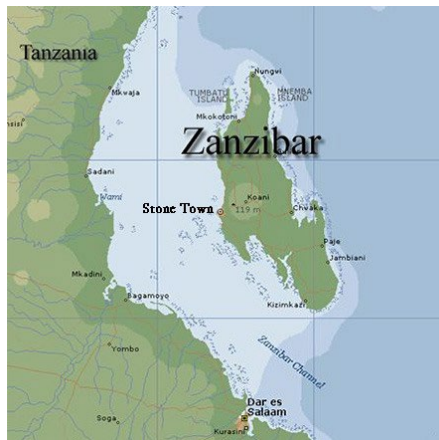




Little Farrokh (Intro to Photo Essay)

THE SHOW MUST GO ON · WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2020 · 16 MINUTES 1245 Reads

This photo album introduction is not to be considered a comprehensive study of the childhood of Freddie Mercury. Rather, it is a timeline designed to enhance the photo viewing experience with context and detailed background information. `



Zanzibar and the city of Stone Town

Farrokh Bulsara, the baby boy who would grow to become the musical icon that we know today as Freddie Mercury, was born on the exotic island of Zanzibar, which is roughly 300 miles (477.32 km) from its mainland, the African nation of Tanzania.

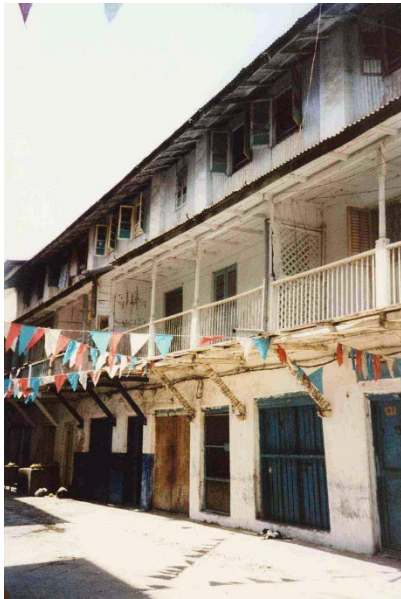
The island is known for its spice plantations and white sand beaches. It is also famous for one of the bloodiest political uprisings in modern history.

On December 14, 1908, Bomi Bulsara was born into a family of Parsees, members of the Zoroastrian faith, in the Indian state of Gujarat. He was one of eight brothers. Bomi was given the surname Bulsara, after the city of his birth, Bulsar.

Gujarat was far from a wealthy community. The state had nothing to speak of in the way of commerce or industry. The only career opportunities lay in the field of agriculture-mango harvesting that is-an occupation which would all but guarantee one a life of poverty. Consequently, when young men in Gujarat reached working age, they were forced to relocate in order to find jobs. Bomi and his brothers were no exception. One by one, they set sail 3,000 miles across the Indian Ocean to the Port of Zanzibar looking for suitable positions. At that time Zanzibar was under British rule.

Bomi was successful almost immediately. He received an offer of employment with the British Government as a high court cashier in the city of Stone Town. He excelled at his new position and created quite a privileged lifestyle for himself.

Jer and Bomi Meet



Bomi's duties required him to travel throughout Zanzibar, as well as to make frequent stopovers in India. It was on one of those business trips to his former homeland that he met Jer. Authors Matt Richards and Mark Langthorne describe her in their book *Somebody to Love*, as a "bespectacled and dainty girl, 14 years his junior." Still, it was love at first sight. They married shortly afterward in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Jer joined Bomi in Zanzibar as his bride.

The couple lived in the city of Stone Town, in the two-story apartment building pictured above. It was accessed from a flight of stairs on busy Shangani Street.

Although they were not wealthy, the Bulsaras were well positioned within the Zanzibarian socio-economic structure, due to Bomi's position with the British Government. Their relative affluence afforded them a much higher standard of living than that of the majority Swahili Bantu population. They were able to employ domestic help and to purchase a small car.

