the choir interacting antiphonally in this manner until bar 9 of the example. Here we see a brief shift of time signature which breaks the antiphony, moving the chorus into a unison statement of “No! No! No!” ascending through a complex progression, beginning in the briefly tonicized key of D major, and climaxing on a I chord in the tonic key, Eb major.¹⁴ Again, this is unique in

¹³Smither, 1977, p. 261.

¹⁴Although the texture of this section and the harmonic progressions are strongly reminiscent of

[illegible]

Musical Example 5: Bohemian Rhapsody – Middle Section

rock music, where background vocals are traditionally comprised of fewer voices, a smaller range overall and a sparser texture that is much less excessive-and-dramatic than Queen's chorus.¹⁵

The chorus in Queen's music can be characterized as an intense dramatic display, not just in "Bohemian Rhapsody" but in much of Queen's music.¹⁶ The dominant vocals evoke strongly the *bodily* presence of the performers, more than that of an instrumentalist's body on a recording, whose presence is mediated through an external instrument. The voices are elaborate and excessive in their arrangements when compared to a typical use of background vocals in rock music. Returning to the earlier discussion concerning gender stereotypes in music, I would argue that this characteristic feminizes the Queen sound and, as such, plays a role in their marginalization. As previously discussed, vocal music is traditionally interpreted as internal, private and personal, by reason of its close link to the body in its production, and as such is most often labeled as feminine. The classically inspired choral sound of Queen is echoed in the tale of Orpheus. Queen, too, display a rhetorical mastery of music, but it is demonstrated in a way that is unconventional to rock. Queen's elaborate choral arrangements portray an emotional intensity, their excessive presence on Queen recordings reflecting a lack of control and an overindulgence on the part of the band.

choral music, the voice leading does not strictly follow the rules concerning proper common-practice period voice leading—parallel octaves and incorrect resolutions are present throughout.

¹⁵This is not to say, however, that rock music is in some way lacking, only that it uses a different kind of musical language.

¹⁶Other pieces which also use the chorus in the manner are "Great King Rat" and "My Fairy King" from *Queen*, "Ogre Battle" and "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke" from *Queen II*, "Killer Queen" from *A Night at the Opera*, "In the Lap of the Gods" from *Sheer Heart Attack*, and "Bicycle Race" from *Jazz*.

As Queen's lead singer, Freddie Mercury's voice is also an important characteristic of the band's sound. In order to understand how Mercury's voice is dissimilar to the majority of vocal production in the rock idiom, I turn to Allan Moore's discussion regarding the voice in his book *Rock: The Primary Text*. Moore notes that, in defining rock vocals, there is a distinction to be made between the "trained" voice and the "untrained" voice:

The "trained" voice is apt to sing tempered pitches precisely "in tune," to employ an even, full-throated tone with rich vibrato, and to have little use for other intonational and embellishing techniques. Although found in a range of older popular musics, it is not commonly found in rock, for its strongest connotations are those of legitimized music. Against this norm, the "untrained" voice is important in the ideology of rock as signifying "authenticity," since the trained voice is clearly held to have been tampered with.¹⁷

Although Mercury did not receive any formal vocal training, his vocal production reflects the characteristics of a classically-trained voice as described above. This is yet another factor which serves to set Queen's sound apart from that of their contemporaries.

In order to demonstrate this difference, it is useful to analyse Mercury's vocals in light of the four factors that Moore outlines as characterizing a vocal style: register and range of the voice; degree of resonance; the singer's attitude to pitch; and the singer's attitude to rhythm.¹⁸ Although he is a tenor, Mercury possesses and makes effective use of a wide vocal range, from his warm chest tone to an unconventionally high, yet controlled falsetto. He readily juxtaposes the low and high ends of his range, which makes for a dramatic performance.

¹⁷Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 42.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 43.

There is a consistency of resonance across the span of Mercury's range. His voice maintains a strong, rich resonance that seems to originate from his diaphragm (as a trained vocalist would sing), instead of originating from the throat, which can give some rock singers a harsher sound. As well, he often employs a controlled vibrato, particularly on long held notes. Equally interesting is the timbre of Mercury's high, falsetto end of his range. In an essay entitled "Men Making a Scene: Rock Music in the Production of Gender," Sara Cohen notes that in rock music the "high-pitched male voice is characterized by thin, reedy or nasal tones."¹⁹ Distortion of the voice is a common characteristic of rock vocal production, an effect which is commonly coded in rock as conveying *power*.²⁰ However, Mercury's singing style does not fall into this norm. Instead, he possesses a clear falsetto which, as Allan Moore suggests, carries connotations of effeminacy.²¹

The timbral quality of Mercury's voice also differentiates him from other rock vocalists. Mercury favours a very full-bodied, open, relaxed sound that is for the most part devoid of the distorted, raw, and aggressive vocal sounds favoured by rock singers like Mick Jagger or Robert Plant. He also privileges the contour of the melody, leaving out spontaneous vocal improvisations, and added vocal sounds such as moans, wails, and punctuating screams which are often characteristics of other rock vocalists.²² Mercury's intonation is regularly tempered. He tends to hit notes directly,

¹⁹Sara Cohen, "Men Making a Scene: Rock Music in the Production of Gender," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, Sheila Whiteley, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 25.

²⁰Walser, 1993, p. 45.

²¹Moore, 1993, p. 45.

²²Walser, 1993, p. 45.

with a minimal use of pitch inflection, sliding, or bending. Mercury's singing does not display many rhythmic subtleties, such as abnormal stresses on certain syllables or anticipations of the beat (which are often viewed as forms of subversion against the beat), but rather remains relatively even, with the occasional use of rubato to add to the dramatic delivery of the lyrics.

Mercury's singing style additionally emphasizes a precise articulation of the lyrics, marked by his clear enunciation of vowels and consonants, resulting in what could be termed an eloquent delivery. He does not interject superfluous syllables or off-beat notes into the vocal line (an extreme example of which would be the "boogification" singing style of Elvis Presley²³). Rather, Mercury's enunciation of the lyrics remains very clear. This is in opposition to other rock singers who often use a more imprecise, relaxed diction (an extreme case would be Bob Dylan), slurring words into each other, or "swallowing" the vowels and consonants, privileging a distinctive vocal timbre over clear delivery of the lyrics. This also relates to the absence of a raw, distorted timbre in Mercury's voice—although widely used in rock vocals, such distortion hampers clear enunciation of the lyrics. This is another way in which Mercury reflects a "trained" voice, for in the singing of Oratorio, opera, and other classical vocal music, clean diction is valued and regarded as a marker of excellent vocal technique.

It is possible that Mercury's clear diction may be purely a result of his Welsh accent. However, other hard rock bands were known to try and erase traces of their

²³Richard Middleton, "All Shook Up? Innovation and Continuity in Elvis Presley's Vocal Style," in *The Elvis Reader*, Kevin Quain, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 3-12.

