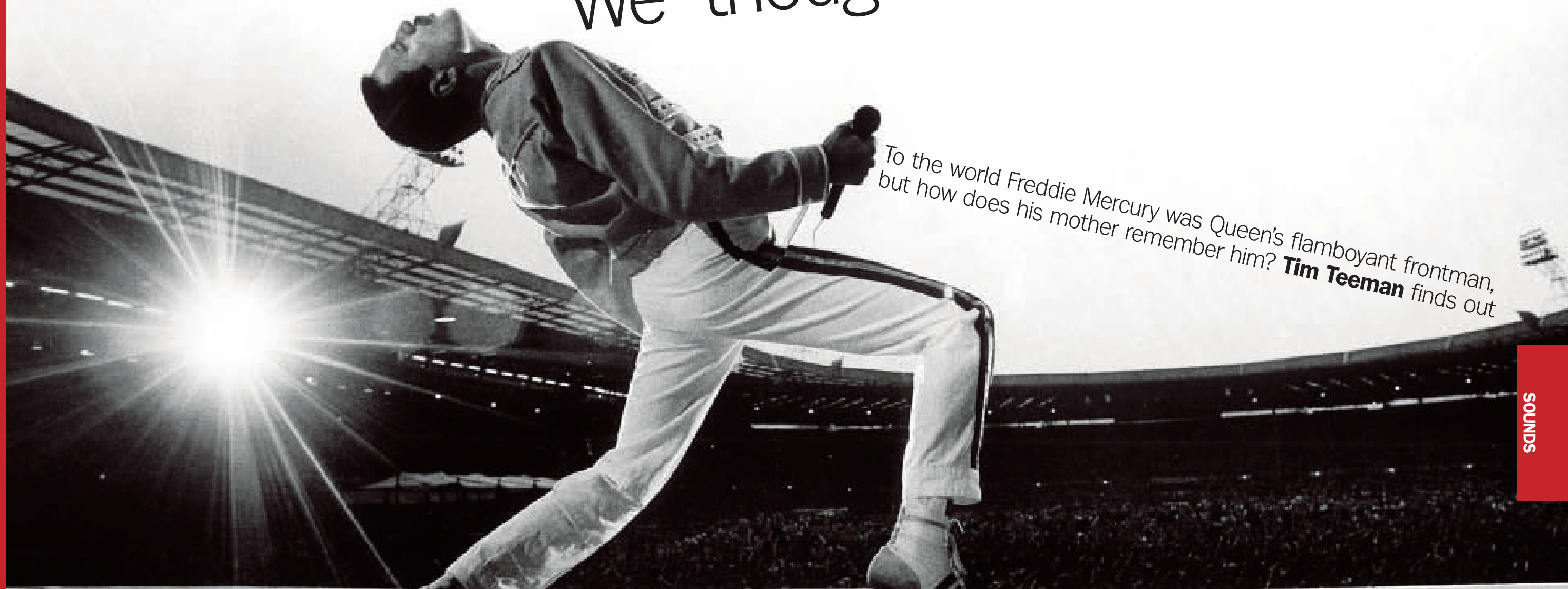


‘We thought he’d go on for ever’



To the world Freddie Mercury was Queen's flamboyant frontman, but how does his mother remember him? **Tim Teeman** finds out

Jer and Bomi Bulsara went to most of Freddie Mercury's concerts. But not Live Aid, on July 13, 1985, when their son, quite literally, rocked the world. "It was such a huge event it would have been too complicated," Jer recalls. "So we watched it on television. I was so proud. My husband turned to me and said, 'Our boy's done it.'"

NEAL PRESTON - RETNA

It's hard to square Mercury's clamorous, strutting stage presence with the small, immaculately kept house

on the outskirts of Nottingham where Jer now lives. It is called "Fredmira", combining the names of her two children, Freddie and Kashmira. With its plumped cushions, chiming carriage clock and neutral decor, it's not the kind of place you expect a rock god's mother to inhabit.

Yet here he is, her much-loved and missed Freddie, in a series of stills from his videos, looking matinee-idolish handsome. (With her full lips and wide smile, the diminutive Jer

looks a lot like her son.) In the corner there is a statuette commemorating his accession into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A painting he did when he was 14 of two horses, one black, the other white, hangs on the wall.

