

Brian May

For the Australian film composer, see [Brian May \(composer\)](#).

Brian Harold May, CBE (born 19 July 1947) is an English musician, singer, songwriter and astrophysicist, best known as the lead guitarist of the rock band [Queen](#). He uses a home-built electric guitar, called the [Red Special](#). His compositions for the band include "We Will Rock You", "Tie Your Mother Down", "I Want It All", "Fat Bottomed Girls", "Flash", "Hammer to Fall", "Save Me", "Who Wants to Live Forever" and "The Show Must Go On".

May was a co-founder of [Queen](#) with lead singer [Freddie Mercury](#) and drummer [Roger Taylor](#), having previously performed with Taylor in the band [Smile](#), which he had joined while he was at university. Within five years of their formation in 1970 and the recruitment of bass player [John Deacon](#) completing the lineup, Queen had become established as one of the biggest rock bands in both the UK and the world, with the album *A Night at the Opera* and its single "Bohemian Rhapsody". From the mid-1970s until the early 1990s, Queen were an almost constant presence in the UK charts and played some of the biggest venues in the world, most notably giving an acclaimed performance at [Live Aid](#) in 1985. As a member of Queen, May became regarded as a virtuoso musician, and he was identified with a distinctive sound created through his layered guitar work. Following the death of Mercury in 1991, Queen were put on hiatus for several years but were eventually reconvened by May and Taylor for further performances featuring other vocalists. In 2005, a [Planet Rock](#) poll saw May voted the 7th greatest guitarist of all time.^[1] He was ranked at No. 26 on [Rolling Stone](#) magazine's list of the "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time".^[2] In 2012, May was ranked the 2nd greatest guitarist of all time by a *Guitar World* magazine readers poll.^[3]

He was appointed a [Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire](#) (CBE) in 2005 for "services to the music industry and for charity work".^[4] May attained a PhD in astrophysics from [Imperial College London](#) in 2007 and was [Chancellor of Liverpool John Moores University](#) from 2008 to 2013.^[5] He was a "science team collaborator" with NASA's [New Horizons](#) Pluto mission.^{[6][7]} He is also a co-founder of the awareness campaign, [Asteroid Day](#).^[8] Asteroid 52665 Brianmay was named after him. May is also an animal rights activist, campaigning against the hunting of foxes and the culling of badgers in the UK.^[9]

1 Early life and education

Brian Harold May, the only child of Harold and Ruth May, was born in [Hampton, London](#) on 19 July 1947, and attended the local Hampton Grammar School, then a voluntary aided school (now independent and known as [Hampton School](#)).^{[10][11]} He is of English and Scottish descent, with his mother being Scots.^[12] During this time, he formed his first band, named 1984 after [George Orwell](#)'s novel of the same name, with vocalist and bassist [Tim Staffell](#).^[13] At Hampton Grammar School, he attained ten [GCE Ordinary Levels](#) and three [A-Levels](#) (Physics, Mathematics and Applied Mathematics).^[13] He studied Mathematics and Physics at [Imperial College London](#), graduating with a BSc. in Physics with honours.^{[14][15]} In 2007, May obtained his PhD in astrophysics from Imperial College London.^[16]

2 Musical career

2.1 1968–1970: Smile

Main article: [Smile \(band\)](#)

May formed the band [Smile](#) in 1968. The group included [Tim Staffell](#) as the lead singer and bassist, and later, drummer [Roger Taylor](#), who also went on to play for [Queen](#). The band lasted for only two years, from 1968 to 1970, as Staffell departed in 1970, leaving the band with a catalogue of nine songs. Smile would reunite for several songs on 22 December 1992. Taylor's band [The Cross](#) were headliners, and he brought May and Staffell on to play "Earth" and "If I Were a Carpenter".^[17] May also performed several other songs that night.

2.2 1970–present: Queen

Main article: [Queen \(band\)](#)

In Queen's three-part vocal harmonies, May was generally the lower-range backing vocalist. On some of his songs, he sings the lead vocals, most notably the first verse of "Who Wants to Live Forever", the final verse of "Mother Love", the middle eight on "I Want It All" and "Flash's Theme", and full lead vocals on "Some Day One Day", "She Makes Me (Stormtrooper in Stilettoes)", "39", "Good Company", "Long Away", "All Dead, All Dead", "Sleeping on the Sidewalk", "Leaving Home Ain't



May (right) on stage with Queen in 1979.

