

Freddie Mercury and the Wade Deacon/Halewood Connection

Mike Royden

Before Freddie Bulsara hit the big time, he spent some of his early career in Liverpool, where he had hooked up with local band Ibox, which later morphed into Wreckage.

Lead guitarist in the band was Mike Bersin who lived in Beechwood Avenue, Halewood. I went to the same school as Mike – Wade Deacon Grammar in Widnes – and we travelled each day on the same coach. He was a few years above me, but we occasionally chatted and as we walked home, conversation usually turning to guitars and music. I first saw him play in the school hall – I think it was part of a musical – but what I do remember was a three-piece band in the style of Cream/Hendrix Experience, the typical acid style light show, the cast walking up



and down the centre aisle with protest placards - Ban the Bomb, Stop the Vietnam War, and everything else that that generation was demonstrating about in 1968. But there was this amazing band and a great guitarist with cool hair, who looked like a cross between Hendrix and Clapton, (during their big bushy afro phase), and to my young ears, sounding exactly like them too. It was a life-changing moment.

I convinced my parents that the clarinet was never going to be mastered, and guitar was clearly the most sensible option (although still trying to master it). So, after getting hold of a second-hand electric, Mike gave me a few lessons, and even showed me a new way to string it, using two top E strings for better effect for lead playing. I still have the diagram tucked into a music book somewhere.

School Christmas dances were excruciating. This was a sixties grammar school still in the 1940s, (former pupils included Alan Bleasdale and educationalist Sir Ken Robinson) and staff were still of a mind, that to turn out young gentlemen, we needed to learn how to ballroom dance. Even missing double Maths for practice lessons wasn't worth it and I hated Maths with a vengeance. I'm sure the girls felt the same. Wade Deacon Girls School was right alongside our school, and they were escorted over by their female teachers, and into the hall. They were seated on one side, and us on the other, while our teachers demonstrated the finer points of the waltz, quick-step, and foxtrot. The most embarrassing moment for us all was when we had to shuffle over and pick our partner, made worse by the fact that no shoes were allowed in the hall, and our first introduction was through the medium of acute bromidrosis. Or as Frank Zappa would call it, Stink Foot.

So that was all prep for the big moment, when we would roll up for the Christmas Dance, the 'highlight' of the year. Which was more of the same, but with shoes, and some of us had even had a wash. Just horrendous. Plus, there was no school coach that time of night from

Halewood to Widnes, so parents were drafted in. I can remember the blood-chilling night when my Dad arranged with another local parent to share the lifts. His daughter was the best looking girl in the year, and way out of my league. We had never even spoken on the coach, and nor did we in the back of the car, all the way there and all the way back. My blood still runs cold thinking about it fifty years later.

So, when Mike and his pals organised a gig in the girl's school hall the following year, it was not to be missed. This really was the big school event of the year. This was a proper late sixties rock night, band and disco. For such repressed teenagers it was a lifesaver of immense proportions. A memorable night just on that level.



Wreckage – Mike Bersin far left, Freddie Bulsara far right.

So it's quite amazing that it now features in numerous books, articles and websites, as an evening that has become legendary, for reasons that would only become apparent so many years later. Probably the best account comes from that written by Andy Davis and John S Stuart;

Freddie lived for music, and in August 1969 he seized upon the opportunity he'd been waiting for – to sing in a band. Too impatient to form one of his own, he did the next best thing and found himself a ready-made outfit. His quarry was Ibex, a Merseyside-base trio comprising Mike Bersin (guitar and vocals.) and John 'Tupp' Taylor (bass and vocals) and a drummer by the name of Mike 'Miffer' Smith. Bersin and Taylor had played together since 1966 in a band called Colour, earning a local reputation with a series of gigs at such noted venues as Manchester's 'Twisted Wheel Club' and the Cavern Club in Liverpool. They'd even acted as pick-up band for British blues singer Jo-Ann Kelly.

"Under the influence of Cream," reveals Mike Bersin, "we realised that you only needed three musicians: one at the low end, one for the middle and one for the high, and one for the rhythm. You'd then solo endlessly until everybody fucked off to the bar." "We were progressive," adds John 'Tupp' Taylor. "We wore hairy fur coats and grew our hair. We

played a few improvised instrumentals which gathered form and almost became songs, but we never got around to completing any lyrics or melodies.”

In May 1969, Ibox played their debut in the small Merseyside town of Penketh, and prior to meeting Freddie, had packed off a demo tape to the Beatles’ Apple label, which resulted in little more than ‘Miffer’ Smith becoming enough of a celebrity to warrant a write-up in the local *Widnes Evening News*.