Moore defines it. Again, Mercury's voice is transgressive to that of the masculine norm of rock singing. For listeners who are accustomed to a certain vocal production in rock, Mercury's clear enunciation and vocal style, which can be likened to a classically-trained voice, subverts our expectations. Mercury's voice serves to further frustrate any understanding of his identity as a typical "rock singer," and the gendered characteristics that define the male rock singer.

Another important characteristic of the Queen sound is their use of the acoustic piano, played by Freddie Mercury. The presence of a piano in rock was nothing new in and of itself. Early rock brought a level of prominence to the instrument through pounding, boogie-woogie stylizations, of artists like Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino and Little Richard. By the 1970's, however, electronic keyboards had become a featured instrument in many groups, particularly in the progressive rock genre. Queen's use of the acoustic piano fit into their proud disclaimer, "No Synthesisers!" as was printed inside all their albums prior to the release of *A Kind of Magic* in 1986. This claim was made specifically so that audiences would not mistake the variety of sounds they heard on the album as being produced using synthesizers. Rather, they wanted audiences to appreciate that the sounds they were hearing were created entirely on Brian May's guitar, or, in the case of the sound of a harp, ukelele, or other "foreign" instrument to the band, on actual instruments played by the band members.

The presence of Mercury's piano playing brings with it many classical music associations that are anathema to the rock aesthetic. In "Bohemian Rhapsody," the slow

chordal arpeggiations of the opening that reinforce the principal melody place the piano in the position of accompanying instrument, similar to the relationship between piano and vocalist in the classical *Ballade* or *Lied* genres. This is not in the tradition of the popular piano, keyboard, and organ styles heard in the majority of rock music of the 1970's, particularly in progressive rock, where the piano engaged in extended solos, much like the tradition of flashy *cadenzas* in classical music. The pianists and keyboardists of progressive rock:

...drew on a host of rhetorical devices drawn from the classical piano repertoire of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, that is, from roughly Chopin and Liszt to Debussy, Ravel, and Bartok. The progressive rock piano style is marked by virtuoso scalar runs and rolling arpeggios in the right hand, arpeggiated or melodically active accompaniments in the left hand, grandiose block chords, and sustained, impressionistic chordal backdrops that make ample use of the damper pedal to blur and blend notes. There is also a definite influence of J.S. Bach's toccata style in progressive rock: the scalar runs, the sequential spinning out of a particular rhythmic motive, the virtuoso arpeggiation of straightforward chord progressions.²⁶

This form of virtuosity, in the style of the "masters" of the classical canon like Liszt, brings with it masculine associations. In his discussion of guitar virtuosity, Robert Walser states:

virtuosity has always been concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called "potency." Both words carry gendered meanings of course; heavy metal shares with most other Western music a patriarchal context wherein power itself is construed as essentially male.²⁷

²⁶Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 36.

²⁷Walser, 1993, p. 76.

Thus the nature of the piano's presence in progressive rock of the 1970's reaffirms the privilege given to the long-standing masculine ideologies regarding technical skill, and the intellectual "mastery" of one's instrument.

A look at the piano part in "Bohemian Rhapsody" reveals a minimal, simplistic texture. As stated before, the opening features slow moving arpeggiations, which simply provide chordal backing to the vocals. The middle section of "Bohemian Rhapsody" is ushered in by straightforward staccato chords, played neatly on each beat. Mercury's playing reflects a naive, simplistic form of accompaniment, which in no way calls to mind the virtuosity of Liszt, nor that of the keyboard virtuoso who was a contemporary of Mercury's, Rick Wakeman from *Yes*. Instead, it reflects the traditionally held binary to the virtuoso concert performer—the piano music of the parlour, a domain typically held by women. Richard Leppert, in his book *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, unpacks the connection that has been made historically between "woman" and the piano. He explains that the harpsichord, and later the fortepiano, were used predominantly as an instrument in the home:

References to domestic keyboard instruments are legion in diaries and memoirs, as well as in stage plays on domestic situations and in countless novels. Modest households typically had a small spinet or, toward the end of the century, a small square piano. The wealthy bought single- and double-manual harpsichords and, later, large fortepianos. . . These instruments, played predominantly by girls and women, were in fact both signifiers and insurers of females' domestic role.²⁸

²⁸Leppert, 1993, p. 105.

Thus, the piano became a symbol of domesticity, of the demure housewife entertaining her family, an amateur pursuit.

Mercury, whose performance is *not* that of a virtuoso keyboardist, embodies this model of domesticity. Lacking in dominance, power and technical prowess, Mercury succumbs to the instrument with his fanciful melodies and gentle arpeggiations. This is exemplified by the emergence of a whimsical piano figuration in the middle of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” following the thundering vocal delivery of the line “Spare him his life from this monstrosity.” (3:28) In this instance, as with many, the piano comes across as simple, lighthearted, quaint, and unassuming. It in no way dominates the music and is completely absent of technically challenging figurations, fugal or other contrapuntal constructions, or virtuosic scale runs. Judith Tick provides a useful perspective of the piano in its female guise, when she says that prior to the emergence of female violinists in the late 19th century, “the piano, harp, and guitar were the appropriate feminine instruments. They were instruments for domestic entertainment and required no facial exertions or body movements that interfered with the portrait of grace the lady musician was to emanate.”²⁹ Mercury’s piano lines are not an expression of power—they are a “portrait of grace.”

The overall presentation of “Bohemian Rhapsody” is made all the more dramatic through Queen’s heavy reliance on studio produced effects in their song writing. As

²⁹Judith Tick, “Passed Away is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life” in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition*, Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 327.

was the practice of many bands in the 1970's, Queen's music sets out to explore and exploit the technologies that were available to them in the recording studio. Recording technology impacted the nature of Queen's compositional style, and certainly constitutes an important component in Queen's individual "sound."

In his article, "'A Magic Science': Rock Music as a Recording Art," Paul Clarke considers the effects that studio production and recording capability have had on the evolution of rock music. He notes that there have always been creative arts—sculpture, painting, books, musical scores—which "involve work which however exacting can be perfected whenever one chooses."³⁰ Clarke labels these as arts of *making*. Opposed to this, he identifies playing instruments, acting, and dancing as performance arts—arts of *doing*. The revolution in this time of recorded rock music is that we are dealing with an entirely new form of art, one that traverses both categories. The record, cassette tape or compact disc is a *made* thing, a concrete object, a recorded 'text' of sorts that we can listen to and enjoy time and again. However, this object is capable of transmitting a *performance*, an act of *doing*, albeit the same act every time we play it. The exciting aspect in this merger of *making* and *doing* is the new forms of *creative* art that have emerged, forms in which "the capturing of performances (on disc or tape or in digital coding) becomes not an end in itself but a gathering of raw material which can then be treated in various ways: speeded up, slowed down, chopped about, mixed, distorted, and so on, as part of a process of considered composition."³¹

³⁰Paul Clarke, "'A Magic Science': Rock Music as a Recording Art," *Popular Music* 3 (1983), p. 199.