Easy" and "Sail Away Sweet Sister".

Throughout Queen's career, May frequently wrote songs for the band and has composed many worldwide hits such as "We Will Rock You", "Tie Your Mother Down", "I Want It All", "Fat Bottomed Girls", "Who Wants To Live Forever" and "The Show Must Go On" as well as writing significant hit songs "Hammer to Fall", "Flash", "Now I'm Here", "Brighton Rock", "The Prophet's Song", "Las Palabras de Amor", "No-One But You" and "Save Me". Typically, either Mercury or May wrote the most songs on every Queen album.

After the famous Live Aid concert in 1985, Mercury rang his band members and proposed writing a song together. The result was "One Vision", which was basically May on music (the *Magic Years* documentary shows how he came up with the opening section and the basic guitar riff) and the lyrics were co-written by all four band members.^[18]

For their 1989 release album, *The Miracle*, the band had decided that all of the tracks would be credited to the entire band, no matter who had been the main writer. Still, interviews and musical analyses tend to help identify the input of each member on each track. May composed "I Want It All" for that album, as well as "Scandal" (based on his personal problems with the British press). For the rest of the album he did not contribute so much creatively, although he helped in building the basis of "Party" and "Was It All Worth It" (both being predominantly Mercury's pieces) and created the guitar riff of "Chinese Torture".

Queen's subsequent album was *Innuendo*, on which May's contributions increased, although more in arrangements than actual writing in most cases; for the title track he did some of the arrangement for the heavy solo, then he added vocal harmonies to "I'm Going Slightly Mad" and composed the solo of "These Are the Days of Our Lives", a song for which the four of them decided the keyboard parts together. He changed the tempo and key of Mercury's song "The Hitman" and took it under his wing, even singing guide vocal in the demo. May also co-wrote some of the guitar lines in "Bijou".

Two songs that May had composed for his first solo album, "Headlong" and "I Can't Live With You", eventually ended up in the Queen project. His other composition was "The Show Must Go On", a group effort in which he was the coordinator and primary composer, but in which they all had input, Deacon and Taylor with the famous chord sequence. In recent years, he has supervised the remastering of Queen albums and various DVD and greatest hits releases. In 2004, he announced that he and drummer Roger Taylor were going on tour for the first time in 18 years as "Queen", along with Free/Bad Company vocalist Paul Rodgers. Billed as "Queen + Paul Rodgers", the band played throughout 2005 and 2006 in South Africa, Europe, Aruba, Japan, and North America and released a new album with Paul Rodgers in 2008, entitled *The Cosmos Rocks*. This album was supported by a major tour.^[19] Paul Rodgers then left the band^[20] in May 2009 and it wasn't until 2011 that another vocalist, Adam Lambert,^[21] was recruited. They subsequently went on a 2012 European Tour, a world tour over 2014 and 2015 and, most recently, 2016 Festival Tour. They also famously played the Big Ben New Year concert on New Year's Eve 2014 and New Year's Day 2015.

2.3 1983–1998: The Brian May band



May in 1981 with the Red Special

During 1983, several members of Queen explored side projects. On 21 and 22 April in Los Angeles, May was in the studio with Eddie Van Halen, with no intentions of recording anything; the result of those days was a mini

album entitled 'Star Fleet Project', which originally wasn't going to be released.

May contributed to former Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett's album *Feedback 86*, playing guitar on the track "Cassandra" and providing guitar and vocals for "Slot Machine," which was co-written by May. Although produced in 1986, the album was not issued as a commercial release until 2000. May worked with his second wife Anita Dobson on her first album, in which she sang vocals to the *EastEnders* theme tune. In this form, the tune became the song "Anyone Can Fall in Love".^[22] May produced the song, which reached No. 4 in the UK Singles Chart in August 1986.^[23] In 1989, May contributed guitar solos to the song "When Death Calls" on Black Sabbath's 14th album *Headless Cross*, and the Living in a Box track "Blow The House Down" from the album *Gatecrashing*.