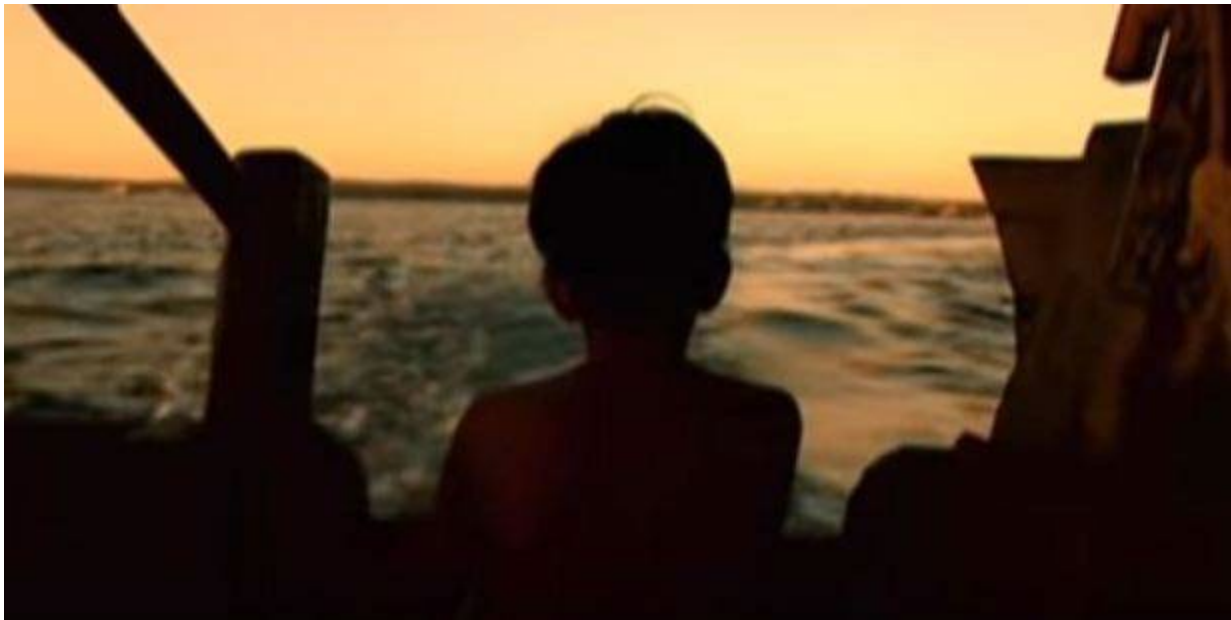
On September 5, 1946, which was coincidentally the Parsee New Year's Day, little Farrokh Bulsara was born at the Government Hospital in Stone Town. He weighed just under seven pounds. As he grew, his older cousin Perviz remembers him.

"When he was very young, a small child, that is about 3-4 years old, when his mother used to go to work, she used to leave him with my mother, because my mother was a housewife and because both parents were working.

"...He was such a naughty little one. I was much older than him and liked taking care of him. He was such a small boy, a very nice child."

At the age of five, Farrokh was enrolled at the Missionary School, an elementary institution in Stone Town operated by British nuns. Already, according to his mother, he had developed an aptitude for singing several genres of music and performing in front of audiences. It had come to be expected for him to be asked to sing when he attended social gatherings with his parents. And little Farrokh was always happy to oblige.

In 1952 his sister Kashmira was born. She would tell an interviewer years later that she only recalled having one year with her doting brother. That is most likely because in February of 1955, on Valentine's Day, and shortly after participating in his Naojote ceremony (Zoroastrian confirmation) 8 year-old Farrokh was sent away to the St. Peter (Boarding) School for boys. The school was some 3000 miles away from Zanzibar, in Panchgani, India. And although his parents would accompany him on the first 3000 mile voyage to his new life, for the next seven years he would only see them one month out of each year, when he returned home for summer vacations. On other school holidays, he would either remain at school, stay with his maternal grandmother and aunt at their home in Bombay, or visit with friends from school and their families.