The Queen chorus, which was previously discussed as being present in the majority of Queen's songs, is one result of this new form of considered-composition. The overdubbing of vocals in "Bohemian Rhapsody" presents a striking example of how recording technology helped Queen produce a performance that would have been otherwise impossible with only the band member's four voices. Recorded over seven straight days of at least 10 to 12 hours of continual singing, the vocal harmonies heard in the middle section of the piece are the result of over 180 vocal overdubs, recorded on tape and mixed together.³² This was a very experimental undertaking, even in the 24-track Sarm Studio in which Queen recorded, a system very advanced for its time.

Gary Langan, who assisted in the recording process recalls:

The drums, the bass and maybe a guide guitar and piano from Fred have got to be 10 or 12 tracks and it only leaves you another 12 to fool around with, which isn't very much when you look at the amount of vocals that are going on. You had to keep bouncing things down without losing the quality of everything, and we couldn't go back a stage. Once you'd gone down a route then nine times out of 10 it would destroy what you'd already done. . .³³

This type of multiple overdubbing was also used by Queen to produce Brian May's guitar tracks, a component of the Queen sound to which I shall return later in this chapter.

The voices came together to form a dramatic pseudo-operatic experience, enhanced by yet another studio technique that Queen were very fond of in their music, that of stereo-separation effects. As with many bands, these effects were used by

³¹Ibid.

³²Hogan, 1994, p. 33.

³³Thomas, 1999, p. 84.

Queen to contribute a certain perceptual depth to their pieces in terms of movement. Often they would manipulate sounds so that they would traverse dramatically from the left speaker channel, through the 'middle' (a balance of left and right), to the right channel. Similarly, Queen would play with speaker balance to move sound forward and back, swelling and diminishing, adding a very *physical* dimension to their recorded performances, one that is very difficult to bring about in a live performance. Exploring the creative potential of stereo-separation technology, Queen would also use the effect in their music to give the impression of a character dialogue. This is particularly prominent in the middle section of "Bohemian Rhapsody." Here, the chorus of voices is apparently split into two groups, one singing from the left channel only, and one singing from the right. The result is the perception that there are now *two* choruses, in dialogue with each other. This can be heard in the rapid interchange of the line, "we will not let you go" (left speaker channel) with "let me go!" (right speaker channel). Two single voices also participate in this conversational interchange: a falsetto "Galilleo" appears in the right speaker channel, which is answered by a deeper sounding "Galilleo" from the left speaker channel.³⁴

"Bohemian Rhapsody" is but one example of how Queen made use of the recording studio to produce a *considered composition*.³⁵ Such studio-centered recording

³⁴A similar use of stereo-separation effects to create dialogue can be heard in "Brighton Rock" (*Sheer Heart Attack*). Here, two characters (Jimmy and Jenny) are brought to life through Mercury's variance of vocal timbre (tenor voice vs. falsetto voice), as well as through the use of stereo-separation to distinguish the characters physically in aural space.

³⁵It should be noted that Queen were largely responsible for production of their albums, although *A Night at the Opera* is credited as being "produced by Roy Thomas Baker and Queen."

practices meant that many of their compositions were *dependent* upon the studio, the studio becoming in a sense a performing force unto its own. As such, the piece cannot be reproduced by the members of the band without the intervention of this technology. For example, when “Bohemian Rhapsody” was performed live, Queen would always sing the first section of the piece on stage, with Mercury at the piano, and then they would abruptly leave the stage while the recorded version of the operatic middle section played, accompanied by a smoke and light show. The band members would then return to play the final, hard rock section, live for the audience. This is the most obvious example of how deeply studio effects were a part of the Queen sound, but even in their other pieces the densely layered harmonies would be missing from the vocals in live performance, as would May’s multiple guitar overdubs. As one critic commented, this meant the live versions of their music were “punchless in comparison to the lush production that stole thousands of AM hearts.”³⁶ Audiences and critics may have felt that they were cheated out of a “proper performance” when Queen left the stage; however, it seems that it was the most reasonable and wise way to handle the situation. In leaving the stage, Queen tacitly acknowledged that section of the piece as belonging to a newly emergent form of creative art, a *considered composition* of the studio that simply does not transfer onto the stage.

The critics reacted negatively to this aspect of Queen’s music, betraying yet another privileged ideology of rock—that is, the importance of a band’s ability to recre-

³⁶Kris Nicholson, “A Night At the Garden,” *Creem* (May 1977), p. 44.

ate their recorded music in live performance. In "A Night at the Garden," critic Kris

Nicholson states:

Queen's music is like strong mouthwash. It takes my breath away but that initial rush is as temporary as it is abrupt. This probably has something to do with the discrepancy between what Queen is and what Queen would like to be. Queen IS a good studio band-cum-variety show with a flair for novelty, a patent on mock opera and Rock of Gibraltar guitar harmonies. . . Unfortunately they've mastered a studio perfection that does not lend itself to accurate live interpretation. . . If Queen—without the assistance of tapes—could reproduce their studio sound live, they'd certainly be one of the most impressive bands on the rock scene. But they can't and they aren't. . .³⁷

In keeping with this perspective, Daisann McLane's review, "Queen's Disrobing," charged that the smoke, strobes and elaborate staging in Queen's live show were actually "elaborate diversionary tactics" to cover up Queen's weak musicianship and material.³⁸ McLane goes on to say that, "Queen is a band with a cleverly constructed veneer: on the surface their music sounds profound and resonant, but underneath there's no substance. The group's studio work maintains this illusion of depth with dense, imaginative production and arrangements."³⁹

The implication in both of these critical examples, and in many other critics' writings, is that Queen is simply an overly dramatic novelty, lacking in any musical substance. Yet their argument hinges on the notion that it is their inability to recreate their music in live performance—a result of their studio experimentations—which is the indication of this weak musicianship. This critical dismissal dismayed Queen, and

³⁷Nicholson, 1977, p. 42.

³⁸Daisann McLane, "Queen's Disrobing," *Rolling Stone* (Jan. 25, 1979), p. 115.