Mercury's life was a game of contrasts. He was a cartoonish, megashowman, belting out anthems such as *Radio Ga Ga* and, most famously, *Bohemian Rhapsody*. But he was also fiercely private and softly spoken. He had huge, insane parties (featuring,

so one rumour goes, dwarves serving cocaine) yet if he was in the UK he would visit his mum once a week for his favourite meal (dhansak) and talk about "normal family things". He told *New Musical Express* in 1974 that he was as "gay as a daffodil" but that information slipped from public view. He was an old-school celebrity who wilfully shrouded himself in mystery.

Then on November 23, 1991, Mercury issued this statement: "Following the enormous conjecture in the

press over the last two weeks, I wish to confirm that I have been tested HIV positive and have Aids. I felt it correct to keep this information private to date to protect the privacy of those around me. However, the time has come now for my friends and fans around the world to know the truth and I hope that everyone will join with my doctors and all those worldwide in the fight against this terrible disease. My privacy has always been very special to me and I

am famous for my lack of interviews. Please understand this policy will continue."

The next day Mercury died of bronchial pneumonia resulting from Aids. He would have turned 60 on Tuesday and the occasion is being marked by a number of events: a tribute day in Montreux, where he had a home and where a bronze statue of him stands, an exhibition of photographs in London, and an ITV documentary examining his life and his legacy.

Freddie Mercury at Wembley, scene of his band's greatest triumph

Like her son, Jer rarely gives interviews, but she is keen for him "to be remembered and celebrated". She grips a tissue throughout our conversation. With her is Roger Cooke, Kashmira's husband.

Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar. The family lived in a flat overlooking the sea, "a comfortable life", Jer, 83, says. As a young boy Farrokh was very happy and loved music, she says: folk, opera, classical. He would throw parties. At 8, ▶▶

TOP CLASSICAL

Richard Morrison



1 BBC PROMS 2006

Who better to kick off the final star-studded week than Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic? Highlights include Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto (Sat). Later in the week, the refined Philadelphia Orchestra plays Beethoven's Ninth (Sun). Royal Albert Hall, Kensington Gore, SW7 (www.bbc.co.uk/proms 020-7589 8212)

2 MATTHIAS GOERNE AND ELISABETH LEONSKAJA

The new season at the Wigmore Hall begins in style. When he's on form, no one surpasses the German

baritone Matthias Goerne in Schubert lieder, and his last Wigmore appearance with the pianist Elisabeth Leonskaja was a sensational event. *Wigmore Hall, Wigmore Street, W1* (www.wigmore-hall.org.uk 020-7935 2141), Fri

3 JOHN METCALF: A CELEBRATION

The Lontano ensemble performs Metcalfe's *Paradise Haunts, Not the Stillness*, and Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time. The Warehouse, Theed Street, SE1* (020-8521 8075), Fri

4 LET THE WOMEN WEAR THE TROUSERS

The mezzo-soprano Katherine Allen teams up with the harpsichordist Julian Perkins to show that the arias composed by Handel for castrati can get a fabulous showing by a woman, too. *Handel House, Brook Street, W1* (www.handelhouse.org 020-7399 1953), Thur
For more classical, go to timesonline.co.uk/theknowledge/classical

TOP FIVE CLUBS

Ed Potton



1 NOISE OF ART

Laurent Garnier and the pianist Benjamin Rippert create a live soundtrack for the classic French docu-drama *Finis Terrae*, as this nomadic music-meets-art festival returns to the NFT. The Berlin techno producer Vector Lovers and Les Hommes du Train also feature. *National Film Theatre, South Bank, SE1* (www.bfi.org.uk/nft 020-7928 3232), Sat

2 ZERO dB ALBUM LAUNCH

The rightly fêted duo play punk jazz, fractured house, hip-hop and future funk in support of their new album, *Bongos, Bleeps and*

Basslines, with support from Nick Matthews (Best Kept Secret) and Dom Servini (Wah Wah 45s). *Medicine, Great Eastern Street, EC2* (020-7739 5173), Sat

3 POPJUSTICE

Two floors of danceable modern pop at this weekly bash from the website hailed as the new *Smash Hits*. *Trash Palace, Wardour Street, W1* (www.trashpalace.co.uk 020-7734 0522), Fri

