



Brian on stage
with his Red
Special guitar

*In Queen, he was a rock'n'roll legend, but Brian May remains refreshingly down to earth. In this candid interview, he talks to Alison Jane Reid about Freddie, a wife in *Strictly*, his passion for astronomy... and the joy of a Mr Whippy ice cream*

STRICTLY, SUPERNOVAS AND THE MAGICAL MR MERCURY

LET ME APOLOGISE in advance for breaking many female hearts with the following revelation. Brian May, rock'n'roll supernova, Renaissance man and consort of Anita Dobson can't dance. And emphatically won't dance. When I ask him if he will be helping his vivacious Mrs to polish her dancing steps for *Strictly Come Dancing*, in which she is starring, it is the only point in the interview when he becomes visibly uncomfortable.

'Not a chance! There is not a remote possibility of that. I feel rhythm; but I don't feel it in my feet. That's the way most guitarists are. Watch Jeff Beck's feet. We feel rhythm in the top line; we're aware of what's underneath; but we don't move with it. A lot would have to happen before I could dance; but I am very proud of Anita.'

It is late afternoon on a day when summer briefly makes an appearance, and in true rock'n'roll fashion, Brian May, Queen's celebrated lead guitarist and now Dr May, PhD in Astrophysics, with a special interest in 'reflected light in dust particles in the solar system', is relaxing in a corner of his favourite Italian. He is dressed in a flowing d'Artagnan

black-and-white shirt, though he protests vehemently that he hates fashion. 'My PA, Claire, bought this shirt. I do one shopping trip a year. Anita is too busy, and I don't like the idea of having to slavishly follow anything; I have never been fashionable.'

He does, however, begin to soften his line at the suggestion that Queen did indeed set the fashion agenda with their vibrant stage clothes by the original *enfant terrible* of fashion, Zandra Rhodes. And then he returns to grazing on a delicious gelato, all the while telling funny, intimate stories about Freddie Mercury and Queen, the greatest rock'n'roll band on earth.

Throughout the extraordinary reign of Queen, Brian and Freddie were close. This year would have been Freddie's 65th birthday, and May is in a contemplative mood.

'Freddie was living the persona of a rock star long before he became one,' he says, recalling the early days of the band. 'Freddie was a strange combination, because he was very shy. But he cloaked it in this very flamboyant way of dressing, and way of behaving. He was funny. As you suggest, he

was a dandy.' Perhaps May, the grammar school boy, and Mercury, the whiz kid from Zanzibar with the perfect, crystalline voice, got along because they shared similar adolescent growing pains. 'I think that is why a lot of us do this. It's to find a way of being confident.

'The strange thing is that I found it less terrifying to be on stage than to be in an audience at a concert, because I didn't know what to do. It was all about dances in those days. You used to play a dance. All the boys would stand around, not knowing what to do, because they were scared of girls. I went to an all boys' school, and I didn't know how to deal with it. I couldn't face rejection, and I thought it would be a lot easier if I was on that stage.'

Smart move. The moment May became the attraction on stage, every girl would want to be with him! 'That's right,' he says looking pleased, 'and they couldn't because I was on stage.' How the male mind works! Before this interview, many people who have met or worked with May told me that he is a laid-back, lovely, down-to-earth sort of man. And he really is.

But 40 years ago, May disappointed his father when he chose the itinerant life of rock'n'roll over a promising career in science. The gamble would, of course, pay off spectacularly, and May eventually healed the rift with his father, who he describes as 'a very talented man.'

It was his father who helped to design and build the extraordinary Red Special, the unique guitar that Brian always plays and describes as 'part of me.' And besides, May has now returned to his early love of science. These days he is just as likely to pop on *The Sky at Night* with his great friend and childhood hero, Sir Patrick Moore, as perform a gig with his rock-star friends at The Royal Albert Hall.

'It's true,' he says, laughing with obvious delight. 'I am very busy, but it is all fun. Next week I am seeing Patrick. We stay quite close; he is a lovely man. We are writing our next book together with Chris Lintott. It's just the three of us, and it's a follow-up to our last book *Bang!* This time we are writing an everyday guide to the universe, it's called *The Cosmic Tourist*.'

Brian says his love of astronomy took off when he was a small boy. 'I was just awestruck by the night sky. I used to look up at the stars and wonder what it was all about.'

And when May wasn't stargazing, or dreaming of emulating his heroes Tommy Steele – the first British rock star – or Buddy Holly, he was nurturing another passion: photography. And in particular, 3D stereo photography.

Throughout the Queen years, he carried a stereo camera around and also has a fine collection of rare images by the Victorian photographer TR Williams, which resulted in a critically acclaimed exhibition and book, *A Village Lost and Found*, which offers a glimpse into a lost, rural way of life. He hopes it will one day find a home in the V&A.

Brian is happiest and at his most eloquent when he is talking about his hobbies and interests and not being asked the same questions about Queen and Freddie and Anita Dobson, his second wife. He also reveals that he and Anita recently slipped over to the Isle of Wight for a pilgrimage-cum-whirlwind-seaside-holiday in honour of an earlier childhood holiday, which he took with his parents in Sandown when he was three years old.

'I was invited to give a talk at the Dimbola Museum and



Brian's book launch at The Groucho Club

Galleries in Freshwater, which has been showing my exhibition – *A Village Lost And Found*. We had a fantastic day. The ladies in the tearoom baked me a cake for my birthday, and then we spent the rest of our holiday exploring the island – making a special trip to Sandown

'The island is a great place. It feels more tranquil and meditative, and no one seems to lock their doors.' There were 'his and hers' Mr Whippy ice creams on the beach at Sandown and fish and chips at the Beach Hut Diner

in Ventnor, which he enjoyed so much, he sent the proprietor, a Ms Carole Parks, a signed album to say thank you.

But does he struggle to blend in with the hordes of visitors, who must be wondering if they have just spotted a Brian May lookalike?

'Ha, ha, the trick is to keep moving. We did look at The Royal Hotel in Ventnor for lunch, which looked lovely, but it was very busy, and that is the point when Anita and I become tourist attractions, so we kept going.'

Did he do any stargazing? 'No, not this time, but the island would be a great place to view the stars. I've seen

'I've seen quite a few total eclipses of the sun – a truly awesome experience'

quite a few total eclipses of the sun, and that is a great thing to do. It's a nice social event; but it is also a truly awesome experience. You feel you are seeing the universe in a different way. Suddenly, you are very aware of being on a piece of rock that is going around the sun. You get to see the sun's corona, the stars come out, the planets look really bright – I would recommend it to anyone.'

Now it is time for this shooting star of rock'n'roll to head home. And no, he won't be doing a cha-cha-cha, a slow waltz or even Hank Marvin's famous shuffle anytime soon. What he will be doing is hanging out with Patrick Moore when an extremely rare transit of Venus happens next year. So remember, not all rock gods can dance.

The original Queen line-up:
Roger Taylor, Freddie Mercury,
Brian and John Richard Deacon

