

Queen's transcendence

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As the art of music has blossomed and matured over time, musicians have come to neglect the most crucial aspect of any song: emotion. Because I have grown accustomed to the impassioned music of classical composers through my study of piano, I find it difficult to listen to some of the lifeless music that reverberates across every radio station. Emotion adds a sense of meaning to every word that a singer utters, every note that a musician plays. Perhaps the most prevalent source of emotion in music came from the songs of the slaves. Unlike many of today's modern artists, slaves didn't simply have an urge to sing, they had a dire need.

Imprisoned by the binding chains of the cotton fields and cow skin whips, slaves sang to express their feelings of ineffable sadness through the only available outlet. If slaves cried a single tear or showed any sign of weakness, they were put to death because they were thought to be "sick." No one conveys this better than Frederick Douglass in his empowering autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. "The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears." (page 30, Douglass).

Just as the slaves voiced their deepest feelings through their songs, Queen front man Freddy Mercury was able to display heartfelt emotions in his last filmed performance of "These Are the Days of our Lives." Published in the album *Innuendo*, Queen composed this song to contribute to the research of AIDS, a disease that afflicted Freddie Mercury and ultimately led to his tragic passing on November 24, 1991. This song has not only had resounding effects on an international scale, but also on Freddie and his fellow band

members. Similar to the hardships that plagued the slaves, AIDS bears a heavy burden on its victims both physically and mentally. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

This unbearable disease progressively attacks your immune system until it is rendered useless. According to the foundation of AIDS research, over 35 million people have AIDS worldwide as of October 2013. While no one knows exactly when Freddie acquired AIDS, it is widely known that, before he died, he sung tirelessly until he didn't have the capacity to utter one more note. His performance of "These Are the Days of our Lives" was filmed in black and white, so as to mask his skeleton-like frame that was being degraded by the AIDS virus. He handpicked this song, written primarily by Queen's drummer Roger Taylor (though he never took the credit for himself), from all of his prior works to raise awareness of and foster monetary donations for the research of AIDS. After his tragic death, a charity known as The Mercury Phoenix Trust was formed by the former members of Queen (John Deacon, Brian May, and Roger Taylor) to raise money and awareness for the disease that took Freddie's life.

Currently, the charity is assisting 28 countries worldwide- ranging from Brazil to Nepal to Zimbabwe. They host a variety of activities in commemoration of Freddie, including the Freddie for a Day initiative. On September 5th, Freddie's birthday, fans young and old are invited to have a gathering with their friends in order to contribute funds to The Mercury Phoenix Trust. The money is later redistributed to places with the greatest need. Even more potent than the feelings of sorrow that spread across the world was the impact of this song for the band upon Freddie's passing.

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As the news stations constantly reported the truly unfortunate news of Freddie's death, the band privately grieved. Unlike other popular artists of their time, Queen had been a tightknit group that enjoyed spending time with each other. Before Freddie began experiencing a myriad of complications attributed to his illness, they consistently performed for thousands of people each and every week. In fact, they only sundered after Freddie's passing. In a rare interview from March 9, 2011, lead guitarist Brian May remarked on the death of his beloved friend. " When Freddie died, it was like losing a family member, and we all handled it in different ways.

For a time, I really wanted to escape from Queen; I didn't want to know about it...I have been to the extremes, where I have found it very painful, and I couldn't talk about him. But I don't feel that any more. He's part of our lives, still, in a very real way. I'm not saying there aren't moments when I don't get tearful, because there are, but most of the time it's a joy." He goes on further to explain his happiest times with Freddie in his final days of recording.

" He wasn't very well by that time, but if it came to it, he'd say, ' Oh well, we need a vocal, don't we?... Then he'd ... prop himself up at the desk, and go for it, and sing amazingly, with such passion and strength, until he dropped." Much like Freddie's unabated willingness to sing in spite of his condition, his performance of " These Are the Days of our Lives" compels me to strive to be the best person I can be for those who matter most. On October 22, 2012, my Aunt Harriet passed away after battling ovarian cancer for five years.

As her days dwindled, I began to recount all of our prior experiences. The memories of our festive holiday gatherings, filled with laughter, wonderful food, and her warm and affectionate visage, were at the forefront of my mind. After she passed on, I manifestly remember sitting in my room, isolated from everyone, clinging on to what I had left of her. This song perfectly embodies the fact that, no matter what happens, love is an immutable force that is ever present in life. No matter the hardships you endure, not even death cannot sever a strong connection between two individuals.

“ Those were the days of our lives yeah, the bad things in life were so few, those days are all gone now but one thing’s still true, when I look and I find, I still love you, I still love you.” When I listen to this song I reminisce of the times I’ve spent with my loved ones, the people who have meant so much for me. I can barely cope with the fact that I will surely outlive many of my relatives. Knowing this, I value our visits as more than just fun times, because they may very well be our last. Every word spoken, every laugh cackled, every single instant of my time with my family is engraved into the depths of my mind. I could never bear the regret of knowing that I walked away, neglecting to say, “ I love you” one final time.

It is this belief, reinforced by “ These Are the Days of our Lives”, that makes me a kinder and more compassionate person. From funding AIDS research to finding meaning in a song to helping cope with a death, “ These Are the Days of our Lives” has been an inspiration to all of those who hear it. This iconic song, sung by a man who imbued charisma, is a homage to the inevitability of death, and more importantly, the beauty of life. Similar to the slaves,
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Freddie Mercury took his most personal feelings and expressed them in the only way he possibly could, in song. His heartfelt emotion permeates through every lyric.

In this sense, Freddie was a slave of the very disease that was eating away at his life. He was in chronic agony—AIDS continued to deteriorate his immune system yet he forged forward. This constant siege of attack was relieved only through singing. Despite his relentless persistence, he was finally liberated from his enslaver to live a new life. “ The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.”