4 CHEW THE FAT!

Pendulum, the Rogue Element, Vlad Sokolov and Paul "Trouble" Arnold take the reins in the main room, while Kidology is in the Lounge. *The End, West Central Street, WC1* (www.endclub.com 020-7419 9199), Fri

5 DTPM AT FABRIC

Mixed night with house, electro and tribal from Craig Daniel, Lisa German and Mark Wilkinson. *Fabric, Charterhouse Street, EC1* (www.fabriclondon.com 020-7336 8898), Sun
For more clubs, go to timesonline.co.uk/theknowledge/clubs

▶▶ they sent him to boarding school in India. "I cried when we left him but he just mingled with the other boys," Jer recalls. There he adopted the name Freddie (the boys used to adopt "English" Christian names) and formed a band, the Hectics.

Her son wasn't a rebel, Jer insists in her quiet precise way, "but he always wanted to be a showman". In 1964 there was a revolution in Zanzibar and the family came to England, settling in Feltham, West London. "Freddie was so excited: 'England's the place we ought to go, Mum.' But it was very hard." Bomi got a job as a cashier, Jer as an assistant at Marks & Spencer.

Freddie went to art school. "I said, 'What are you going to do, son?' and he said he didn't know. I remember him filling out application forms for jobs and saying, 'I hope I don't get it.'" Watching Elvis Presley on TV, he vowed: "I'm going to be like him one day." He hung out on the music scene, changing his surname to Mercury after his ruling astrological planet.

Queen were formed in the early 1970s. Jer remembers going to their first gig. "Brian May's mum and I would ask each other, 'Are they going to make it?' That night I thought, 'Yes,'" although after her son became famous she carried on working in M&S for some time.

Did she mind Mercury's outrageous stage persona? "It's what a performer has to do to please the audience," she says. The parties? The hedonism? "As a parent you worry but you have to let your child get on with their life." Roger suddenly says: "Freddie kept his life in compartments: the job, social circle, us. He didn't mix them much." Jer says: "He always respected his family and loved us so much."

"I'm completely panto compared with his voice and him as an entertainer. His voice was like a machinegun. It hit everything perfectly"

Robbie Williams

"He had theatricality, he was larger than life, new, fresh, cool. This is a god that walks as man"

Mike Myers

"The difference between Freddie and almost all the other rock stars was he was selling the voice"

Montserrat Caballé

"Freddie, if you're out there and you want to choose any artist to channel your work, please give me an album, or at least a middle eight"

Robbie Williams

From *Freddie Mercury: A Kind of Magic*, ITV One, details right

Did she know he was gay? Did he come out to her?

"No." She grips the tissue, wells up, looks down. "That area's too sensitive," Roger says, and adds that Mercury never came out to his family.

But later, more relaxed, Jer says Freddie wouldn't have minded people finding out that he was gay, that he didn't care what people thought of him. But he cared enough not to say it openly? "At that time. Society was different then," says Jer. "Nowadays it's all so open isn't it?" Jer thinks that had he been alive today, Mercury, too, would have become more open.

Roger thinks that Mercury may have worried that coming out would affect record sales, though he was naturally private. "His attitude was 'My life is my business.' The distinction was that he was private, not shy."

"He didn't want to upset us," Jer says. "I don't think it was aimed at the family," Roger says. "He liked to have people in different sets."

"When he came home he was just 'Freddie'," Jer says. He was down to earth, Roger adds. "When I think of Freddie I think of that Eagles song, *Life's Been Good*: 'It's tough to handle/ This fortune and fame/ Everybody's so different/ I haven't changed.'"

What about his illness? In his book *Mercury and Me*, Jim Hutton, Mercury's partner for the last six years of his life, says that Mercury tested positive in 1987. Jer, again visibly very upset, looks into nowhere.

Roger says: "He didn't tell anybody in the family. We gradually became aware he had an illness but we had no idea what it was or how serious it was. Then in August 1990 Kash and I saw a mark on his foot. It was Kaposi's sarcoma [a malignant tumour of the connective tissue often associated with Aids].