Mike Bersin: “We persuaded Mick to pack up his job as a milkman and go down to London to make it in the music business. We had a Comma van and a load of phone numbers. The morning after we arrived, we all piled into a phone box. Our roadie, Ken Testi, dialled this number. We were all crowded around the mouthpiece and we heard him say, ‘Hello, is Chris Ellis there, please?’ and this very frosty-voiced woman on the other end said ‘Yes, this is Chrysalis’. That was the level of our sophistication.”

“We met the members of Smile at a pub called the Kensington,” recalls ‘Tupp’ Taylor. “We saw them play a couple of times and they were really good. They had a great vocal-harmony thing going. Tim Staffell, their bass player, was a really good singer, and Freddie was a mate of theirs. We’d all sit around and have amazing vocal sessions singing Bee Gees, Beach Boys and Beatles songs. We could do great harmonies because there was three of them in Smile, myself, Mike Bersin, who’d chip in, and Freddie, of course.”

At this point, it was common knowledge among the Smile crowd that Freddie was desperate to get into Brian and Roger’s band. Perhaps joining Ibox might be a way in.

“Freddie hadn’t quite persuaded Smile to take him on as a vocalist,” confirms Mike Bersin. “They thought they were doing OK as they were. So, he said, “You know what you guys need, and that’s a vocalist.’ He was right, too, as John Taylor recalls: “I wasn’t the world’s greatest singer by any stretch of the imagination.” And as Ken Testi reveals “Mike had never been confident about his singing, but had been pushed into it.”

Freddie first met Ibox on 13th August 1969. Such was his enthusiasm, that just ten days later, he’d learned the bands’ set, brought in a few new songs, and had travelled up to Bolton, Lancashire, for a gig with them – his debut public performance. The date was 23rd August, and the occasion was one of Bolton’s regular afternoon ‘Bluesology’ sessions, held at the town’s Octagon theatre. For Ibox and friends, it was the event of the summer. No fewer than 15 bodies, including Freddie, Ken Testi, and the band’s other roadie Geoff Higgins, Paul Humberstone, assorted friends and girlfriends, plus Ibox’s instruments were squeezed into a transit van borrowed from Richard Thompson, a mate of Freddie’s who’d previously drummed in ‘1984’ with Brian May and Tim Staffell.

The gig, booked by Ken Testi before Ibox had left for London, provided a forum for amateur and semi-professional outfits to play, ‘on the understanding that no fees are available, though nominal expenses can be claimed from the door takings’. Peter Bardens band, Village, preceded Ibox on stage and the gig took place ‘in the round’, with the seating placed around the circular stage.

The following day, Ibox appeared in the first ‘Bluesology pop-in’, an open-air event on the bandstand in Bolton’s Queen’s Park. On the bill were local band Back, another called Birth, Spyrogyra, Gum Boot Smith, The White Myth, Stuart Butterworth, Phil Renwick and, of course, Ibox. In a report published the day before the Bolton Evening News wrote ‘The last -named act make a journey from London especially for the concert. The climax of the whole affair will be a supergroup, in which all the performers will play together. If the weather is fine the noise should be terrific”.



Remarkably, for such a relatively inauspicious event, Freddie's first-ever public performance was extremely well documented. There were at least three photographers present, and the proceedings were covered in Bolton's Evening News for the second time on 25th August. This even featured an uncredited photograph of Freddie, with the caption: 'One of the performers gets into his stride' If Freddie wanted to be a star, he was going about it the right way.

"Freddie really loved going up to Bolton to play with Ibex," remembers Paul Humberstone. "He was really on form. The band was very basic, but good. They did very reasonable cover versions, and were very loud. That was his very first outing with the band, but Freddie struck his pose. Remember him doing 'Bohemian Rhapsody'? He was like that only without the eye makeup."

"Freddie was shy offstage," recalls Ken Testi, "but he knew how to front a show. It was his way of expressing that side of his personality. Everything on stage later in Queen, he was doing with Ibex at his first gig: marching from one end of the stage to another, from left to right and back again. Stomping about. He brought dynamics, freshness and presentation to the band that had been completely lacking previously."

Mike Bersin agrees: "As a three piece, we'd thought it was sufficient to play fairly basic music and not worry too much about stage craft. Freddie was much better at putting on a show and entertaining people. That was pretty radical for us. I thought that's what the light show was for, you know, we make the music and the audience can watch the pretty coloured bubbles behind us, but Freddie was different. He was so wonderfully camp in that beautifully English foppish way. With hindsight, I recognise the determination to succeed that he had in spades. He demanded to be treated as a star before he was one. His talent and ambition made people react in very different ways, but it wasn't an unpleasant thing."

