

Bohemian Rhapsody is Honest to Freddie Mercury's Identities

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I bought a ticket to see 2018's *Bohemian Rhapsody* somewhat apprehensively. Though I was originally elated at the prospect of a Queen biopic, I'd heard rumors that the film denied any mention of frontman Freddie Mercury's sexuality or his Parsi ethnicity. These assertions were so widespread that back in June I'd witnessed a woman at WeHo Pride yell at a street team promoting the film. How this version of the story flourished months ahead of the film's actual release is anyone's guess, but--after viewing the movie on opening night--I am happy to report that the rumors have no truth behind them.

Mercury is explicitly portrayed as a queer man of color and Rami Malek shines in the role, capturing Mercury's complexities with extreme vulnerability. In fact, casting all around is wonderful: Gwilym Lee looks like a carbon copy of Queen's lead guitarist Brian May, Ben Hardy provides a good deal of comic relief as drummer Roger Taylor, and Joe Mazzello's portrayal of bassist John Deacon manages to communicate amusement frequently--often without saying a word. The chemistry between band members and their shifting priorities is believable as the plot skims fifteen years, 1970-1985, of the band's career.



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Queen's music comprises the entire soundtrack and the recording session scenes are perfect. As a fan of the music, it was a treat to catch a glimpse of the band creating their most popular tracks. In this aspect, *Bohemian Rhapsody* gains a lot from the involvement of May and Taylor in the making of the film. Both band members are credited as "Executive Music Producers" in the credits, while former member Deacon is noticeably absent. Deacon retired from the limelight after Mercury's death in 1991 and wasn't involved in the film, though he approved the making of it.

For all that the band's involvement gives the film, it also hampered it from reaching its full potential. The project May and Taylor advocated for seems to be one that provided fans a surface-level glance into Mercury's life: this film celebrates Mercury's creative genius, provides a passing glance at his struggles and ends emotionally with his ascent to legend. To that end, it's a great film: everyone in the audience spends two and a half hours jamming to Queen and leaves the theater happy as Mercury maintains his iconic status for outcasts the world over. While there are moments of tension, there are never any shocking, horrible, or ugly truths presented for audiences to grapple with and each struggle is neatly resolved by the end. It's the perfect feel-good fan movie. As a biopic about an artist often in emotional turmoil, it's success is much fuzzier.



Illustrating the life story of a close friend who has long passed yet lives on as a legend cannot be an easy feat, especially with the pressure to maintain Mercury's legacy and Queen's brand. Queen is still very much alive and, while it's nearly impossible for most of us to separate Queen from the flamboyance and voice that were Freddie Mercury, the band didn't end when Mercury passed. Deacon walked away from the stage, but May and Taylor continue to tour with new frontmen and most recently employed Adam Lambert in the role.

Lambert's association with the band is fitting as Mercury is often lauded as a bisexual icon to the LGBTQ+ community. Mercury never publicly discussed his sexuality, so though he initiated relationships with men and women throughout his life, we can't know how he self-identified. Herein lies the first of three times that the film's presentation of facts spark confusion.

****Spoilers from here on! Stop reading now if you want to avoid them!*****

Early into *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Mercury breaks up with his fiancée, Mary Austin, explaining, "I think I'm bisexual." A tearful Austin replies, "No, Freddie you're gay." This response from Austin simplifies a complicated topic. While Mercury and Austin maintain a close relationship throughout the film as they did in life, *Bohemian Rhapsody* doesn't address Mercury's rumored relationship with actress Barbara Valentin. At the same time, the film hints at Mercury's relationships with men but we don't see one play out on screen until he meets Jim Hutton, the partner who would spend six years by his side and sit with him as he died.

Bohemian Rhapsody doesn't delve deep into Mercury's sexual identity, perhaps because without his own explanation of it, it presents a near impossible feat. However, the decision to discount Mercury's plausible bisexuality with Austin's reply and zero mention of Mercury's other lovers felt uncomfortable as it played out on screen.

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The script vexed me again with the timing of Mercury's disclosure of his HIV positive status to his bandmates. While the scene is moving and exemplifies how close the band members truly are, it's set two years too early. In the film, it's just before Queen's triumphant and stirring performance at Wembley Stadium for Live Aid in July of 1985. In reality, Mercury had tested negative earlier that year and it's widely believed that Mercury didn't know he was positive until 1987 or so. Giving Mercury and the band this knowledge before Live Aid lends a sense of urgency to the concert scene that follows, but it also feels cheap to use a disease that rocked the LGBTQ+ community to elicit emotion from the audience.



I was perplexed a final time as the film came to its end immediately following Queen's performance at Live Aid. A few sentences of text followed to explain that Mercury died six years later in 1991 and then the credits begin to roll. Should the film have followed Mercury's last years with Queen and portrayed his death? For me, the answer is yes.

To follow Mercury from the day he joined the band, witness his rise as one-of-a-kind frontman, and leave not only before his death but also before he stopped recording music with the band feels woefully incomplete. Leaving the theater, I felt as if someone ripped out the final chapters in a book I was reading so I wouldn't see any of the sad parts.

I've heard the argument that May and Taylor may have been against producing a project depicting the tragic and painful death of a friend. This explains why *Bohemian Rhapsody* ends on a positive note and includes Mercury's diagnosis with HIV but none of his life after. I understand that sentiment and while I respect it, it feels like a disservice to the truth and the film. Life is full of dark and light moments and focusing only on the light bits robs the film of a depth it most surely would have benefitted from.

While I don't find *Bohemian Rhapsody's* toying with facts enough to render it a bad movie, I'm still looking forward to the day someone offers Freddie Mercury fans an in-depth look into the life of one of music's most intense and talented artists.