"Kash asked what it was, whether

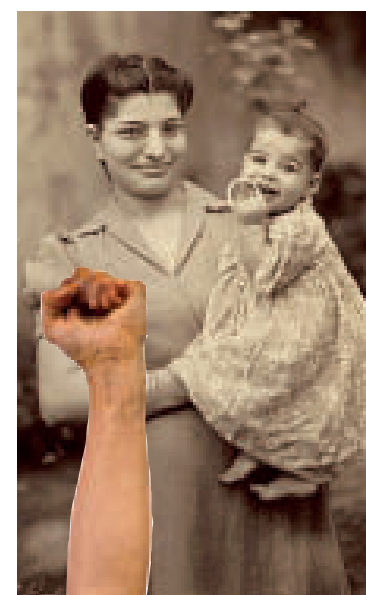
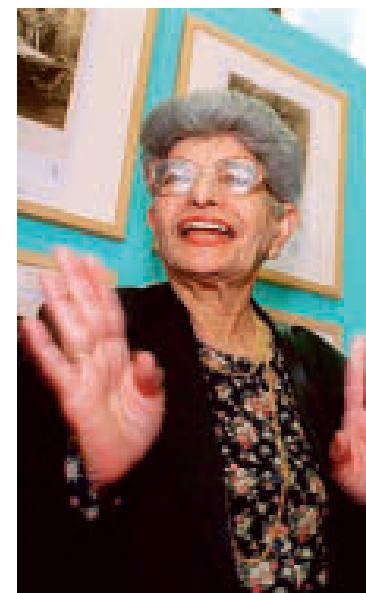
it was getting better. Freddie said: 'You have to understand that what I have is terminal. I'm going to die.' That was it. He didn't say it was Aids. It didn't register immediately. We were driving home and I put a cassette on, and of all the things it was him singing *Who Wants to Live Forever*? That suddenly brought home the significance of what he had said."

How would he have felt about the criticism that he could have done more good had he come out and been open about his Aids diagnosis?

"He would have thought, 'F*** 'em, it's none of their business,'" says Roger. "It was only Jim Beach, his manager, who convinced him to release that statement." Jer says quietly: "He wanted the world and his fans to know the truth."

Mercury once told his mother that he might retire and paint. "We just laughed and told him we wouldn't let him. We thought he would go on for ever." The last time Roger saw him he spoke about "normal things, certainly not the illness". He stared into the water of the pond of his Japanese garden. Jer says quietly the last time she saw her son was "very emotional, very hard. He asked, 'Are you all right? Did any of the media worry you?' We said: 'Don't worry about us dear'. He was so ill and still he was being so caring."

There were many tabloid stories after his death, including the charge he had hidden his Indian background. "But Freddie wasn't Indian," says Roger. "He was Parsee. The Parsees settled in India and were gradually absorbed into its culture in much the same way as Jews were absorbed into other cultures and countries. In fact, the Parsees were known as the Jews of India." But he never spoke about it? "For Freddie the past was the past. He only wanted to talk



about the future," says Roger.

Mercury's songs come on the radio which is "sometimes emotional" for Jer. Her favourite is *Somebody to Love*. Hearing his soft spoken voice is harder as it's more "him". Bomi died three years ago, which "left a big hole", but Jer keeps busy and has grown used to being recognised in the street and supermarket. The other day one man said to her: "It's good to see you looking so well."

She has gone through what every parent shouldn't — outliving their own child — and she remains as immensely protective of him as he was of her. One thing that keeps her going, she says, are the letters she gets from people (addressed to "Freddie Mercury's mother, Nottingham") saying what his songs have meant to them. Had he been alive now, she thinks he would have composed rock operas. In an interview he once said that he wanted to go to Hell, rather than Heaven: "Think of the interesting people you're going to meet down there."

Jer is still gripping the tissue as I leave, but she is far from tragic or bereft. She laughs merrily as we imagine how Mercury would have celebrated his 60th (probably debauchedly). It's a long way from Zanzibar to Nottingham but, like her late, life-loving son, Jer Bulsara has relished the incredible journey. ■
Freddie Mercury: Lover of Life, Singer of Songs, Sony Ericsson Proud Central, 5 Buckingham Street, London, WC2 (020-7428 4949; www.proud.co.uk), Sep 8-Nov 17; *Freddie Mercury: A Kind of Magic*, Sept 12, ITV1, 9.45pm

Above: Jer Bulsara at home in Nottingham, and with her son
Below: the many faces of Freddie, the ultimate rock showman

