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Having such a good time, having a ball at 'Bohemian Rhapsody'

With input from Queen's surviving mates, film as much about music as it is Mercury

Last spring, I donned a sparkly disco dress and joined my college roommates in New York for "Summer: The Donna Summer Musical." We were ready to dance the night away. But after the house dimmed all the lights, we dissolved in disappointment like cake in the rain as we sat through the painful pathos of the performer's life, punctuated by fragments of her famous hits.

On the screen, "Bohemian Rhapsody" is the opposite experience.

It doesn't really matter that this musical depiction of the life of Queen frontman Freddie Mercury (Rami Malek) isn't a great movie. It's a great time.

Queen bassist Brian May (Gwilym Lee), the guitar god and second-career astrophysicist who still sports an Isaac Newton hairdo and drummer Roger Taylor (Ben Hardy) were deeply involved as executive producers of the film, ensuring that "Bohemian Rhapsody" is as much about the music

as it is about Freddie Mercury.

Born as Farrokh Bulsara into a conservative Zoroastrian family exiled from Zanzibar to London, Mercury lived with his doting mother, admiring sister and controlling father, whom he defied by spending nights hanging out at clubs.

It was in the alley of one such establishment that Mercury held an impromptu audition with a student band whose lead singer abruptly quit. The students were May and Taylor.

Mercury claimed his extraordinary vocal range could be attributed to four extra incisors that pushed his front teeth forward, creating additional room in his mouth.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" takes us on the wild ride from that alley audition to Live Aid, the star-filled famine relief festival, where Queen seized the prime spot and gave a legendary performance attended



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rjford@scharfbanks.com.

and admired by Princess Diana at the height of her influence.

Malek delivers a fine enough impersonation of Mercury. Once the prosthetic teeth are in, all trace of Malek vanishes. (Mercury claimed his extraordinary vocal range could be attributed to four extra incisors that pushed his front teeth forward, creating additional room in his mouth.) Malek's doleful liquid eyes telegraph the singer's vulnerability, isolation and his burden of remaining publicly closeted.

dominant stage presence that we remember as Mercury — part Jagger, part Brian Wilson and part Liberace.

Forever in search of somebody to love, early in his career Mercury fell for Mary Austin (Lucy Boynton), who remained his muse and soulmate even after Mercury, still on the down-low, took a high dive into the ecstasies of pre-AIDS gaydom.

Sacha Baron Cohen was originally cast as Mercury but is rumored to have parted with the production because of differences with May and Taylor over how deeply the film would forage into Mercury's private life.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" is rated PG-13. In this family-friendly(ish) version, sexual excess, regret and familial disapproval is treated the same as that of any other rock and roller (think Russell Brand in "Get Him to the Greek"), and there is plenty of excess, regret and disapproval to go around.

Mike Myers, whose 1992 "Wayne's World" movie revived interest in the 1975 "Bohemian Rhapsody" song, appears permed and bearded in a small role as the record executive who refused to champion the extended-play single, predicting it would bite the dust. Instead, radio went gaga for Mercury's soaring operatic harmonies.

The music's dynamite-with-a-laser-beam earworms set off waves of pleasantly wistful, exuberant nostalgia, even among those who aren't committed Queen fans as they enter the multiplex. "Bohemian Rhapsody" hits all the notes of a proper jukebox musical.

It will rock you.