³⁹Ibid.

they responded to the critics by insisting that their recorded performances and stage performances should be treated as totally separate entities, and that when they do something on record, there should be no obligation to repeat the feat in front of a live audience.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, such a separation of recorded and live performance is not part of the rock aesthetic. As Richard Middleton discusses in a chapter entitled “‘Over the Rainbow’? Technology, Politics, and Popular Music,” “live performances are inevitably ‘checked’ against memories of recordings.”⁴¹ This is due to the emergence of a new listening audience who, as discussed at the beginning of this section, are acutely aware of *sound*. Middleton labels this awareness a “recording consciousness” that has inevitably developed in the ears of audiences after repeated listening to recorded music, mediated by recording technology. Middleton continues to explain that, “this consciousness defines the social reality of popular music, and live performances have to try to approximate the sounds which inhabit this consciousness.”⁴² Queen’s experimentations in the studio simply moved in such a radical direction that, in some cases, it was impossible for them to approximate their recorded music at all. The result was a misleading critical assessment, determined through a confusion of two separate issues. Queen were thus labeled as musically weak, when what was really at issue was the critic’s inability to view Queen’s studio experimentations and innovations in their recordings as a possible strength, separate from their live performances.

⁴⁰They attested to this fact in a number of interviews, but most specifically in discussion with Harry Doherty, as published in the article “Killer Queen,” *Melody Maker* 51 (Sept. 18, 1976), pp. 26-27.

⁴¹Middleton, 1990, p. 88.

⁴²*Ibid.*

Due to the abundance of stereo experimentations in Queen's pieces, their music has at times been interpreted by critics as "overproduced." The excessive vocals and multi-tracked guitar layering was clearly brought about through intense studio efforts, and the resultant sound was excessive, opulent—luxurious. This recalls the same scenario of excess that was described in Chapter 2 regarding Mercury's movements. As explained in Barba's theory, excessive physical energy allows the performer to operate with a "luxury" balance. Although this is one way in which an effective bodily performance is brought to life, such a positive interpretation may not have been made by the critics regarding Queen's luxurious sound. For, ultimately, the opulence of their sound can be linked to commercialism. The large sums of money required to pay for the countless hours of studio time to produce this music can almost be heard within the many layers of overdubbed vocal and guitar lines. Given the earlier discussion in Chapter 1 regarding the critic's negative views of commercialism in music, these excesses in production were likely a point of disdain for the critics.

One last attribute that is part of Queen's sonic-fingerprint is their stylistic eclecticism. In a retrospective of Queen and Freddie Mercury in *Rolling Stone*, critic Jeffrey Ressler states that, "Queen laced British glam pop with swooping arias, corny vaudeville themes and heavy-rock bombast."⁴³ Each of Queen's albums offered a pastiche of musical styles, and *A Night at the Opera*, which featured "Bohemian Rhapsody," was no exception. The operatic single was accompanied on the album

⁴³Jeffrey Ressler, "Freddie Mercury: 1946-1991," *Rolling Stone* (Jan. 9, 1992), p. 13.

by the folk sound of "'39", the jazz influenced "Good Company," two vaudevillian numbers ("Seaside Rendezvous" and "Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon"), the hard rock sound of "Death on Two Legs" and "I'm in Love With My Car," and the slow tempo ballads "You're My Best Friend" and "Love of My Life." This stylistic diversity is sometimes felt even within the confines of a single piece, like in "Bohemian Rhapsody." Each section sounds stylistically like a completely different song, with the operatic vocals of the beginning standing in stark contrast to the heavy rock sound at the end. The final section of the piece features some heavy guitar riffs from May, along with a rare appearance of distortion in Mercury's voice. Although distortion is not a part of Mercury's vocal style, his use of this vocal style in the final section of the piece is appropriate, as it contributes to the hard rock feel. The intrusion of this heavy section of music into the operatic texture reflects the stylistic diversity of Queen. As well, it contributes to the theatre of Queen's music—each contrasting musical style in "Bohemian Rhapsody" delineates a change in mood and scene in the dramatic story. It also indicates that the band *knew* what the "rock" sound was, yet were clearly choosing not to follow that stylistic convention in their own music.

What can be made of this unusually eclectic style? The nature of Queen's stylistic diversity is not necessarily without historical roots, for it is akin to the spirit of a late 19th century tradition in British popular music. Queen's approach to musical entertainment is similar to the eclectic concerts of the Music Hall tradition. Officially named in the 1850's, the term "music hall" was adopted as a label for the venues

in which popular entertainment was presented. The term was likely chosen to lend respectability to these popular venues, as previously "music hall" had been used to describe concert halls which specialized in the more traditional forms of classical music.⁴⁴ These music halls were frequented by both upper and lower class patrons, and featured a wide variety of music, drama, and variety acts. However, musical entertainment remained the principal element in music hall shows until its decline in the mid-1920's.⁴⁵ Although this was not a living tradition during the time of Queen, it is still a possible influence on the diverse style of Queen's music. The remnants of such English traditions do remain, at least to some extent, in the eclectic entertainment associated with mens working clubs, the social "Pub" scene in Britain, as well as in the eclecticism of British AM radio programming.⁴⁶

An evening of music hall entertainment drew on a diverse mix of musical styles: parlour ballads which were comical, politically satirical, or sentimental in nature; familiar folk tunes; glee songs; music for the presentation of ballet; street ballads that commented on everyday life; waltz-refrains; and barrel-organ music. As well, "classical selections, overtures and madrigals featured in most music hall performances..."⁴⁷ Bawdy songs were also featured in the music hall until the 1880's. As one observer documented, "gradually, a change took place in the style of enter-

⁴⁴D.F. Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbot: Biddles Limited, 1974), p. 17.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁶I would like to thank Dr. Ken McLeod for drawing my attention to, and assisting me in developing, this important connection between British Music Hall traditions and Queen's eclectic musical style.

⁴⁷Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 88.

tainment. Ribald songs were banished, and instead the choruses were sung by choirs of young boys whose sweet fresh voices were heard with charming effect in the old glees and madrigals.”⁴⁸ Eventually, ragtime music and Dixieland jazz crept into the halls by 1912, which shifted the focus of the halls and led to the decline of the old-time music hall shows.⁴⁹

Perhaps it is these cultural roots which can explain the variety of styles that Queen strove to include on their albums. As well, the inclusion of classical music in the music hall is paralleled on Queen’s albums—the opera of “Bohemian Rhapsody” and the appearance of the waltz form in “The Millionaire Waltz” (*A Day At The Races*) are but two instances of this. Moreover, the comment regarding young boys’ choirs is most interesting, as the male ‘choir’ backup vocals are a backbone of Queen’s sound.