A dramatization of little Farrokh's journey to school in India from "Freddie Mercury: The Untold Story"

The Boarding School Experience

The phrase “Sent (or shipped) away to boarding school” carries with it a negative connotation. It often describes a convenient, socially acceptable means for the privileged to dispose of an unwanted child. The expression tends to conjure up images of tormented orphans in a Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë novel.

The Bulsaras however, should not be judged so harshly. Both mother and father loved their son dearly. They never intended him any harm and certainly had no desire to ‘dispose’ of him. His father’s only crime was in wanting little Farrokh to receive a stellar education, the quality of which was unavailable in Zanzibar.

His mother Jer, recalls the moment of separation.

“I cried when we left him, but he just mingled with the other boys.” She continued. “He was quite happy and saw it as an adventure, as some of our friends’ children had gone there.”

Whether little Farrokh was truly happy or just putting on a brave face for his ‘mum’ is a subject for debate. In any event, **psychotherapy trainer and psycho-historian Nick Duffell** warns in his book, *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, that sending an 8 year-old away to boarding school is on par with child abuse. He cites thousands of letters that he has received from people who feel that they were damaged by the boarding school experience. He writes:

“Children need to be brought up in the company of people who love them. Teachers, however good they may be, cannot supply that love. Children of this age do not have the emotional intelligence or maturity to deal with this sense of loss. They develop what I call a “strategic survival” personality. On the outside they are competent and confident. Inside they are private and insecure. For many, the insecurity affects the rest of their lives.”

Several Queen historians have pointed to Freddie's life-long struggle with personal insecurity and separation anxiety as evidence of this theory. Adult Freddie spoke to the issue during an interview with the British publication, *NME Magazine*, in March of 1974.

"Of course, there were feelings of being sent away from my parents and sister whom I missed very much-feelings of loneliness, feelings of being rejected-but you had to do what you were told. So, the sensible thing was to make the most of it."

He added that the boarding school experience had also taught him to "fend" for himself.



Freddie with his classmates and teacher at St. Peter School, Panchgani, India, Circa 1961

In that interview, Freddie also addressed the subject of sexual experimentation and abuse at boarding school.

“It’s stupid to say there is no such thing in boarding school. All the things they say about them are more or less true. All the bullying and everything else.

“I’ve had the odd schoolmaster chasing me. It didn’t shock me because somehow, boarding schools, you’re not confronted by it, you are just slowly aware of it. It’s going through life.”

He was then asked if he was the “pretty boy” whom everybody wanted to lay.

“Funnily enough, yes. Anybody goes through that. I was considered the “arch poof.”

The next question: “So how about being bent?”

“...Let’s put it this way, there were times when I was young and green. It’s a thing schoolboys go through. I’ve had my share of schoolboy pranks. I’m not going to elaborate further.”

If and to what extent Farrokh’s boarding school liaisons shaped Freddie’s sexual orientation is impossible to determine. **Jungian analyst and psychotherapist Joy Schaverien** offers a clinical hypothesis. She writes:

“Warmth may be sought with the available other as a new form of sibling group emerges. Sexual experiments may offer solace, but may also lead to abuse. This may lead to confusion in the development of sexual identity and some boys become uncertain of their primary sexual orientation. While initiating the child into the pleasures of homosexuality, the institution proclaims its (homosexuality’s) dangers. This may set a person on the path of covert homosexuality or of proclaimed heterosexuality and emphatic disavowal of homosexuality.”

Farrokh Returns Home



Final Zanzibar Bulsara home on Kenyatta Road

On February 25, 1963, Farrokh, who had come to be known by this time as Freddie Bulsara, was summoned back to Zanzibar by his parents, after having failed his Class 10 exams. *(In India, after the completion of the tenth grade, students are required to take a national or state board exam. The score determines one's Class 11 options.)*

Subash Shah, a friend from Zanzibar who also attended St. Peter with Freddie (until he too was brought home after failing an exam), remembers being surprised when he ran into Freddie at school back in Stone Town.

