

**This interview with  
Sir Brian May of QUEEN  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on May 22, 2024**



*Sir Brian May*

**Library of Congress:** First, do I call you Sir Brian, Mr. May, what is the proper term?

Sir Brian May: You can call me “Brian”; most people call me Brian.

**Library of Congress:** Very well! When you first heard or heard the first notes of “Bohemian Rhapsody” from Freddie, what did you think?

BM: Well, a lot of people ask this question thinking that it would be a shock, but it wasn't really, because we'd already dealt with a lot of complexity, I suppose you would call it. If you look at “My Fairy King” on the first album, first of all, you would hear Freddie playing some bits and you'd say, “Well, what's that?” He'd say, “Well, this bit goes with this bit” and whatever. So we were used to sort of building things up in the studio. And he came with a number of pieces of “Bohemian Rhapsody,” and said, “Yes, this all connects to this and this.” And it was interesting, but not vastly out of the norm, I would say. It was just something else nice and juicy to work with and work on.

The deal with us was, if somebody brought in an idea, it was put on the table and everybody would then dive in and work together as a team, and it worked very well at that point. So there was always this feeling, by the original author, that he's kind of giving his work to the lions and it can get kind of ripped apart, but, at the same time, it would always benefit. And by the time it got reassembled, it would have benefited from everybody's input. That's kind of the working relationship we had.

**LC:** Did you know when it was done, and, by that I mean, done being written or done being recorded, that you had what has since been called a “song for the ages”? Did you know it was special?

BM: I think we did feel it was pretty special, yes. We knew it was unique. I think it's safe to say we were very excited. We were excited about the whole record, though, the whole album. We never considered ourselves a “singles band.” We didn't go into this to make singles pretty much ever; I don't think we ever did that. We always went in with the idea of making an album, [and]

that's kind of "old school" thinking, but that's the way we were, we wanted to present a piece of work which represented us at that particular time.... That's kind of the way the tradition was back then, like from the Beatles and from Led Zeppelin. There's that feeling that an album defines you at any particular moment and so you paint it with all the colors you can to make it a complete work.... In those days, of course, we hoped that people would put on the album and listen to it from beginning to end: side one, turn it over, play side two, but that kind of doesn't apply now.

**LC: No, sadly, it doesn't.**

BM: But that's definitely the context that you have to view "Bohemian Rhapsody" in--very long, very complex.... There was a song that was equally long and equally complex on the other side called "The Prophet's Song."... I think you then get to the point where it's all done and you think, "Wow! We'll unleash this on the public, and what is going to happen?" You have to make a choice about the single fairly early on, because that's going to be your flagship, and pretty early on, that decision was made, but we were advised that ["Bohemian Rhapsody"] wouldn't work as a single because it was too long. The information we had was that no one would play it, no radio station would play it.... John [Deacon] actually came up with an edit which started with the verse and the first couple of choruses, then cut out the whole of the operatic session and then finished with the conclusion of the chorus. But we all hated it.

Even our manager, John Reid, and John Reid was very enthusiastic, it was all new, we'd only just signed with him. He was Elton's manager at the time, and we'd just signed up with him, and he really did a rescue job on us because we were in debt and in a terrible situation with our former management. He went in and said, "Okay, you make the best album you've ever made and I will sort out all the business!" So he was very enthusiastic but even he said, "This is a problem. We have a problem because this single is too long."

The situation only really changed when we had our launch party. It was attended by a DJ who was very popular in this country at the time, called Kenny Everett. He was a DJ for Capital Radio. He basically stole a copy of the still-unfinished master tape and immediately played it on his radio station. I think he played "Bohemian Rhapsody" four times in succession--don't quote me on the number of times--but he went in there and I think he sort of locked his door and these producers were upset with him, but he had this hugely confident feeling about "Bohemian Rhapsody" and he just kept playing it and people loved it. He got a fantastic response.

Then it was reflected in the fact that Capital Radio at that time had a lot of feedback going on, so people would vote for what they wanted to hear and they all voted. Suddenly Capital Radio was playing the record, and from that point on, it was kind of a given that everybody else would be playing the record.

**LC: The music video for that song is almost as iconic as the song itself. Were videos even a thing, kind of yet, when you made that?**

BM: No, really we're often given credit for inventing the music video. Whether that's something to be proud of or not, I don't know. Yes and no. I mean, a few people had made clips like eight millimeter, 16 millimeter clips, including the Beatles, but they weren't really made as vehicles for promotion. "Bohemian Rhapsody" emphatically was. We knew that we were going to be out on the road, so we wouldn't be able to do the TV spots which you would normally hope to do, particularly this huge monolith called "Top of the Pops." "Top of the Pops" ruled the UK music world. You *have* to be on there. We knew we wouldn't be able to get in the studio to record it for them. [So,] we had this idea that we would send them a video instead.

If the record was number one, their policy was they had to play it every time it was number one. So it turned out to be very useful because the record was number one for-- is it six weeks? I can't remember. So "Top of the Pops" felt obliged to play our video every week, and, of course, it was a massive boost for the record, which was already very hot. It snowballed in the UK and then the video enabled the record to snowball all around the world. It was massive in Australia. I know they had a similar system where the video was played on TV and the record was massive and it completely-- it was a game changer, all around the world, all around the world at that time.

