

Freddie Mercury and the AIDS Closet

British Singer's Death Raises Specter of Homophobia in Rock Music World

BY ADAM BLOCK

tatives—and announced that, indeed, he was ill.

"I wish to confirm that I have tested HIV-positive and have AIDS," his press release stated. "I felt it correct to keep this information private to date in order to protect the privacy of those around me. I am famous for my lack of interviews. Please understand this policy will continue."

Mercury certainly managed to dodge unpleasant questions. Within 24 hours of the release he was dead, becoming both the first major rock star to announce he had AIDS and, all too quickly, probably the first to die of its effects.

How long, many wondered, had Mercury kept his secret? And why? Gay music promoter Robert Caviano, who had worked with the band on its 1980 dance hit "Another One Bites the Dust," says that rumors of Mercury's illness have been circulating since 1986. "He had been sick since then, but nobody wanted to talk about it," says Caviano.

Friends and associates suggest that Mercury might have known he was seropositive five years ago but had been battling the disease only since 1988. It was a war he waged in private, remaining a virtual recluse during the last two years of his life.

Shortly after Mercury's death, singer Phil Collins told the London *Sun* that despite his admiration and affection for Mercury, "If you go around leading a pretty much promiscuous life, as he did, then you always run the risk of AIDS."

FEAR AND LOATHING

The specter of AIDS and the barely concealed homophobia it inflames run rampant among rock musicians and their fans alike. Roger Clarke, who handled publicity for Music for Life, the massive 1989 AIDS benefit concert sponsored by the late Bill Graham, admits that "there is a stigma associated with this disease. It was tough to get artists to sign on, but worse was the realization that the tickets weren't selling until we took the word AIDS out of the ads."

Record producers Leigh Blake and Jon Carlin were similarly appalled at the scores of closeted artists who declined any involvement in their 1990 AIDS fund-raising album, *Red Hot + Blue*. And there have been many other examples of the pop music world's indifference to AIDS as well.

When Klaus Nomi, a New York cabaret artist and a collaborator of David Bowie, succumbed to AIDS in 1983, few took notice. When B-52s guitarist Ricky Wilson died of AIDS-related causes in 1985, the band didn't acknowledge he had the disease

until a year later. Band member Kate Pierson admitted to the *Los Angeles Times*, "There is a fear among rock artists for their image: a fear of being identified with AIDS or as gay." Not surprisingly, when black disco singer Sylvester announced his AIDS diagnosis in 1988, public sympathy seemed largely confined to the gay community.

QUEEN'S BUSINESS

Mercury was no cult artist, however, nor a low-profile member of a band. He was the flamboyant leader of a group whose records have sold over 80 million copies worldwide in the last 18 years. Mercury's first release, issued in 1973 under the name Larry Lurex, was a remake of the Beach Boys' "I Can Hear Music." The single was followed that same year by Queen's eponymous debut album.

The band's first American hit came in 1974 with the glitter-rock assault of "Killer Queen." Mercury brought operatic and vaudevillian extravagance to Queen's heavy metal settings, and the group burst onto the *Billboard* Top 10 list the following year with *A Night at the Opera*. The album's hit six-minute single, "Bohemian Rhapsody," was accompanied by one of rock's first videos.

Queen continued its upward climb with increasingly bombastic hits like 1977's "We Will Rock You" and "We Are the Champions," which became an unavoidable tune at sports events. The band topped American pop charts twice more with hit singles, but by the '80s, Queen's primacy had waned.

Last year, however, the group signed a \$10-million four-album contract with Hollywood Records. The deal also included the rights to the band's back catalog. This year the label released a new Queen LP, *Innuendo*. But rumors of Mercury's ill health were further fueled by the announcement that the band wouldn't be touring and by a group photo in which the once-vital vocalist looked dangerously gaunt.

A VEILED LIFE

When pressed on the question of being gay, Mercury tended to portray himself as a blasé bisexual. London's *Daily Telegraph*, in an obituary on Mercury, quoted the



Tabloid treatment

Mercury's death capped a year of speculation about his health in the British press.

singer as once saying, "I've tried relationships on either side—male and female. But all of them have gone wrong."

In 1984, Mercury went so far as to appear in trashy suburban housewife drag for the video version of "I Want to Break Free." But as an openly proud queer, he never seemed to make it. When asked if he was gay during the height of Boy George's gender-bending vogue, Mercury laughed and stated, "If I said I was now, people would accuse me of jumping on the bandwagon."

After his death, Mercury's fellow band members released an ambiguous statement promising, "As soon as we are able, we would like to celebrate his life in the style to which he was accustomed." Mercury's

publicist also issued a press release requesting that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Terrence Higgins Trust in London, a home care and education foundation named for the first Briton to die of AIDS.

The release goes on to recount Mercury's conviction that "through ignorance and prejudice, people with the virus often find themselves jobless. Freddie was concerned that financial support should be available to those less fortunate than himself."

One can only wonder if the singer will do more to battle that ignorance and prejudice in death than he managed to in his lifetime.

Richard Laermer provided research for this article.



Rock star Freddie Mercury
Queen's lead singer remained silent about his illness until the day before he died.