“Freddie walked into my class and I was shocked, as I had presumed that he was already halfway across the Indian Ocean, going back to Panchgani.

“But he never told me why his parents had brought him back and I never asked.”

Various rumors concerning Freddie's campus escapades began to surface in the years following his death. One had him in a relationship with an older male student. Another linked him to a boy in Bombay.

In 2008, Peter Patrao, a former teacher at St. Peter, gave an interview concerning Freddie to the *Hindustan Times*. He claimed that word of one of Freddie's gay affairs had found its way back to Zanzibar, and had sent shockwaves through the Bulsara household.

“His father would have been informed and I'm sure very disappointed,” Patrao told the *Times*. “The family has a very rigid background going back generations, and Zoroastrians completely forbid homosexuality.”

Whether because of a disappointing academic performance, a preoccupation with music (his band the Hectics were the rage in Panchgani), out of control teenage hormones, the discovery of an illicit affair, or all of the above, 16 year-old Freddie Bulsara appeared to have hit a brick wall. Having apparently squandered his opportunity for a superior education, he found himself back at school in Zanzibar, poised to receive a mediocre education, and facing an uncertain future. And then...

The Revolution

Zanzibar became a British protectorate when the English seized control of the spice island in 1890. For decades the colony was home to a multi-ethnic population due to ongoing trade with other African nations, as well as countries within Asia and the Middle East. But in the early 1960s, the British felt their grip on the island weakening in the face of festering tension between the ethnic groups. Despite comprising only 20% of the population of Zanzibar, the Arabs had an economic and political stranglehold on the black African majority. That dynamic created an atmosphere of resentment and discord between the communities.

In 1963 Britain granted Zanzibar its independence and a national election was scheduled to establish a government for the newly liberated state. The election would pit the minority Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) under the leadership of Sultan Jamshid bin Abdullah, against the majority Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP). The ZNPs won with 54% of the vote. The ASPs, however, declared that the results were rigged, citing the disparity between the Arab population percentage and the vote totals. The Arab minority further infuriated the African majority by expelling African police officers from the country in order to (as they explained it) maintain order.

On January 12, 1964, at about 3:00 am, a coup of 600-800 insurgents, led by self-appointed Field Marshall John Okello, stormed the government buildings in Zanzibar City.

Nine hours later, they had, for the most part, taken control of the island. Over 5,000 Arabs lay dead in the wake of this *initial* attack. The Sultan fled to the mainland and from there to the UK.

There has never been an official casualty figure. Estimates vary from 17,000-20,000 people killed in the initial attack and its aftermath.

WARNING: Graphic Content. The following photographs may be upsetting to some viewers.



Only 3 out of hundreds of mass murder scenes resulting from the 1964 Zanzibar revolution.

Meanwhile, the Bulsaras were in extreme peril. No one was safe who even appeared to be of Arab descent. Although the mass killings had ceased, home invasions were now underway. Even if they managed to escape the killing fields, they could be detained in camps for days.



Jer Bulsara recalled: “It was really frightening. And everybody was rushing around and didn’t know what to do exactly. And because we had young children, we had to decide too, we had to leave the country.”



Subash Shah recalls that the Bulsaras left in March, ahead of his family who left in June. The Bulsaras reportedly fit as many of their belongings as possible into two suitcases and fled Zanzibar forever. In May they arrived at London’s Heathrow Airport.

The family could have settled in Jer and Bomi's homeland of India. But considering the fact that Bomi had a British passport and worked for the British government, London was a more practical destination. Equally as important to his mother, was the fact that Freddie was ecstatic at the thought of moving to London. He had been obsessed with Western culture for many years. He identified with the music and loved the fashion. He regularly devoured the news from the music and pop culture scenes. He could have never imagined that it would take such a confluence of events to make his dream come true.