As the rest of us would wear jeans and trench coats, he was the fur-and-satin man and all the moves and poses he had with Queen, were already there with Ibex, he never imitated anybody, Freddie was Freddie from day one, he was entirely his own creation and a culture shock. He worked extremely hard to be something worth to look at and to listen to. He only had one pair of boots, one t-shirt, one pair of trousers, one belt and one jacket. Still he remained immaculate. We had some gigs in Bolton which were very significant to the band. While we were getting ready, Freddie had been backcombing his long hair to make it stand out more and twitching himself in the mirror for ages. I eventually yelled at him: 'For God's sake, stop messing with your hair, Freddie!', to which he responded: 'But I'm a star, dear boy!'. There is not a lot you can say to that. In many ways, you felt Freddie almost wasn't real."

"I don't think Freddie developed," reckons John 'Tupp' Taylor. "The first day he stood in front of that crowd, he had it all going. It seemed as if he'd been practicing for years to be ready. We'd only ever sang together as mates before that. We'd never done anything by way of trying it out. He was going to be in the band and everyone was happy with that. Once Freddie was in, we changed in loads of different directions. We began to play 'Jailhouse Rock', for a start! I think that was the first thing we did with him on stage."

Back in London, a revitalised Ibex began to make plans. "Freddie and the band very quickly became inseparable," remembers Ken Testi. "They were spending large parts of their time together, working out a new set which included different covers and some original stuff."

Mike Bersin: "Freddie was the most musical of all of us. He was trained on the piano, and he could write on the black notes. He said 'We're never going to get anywhere playing all this three-chord blues crap, we'll have to write some songs.' A couple of things came out of it, but they've all vanished now. I can't imagine they would be very satisfactory anyway – largely because he was working with me, and my understanding of music was incredibly rudimentary. We used to argue about whether we should put in key changes. I'd say 'What do you want a key change for?' And he'd say that it made a song more interesting, it gave it a lift. I'd think 'Why has he got this thing about gratuitous key changes?' The idea of



Above: Ibex on 24 August 1969 at the time of the Bolton gig. L-R Freddie Bulsara (Mercury) Paul 'Flogger' Fielder, John 'Tupp' Taylor (no shirt), Pat McConnell, Sian Ollet, Ken Testi, Bruce Sanderson, and Mike 'Miffer' Smith. Mike Bersin is pictured right standing, and also below.

Although these photos have previously been said to have been taken in St Helens, guitarist Mike Bersin road manager Ken Testi say the photographs were taken in Bolton. [Photos – Mark and Colleen Hayward/Redferns]





changing the key of a song just because it made it more interesting to listen to was really alien to me.”

That said, Geoff Higgins remembers at least one decent Bulsara-Bersin tune: “ They did a great song called ‘Lover; the lyrics used to go, ‘Lover, you never believe me’ and Fred later turned it into ‘Liar, you never believe me’ It was almost the same tune, but not quite. In fact, it was similar to ‘Communication Breakdown’, they used to rip off Led Zeppelin a lot.”

Before they knew it, however, the summer was over and it was September. Mike Bersin returned to Liverpool to begin his pre-diploma years at the local art college, at what is now John Moores University. With nothing better to celebrate than the new term, the pre-dip freshers threw a party, and who better to provide the entertainment than Mike’s band, Ibex? Subsequently Ibex’s third and final gig took place on 9th September 1969 at the Sink Club

in Liverpool, a former soul-blue hang out in the basement of the Rumbling Tum – a place Ken Testi remembers as a “pretty dodgy, post beatnik café”. The club was situated on Hardman Street, which runs parallel to Mount Street, the site of Paul McCartney’s new LIPA building, and was a small venue. “If you got thirty people in there would have been a squash,” recalls Ken.

While Freddie’s trip to Bolton with Ibex was photographed, unbeknown to Queen historians these past 27 years – and indeed to friends and members of the band – Ibex’s appearance at the Sink was recorded. Hazy memories and a cluttered attic have obscured this amateur quality time capsule of Freddie for nearly three decades. What’s more the recording pre-dates the earliest known live tape recording of Queen (the Marquee, 20th December 1972) by more than three years.

Ibex live, featuring Freddie Mercury - Rain (Live 1969):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlbGF4HXamI&feature=youtu.be>



The ‘Rumbling Tum’, Hardman Street, Liverpool, with the Sink Club in the basement

Ibex’s roadie, Geoff Higgins, is the man behind the mono tape recorder and the rediscovery of a lifetime. He picks up the story: “I had a Grundig TK14 reel-to-reel machine. We used to record almost everything, and practically all of it is now gone. That night I just thought I’d take it along and tape the band. There was no other reason for it. You don’t expect to end up in the history of one of the biggest acts in the world. We didn’t hold those tapes as being precious. Although I’ve kept everything of Mike’s since!”