More importantly, this music hall tradition may explain why the British press was generally more accepting of Queen than the American press, given that this form of eclecticism is at the root of the British popular music tradition. Even so, this stylistic diversity *was* yet another bone of contention for the British and American critics. The inability to classify, to pigeonhole the band under a genre label, and to line the band up neatly alongside existing acts in rock at the time, was a point of frustration to critics. Queen and their music didn’t “fit” neatly, didn’t seem to belong. Critic Chet Flippo’s 1978 review of the band reveals this paradoxical issue:

Queen cannot decide between art rock of the most pretentious sort or hard rock of the most derivative sort. Freddie Mercury cannot decide whether

⁴⁸Cheshire, 1974, p. 19.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 53.

he wants to be Mick Jagger or Paul McCartney. Queen's songs cannot decide whether to be the Who or Led Zeppelin or the Beatles or tortured chanting Gregorians.⁵⁰

The way in which many critics dealt with Queen's eclecticism was, again, to dismiss them—this time, by accusing them of merely copying a multitude of groups which had come before. Paul Nelson in a very dismissive concert review, "Queen: Pomp Without Circumstance," said of the concert:

The long march began. Queen gave us Yes, Uriah Heep, the most leaden of Led Zeppelin, even the Beatles. During "Father to Son" they went from heaviest metal into a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young harmony riff, capping that with a Pete Townshend-like leap by guitarist Brian May...⁵¹

However, as Flippo continues, his description of Queen's eclecticism is cast in a negative light: "Therein lies the serious paradox that will forever keep Queen from being a truly major group: its ambivalence."⁵² In this case, and in the writings of other critics, Queen's artistic creativity is sooner understood as "ambivalence" than an exciting form of musical entertainment. Is it Queen who is pretentious, or is it the popular press?

Brian May - Guitar Orchestrator

Another crucial component of Queen's sound was Brian May's trademark guitar, the Red Special. In 1963, by the age of sixteen, May had decided his acoustic guitar was inadequate, and longed to purchase an electric guitar. Unable to afford one, May and his father set out to build an electric guitar on their own, a project which took 18

⁵⁰Chet Flippo, "A Night at Queen's Royal Carnival," *Rolling Stone* (Jan. 26, 1978), p. 60.

⁵¹Paul Nelson, "Queen: Pomp Without Circumstance," *Rolling Stone* (Apr. 24, 1975), p. 78.

⁵²Ibid.

months to complete and cost a mere £18.⁵³ The neck of the guitar was painstakingly carved from a piece of mahogany taken from an old fireplace, and was supported by a truss rod to keep it straight. The neck was then bolted onto the oak body, and pearl shirt buttons from Mrs. May's sewing box served as fret markers. Next came the three pickups and tremolo arm. As Jacky Gunn and Jim Jenkins recount in their book, *Queen: As It Began*:

The pickups Brian wound himself, with wire and magnets. . . but the result was less than satisfactory so he resorted to buying a set of Burns pickups at three guineas each. He adapted them by filling them with epoxy resin to stop them being microphonic. The tremolo arm was made from a piece of mild steel, hand carved, rocking on the blade of a case-hardened steel knife edge and the pull of the strings was balanced against two motor bike valve springs.⁵⁴

The unique specifications to which May built the guitar are in many ways responsible for the truly original sound that he produces. Primarily, the wiring and switching systems allow for pickup combinations that are not normally available on three-pickup guitars. With the Red Special, each pickup can be selected individually or can be used in combination with any other pickup. As well, there is a series-parallel switch which allows any pickup or combination of pickups to be in- or out-of-phase with each other. According to Wolf Marshall, "Brian generally places [his pickups] in series. His favorite tone setting, used 85 percent of the time, is the bridge and middle pickups in-phase - a familiar fat sound on Queen records, particularly on the heavier

⁵³Jacky Gunn and Jim Jenkins, *Queen: As It Began* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., 1992), p. 4.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

riffs and solo lines. Occasionally he will opt for more unusual tones. . . .”⁵⁵ Another unique feature that the Red Special possesses is its vibrato bar system, which falls over an octave to the low E, much lower than other guitars of the time. Marshall explains, “[Brian] uses the bar for dive bomb effects, engine noises, and to add a mellow vibrato to chords and single notes.”⁵⁶

May’s sound can also be attributed to his use of a sixpenny piece as a pick. He has commented, “I could never find a plectrum which was stiff and rigid enough for me. The coin is totally rigid so you feel the movement from the strings in your fingers.”⁵⁷ May found he was able to use it in different ways which resulted in various effects: playing it straight against the strings produced a hard but clean sound, while hitting the strings with the serrated edge would result in a harsh, grating sound.⁵⁸

The Red Special is the only guitar on which May performed, save for the occasional acoustic set, and his use of a Fender on “Crazy Little Thing Called Love.” Brian recalls:

I used one of Roger’s really old, beat up, natural wood Telecasters. I got bludgeoned into playing it. I said, “I don’t want to play a Telecaster. It basically doesn’t suit my style.” But “Crazy Little Thing” was such a period piece, it seemed to need that period sound. So I said, “Okay, if you want to set it up, I’ll play it.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵Wolf Marshall, *The Best Of Queen: A Step-By-Step Breakdown of the Guitar Styles and Techniques of Brian May* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1997), p. 7.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Laura Jackson, *Queen and I: The Brian May Story* (London: Smith Gryphon Ltd., 1996), p. 25.

⁵⁸Gunn, 1992, p. 5

⁵⁹Jas Obrecht, “Brian May: On The Record,” *Guitar Player* (Jan. 1983).

The style May speaks of hinges on the sound that his one-of-a-kind Red Special produced.⁶⁰ In relying so completely on his custom-built guitar, May acted to marginalize himself from rock culture. He did not belong to the world of musicians able to quote model numbers of their Stratocaster or Gibson guitars, and never strove to join that world by promoting or using any of the brand name guitars available on the market.

May commented in one interview:

I don't have much interest in guitars and equipment to be truthful. The most boring thing that can happen to me in an interview is when people say, "What number do you turn up to?" At that point I kind of turn off because I don't give a fuck really. If it sounds good, it is good. I don't have any interest in gear.⁶¹

This marks an important distinction between May and his contemporaries who used commercially-made guitars with such trademark names as the Gibson Les Paul, and the Fender Stratocaster, among others. In the culture of rock guitar playing, using these instruments, possessing technical knowledge about them, and engaging in discourse that demonstrates this knowledge, is a critically important step in being accepted and included in an exclusive club. Open the pages of any guitar magazine, or of many books about guitar-based bands, and there will be descriptions of exactly which guitars the virtuoso prefers, which he has played on what song, and technical discussions of how these instruments work and what sounds they are capable of producing. Using these instruments and possessing knowledge about them is part of the discourse of authenticity in rock music—by doing so, one positions oneself inside

⁶⁰I will address the issue of May's unique guitar sound in more detail later in the chapter.

