

RETROSPECTIVE

The Retrospective feature began as an examination of an overlooked album from the past, with interviews from those who helped create it. However, since its inception in *Fireworks* #44, the feature has expanded to include full periods or landmark live performances. This time, a very special edition of Retrospective takes a look back at one of the most iconic rock stars to have ever graced the Earth - Freddie Mercury. After the great response to the superb Queen documentary *Days Of Our Lives*, director Rhys Thomas was once again brought in to create a film about Freddie's life and work outside of Queen. *The Great Pretender* is the result, a superb and detailed documentary crammed with unseen footage, new interviews and a close look at Freddie off stage, as well as on. Queen fan James Gaden was present at the premiere of the film in London, where he sat down with Rhys, as well as catching comments from many of the other people in attendance...

There is no doubting Rhys Thomas knows what he is doing when it comes to making films about Queen. *Days Of Our Lives* was a phenomenal success with fans and critics alike, and *The Great Pretender* offers the same measure of quality. So it's surprising to learn Thomas' background is in comedy - he started out as a runner for Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer's show *Shooting Stars*, before eventually writing and performing on *The Fast Show* and ultimately creating and starring in his own sitcom. So the obvious first question is how does a "comedy guy" end up making documentaries about rock royalty?

"Basically it's purely out of love," the young, exuberant director explains, "because I love Queen more than you can possibly imagine. It's actually twenty years ago this year that I went to the Freddie Mercury tribute concert with my brother. I went to see other people to be honest, but there were a lot of Queen songs I'd never heard before, from the seventies, like 'Somebody To Love' for example. I came away just loving what I heard and became addicted to Freddie and Queen's music. For about eight years after that I don't think I listened to anything but Queen. Around that time I was making sitcoms and I did one called *Fun At The Funeral Parlour*. My producer also loved Queen and we wanted Brian May to do the music for it. We asked him if he would and I said to him that there weren't many Queen DVDs out. He agreed and I made a flippant remark of 'We'll make them for you!' He thought it wasn't a bad idea, he could see we knew a lot about Queen as fans. Also, having a comedy background, my documentaries don't come from a standard documentary format. I want to show the funny side of Freddie Mercury. He was so funny in interviews, he was quick witted - nearly everything he said was quotable. He'd ad-lib as a performer and a lot of comedians love Freddie, he had an impact on them, like Noel Fielding, Al Murray... So basically I walked into the job through love!"

Working on a film about the history of Queen for *Days Of Our Lives* provides a wealth of albums, tours and interviews to work with. Surely it must have been more daunting to focus just on one member, even if he is Freddie Mercury?

"We found, with *Days Of Our Lives*, there was a whole thing missing," Rhys explains. "You had to deal with all four members of the group, but you couldn't go into detail about Freddie's personal life for instance. I also found Freddie's solo work really interesting, stuff like 'Barcelona', but there was no room to go into all that on *Days Of Our Lives*. I wanted to look at Freddie's solo work - 'Mr Bad Guy' was a massive flop, so I wanted to portray that it wasn't all massive success. People remember Queen as one of the biggest bands in the world, but there were lots of ups and downs. This documentary tells the story of Freddie's life outside of Queen, spanning 1980-1991. It's a companion piece to *Days Of Our Lives* in a way, the other members of the band aren't in it as much. I also wanted to tell the story without a narrator, or captions, or anything like that. It's basically told by Freddie from old interviews - we have an interview with David Wigg, a lot of which hasn't been seen. Those bits that have are the same clips that everybody has seen. We've gone back and got the whole interview and used that as our backbone, like a Frost/Nixon thing. Then we cut from that to different places. We found two others that had never been seen before. Freddie was so honest! The reason he didn't do many interviews was because firstly, if he had the wrong interviewer, if he didn't like them, he'd come across as quite arrogant because he didn't want to be there. If he did like them, he'd tell them far too much and have too much fun. The reason the David Wigg interview never came out was that on the long version, Freddie was having far too much fun and was drunk. But he was so honest

there, he'd tell you everything, you'll see that side in the documentary."