He continues: “I had two beer crates as a table, with my tape on top of them and a little old-fashioned mono, crystal microphone hanging down by its own wire. That’s why the tape is such chronic quality. Imagine being in the audience and looking at the stage, I would have been by a pillar on the right of, and slightly on front of, the stage. That’s why the bass is so loud, because Tupp was on the right-hand side. Mike was on the left. Miffer in the middle, and Fred out on the Floor in front of the stage, because there simply wasn’t enough room for a singer as well.”

The tape runs for thirty-five minutes and demonstrates Ibex’s love of Cream and Jimi Hendrix, as well as Freddie’s favourite of the day, Led Zeppelin. It opens half way through the band’s reading of Cream’s ‘I’m So Glad’ complete with Tupp Taylor’s dextrous bass solo before diving into a full throttle reading of Zeppelin’s ‘Communication Breakdown’, with Freddie’s towering falsetto homage to Robert Plant earning the band a smattering of applause. Freddie’s vocal extemporising on the next track, the Beatles ‘Rain’, vindicates

stories of an untried singer with the confidence to launch himself with his own style. Cream's apocalyptic 'We're Going Wrong' follows with 'Miffer' Smith's Ginger Baker-like drumming rising and falling beneath Freddie's undulating vocals. Guitarist Mike Bersin shines on 'Rock Me Baby', the blues standard popularised by Jimi Hendrix, although the version owes more to the one found on Jeff Beck Group's 'Truth'; at one point. Freddie echoes Bersin's wah-wah with his own 'wow-wow' adlibs.

The tape pauses here and restarts towards the end of a strut through Hendrix's 'Stone Free' an extended stab at Freddie's perennial favourite, 'Jailhouse Rock', leads into an accomplished power blues blast through Creams 'Crossroads'. Freddie introduces the next number, one of his compositions, called 'Vagabond Outcast'. It's reminiscent of the Queen rarity, 'Hangman', and although it's under rehearsed, it's similar in style to Ibex's better-known covers, and earns the band another ripple of applause. Mike and John re-tune their guitars before 'We're Going Home', during which Freddie's voice can be heard half-taking, half ad-libbing, beneath the low murmuring of 'Tupp' Taylor's bass solo. Freddie then re-emerges, exploding with an alarming rock shriek as the song draws to a close.

It's a fascinating, if slightly ragged performance, but a crucial early document of one of rock's greatest stars. "Everyone was incredibly competent in the band," agrees Geoff Higgins. "There were no slackers. They weren't rubbish by any means. I know this is a poor recording, but these guys were good."

Geoff has a further revelation, which called to mind Paul McCartney's presence in the audience at the first-ever recording of John Lennon with the Quarry Men back in 1957. "Smile were in Liverpool that night... playing another club, possibly the Green Door. And because we were at the Sink, they came down to see us." The rest of the story is almost too good to be true. Brimming with encouragement for their flamboyant friend Brian May and Roger Taylor wasted no time in joining Freddie on stage (or as near as they could get.) They probably bashed out a few Smile numbers and this occasion marked the first time the three of them played together in front of an audience. "We virtually had Queen in there," remarks Ken Testi, "although of course we didn't know it then." However, here's the sting: although Geoff Higgins' tape recorder was still only yards away at the time, the tape ran out before the three musicians had the chance to play a note together.

Wreckage

Sometime between 9th September and the end of October 1969, probably while Freddie was staying with Geoff Higgins in Liverpool, [*flat above Dovedale Towers, Penny Lane*], Ibex underwent a mini upheaval – at Freddie's instigation. "I recall him canvassing the idea of calling the band Wreckage, but nobody was enthusiastic," reveals Mike Bersin. "Then he phoned me one night and said, 'the others don't mind. How do you feel?' I said, 'If they agree then fine'. So, we went along to the next rehearsal and all the gear had been sprayed 'Wreckage'. When I spoke to the others about it, Freddie had phoned them all up and had the same conversation".

The name-change went hand-in-hand with the departure of drummer Mike 'Miffer' Smith as Freddie documented in a letter to Celine Daley. Dated 26th October the letter bears the address 40, Ferry Road, Barnes SW13 – another flat rented that summer by members of Ibex, Smile and various associates.