⁶¹Author unknown, "Interview with Brian May and Nuno Bettencourt," *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, (September 1993). [ONLINE] Available from <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Venue/6448/gftpmsep93.html> [Accessed Sept. 20, 1999].

the culture. Since May did not use these instruments or wish to talk about them in technical terms, he positioned himself firmly outside of that culture. Given that this discourse is created largely by and about male performers, it too is gendered primarily as masculine. May, then, not only situated himself outside of one of the central debates concerning rock authenticity, but he also marginalized himself from a central debate concerning technology and knowledge about that technology which is gendered as male.

In addition to playing a unique guitar with a sound unfamiliar to rock, May also did not fit into the “transcendental guitar hero” cult of the mainstream that began in the 1960’s with Jimi Hendrix, and continued into the 1970’s with artists like Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, and Jeff Beck. Simon Frith, who describes the electric guitar as a “central sound of rock,” states that “the archetypal rock image is the guitar hero—head back, face clenched, his feelings visibly flowing through his fingertips.”⁶² This is one of the many stereotypes that Brian May contradicts as a performer. To watch May on video footage of the band reveals a shy, restrained performer. It is rare to see May travel from his position on-stage, at Mercury’s left. During his solos, May generally keeps his head down, eyes focused on the fingerboard of his guitar, his movements very contained, his face reflecting a calm concentration. Frith further associates the guitar and the guitar hero with the production of “male,” and “cock-rock” music, wherein the performance becomes an “explicit, crude, ‘master-ful’

⁶²Frith, 1978, p. 161.

expression of sexuality,” the guitar acting as a phallic symbol.⁶³ The use of the guitar as a “phallus,” as representative of control and “masterful expression” brought about through the external manipulation of the instrument, recalls the notions the Ancient Greeks held regarding stringed music as a *public, manly* display. May, however, presents a more restrained performance that, contrary to the guitar “hero” image, reflects a personal sharing, a private action, an approach which serves to effeminize May as a performer, *internalizing* the power of his performance.

The discourse which surrounds the characterization of the *rock* guitar sound invariably involves terms such as distortion, power chord, sustain, and feedback. It is a discourse entrenched in the notion of “power.” Robert Walser makes this connection explicitly in his discussion of distortion, “distortion functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it.”⁶⁴ As well, Walser re-iterates this connection in his discussion of sustain, “since sustaining anything requires effort, the distorted guitar sound signals power, not only through its distorted timbre but also through this temporal display of unflagging capacity for emission.”⁶⁵ Given this association with power, the electric guitar is typically viewed as rooted in the male experience, exhibiting “masculine virtuosity and control.”⁶⁶

⁶³Ibid., p. 227.

⁶⁴Walser, 1993, p. 42.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 108.

There is at least one song on each album in which May's electric guitar appears in this traditionally understood guise. For instance, a song like "Stone-Cold Crazy" from *Sheer Heart Attack* features the "powerful" guitar sound discussed above. May begins the song with a wailing feedback note, which is followed by the entry of the main riff of the song, which can be characterized as "a heavily-accented, low-register melody made of chunky eighth notes and a Bb5 power chord."⁶⁷ Wolf Marshall, in his analysis of this piece, notes that "the predominate scale is G minor pentatonic, which is characteristic of the era's metal lexicon."⁶⁸ May's playing in this piece incorporates the string bends, vibrato, and blues sound which were typical to the sound produced by such prominent rock guitarists as Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and Jimmy Page, the "school of British electric blues."⁶⁹

However, much of May's guitar work does not fit the "archetypical" guitar sound. Herein lies yet another factor which differentiates Queen, excluding them from the commonly held ideologies of what constitutes the rock sound. First, there is the issue of the key structure of much of Queen's music. Brian May explains:

Freddie wrote in strange keys. Most guitar bands play in A or E, and probably D and G, but beyond that there's not much. Most of our stuff, particularly Freddie's songs, was in oddball keys that his fingers naturally seemed to go to: E-flat, F, A-flat. They're the last things you want to be playing on a guitar, so as a guitarist you're forced to find new chords. Freddie's songs were so rich in chord-structures, you always found yourself making strange shapes with your fingers. Songs like *Bicycle Race* have a billion chords in them.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Marshall, 1997, p. 29.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰David Thomas, "Their Britannic Majesties Request," *Mojo: The Music Magazine* (August

Thus May's playing was often not rooted in the blues-based sound that was common to the period, but rather featured atypical chord progressions, derived from the diatonic scales found in classical music. This is problematic for Queen, as it places their sound outside the notions of authenticity which surrounded rock music at the time. Allan

Moore addresses this issue of authenticity in *Rock: The Primary Text*:

[The] search for origins in the blues is the key element in the ideological identification of 'rock' as separate music from 'pop'...British cultural theorists with an interest in rock have a strong tendency to devalue any style that is not primarily constituted from elements which can be tagged as 'black'...It also represented an attempt to find a music 'pure' and lacking in 'artifice', again since all our music, whether 'pop' or 'classical', was overburdened with these features.⁷¹

Upon reading various interviews with May, it becomes clear that he was very obsessed with his own sound, striving for a specific tone, one that would be akin to that of a voice, and not at all derived from the rock or blues idioms. May commented:

For me, the sound is vitally important. There is really no beauty in guitar playing unless the sound is beautiful to begin with. If the thing is sounding scratchy or distorted or just not right, I instantly feel that I can't play. My guitar is very personal. People have said, "Why don't you sit in with us and play something? You can use my guitar." Sometimes I've said yes and then haven't been able to play anything because I couldn't make it sing.⁷²

When asked by one interviewer, "Are you not aware that your sound is unique?" May replied:

That's partly accidental because me and my dad made the guitar...I had this sound in my head. I knew that I wanted it to be like a voice so there was some planning involved. But really I was lucky that I found it. I

1999), p. 79.

⁷¹Moore, 1993, pp. 64-65.

⁷²Jas Obrecht, "Brian May: On Record," *Guitar Player* (January 1983).

suppose I had a slight doubt in the beginning that maybe it was a little too mellow. And it was sounding different to everybody else. I felt that it was like a voice and I kind of went on with it.⁷³

Describing how he produces this mellow, voice-like sound, May explained:

I use the fingerboard pickup and the middle one in phase to make a very mellow sound. And there's a point on the amplifier where it's just about to get distorted, but not quite. Instead of using a pick, I tap the fingerboard with the right hand, and that just sets the thing moving. It sustains itself. You hardly even need to tap it any...it's very smooth.⁷⁴

This notion of a “mellow” sound that “sings” is antithetical to that of the heavily distorted, raspy, heavy timbre of other guitarists. Whereas many players boost the bass and treble on their instrument, resulting in a rough-edge to their tone, May's sound reverses this balance, reducing the bass and treble leaving a warm, mellow sound.⁷⁵ It is only fitting that May's sound should be unique in this way, for it exists in a complementary relationship with Freddie Mercury, mimicking Mercury's vocal style. As such, it serves to augment the “vocal opulence” that defines Queen.

