

Freddie Mercury and Expressions of Vocal Authenticity Abstract for IASPM-ANZ Conference 2017

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In the 1970s, glam rock artists engaged, subverted, and toyed with notions of the ‘authentic’ rock performer (Auslander 2004, Moore 2012). This primarily took the form of treating stage personas (comprising musical and extramusical characteristics) as unfixed—Bowie is the case *par excellence*. This paper explores this idea further with respect to the singing styles of Queen’s Freddie Mercury, focusing on music produced in the first decade of the group’s career.

One of Mercury’s strengths was his ability to vary the colour of his singing voice. I contend that he possessed four main voice ‘types’: powerful, gravelly, sincere, and exaggerated, each of which was defined by specific singing techniques, and each of which appears in different songs according to emotional content and tone. This approach can be understood as subversive vis-à-vis rock authenticity, because the singer appears to serve the song, rather than the song existing as a vehicle for the singer.

More subversive is Mercury’s exaggerated tone, which I argue takes its stylistic cue from Liza Minnelli and cabaret. The seemingly effortless and feminine style of singing stands in contrast to the overt and explicit demonstration of masculine power from a rock singer such as Robert Plant. In a final twist, Mercury often used this vocal tone for intimate songs (e.g. ‘Love of My Life’), which are sometimes assumed to reflect his most personal and heartfelt sentiments. Therefore, it is through an apparently ‘inauthentic’ performing style that we, as listeners, get a fleeting glimpse of the ‘authentic’ Freddie Mercury.