'Miffer' is not with us anymore," wrote Freddie, "cause the bastard just got up and left one morning saying he was going to be a milkman back in Widnes. (he meant it too)." He goes on to boast that Roger and he go 'poncing and ultrablugging just about everywhere," which led to the pair "being termed as a couple of queens." Interestingly, this word doesn't seem to imply any of its more modern connotations. There was another term for that, as Ibex's former drummer was well aware. "Miffer, the sod," wrote Freddie, "went and told everyone down here that I had seriously turned into a fully-fledged queer."

"You can see he was exploring the concept there, can't you?" interjects Mike Bersin, "to see how many people felt about it and how comfortable he was with it. He was always very

camp, but when I knew him, he was living with Mary Austin, and I certainly knew at least one other girlfriend he knew at the time. So, he was kind of straight then, but if he hadn't come out of the closet, he was certainly looking through the keyhole."

Crucially, as far as Queen's pre-history is concerned, Freddie pinpoints the date when Ibex became Wreckage: "Our first booking as Wreckage is on Friday, 31st October at Ealing College," he wrote. He also names Richard Thompson, the former drummer in Brian May's 1984, as Miffer's replacement.

"I'd known Freddie for years," Richard recalls. "I first met him in 1966. I used to go round his house to listen to Beatles records. Then we'd go and watch Smile play, before he joined Ibex. I knew all of Ibex's songs, as I'd watch them perform, so there was no point auditioning anyone else."

With Wreckage's first (and Freddie's forth) concert appearance just five days away, the band set about rehearsing a new set. "Mike came down today," wrote Freddie to Celine, "for a five-hour live marathon practise. Richard collapsed halfway through and I've really gone and lost my voice (no kidding). It hurts just to breathe. Hope I'm OK for this Friday, 'cause I'm going to out-ponce everybody in sight. (it shall be easy.)" Freddie ended the letter with this hitherto unpublished information: "We've written a few new numbers: 1) 'Green'; 2) 'Without You', 3) 'Blag-a-blues', 4) 'Cancer on My Mind' (originally called 'Priestess'.)

"Freddie always had very unusual titles at that stage." Recalls Mike Bersin. "I can't remember what 'Green' was about. It might be the one with the intro which went, E, A, D, G, D, A, E, A, D, G, D, A in guitar chords". As neither Ibex nor Wreckage went within striking distance of a recording studio, none of these songs was ever recorded officially. Miraculously, however one of them has survived – and it's the one that stuck in Mike Bersin's mind, 'Green'.

Richard Thompson is the man responsible for its preservation. "The song was taped at the flat in Barnes, on a Fidelity two-track recorder I'd had for about ten years. It was at the rehearsal for the Ealing College gig, after Mike had come down from Liverpool. I only recorded it so that I could learn the song. It is straightforward 4/4 in the middle, but we needed to learn the beginning. Most of Freddie's songs were like that. I can't remember the rest of them, but they were Hendrix and blues copies."

'Green' is a melodic, medium-paced ballad, whose tone recalls that obscure Queen delight, 'Mad the Swine' and ironically, some of the more reflective material he wrote towards the end of his life. "There's a sudden change in me..." sings Freddie "I believe my time has come. Any moment I'll be drifting to the sun...Green, turning green. Rapidly changing through the bassline, turning green."

The excellent quality recording survives on a 5" spool, and runs for just over 10 minutes. As Freddie revealed in his letter, the session was an extended one. In addition to his tired voice and Richard Thompson's exhaustion. Wreckage had the other occupants of the flat to consider. So, while Freddie sang in a hushed, compelling manner. Mike Bersin can be heard strumming along on an unplugged electric guitar. Only John 'Tupp' Taylor's bass is amplified, while Richard Thompson keeps time by tapping on a cardboard box. Wreckage make several attempts at 'Green' before switching to another song, obviously a Freddie-composed number, which is difficult to identify from its lyrics because the band were interrupted before they reached the chorus.

"Whoever we were sharing the flat with came in and complained that it was one o'clock in the morning," remembers Richard Thompson. "So, Freddie stopped singing", and there ended the final, and certainly most important pre-Queen recording.

Apart from pre-Queen titles like the previously documented 'Lover' and the newly discovered 'Vagabond Outcast'; plus, the three originals disclosed in Freddie's letter to Celine Daley; there are a further four contenders for the title of the mystery track. That's

the number of unknown Freddie songs stencilled and typed onto a piece of paper by Richard Thompson in October 1969. Richard has a recollection that one of these, 'Universal Theme' was a Bulsara-Bersin guitar instrumental, which leaves three songs in the running – 'Boogie', 'One More Train' and 'FEWA', the last of which Sour Milk Sea's Chris Chesney recalls was an acronym for 'Feelings Ended, Worn Away'.