Given the ideologies revealed earlier in a quote from Allan Moore concerning “authentic” rock vis-a-vis the artifice of classical music, it becomes easy to understand how May's *compositional style* could also be viewed as disconcerting to critics entrenched in the blues-based guitar sound of the 1970's. May demonstrated great skill as a composer in what can be considered his guitar *orchestrations*. His parts and solos

⁷³Author unknown, “Interview with Brian May and Nuno Bettencourt,” *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, (September 1993). [ONLINE] Available from <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Venue/6448/gftpmsep93.html> [Accessed Sept. 20, 1999].

⁷⁴Obrecht, 1983.

⁷⁵I would like to thank Simon Wood for sharing with me the technical details of sound production on the electric guitar, and for helping me to recognize the differences in sound between May and other guitarists.

in various Queen songs take on the character of full scale, considered compositions for the instrument. My choice of terminology reflects yet another instance of how Queen's music demonstrates classical appropriations. In choosing words like orchestration, composer, and compositions, I invoke terms which are generally associated with *classical music*, not rock bands. This is intentional, for I believe it is these classical terms which accurately describe the sound of May's playing, as well as the intent behind his unique approach to music writing. This crossover of terminology from classical music into rock music analysis is addressed by Richard Middleton. In problematizing the issue, he explains that the rich vocabulary of "classical music" is ideologically loaded. Words like "accidental" and "semitone" automatically call to mind the processes of functional-tonal music, just as "syncopation" is often understood as a subversion of the rhythmic norm. The problem, according to Middleton, is that these terms do not serve Other musics such as rock, jazz, or world musics very well, hence there is a difficulty in using the terms and methodologies of the classical 'canon' in understanding popular musics.⁷⁶

The principal recording technique that May is known for is his multi-guitar layering. As opposed to overdubbing various guitar lines in an effort to produce a more *powerful* sound, May weaves complex triadic textures in a classically contrapuntal style, resulting in what could be called a *choir* or *orchestra* of guitars.⁷⁷ May himself

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 104

⁷⁷Wolf Marshall in *The Best of Queen* makes an analogy between Brian May and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, stating that Page's strategies resulted in a "guitar army," very different from the May guitar orchestra. (p. 13)

comments to this point directly in a 1983 interview with Jas Obrecht of *Guitar Player* magazine:

On *Queen II* there is a lot of stuff which I like because that was the beginning of doing guitar orchestrations, which I always wanted to do. The first track—"Father to Son"—starts off with an introduction. After it gets into the song and a few words are sung, it immediately goes into a six-part orchestral kind of thing. . . that was the fulfillment of an ambition for me, to get started on that road of using the guitar as kind of an orchestral instrument.⁷⁸

This technique was one that audiences had rarely heard before. If any sound can be defined as dramatic and indulgent, May's layers of guitar overdubs is exactly that: completely over the top. This layering of guitars using studio techniques may have been construed by the critics as a form of artificial virtuosity, since May's guitar playing on recordings was so highly dependent on the mediation of studio effects. However, such an impression would be misunderstanding May's skills as a performer. For, as much as May's recording may not have frequently indulged in the more traditional improvisatory, transcendental guitar solo, his guitar orchestrations required considerable skill in terms of composition and arrangement. Again, these are two components of performance that are privileged moreso in classical genres than in rock music.

There are many characteristic techniques that appear in May's guitar lines, all of which come together to constitute his unique multi-layered, contrapuntal guitar orchestrations. In his compositional approach, which carefully considers each individual guitar voice as independent yet integrated through overdubbing, May draws

⁷⁸Jas Obrecht, "Brian May: Queen's Flash Guitarist," *Guitar Player Magazine* (January 1983).

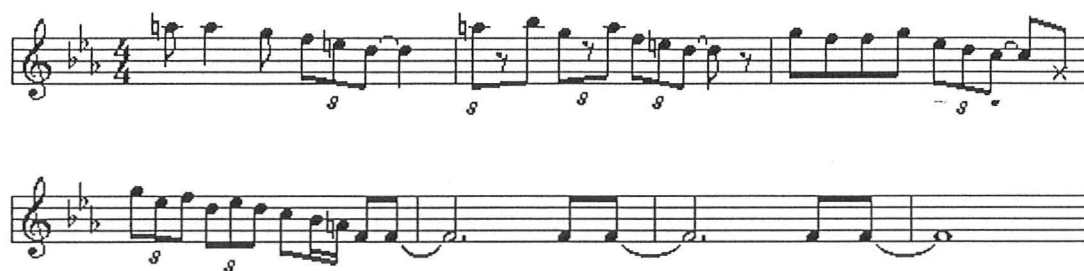
on a number of techniques whose roots can be found in classical music. Often, his solos employ the use of repeated motives which are used in creating sequences and melodic imitation. This type of stretto can be seen in the following segment from May's guitar solo in "Killer Queen:"

Musical Example 6: Killer Queen – Guitar Solo

I use the term 'motive' as opposed to the appearance of 'riffs' in rock music because of May's treatment of motivic groups. Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* discusses the presence of riffs in rock music and differentiates between these two terminologies. Middleton states that, "'Motive' immediately suggests Beethovenian symphonic development technique," whereas in many kinds of popular music, "'motive' may be used not for 'development' but as 'hooks' or 'riffs.'"⁷⁹ Thus I invoke this term purposefully, as May's approach is one of *development*, as opposed to the more traditional rock approach wherein the riff acts as a form of musematic repetition in the music; frequently repeated and unchanging as a structural base for the composition.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Middleton, 1990, p. 104.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 269.



Musical Example 7: Killer Queen – Guitar Solo

For May, the motives are not unchanging, but rather they develop and grow, changing through processes of inversion and further fragmentation. Such passages of motivic imitation are not just an issue of melodic consideration for May, but the voices, in their overlap, additionally form triadic structures that make up the harmonies of the piece. Wolf Marshall notes that the melodic direction of the voices, the crossing of guitar lines, and the contrary motion “lends an attractive vocal sound to May’s harmony guitar phrases,” and that this vocal sound, analogous to a vocal choir or string section, is due to May’s “thoughtful voice leading in all parts, impeccable phrasing, and a well-balanced timbral blend.”⁸¹

Another characteristic sound in May’s guitar passages is his tendency to build to climaxes through tightly harmonized ascending passages of parallel triads:



Musical Example 8: Keep Yourself Alive – lead in to chorus

⁸¹Marshall, 1997, p. 35.

May demonstrates a penchant for strings of first inversion triads. This particular example contains an interesting combination of diatonic and chromatic melody, which helps to drive the music into the next section, increasing the musical tension as it ascends. The presence of such chromatic movement in May's guitar parts further intensifies the diatonic tonalities of Queen's music. It also mimics the type of movement often found in the triadic structures of the vocal chorus, as previously discussed in my analysis of "Bohemian Rhapsody."

