

“Bohemian Rhapsody”—Queen (1975)

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Essay by Don Breithaupt (guest post)*



Queen, c. 1975

In pop, innovation is often the sound of young artists refusing to be bound by the previous generation’s technological limitations. When Queen entered Rockfield Studios in Wales in the summer of 1975 to begin recording their fourth album, “A Night at the Opera,” the age of 24-track recording had just begun. “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” was barely eight years old, but the technology used to record it had long since ceased to be the industry standard. Recording to 24 channels had exponentially increased the possibilities of the modern recording studio, and Freddie Mercury’s restless muse turned out to be its perfect end user. By the time it was finished, “A Night at the Opera” was one of the most expensive records ever made, and its crown jewel was singer/pianist Mercury’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” an over-the-top musical thrill ride whose six minutes contained more technology-stretching bravado than most bands’ entire careers. Pieces of the mini-opera had been pullulating in Mercury’s head for years, but the machinery necessary to merge them into one of progressive rock’s defining works was brand new.

Mercury’s musical ambition was outsize. Manifesting it took weeks, and it made extraordinary demands on the members of Queen and their longtime producer Roy Thomas Baker. The literally hundreds of vocal overdubs on “Bohemian Rhapsody” required Baker to sub-mix successive layers of vocal tracks, many times over. Mercury, guitarist Brian May, and drummer Roger Taylor sang and re-sang parts covering most of the human vocal range. The stereo spectrum was exploited fully, with vocal events panning dramatically from left to right, and various characters in the operatic section occupying specific sonic locations. The band entered and exited as required, giving the piece almost unheard-of dynamics for a rock record. May layered his guitar tracks like an orchestrator. Taylor’s drums were augmented with tympani and a gong. Sections came and went, running the gamut from confessional balladry to hard-rock thunder. Baker combined dry and roomy sounds, pristine and over-modulated sounds, live-off-the-floor performance and high-tech vocal stacking. The two-inch tape containing the song finally became translucent from overuse.

Of course, “Bohemian Rhapsody” wasn’t merely a technical accomplishment; it was a minor creative miracle. Full of 19th-century chromaticism and inscrutable lyrics (in which the song’s title does not appear), and without a traditional chorus, it had none of the usual earmarks of mass-market likability. Synthesizers, by then ubiquitous in pop, were absent. Gilbert & Sullivan stood in for Lennon & McCartney. But Queen cooked up a succession of great moments, including May’s soaring guitar solo and Mercury’s trademark vocal burn (“*thrown it all away,*” “*face the truth*”), and made what could have been mere pastiche into a cohesive masterwork. Mercury dodged questions about the meaning of “Bohemian Rhapsody” for years afterward, preferring to let a multiplicity of fan interpretations coexist. Some theorized that the lyric’s themes of sin and punishment had to do with the struggles of a gay man contemplating the firestorm that would accompany his coming out, but Mercury was equivocal to the end.

In December of 2018, “Bohemian Rhapsody” became the most-streamed 20th-century song of all time. By then it had had four lives as a hit: its initial run in 1975; its return to the center of pop culture after Mercury’s death in 1991; its “Wayne’s World”-fueled chart resurgence in 1992, and its titular association with the Oscar-winning Queen biopic in 2018. It has achieved multiplatinum status in at least ten countries, and its video is widely acknowledged as a watershed moment in the music video revolution. It is now in a class by itself, more pervasive even than other long-form rock classics like “Stairway to Heaven,” “Hey Jude,” and “Won’t Get Fooled Again.” This despite the fact that music executives on both sides of the Atlantic predicted it would fail to find an audience on pop radio, and--its final technical challenge--would be too long to fit on a 7-inch 45-RPM record. Freddie Mercury’s grand vision, it turned out, would not be denied.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.