Despite an arduous rehearsal, no one seems to recall Wreckage's debut at Ealing College, but Richard Thompson once again comes up trumps with a typewritten set list for the gig. In addition to playing all ten of Freddie's originals mentioned above, Wreckage created an intriguing new live concoction by tagging the Beatles' 'Rain' into 1983 – not a reference to Brian May's former band, but the dreamy psychedelic soundscape from Freddie's favourite LP, Jimi Hendrix's 'Electric Ladyland'. They ended the set with 'Let Me Love You', no doubt inspired, once again by the version on Jeff Beck's 'Truth'.

Only an impression of Wreckage in general remains: "It was a far better group than Ibex, because of Fred," recalls Geoff Higgins. "Mike's guitar playing and 'Tupp's bass playing were always excellent, but Fred made it gel. It was a proper progressive rock band, which is what they'd always wanted it to be."

Better than Ibex they may have been, but the brief history of Wreckage isn't nearly as well documented. Only a handful of gigs were booked under that name, one of them which is rumoured to have seen them support US rockers Iron Butterfly at Imperial College – possibly at the 5th November 1969 gig listed in Freddie's letter to Celine Daley. "We also played somewhere in Richmond, at a rugby club," recalls John Taylor. "A friend of Brian May's arranged it, and Brian came along. He thought our image was 'savage'. He thought we were really good. 'Oh Savage' he said."

Wade Deacon

What was probably the last Wreckage appearance took place at the **1969 Christmas dance held on 12 December at Wade Deacon Grammar School for Girls in Widnes**, apparently booked with the help of John Taylor's younger sister, who was a pupil at the school. The date has gone down in history as the night when Freddie discovered what was to become his trademark. Fed up with the microphone stand he'd been using, he removed part of it from its base and leapt around in familiar fashion, gripping what amounted to a redundant three-foot pole attached to his mike.



"There are lots of legends about that," reckons Geoff Higgins. "It happened all the time because we had a really crap microphone stand. It was one of those big, heavy three-legged ones that most jazz bands used. Fred liked to move around, and because it was too heavy, he used to unscrew the middle and take out the pole. He did it all the time. It was purely a practical thing."

Despite flashes of true potential, the end of the 1960's also marked the end of Wreckage. Gigs were few and far between, and while John Taylor, Richard Thompson and Freddie remained in London, Mike Bersin was committed to his course in Liverpool. Inevitably the band petered out.

"Before I went down to London," says Mike, "I told my parents what I wanted to do. They were completely horrified and had visions of me disappearing into the fag-end of swinging London in a haze of drink, drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll and never coming back again. They made me promise that if I got enough 'A' levels to go to Art College, then I would go. Eventually the letter came, and I had to tell the guys that a promise was a promise. I didn't

have any regrets. It was fun, but I didn't perceive it as going anywhere. Freddie was serious but we weren't. When we started to fall to pieces, he moved on to something else."

Taken from <https://www.queenpedia.com/index.php?title=Ibex> where the history of Freddie and Queen continues.

See also: www.markrblake.com Author of *Is This The Real Life: The Untold Story Of Queen* and article in *Mojo Magazine* January 2011;
<https://markrblake.wordpress.com/2015/09/05/freddie-mercury-before-he-was-famous/>

Great Day

When Freddie Mercury returned to Liverpool with Queen, an early gig was at the 1973 Christmas show at the Top Rank Club, St John's Precinct, where they supported 10CC. Queen's appearance had been organised by Ken Testi, and his own group, **Great Day** were on first, which featured Mike Bersin on guitar. (This was not their first return however, I had already seen Queen for the first time, supporting Mott the Hoople at the Liverpool Stadium on 17 November 1973, and they played again at the Mountford Hall, Liverpool University on 8 December 1973. An even earlier gig was at the Cavern on 31 October 1970, although John Deacon hadn't yet joined and they may have been billed as Smile).



Amazon Recording Studios

Before Mike moved into his successful career in radio, he worked with Geoff Higgins in Liverpool's best-known recording studio during the 70s and 80s, Amazon in Simonswood. Mike's sister Anne Bersin was working there too.

[At the beginning of the 70s two ex-policemen, Harold Collins and Eddie Hunt, who had a security firm with offices on the Stopgate Lane industrial site set up a studio called Liverpool Sound Enterprises to promote and record local artists. It was located in a plain, concrete building in the fields of Simonswood, just outside Kirkby, a suburb on the northern edge of Liverpool. The building was a remnant of what had been built as the Royal Ordnance Factory, which was built to serve as an ammunition plant during WWII. Amazon studios began in 1973 when Jeremy Lewis took over the studio to use as a place to record his own band and, hopefully, others as a commercial enterprise. Amazon Recording Studios. <http://uk45s70.orgfree.com/70s/70A/70AMAZON.htm>]



Mike still continued to play during his radio career in the North East.