May's effort to think and record *orchestrally* is also evident in the variety of textures in his music. In his guitar writing, May weaves guitar lines in and out of the background during vocal passages, as well as during his solo passages ("God Save the Queen" on *A Night at the Opera* featured more than twelve separate guitar parts working contrapuntally). Often, one guitar will suddenly, through overdubbing, become 2, then 3, and so on. As listeners, we are witness to "additive" effects which cause the texture of the music to thicken into a fully voiced, complex solo passage. Similarly, the effect of May reducing a full blown multi-layered guitar chorus into a single melodic line at the end of a passage can be a poignant motion, focusing the ears from the complexity of a contrapuntal passage into a moment of lyrical simplicity. Any passage can then be further enhanced in its complexity, as May assigns different timbral settings to each line by changing the pick-up combinations on his guitar. In a sense, each guitar line gains its own *voice* in the resulting mix. It is May's singular approach to multi-guitar layering that makes these exciting sounds possible. However,

these differences are also a contributing factor to Queen's marginalization, as they so clearly deviated from the norms of the rock sound.

Adding to these complex passages of guitar choirs is May's carefully considered treatment of melody. In addition to incorporating chromatic passing tones for melodic flow, May will often add decorative passing chords into the harmony in an effort to create better voice leading in the melody:



Musical Example 9: Killer Queen – Final Chorus

A consequence of this is that the harmonies of Queen pieces are further enriched.

By incorporating the aforementioned classical styles of composition into his guitar orchestrations, May subscribes to the “high culture” of classical music which is often seen as antithetical to popular musics. It is important to note that rock guitarists have often incorporated classical appropriations into their work.⁸² However, similar to my earlier discussion of Freddie Mercury's keyboard style, these appropriations generally reflect a form of *virtuosity*, typically a “masculine” domain. The nature of May's style does not borrow from the virtuosic tradition, but rather involves an exploration of lush harmonies and classically derived contrapuntal movement.

⁸²This has been the case in the styles of Robert Fripp of King Crimson, Ritchie Blackmore of Deep Purple, or Eddie Van Halen of Van Halen, for example.

These intricate compositional approaches in Brian May's guitar writing and playing are a large part of what defines Queen's unique style, setting them apart from other rock bands. Wolf Marshall, in his look at May's innovations in "Bohemian Rhapsody," had the following to say regarding May as a player:

Brian May is a master of guitar orchestration. Where his predecessors (the Beatles, Wishbone Ash, Allman Brothers, Jimmy Page) utilized the concept to various degrees in their music, May elevated it to unprecedented heights with lavish overdubs, homophonic and polyphonic lines, and skillful timbral blending. His ability to conceive and execute complex contrapuntal multi-guitar arrangements is second to none.⁸³

This is a telling comment that sums up Brian May's contributions, talent and importance as guitarist for Queen.

It is the contrapuntal nature of May's playing, with its careful attention to motivic development and voice leading, that reinforces the similarities between May's guitar and Queen's prominent chorus. When asked about the stacked harmonies in his playing, May replied:

I was always fascinated with harmony... from the 60s records that I grew up with - the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly and the Crickets. But I also felt that the guitar became a different instrument when it was turned up to maximum and fully distorted - it was no longer a polyphonic instrument, really. So it seemed to be crying out to be orchestrated, and I could hear just what it would be like in my head.⁸⁴

In the same interview, May explains the process by which these polyphonic voices come together to form the stacked harmonies:

⁸³Marshall, 1997, p. 40.

⁸⁴David Mead, "Harmony in My Head," *Guitarist Magazine*, (December 1992). [ONLINE] Available at <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Venue/6448/gmdec92.html> [Accessed Sept. 20, 1999].

I've always thought of the guitar as another voice, so I start with a voice, singing along with the vocal, and from time to time you can hear a place where other voices would come in, like backing harmonies, which then become part of it. . . In the case of "Killer Queen," which I still like, it was just three separate voices and they go in and out of harmony, but they play their own tune. I enjoy things like that, where they have a life of their own.⁸⁵

Clearly May envisioned a polyphonic guitar setting which featured horizontal melodic structures interacting contrapuntally, rather than the vertical sonorities of power chords or monophonic solo lines, which are prevalent in conventional rock.

May's style further contributes to the effeminization of Queen. This is partly owing to his use of diatonic keys, which is contrary to the blues-based/modal tendencies is 1970's rock. Such a label of effeminization is equally derived upon contextualizing May's sound within the "masculine" coded norms of distortion, feedback, and power chord structures which are more customary to the rock idiom and which May regularly does not employ. Further, recalling the earlier quote regarding Orpheus, whose elaborate vocal display threatens to feminize him, May's sound itself becomes a very elaborate musical display. This vocal sound is partially achieved through its focus on *expressive lyricism*. Such lyricism is commonly understood as effeminate, which places May's style as Other, particularly when contrasted with the powerful, bold gestures of strength in music that are most commonly understood as masculine, and against which much of rock is defined and understood. May's choice of guitar polyphony marked him as Other against the backdrop of "guitar hero" culture which was most widely accepted and *expected* by rock critics. As such, his style became yet another element contributing to Queen's marginalization.

⁸⁵Ibid.

This analysis of Queen's sonic-fingerprint returns us to the notion of "bricolage." Individually, perhaps, Mercury's lead vocals and piano technique, the Queen chorus, or May's guitar orchestrations are not groundbreaking. However, it is their combination which produces a sound that is so unfamiliar in the context of the 1970's rock scene. Queen managed to turn glee-club, choir boy arrangements into successful rock. Vocal virtuosity, manifested not only through the singing voices of the group but also in the guitar playing of Brian May, took centre-stage over instrumental virtuosity, which might explain the critics' reaction to the band as "unskilled instrumentalists." The voice and guitar parts give the impression of being *considered compositions*. This aspect of Queen's music reinforces May's exclusion from the masculine cult of the "guitar hero." His solos are "composed" in nature, reflecting an emphasis on lyricism and guitar polyphony. As such, May does not portray the standard "rock" image of a guitarist sweating over his performance in an effort to produce a transcendental solo. Such is the image of the virtuoso guitar player—an image that May contradicts. Additionally, Queen's vocal flamboyance and orchestration of voice and guitar, when taken in combination with each other, result in a sound that is more closely related to the traditions of European art music than to the rock sound of Queen's contemporaries, marking their sound as less authentic when compared to blues/modal-based rock songs. Their music is best characterized as opulent, operatic in its excess and flamboyant release, characteristics that serve as markers of femininity in the masculine realm of rock music which privileges control and power.

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