**LC: Whose idea, whose concept, was the video? Did Freddie come up with that or all of you or a director?**

BM: We had a director, but, basically, I will go down in history as saying the concept was basically ours. We put it all together kind of offline. We were already in rehearsal mode in a studio in, I think, in Shepperton, so we set it all up ourselves and discussed it. Freddie had the idea of using this top lighting that was very Marlene Dietrich for the album, which we'd already used conceptually for the cover of the "Queen II" album which was a couple of years old at this point. But we thought we'd like to bring the "Queen II" album to life, but there are people out there who will dispute and say it was their idea. One is Mick Rock, who claims that the idea of doing the Marlene Dietrich thing was his idea, and one is Bruce Gowers, who says that all the concept of the "Bohemian Rhapsody" video came from him. Actually, it's not Bruce Gowers, it's his wife, because Bruce, and I don't think Bruce would ever have wanted to pick a fight with us, but now there are all sort of disputes pending out there because a lot of people want to rewrite history, especially very lucrative history. We've had a lot of people claiming, I mean, even like some of the roadies claiming to have had the idea for songs or whatever. It's a bit of a-- what? It's a minefield out there...

...But basically, we were a very tight unit, and we were proud of the fact that, conceptually, everything came from the four of us. *Everything*. That's why we had such great control of our image, our output, our production, our artwork, everything was from this one small fountain. That's why I think it worked. We didn't let anybody come in and tell us, "Oh, you need to do this," "You need to have this kind of image," whatever, anything: costumes, lights, production, the whole thing came from us. We were a very powerful collaboration, [and] very lucky that between the four of us, we had these talents which just were complementary and gave us the machinery to drive everything else.

**LC: Let's talk about "Wayne's World." I think "Bohemian Rhapsody" would have been revived without it anyway, because it's just that sort of song, but "Wayne's World" certainly brought it to a whole new generation, a whole new level. Do you remember when you were first approached about its use in the film and what did you think?**

BM: Mike Myers phoned me up. He phoned me up and said, "We really love this song. We really want to use it and we really want you to see what we're doing." He sent across... a little, must have been a video cassette, and I took it 'round to Freddie, and Freddie was very poorly by that time, could hardly get out of bed, but I showed it to Freddie and he loved it. He laughed, he smiled, and we just thought, what a great thing... Freddie was widely quoted earlier and saying, "I don't suppose we'll fucking ever get America back until I die." Which proved to be strangely prophetic... I mean, [the band] grew up in America, America was our turf, we toured constantly in the States, many months of every year, and it was all going great until we got involved unwittingly in a payola scam from the record company we just recently signed up to. Our records got dropped. That's one thing that happened, and the other thing that happened was we made a video in which we were cross dressing, which was unacceptable in the majority of America at that time. [It] became acceptable later on when the Foo Fighters did it. But, at that time, it was shocking and eyebrows were raised.

[Then] from that point on--“Radio Gaga,” “I Want to Break Free”--we were having hits all around the world, but not in the States. Mike Myers really had a big hand in changing that. The fact that “Wayne’s World” made [the song] so acceptable to a whole new generation-- not just acceptable, but desirable and cool... I mean, you can say it would have happened anyway, but I would certainly give a lot of credit to that film. And we loved it. It was done so respectfully and with such grace and humor. It really, it was a game changer. It opened the door back for us into the States.... For Freddie, it was too late sadly, he was never going to be able to tour. But we've been touring in the US. We toured with Paul Rodgers and with Adam Lambert. Just this last year, we probably did the biggest tour we've ever done in the States.

**LC: Good for you! Why do you think “Bohemian Rhapsody,” among so many of your songs, has had such an endurance and has achieved such a beloved status within, truly, the global culture?**

BM: It's massive and it seems to be growing. I don't know if I can answer that any more than anyone else can. I think it has a deep authenticity on so many levels.... It's not something trying to be clever; it's not something which was assembled from non-intersecting places; it was one concept, even though it's very complex, it was very much in Freddie's head at the time, telling a story, and it had the benefit of us as a production or collaboration at our peak. It had all the benefit of our input, [and] had the benefit of great technical assistance, if you like. We had Mike Stone by that time, and Roy Baker; they were a team together. Mike was doing the engineering; Roy was the producer, and we were, of course, co-producing, because we were very precocious boys from long before that time. It had the benefit of everything, the timing was right, the concept was right....

**LC: What role did the producer play in bringing “Bohemian Rhapsody” to the form that we know it today?**

BM: Well, like I told you, nobody could tell us anything! We were very precocious and Freddie was at least as precocious as the rest of us. We steered it with expert help from Roy and from Mike. Mike gets very little credit in the world as it is, he's now gone, and it's very-- because he was, I would call him a genius in regard to blending sounds and creating that tapestry which all hangs together so beautifully.... Roy was very experienced as being a producer, but, by that time, Roy was a conceptual producer, he was the one who would have the arguments with us, but generally we would win the arguments because looking back on it, we were, I suppose we were very confident, very certain of our path. But you have to give the major credit to Freddie all the way down the line, because he had *this* and we helped him to fulfill his vision and he never explained. Your next question is probably, “What is the song about?”

**LC: How did you... Yes! You beat me to it! It's right here in my notes!**

BM: That's great. I'm very happy to tell you that nobody knows what it means, and Freddie never explained it to us. That was kind of an unwritten rule with us anyway, at those points, we never explained our songs to each other. It was an unwritten thing that we... and partly because you don't like explaining your art and partly because it was sort of taboo.

Much later on, we started to collaborate so closely, like in things like “It's a Hard Life” and “One Vision,” where we actually created much more together and then we had to talk about what the song was about. I mean, particularly “The Show Must Go On,” I started writing that and I had to explain to Freddie where I was going with the song. Even then I didn't say this song is about you, I didn't, I didn't go that far. I just said, “Here's the song about a clown who has to keep his face on” and all that sort of--

“Bohemian Rhapsody,” we can all guess what it's about and we think we know, obviously Roger and I and probably John--although we don't see John these days--we all think we have a fair idea what it's about, but really it remains in Freddie's head.

And I believe it should definitely.