A New Life



22 Gladstone Avenue, the new home for the Balsara family in Feltham (Greater London)

Freddie and his family happily settled into a four bedroom house in the London suburb of Feltham. His mother had a sister living in the area and Feltham was very close to the airport, where Freddie would eventually find work.

However, there would be adjustments and unforeseen circumstances.

The family would discover that the cost of living was considerably more expensive in London than it had been in Zanzibar. Whereas they were accustomed to an upper middle class lifestyle, they would now struggle to remain in the middle class. There would be no money for domestic help, and Jer would also have to work (although she did work for a time in Zanzibar as well). She was hired at a local department store and Bomi would find employment as an accountant for a local catering company.

But the most foreboding aspect of the change was the decidedly hostile climate for immigrants which the Bulsaras would be subjected to.

Authors Richards and Langthorne, in *Somebody to Love*, noted:

"Since the late 1940s onwards, the Black and Asian population in Britain had increased through migration from the Caribbean, as well as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A tide of resentment was beginning to grow, and race and immigration had become major domestic political issues.

"...Against such a tense background, Bomi and Jer Bulsara opted to keep their heads down and simply provide for their family as best they could, while they created new lives for themselves in the UK."

Journalist Palash Ghosh wrote in 2011 (regarding Freddie):

"Being perceived as Indian or 'foreign' was clearly a disadvantage. Luckily for Freddie, with his white skin and dark brown hair, he was physically indistinguishable from any European (or indeed, any British) man."

Warning! Some viewers may find the content and general tone of the following video to be offensive.

Whose England? (Part 1)

https://youtu.be/L8M6FEu4_HY

The Paper Chase



Freddie poses during class at Ealing College.

And finally, there was the matter of Freddie's education. If you recall, it was interrupted twice-once because of folly; once because of a revolution.

Freddie always wanted to attend Ealing Technical College and School of Art in London. Not only was Ealing a good art school, it was *the* good art school. While Freddie was still in Zanzibar, he had learned from the few Western magazines that he was able to get his hands on, that English rock and roll greats such as Pete Townshend and Ron Wood had gone there. In fact, attending art school was seen as a rite of passage for up and coming pop stars.

And Ealing was the art school with the best networking opportunities.

But as Freddie had not received the proper academic credits either in India or Zanzibar, he did not possess the qualifications to get into Ealing.

In order to qualify, he was required to take several foundational courses at Isleworth Polytechnic, another London college approximately 35 minutes from Feltham. Not only did Polytechnic allow Freddie to earn the academic credentials that he needed for Ealing, it also acted as a Western culture finishing school of sorts. During his two year stint at the institution, Freddie was introduced to the music, films, and theater that he had only read and dreamt about. He learned how to dress, how to wear his hair, and in general, the Western way of being.

In the end, Freddie was successful in achieving the long sought after A-level that he needed to get into Ealing School of Art. He would go on to complete his studies at Ealing, earning a degree in graphic design.

*"I think I'm goin' back
To the things I learned so well in my youth,
I think I'm returning to
The days when I was young enough to know the truth"*

*"Now there are no games
To only pass the time
No more coloring books,
No Christmas bells to chime
But thinking young and growing older is no sin
And I can play the game of life to win"*

Song: Goin' Back Artist : Freddie Mercury (originally released under the name *Larry Lurex*)

Sources and Resources

[Somebody to Love: The Life, Death and Legacy of Freddie Mercury](#)

[Is This the Real Life?: The Untold Story of Queen](#)

[Freddie Mercury: The Definitive Biography](#)

[Freddie Mercury: The Untold Story](#)

[How a Panchgani School Moulded the Rock Legend Called Freddie Mercury](#)

[Panchgani's Wild Strawberry](#)

[Boarding School Syndrome: The psychological trauma of the 'privileged' child](#)

[The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System](#)

[What We Forgot To Remember, Part 1: Genocide in Zanzibar](#)