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A voice like no other



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On Freddie Mercury's 70th birth anniversary, REJI VARGHESE pays tribute to one of the greatest voices in rock

For a man who's been dead for 25 years, its odd how Freddie Mercury's name keeps popping up in the news.

A few weeks back it was Donald Trump's grand entrance at the Republican National Convention, to Freddie Mercury's, "We Are The Champions". The unauthorised use of that song and Queen's statement disassociating the band with Trump's "unsavoury campaign" became news over the next couple of days.

A month before that it was a notebook that Freddie Mercury had used to pen lyrics for the songs he wrote, that went up for auction, that made headlines across the world.

But to me the news item that would explain why Freddie Mercury has still not faded from public memory 25 years after his death was a research paper published by a group of Austrian, Czech, and Swedish researchers in April titled "Freddie Mercury - Accoustic Analysis of Speaking, Fundamental Frequency, Vibrato and Subharmonics."

Science stories don't make international headlines unless it's something very significant like the discovery of a new sub-atomic particle or a star, or the Nobel prize being announced. So it was very odd indeed that a research paper on a rock stars vocal chords would make international news - from CNN to Fox News to Time Magazine and many other publications worldwide.

The study found that the Mercury created those stunning vibratos by using subharmonics, a singing style where the ventricular folds vibrate along with the vocal folds. This is a technique used by Mongolian throat singers and most human beings never speak or sing with their ventricular folds.

Perhaps this explains why Freddie Mercury's voice was like no other. He could be low and throaty, fragile and tender, and reach a pristine, high, operatic coloratura - all in the same song. But Freddie was not only a great singer, he was also a brilliant songwriter and an accomplished piano player.

In an interview to the BBC, Spanish Opera soprano Montserrat Caballé says - "People think of Freddie only as a rock singer, but he was a great musician. At his home one night I told him I loved Chopin's 'Impromptu'. He just sat at the piano and played it to me. We were there until 6 o'clock in the morning."

Freddie's first formal piano lessons were not in glitzy London but in St. Peter's boarding school in sleepy Panchgani, a hill station close to Pune. At the time there was no Freddie Mercury either - he was known as Farrokh Bulsara, the name given to him by his Parsi parents. While at school he got his first taste of Rock n Roll playing piano in the school band at the age of 12.

Mercury's love of western classical made Queen's **music** a bit different from the regular rock music of the time. One of my favorite Queen songs, "The Show Must Go On", is about Mercury continuing to perform despite being terminally ill. When the song was being recorded the other band members were concerned whether Mercury would be physically capable of singing the song as he could hardly walk. As Brian May recalls, "I said, 'Fred, I don't know if this is going to be possible to sing.' And he went, 'I'll f---ing do it, darling' – vodka down – and went in and killed it, completely lacerated that vocal."

Towards the end of his life he was increasingly captivated by opera and in 1987 he recorded an album with Montserrat Caballé called 'Barcelona', the title song of which went on to become one of Mercury's biggest hits. Cabellé performed the song live at the 1992 Olympics, a year after Mercury's death.

Freddie Mercury would've turned 70 today. If AIDS hadn't got him at the age of 45 it could've been very possible that Freddie Mercury the rock star could've evolved into Freddie Mercury the opera singer. Whether he would've made a great opera singer or not we will never know.

But what millions of his fans knew decades ago, scientific research has just revealed - that there never was or ever will be another voice like Freddie Mercury's.

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