

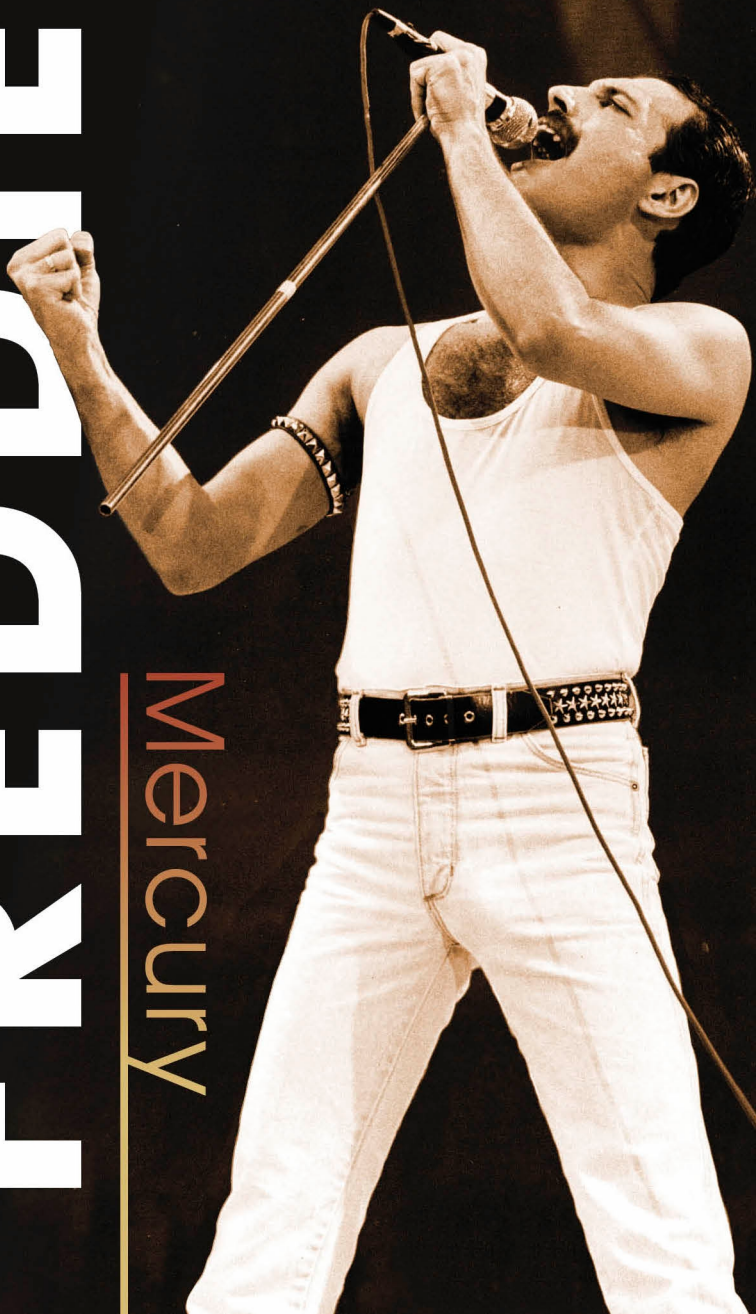
Penguin



Readers

FREDDIE

Mercury



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The boy from Zanzibar

It was Wednesday 5th September 2018, another normal day at London's busy Heathrow Airport. Passengers who had just arrived at the British Airways building stood waiting to collect their bags. Some were looking at their phones, while others talked quietly to their friends. Nobody had any idea that something amazing was going to happen.

Suddenly the music of "I Want to Break Free", a song by the famous **rock** band Queen, started playing loudly. Immediately a group of airport workers stopped work and started dancing to the music. Each man was dressed like Queen's **lead** singer, Freddie Mercury. They wore white trousers and bright yellow jackets, and each had a big, black moustache. They danced around small yellow or white cases. The people watching were very surprised. They looked at the men, and then they looked at each other and began to smile. Some began taking videos on their phones, while others started moving to the music. Everybody felt happy as they watched the men dancing.

The airport workers had worked hard for weeks, practising their dance. Although Freddie had been dead for many years, he was born on 5th September 1946,

and they wanted to remember his birthday. Not many people knew that, before he became a famous rock **star**, Freddie had worked at Heathrow Airport for a short time. There were several other surprises for passengers that day. The names of famous Queen songs appeared on information boards, and people called Freddie, Frederick or Farrokh (Freddie Mercury's real name) were invited by British Airways to use their lounge for free. It was a wonderful way to remember a great rock star.