<https://youtu.be/GDwId9Tq6zQ>

**The Proper Boys at The Tyne Bar
Newcastle upon Tyne, 27 Aug 2012**



[I had a brief spell at Amazon in the early 80s, hoping for a start as an engineer, but it coincided with an offer of a place to study History at the University of Liverpool and I chose the latter.]

Another local link – in the mid-1970s when we needed a new bass player, a school pal of some of the lads involved in the band said he was interested (all from Halewood Comp), and we both sat in our house a few times running through various songs. He was a nice guy and we got on well, but nothing came of it. That was **Gil Norton**, and a good job he didn't join, as he then became an engineer in Amazon, followed by a stellar career, home and abroad, as a sought-after producer, working with a myriad of top bands such as The Pixes, Echo and the Bunnymen and the Foo Fighters. [see <https://www.140db.co.uk/gil-norton>]

.....

Finally, two articles from more recent times. Mike Bersin's parents, Sheila and John, as well as neighbours, were also friends of my parents, so I saw them quite regularly. Sheila was also a librarian in Halewood Library, where in the 1980s, we both set up Halewood History Society. Sometime during the 1970s, Sheila had told me this following story, which until then I had been completely unaware of. Years later in 2019, she recounted it to the *Liverpool Echo*;



Freddie Mercury slept on my living room floor

Sheila Bersin, 88, was used to having house guests when her son, Mike, was in bands - and one went on to become a world superstar!
in bands - and one went on to become a world superstar!

by Paddy Shennan 31 July 2019

I have lived in the same house in Beechwood Avenue, Halewood for 60 years - and 50 years ago Freddie Mercury, then Freddie Bulsara, slept on my living room floor!

My son, Michael - everyone else calls him Mike - went to Wade Deacon School in Widnes. He was always in bands and, in 1969, he was in Ibex.

Michael did his A levels that year and wanted to go to London to see if the band could make it there. My late husband, John, and I weren't happy about this, but he promised us faithfully that, if he got his A levels, he'd come back to Liverpool to go to art college in the autumn.

Michael met quite a lot of people in London, including Freddie - who was a follower of the band Smile, which included future Queen members Brian May and Roger Taylor. Freddie really wanted to be THEIR singer. They were not too sure about it, but knew Michael was looking for a singer - so Freddie joined Ibex.

They played gigs up here, but this of course meant Freddie had to travel up from London. He had very strong likes and dislikes and one thing he really didn't like was travelling by public transport - so he had to make sure he always hitched a lift.

When they came up to the North West, the band would base themselves here - and while Michael slept in his own bed, his mates kipped on the floor. I remember John getting up first and then coming back upstairs saying 'Michael's friends are sleeping on the living room floor in sleeping bags'.



My daughter, Anne, was then 15, and I couldn't ask a 15-year-old girl to go into a room full of young men - so I used to persuade my other daughter, Helen, who was then just three, to go in. And I can still hear her little voice asking 'Would you like a cup of coffee, boys?' It was delivered so precisely and so sweetly. It's funny how I can still recall it so clearly.

And the boys were always eating. Michael and his friends would sometimes be here at lunchtime or in the evening - and I remember Ibex's road manager, Ken Testi (who was later co-owner of, and named, the original Eric's club in Mathew Street) loved my meat loaf. I never told him how I made it - I used to pad it out with sausage meat!

On some occasions, there would be two or three of them on the floor - at other times, about six. But I didn't know which part of the carpet Freddie slept on because I wouldn't go in before they got up. I remember Freddie and the others were always very polite. I find it difficult to explain but I knew there was something different about Freddie - he wasn't the same as the others. At the time, I didn't really think anything of it. Knowing what we know now, maybe I would have expected him to have spoken up a bit more - he was very quiet. But I think he liked being in Liverpool, though he had always wanted to be in Smile. And he wanted to be based in London.

I was a self-taught dressmaker, and Michael once asked me to make him some gold lame trousers, while I also made him a waistcoat to match. Then Ken Testi asked me to make him a brocade jacket - I must have been daft!

As for the carpet Freddie and the others slept on, we threw it out years later. We should have kept it - we could have cut it up and made a mint for various charities, because I've always been so involved with so many things (in 2002, pensioners' champion Sheila was awarded an MBE for services to the community in Merseyside, especially Knowsley. She followed in the footsteps of her late brother, Bill, who was awarded an MBE for services to the disabled 20 years earlier).