After the tragic break-up of any band, it feels impossible to continue but I was really glad that Brian did launch a solo career. He had such a lot of music in him and a great deal more to give

—Joe Satriani^[24]

In the aftermath of the November 1991 death of Freddie Mercury, May chose to deal with his grief by committing himself as fully as possible to work, first by finishing his solo album, *Back to the Light*, and then touring worldwide to promote it. He frequently remarked in press interviews that this was the only form of self-prescribed therapy he could think of.^[25] According to Def Leppard lead singer Joe Elliott, "It was undoubtedly an enormous and terrible blow to lose someone he was so close to. Personally, I know it ripped the heart out of Brian, but having said that, he was in great spirits after the album was finished."^[24]

In late 1992, the Brian May Band was officially formed. An earlier version of the band was loosely formed for 19 October 1991, the date of the band's last concert of reunion, when May took part in the *Guitar Legends* guitar festival in Seville, Spain. The line-up for his performance was May on vocals and lead guitar, Cozy Powell on drums and percussion, Mike Moran and Rick Wakeman on keyboards, and Maggie Ryder, Miriam Stockley and Chris Thompson on backing vocals. The original line-up was May on vocals and lead guitar, Powell on drums and percussion, Michael Casswell on guitar, Neil Murray on bass, and Ryder, Stockley and Thompson on backing vocals. This version of the band lasted only during the South American support tour (supporting The B-52's and Joe Cocker) on only five dates.

Afterwards, May made significant changes, feeling the group never quite gelled. May brought guitarist Jamie Moses on board to replace Mike Caswell. The other change made was in the backing vocals department, when Ryder, Stockley and Thompson were replaced with Catherine Porter and Shelley Preston. On 23 February 1993, this new line-up of The Brian May Band began its world tour in the US, both supporting Guns N' Roses

and headlining a few dates.^[26] The tour would take them through North America, Europe (support act: Valentine) and Japan. After the tour ended on 18 December 1993, May returned to the studio with fellow surviving Queen band members Roger Taylor and John Deacon to work on tracks that became *Made in Heaven*, the final Queen studio album.^[27] The band took Mercury's solo album demos and last recordings, which he managed to perform in the studio after the album *Innuendo* was finished, and completed them with their additions both musically and vocally.^[28] Work on the album after Mercury's death originally began in 1992 by Deacon and May, but was left until a later date, due to other commitments.^[27]

In 1995, May began working towards a new solo album of covers tentatively named *Heroes*, in addition to working on various film and television projects and other collaborations. May subsequently changed the approach from covers to focus on those collaborations and on new material. The songs included *Another World*, and featured mainly Spike Edney, Cozy Powell, Neil Murray and Jamie Moses. On 5 April 1998, Cozy Powell was killed in a car accident on the M4 motorway near Bristol, England. This caused a huge, unexpected disruption to the upcoming tour for The Brian May Band, with a new drummer being needed at short notice. Steve Ferrone was brought on to help May finish recording drums and to join the band for the early stage promotional tour of five dates in Europe before the world tour. Following the early promotional tour, Eric Singer replaced Steve Ferrone for the full 1998 world tour.

2.4 2000–present

From his last solo release in 1998, May has been performing as a solo artist, as part of an ensemble, and infrequently as Queen with Roger Taylor. On 22 October 2000, Brian May made a guest appearance at the Motörhead 25th Anniversary show at Brixton Academy along with Eddie Clarke (former Motörhead guitarist) for the encore song "Overkill". As part of the Golden Jubilee of Elizabeth II celebrations in June 2002, May performed a guitar solo of "God Save the Queen" from the roof of Buckingham Palace, with the performance appearing on the 30th Anniversary DVD edition of *A Night at the Opera*.^{[29][30]} In 2004 May played guitar on the song "Someone to Die For" on the *Spider-Man 2* soundtrack.^[31] In the Queen's birthday honours list of 2005, he was made a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire "for services to the music industry and for charity work".^[32]

May was a celebrity guest at the Genesis reunion concert at Twickenham Stadium in 2007.^[33] May and Genesis frontman Phil Collins had worked together on two previous occasions, at The Prince's Trust Rock Gala in 1988 and the Party at the Palace in 2002, when Collins had played drums with Queen. In 2011 he contributed to a feature about Collins for *FHM*, praising him as "a great



May performing in Chile, 2008

guy and an amazing drummer”.^[34]