It becomes obvious at this point that Rhys knew exactly what story he wanted to tell, but how do you put together a documentary when the main focus point is no longer with you?

"You start with absolutely nothing, and figure out what the story is going to be about," Thomas replies. "Initially, it was going to be the making of 'Barcelona'. So we were going to do an hour long documentary about that, and we got the video rushes from the filming, but not much else. In order to get to that story though, I felt you needed to have the story of the previous solo outing failing, which was 'Mr Bad Guy'. You needed to think 'Oh, what will he do next, something more commercial?' No, he does a duets album with an opera singer! Everyone says 'What the fuck are you doing?' and it just showed he didn't care what people thought, he did what he wanted to do. You had to tell both of those stories, and the backdrop to 'Barcelona' was he found out he had AIDS at that point. Also, I wanted to include details about his genuine love for opera - the fact he wasn't a typical rock star. He went to see Pavarotti in concert and when he saw Montserrat Caballé he was amazed by her voice, but it took seven years before he sang with her. It was a long journey and we show that journey in the finished film.

"So you start by writing a story outline like you would if you were writing a film. You begin watching the stuff in the archives of what you can use to fill the parts of the storyline and then look for new things."

For all the relevant material to be called upon, somebody has to oversee the collection and have everything in order. That person is Queen Archivist Greg Brooks, who was also in attendance on the night.

"My job is extremely varied," he explains. "One day I could be labeling audio tapes, videos or film, or photographing tapes or track sheets, or arranging a copy of a video for TV or documentary use. Or I could be researching stuff for sleeve notes, or compiling reports or facts and figures and Queen stats for press releases and the like. I could be logging Brian's memorabilia, photographing his costumes or gold awards, or logging his personal collection, or moving stock around. Or I could be

helping Richard Gray with a book, or checking CD or DVD artwork for spelling errors or basic oversights, such as the song writing credits. I spend lots of time checking text and basic detail.

"I spend most of my time looking after tapes and making sure their content is findable on computer searches; that the right material can be quickly found when it needs to be. And I spend much time listening out for stuff that might be relevant to future projects. I also put detailed proposals together, with my colleagues, to put to the band. I draw up massive lists of everything Queen related you can imagine, so that we can all then try to whittle it down... knowing that nothing has been missed. I'm forever working on Excel sheets and lists that makes my work easier... lists that I can refer to if I get a random telephone call from (Queen manager) Jim Beach or the record label or publicity people, etc. I also research and write my own Queen material, much of which is yet to be published. I love the job and its variation, and the people I work with are the best you could ever meet."

I'm curious to know whether Rhys was afforded carte blanche to create the film, or if Roger Taylor, Brian May and Jim Beach were involved.

"Jim Beach has been really good," Rhys smiles. "With this, because we've done so much for Queen over the last ten years, Jim knows I'm not going to do a 'dish-the-dirt' kind of film. At the same time, there's a story to tell and we didn't want it to be a back-slapping exercise. Jim, Brian and Roger have all given us the freedom to tell what they think is the best story, including good and bad. There's a bit where Freddie says 'I want everyone to get fucked every night, just like I do!' Twenty years ago, you wouldn't have wanted people to see that, but now it's important to give context to his attitude toward life. He was promiscuous, he admits it himself, but when he was doing that, nobody knew what the consequences were. He was judged later on in life as somebody who knew exactly what he was doing and was irresponsible. But that simply wasn't the case. So the band and Jim gave me a lot of freedom, they could have said 'Take that out, we don't want that bit in...' But not one of them has ever said that to me."

One of the most interesting parts of the film features photos of Freddie and Michael Jackson working together, including an audio clip of the two legends duetting. Also, there is a short clip of Rod Stewart performing a section of what would eventually become 'Let Me Live'. I ask if Rhys had just snippets of audio to work with, or full songs.