New Year Honours 31 Dec 2002 Order of the British Empire Sheila Marie Bersin MBE, awarded for services to the communities in Halewood and Knowsley, Merseyside. Sheila is pictured with her husband John Bersin and her MBE award.

Years ago, Michael - who is now 68, retired and lives in Norfolk (he worked in commercial radio advertising) - was asked to speak at a Queen convention. One of the tribute bands who played at the convention later asked him if he could get his band back together. This led to a version of Ibex - sadly minus Freddie, of course - performing at the Royal Albert Hall in 2004. We were in the royal box and they went down very well.



Michael told me 'Mum, I always said I'd bring you to the Royal Albert Hall one day to see me play there!' - while I'd already taken him to Buckingham Palace when I received my MBE! Michael is a fantastic man, and I'm very proud of him.

I'll certainly never forget the summer of 1969 - I just wish I'd kept that living room carpet!

From the *Liverpool Echo* 31 July 2019



Amazing Merseyside past of rock royalty Freddie Mercury

Liverpool played a formative role in the early days of Queen

By Alan Weston 18 May 2019

(Right: Members of Liverpool rock group Ibex - including Freddie Mercury (Bulsara) on the left (Photo by Mark and Colleen Hayward/Redferns)

He would go on to become one of the biggest rock stars on the planet. But every stellar career has to start somewhere - and in Queen frontman Freddie Mercury's case, it was with a little-known Liverpool-based rock outfit called Ibex. Very few pictures exist of the then unknown Mercury - who at the time went by his real name of Freddie Bulsara - during his short-lived career as a struggling musician around the Merseyside area. But as this amazing picture taken 50 years ago shows, it was a far cry from the glamour and glitz of his Queen heyday.

Taken on a patch of waste ground in August 1969, it shows Freddie in a white top on the extreme left, with other members of the band and their girlfriends.

Although Freddie looks very different with his shoulder-length curly dark hair, he is still recognisable as the future Queen icon whose astonishing story was told in the hit film *Bohemian Rhapsody* last year.

It is just one of a surprisingly large number of Liverpool associations of the flamboyant future Queen frontman - including possibly providing him with the inspiration for the name of the band itself.

One of the people with memories of those far off days is locally-based historian, writer and musician **Mike Royden**, a school pal of guitarist Mike Bersin who formed Ibex in the late 1960s.

Mr Royden, now aged 63, said: "Freddie Bulsara's time in Merseyside is not spoken about very much. It's only hardcore Queen fans who know the story and there are so many different versions of it.



"I grew up with Mike Bersin and went to the same school as him. He was a cracking guitarist and looked like Jimi Hendrix on stage. We would get the coach from Halewood to Wade Deacon school in Widnes, and on the way he would tell me what the band were doing.

"After leaving school, he went down to London to try and make it with the band, and that's where he met Mercury.

"Mike came back to Liverpool because he had some gigs lined up, so Freddie came up too. Among the places they played was our school, **Wade Deacon**, at our end of term do in 1969.

He added: "Freddie used to doss in Beechwood Avenue, Halewood, a few doors from my house, with Mike Bersin. Mike's mum often told the story of her coming downstairs to find Mike and pals all lying on the floor, crashed out after travelling from London or a gig, which included Freddie."

Mr Royden said it was only years later, long after Freddie Mercury had found fame with Queen, that he realised it was the same person. He said: "It was Mike's mum who told me that Freddie Mercury was the same guy who used to doss on her floor in Halewood. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed before, especially as he'd sang at my school."

"Freddie definitely livened up Ibex while he was a singer with them. Before they were a classic Hendrix/Cream three-piece, but he stood out and made them more showy."

But Freddie Mercury's Liverpool links don't end there. Through his association with Ibex (later known as The Wreckage), their roadie-cum-manager, Geoff Higgins, offered him digs above Penny Lane's famous Dovedale Towers, which at the time was run by Geoff's parents.

The Dovedale Towers, Penny Lane

The room that was formerly Freddie's bedroom is now a 180-seat event space that pays homage to the building's past.

Another crucial date was September 9, 1969 at the old Sink Club in Hardman Street - just a couple of weeks after this picture was taken. It is said to be here that Freddie, who was performing with Ibex, was joined on stage by future Queen guitarist Brian May and drummer Roger Taylor for the very first time. At that time, May and Taylor's band were known as Smile.



.....

Mike Royden is the author of several books including *Merseyside at War 1939-45*

www.roydenhistory.co.uk