May worked extensively with stage actress and singer Kerry Ellis, after he cast her in the musical *We Will Rock You*. He produced and arranged her debut studio album *Anthems* (2010), a follow-up to her extended play *Wicked in Rock* (2008), as well as appearing with Ellis at many public performances – playing guitar alongside her. He also contributed a guitar solo to Meat Loaf’s *Hang Cool, Teddy Bear* album in exchange for the use of drummer John Miceli. Along with Elena Vidal, Brian May released a historical book in 2009 entitled *A Village Lost and Found: Scenes in Our Village*. The book is an annotated collection of stereoscopic photographs taken by the Victorian era photographer T. R. Williams and it is sold with a focussing stereoscope. May became an enthusiast of stereoscope photographs as a child, and first encountered the work of Williams during the late 1960s. In 2003, May announced a search to identify the actual location of the *Scenes in Our Village* images. In 2004 May reported that he had identified the location as the village of Hinton Waldrist in Oxfordshire.

On 20 May 2009, May and Queen band mate Roger Taylor performed “We Are the Champions” live on the season finale of *American Idol* with winner Kris Allen and runner-up Adam Lambert providing a vocal duet.^[35] In November 2009, May appeared with Taylor on *The X Factor*, with Queen mentoring the contestants, then later performing “Bohemian Rhapsody”. In April 2010, May founded the “Save Me” 2010 project to work against any proposed repeal of the British fox-hunting ban, and also

to promote animal rights in Britain.^[36] In February 2011 it was announced that May would tour with Kerry Ellis, playing 12 dates across the UK in May 2011.^[37] On 1 March 2013 May and Ellis played a free thirty-minute acoustic set at St Pancras railway station to launch Tiger Track, a three-week tiger conservation event.

On 18 April 2011, Lady Gaga confirmed that May would play guitar on her track “You and I” from her latest album *Born This Way*, released on 23 May 2011.^[38] In June 2011, May performed with Tangerine Dream at the Sarmus Festival on Tenerife, celebrating the 50th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin’s first spaceflight.^[39]

On 26 August, May performed “We Will Rock You” and “Welcome to the Black Parade” with American rock band My Chemical Romance at the Reading Festival.^[40] On 28 August, May performed “You and I” live with Lady Gaga at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards at the Nokia Theatre, Los Angeles.^[41] On 10 October, May made an appearance to celebrate the reunion of British rock band The Darkness at an “intimate” 100 Club show with support from Dark Stares.^{[42][43]} A long-time fan of the group, May performed three songs onstage with The Darkness, including Queen’s “Tie Your Mother Down”, at the Hammersmith Apollo on their subsequent “come-back” tour.^{[44][45]}

At the 2011 MTV Europe Music Awards on 6 November, Queen received the Global Icon Award, which Katy Perry presented to Brian May.^[46] Queen closed the awards ceremony, with Adam Lambert on vocals, performing “The Show Must Go On”, “We Will Rock You” and “We Are the Champions”.^[46] The collaboration garnered a positive response from both fans and critics, resulting in speculation about future projects together.^[47] Queen + Adam Lambert played two shows at the Hammersmith Apollo, London on 11 and 12 July 2012.^{[48][49]} Both shows sold out within 24 hours of tickets going on open sale.^[50] A third London date was added for 14 July.^[51] On 30 June, Queen + Lambert performed in Kiev, Ukraine at a joint concert with Elton John for the Elena Pinchuk ANTI-AIDS Foundation.^[52] Queen also performed with Lambert on 3 July 2012 at Moscow’s Olympic Stadium,^{[53][54]} and on 7 July 2012 at the Municipal Stadium in Wrocław, Poland.^[55]

In January 2012, May featured on N-Dubz frontman Dappy’s solo single “Rockstar”,^[56] providing “rumbling guitar riffs which culminate in an electrifying solo”.^[57] The pair also collaborated on a performance of “We Will Rock You” for BBC Radio 1’s Live Lounge.^[58]

On 12 August 2012, Queen performed at the closing ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.^[59] May performed part of the “Brighton Rock” solo before being joined by Taylor and solo artist Jessie J for a performance of “We Will Rock You”.^{[59][60]} On 16 September 2012, May appeared at the Sunflower Jam charity concert at the Royal Albert Hall, performing alongside bassist John Paul Jones (of Led Zeppelin), drummer Ian Paice (of Deep