Freddie had died in November 1991, but people all over the world still loved his music, and Queen's songs were famous in many different countries. A movie about the story of Freddie and Queen, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, was going to be **released** in October 2018. Most people knew that Freddie Mercury was an amazing songwriter and **musician**. But they did not know much about his life, or that Freddie's story started in a very different country from the United Kingdom.

Freddie's life story is very interesting, and it began far away from the UK, in Stone Town on the island of Zanzibar. His father, Bomi Bulsara, had travelled to Zanzibar from India several years before to work. The British had controlled Zanzibar since 1890, and Bomi had a good job working for the British **government**. However, he often had to go back to India on business, and, on one of these visits, he met and fell in love with a girl called Jer, who was fourteen years younger than him.

Bomi and Jer married, and Jer went to Zanzibar to start

a new life with her husband. Their first child, Farrokh, was born on 5th September 1946, and six years later they had a daughter, Kashmira.

Little Farrokh was a good-looking child, and when he was six months old he won first **prize** in a competition for the most beautiful baby. By the age of four or five, he loved singing at the parties of his parents and their friends. As a small child, he went to school in Zanzibar, but in 1955 his parents decided to send him to India to St Peter's School in Panchgani, which is south east of Mumbai. The school was almost 3,000 miles from Zanzibar, so, for the next few years, Farrokh could only go home and see his family for one month each year in the summer holidays. During his first years at St Peter's School, he was very quiet. He was **especially** shy about his teeth because he had four extra teeth at the back of his mouth, and this made him look different from the other boys. He was very good at sports, music and art, and when he was eleven he won an important prize for sport. Some of the teachers and other students at the school called him "Freddie" instead of "Farrokh". He liked this name very much, and he started calling himself Freddie Bulsara.

Freddie had always loved music, but in Zanzibar he had mostly listened to Indian music. However, at St Peter's he became very interested in **Western** pop music, and in 1958, at the age of twelve, he **formed** his first band with four schoolfriends. They called themselves The Hectics, and they played rock music. They wore white shirts and black ties.

Freddie was having piano lessons, so he became the band's piano player. He had a special ability, because as soon as he had heard a song once on the radio he was able to play it on the piano. The Hectics often played at the school and also became very **popular** with the people in the town, especially the girls!

However, The Hectics came to an end on 25th February 1963, when Freddie left St Peter's and went back to Zanzibar to live with his family. Western music and fashions were still very important to him, and, when he could, he read Western magazines. He dreamed of going to live in the West, but he did not know how he was going to do that.

Then something happened in Zanzibar that changed the lives of thousands of people, **including** Freddie's family. Over the centuries, many different groups of people from many countries in Africa and Asia had come to live in Zanzibar. Until December 1963, the British had controlled Zanzibar, but then a new government was formed by the Zanzibar National Party (ZNP). However, other groups were against the new government, and one month later a **revolution** started. It moved quickly across Zanzibar towards Stone Town, and thousands of Arabs and Indians were killed. Things were becoming very dangerous for ordinary people, and the Bulsaras and many other families were frightened for their children. So the Bulsaras decided to leave as quickly as possible, taking only a few things with them. Freddie's father, Bomi, had worked for



Arabs being questioned during the Zanzibar Revolution

the British government in Zanzibar, so the family decided not to go back to India but to start a new life in the UK.

In autumn 1964, the Bulsaras moved into a house with four bedrooms at 22 Gladstone Avenue, Feltham, in south-west London, not far from Heathrow Airport. Freddie's first home in London was an ordinary house in an ordinary street. It was very different from the expensive houses where he lived after he became famous. In 2016, a blue sign was put on the wall to mark Freddie's first house in England.

Although the Bulsaras were safe in the UK, at first things were not easy for them. The colours and sounds of London were very different from those of Zanzibar.

Zanzibar had beautiful beaches, blue skies and warm days, but the skies of London were often grey and rainy. The houses, streets and shops were all very new and strange. Planes flew above the family's home on their way to and from Heathrow, making a lot of noise. Everything in London was expensive, too. In Zanzibar, Bomi had had a good job, so his family enjoyed a comfortable life. Like other families with money in Zanzibar, the Bulsaras had owned a car, and Jer had someone to help her in the house. But in London both Freddie's parents had to go out to work to **support** their family. However, Freddie was very happy to be in London because it was the start of his dream.



Freddie's first home in London