"They just gave us enough. I don't know how much there is of the Rod Stewart thing, I don't know if there's a whole song in there or not," he replies. "With Michael, we didn't want to use the whole thing, we wanted to tease people."

Therefore I decided to put the question to a man who is in a position to know what exists, and asked Greg Brooks.

"There isn't enough of the Rod Stewart session to make a complete version," the archivist reveals. "There are only odd fragments, and they were never intended to be used for a proper recording; it's just the band and Rod experimenting in the studio - another spontaneous jamming session, which Queen and friends would often do back in the 80s. Besides that, there is a definitive version of 'Let Me Live' on 'Made In Heaven', so there's no reason to attempt another one.

"The songs Freddie

worked on with Michael were 'State Of Shock', 'There Must Be More To Life Than This' and 'Victory,'" Greg continues. "Freddie of course did 'There Must Be More To Life Than This' on his 'Mr Bad Guy' album, but there are out-takes featuring Michael. Freddie and Michael never found time to finish 'State Of Shock', so Michael later revisited it with Mick Jagger and their version found its way onto the Jackson's album 'Victory!'"

The good news is that it sounds like the Mercury and Jackson duets may well see the light of day. There have been clips on the internet for some time, but rumours in various media sources and websites have claimed Queen are working on them now that the Jackson Estate has given permission - something Rhys confirms.

"Yeah, 'There Must Be More To Life That This' will come out. Queen are working on the tracks now, there are plans for them to come out next year. It's been talked about, it's fairly well known and I think it'll happen soon. There are bits and pieces on Youtube but we have the original, official thing. Some of the stuff on Youtube is faked, with Michael cut in, it's not the real thing."

With Rhys being such a fan of Queen and now able to have a hand in what comes out, I inquire what he, as a fan, would like to see released in the future.

"We talk about this all the time," he grins. "We'd like to put out a Blu-Ray of all the videos. One thing we learned on this, once it's transferred to HD, it just looks stunning. Everything is carefully preserved, so we'd like to do that. Also, in *Days Of Our Lives*, a lot of the footage was taken from an unfinished documentary by Bob Harris, it shows Queen on tour in the seventies in America. It would be nice to finish that off and release it with an American show, 'Live In Houston'. I'd like to see Hyde Park released too, some earlier shows."

I put the same question to Greg, who has no hesitation in his answer.

"Yes, a 'Live Killers' boxed set - it's such a fantastically exciting period of the band's career. And some kind of studio out-takes set - rare gems from the early period. Queen making those first five or six albums, working together in the studio and creating innovative, groundbreaking, wonderful music with longevity that's truly stood the test of time. I love that stuff, and would love to see the best and most interesting things make it to the public domain one day. We could put together a truly breathtaking project that would stun fans all over again!"

Greg is definitely more old school in his taste, earmarking much of the band's earlier work as some of his favourite pieces.

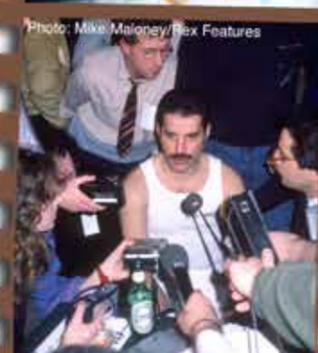
"I really love the 'Jazz' album, along with 'Queen' and 'Queen II'. But 'A Day At The Races' has a special place in my heart too. Some of my favourite songs would be 'The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke', 'Flick Of The Wrist', 'The Prophet's Song', 'Too Much Love Will Kill You'... and numerous obscure things on various albums that were never singles."

Rhys enjoys the old material too, but acknowledges that the eighties period was the most commercially successful.

"They have to release what is popular, and the reason why *Live In Budapest* and *Rocks Montreal* came out first is because they are meant for DVD," he says. "They were shot on film and DVD takes advantage of that. Whatever you do with 'Live At The Rainbow', it'll never look that brilliant. I think it would be wise to put together an early years package, one that caters for the hardcore fans, instead of being a mass appeal release. Anybody can buy *Live At Wembley* and know pretty much all the songs, it's an iconic show. The early ones are a harder sell."

The film itself is spectacular and absorbing. At the premiere it was introduced by speeches from Rhys and Jim Beach, before the audience sat enthralled. After the show, the party was attended by most of those in the audience, many of which were famous faces from comedy. David Baddiel and Charlie Higson were sighted, along with *Manchild* actor Ray Burdis and *Mighty Boosh* star Noel Fielding, who was delighted with what he had witnessed.

"I'm a big Queen fan," he says, "but there were some things on there I didn't know. Freddie certainly had the



X-Factor. It was nice to see Freddie talking so much on it, because he was quite enigmatic, with a brilliant sense of humour. I was surprised about how much the film revealed about him, and I loved the pacing of it. It had a great blend of comedy and drama."

Noel was with Bob Mortimer, who happily gave his opinion on what he had just watched.

"Honestly, I didn't know that much about Queen or Freddie Mercury and I thought it was funny and fascinating. I'm just amazed he bothered speaking at all after hearing his singing voice!"

Die hard Queen fan David King offered his thoughts. David has been a fan club member since 1977, seeing Queen twenty times with Freddie as well as being an extra in iconic videos such as 'We Are The Champions' and 'Radio Ga Ga'.

"I very much enjoyed watching it," he states. "I've been looking forward to this for a long time as there have been DVDs about Queen as a whole over the years but none that focused solely on Freddie.

"It's a very well put together documentary with a lot of new interviews, and I liked the great footage of Freddie being interviewed by David Wigg - one of the few journalists of the time that he trusted, as most of the time the ones he did interviews with usually misquoted what he said to them.

"There was also a very nice interview with Montserrat Caballé who, from what she had to say, obviously loved working with Freddie. The film made you laugh out loud in some parts but in others brought a tear to the eye, especially towards the end when he found that he was HIV positive. When the other band members and his closest friends rallied round him to protect him from the prying eyes of the press of the time, that enabled him to channel all his energies into making music that he could leave as his legacy. That legacy will live on forever and I think every generation will discover the music and magic that is Queen and Freddie Mercury."

When Freddie embarked on his solo career, did it worry David, as a huge fan of Queen, that success for Freddie could have killed the band?

"Whatever he did outside of Queen, even if he was still around today and if they had stayed together, he would have always been a member of the band as he needed them and they needed him," he replies.

"Who knows what else he would have achieved with his life if he would have still been around, as he had such a creative mind. He could turn his hand to many genres of music, be it rock, dance, pop and even opera! A more diverse recording artist would be hard to find.

"He was always looking for the next new thing that was coming along which was fresh and new - he needed these things as he got bored very easily. As Jim Beach said, Freddie asked him to make sure he never became boring and that's one thing you could never say about the great man."

A brief chat with the film's editor Christopher Bird revealed that he and Rhys were delighted with the response to the film. Christopher also confided that Roger Taylor's typically expressive comments about magician Paul Daniels nearly didn't make the cut. Archive footage shows May and Taylor speaking on *TV-AM* shortly after Freddie passed away, with Paul Daniels sat next to them. Roger's typically outspoken and expressive recollection of the experience easily drew the biggest laugh of the night, but the original worry was it made light of the mood after Freddie's death. Rhys and Christopher fought to keep it in, to keep things upbeat.

Their decision was justified as Rhys gleefully noted. In mingling with various attendees, every single one of them responded in the same way, with Bob Mortimer no exception:

"My favourite part? Oh, the Paul Daniels bit," he laughs. That's unanimous then - if you're curious, you'll just have to watch the film. You won't regret it. As Rhys so masterfully said before the film began, "If you don't laugh and cry at the end of this, you aren't human."

'Freddie Mercury: The Great Pretender' is out now on Blu-Ray and DVD from Eagle Vision.