Purple), and vocalists **Bruce Dickinson** (of **Iron Maiden**) and **Alice Cooper**.^[61]

May donated his guitar talent to the end credits song from the film, *A Dog Named Gucci*, in the song “One Voice”, which also features the talents of **Norah Jones**, **Aimee Mann**, **Susanna Hoffs**, **Lydia Loveless**, **Neko Case**, and **Kathryn Calder**. It was produced by **Dean Falcone**, who also wrote the film’s score. “One Voice” was released on **Record Store Day**, 16 April 2016, with profits from the sale of the single going to benefit animal charities.^[62]

2.5 2004–2009: Queen + Paul Rodgers

Main article: **Queen + Paul Rodgers**

At the end of 2004, May and Taylor announced that



2005 *Queen + Paul Rodgers Tour*.

they would reunite and return to touring in 2005, with **Paul Rodgers** (founder and former lead singer of **Free** and **Bad Company**). Brian May’s website also stated that Rodgers would be “featured with” Queen as **Queen + Paul Rodgers**, not replacing the late Freddie Mercury. The retired **John Deacon** would not be participating.^[63]

Between 2005 and 2006 Queen and Paul Rodgers embarked on a **world tour**, the first leg being Europe and the second, Japan and the US in 2006.^[64] On 25 May 2006, Queen received the inaugural **VH1 Rock Honors** at the **Mandalay Bay Events Center** in Las Vegas, Nevada, and May and Taylor were joined on stage with the **Foo Fighters** to perform a selection of Queen songs.^{[64][65]} On 15 August 2006, May confirmed through his website and fan club that Queen + Paul Rodgers would begin producing their first studio album beginning in October, to be recorded at a “secret location”.^[66] The album, titled *The Cosmos Rocks*, was released in Europe on 12 September 2008 and in the United States on 28 October 2008. Following the album the band again embarked on a tour through Europe and parts of the US, opening on **Kharkiv’s freedom square** in front of 350,000 Ukrainian fans.^[67] The show in Ukraine was later released on **DVD**.^[67] Queen and Paul Rodgers officially split up on 12 May

2009. Rodgers does not rule out the possibility of working together again.^{[68][69]}

2.6 2011–present: Queen + Adam Lambert

Main article: **Queen + Adam Lambert**

Not long after performing with *American Idol* finalists



Queen + Adam Lambert concert at the TD Garden, Boston in July 2014

Kris Allen and **Adam Lambert** during the programme’s season finale in 2009, May and Taylor began contemplating the future of Queen after the group’s amicable split with frontman Paul Rodgers. Two years later, at the **2011 MTV Europe Music Awards**, Queen was presented that year’s **Global Icon Award**, accepted by May. As part of the broadcast, Queen performed a short set with Lambert, receiving an overwhelmingly welcoming response.^[47] Speculation regarding a collaboration with Lambert soon arose, with the three formally announcing a short summer tour of Europe in 2012, including three dates at the **Hammersmith Apollo** in London, as well as shows in Ukraine, Russia and Poland. As with the partnership with Paul Rodgers, **John Deacon** did not participate.

The collaboration was revived in 2013, when the three performed together at the **iHeartRadio Music Festival** at the **MGM Grand Hotel & Casino** in Las Vegas on 20 September.^[70] Five months later, May, Taylor and Lambert announced a 19-date summer tour of North America on *Good Morning America*.^[71] Due to ticket demand, five dates were soon added.^[72] In May 2014, shows in Australia^[73] and New Zealand^[74] were announced, along with festival performances in South Korea^[75] and Japan.^[76] The tour was extended to the UK and greater Europe in early 2015.^[77] The group performed together in South America in September 2015, including Queen’s first performance at the **Rock in Rio Festival** since 1985.^[78]

In 2016, the group embarked across Europe and Asia on the **Queen + Adam Lambert 2016 Summer Festival**

Tour. This included closing the Isle of Wight Festival in England on 12 June where they performed "Who Wants to Live Forever" as a tribute to the victims of the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida earlier that day.^[79] On 12 September they performed at the Park Hayarkon in Tel-Aviv, Israel for the first time in front of 58,000 people.^[80] Though the collaboration remains active, there are currently no plans of recording a studio album, though the three are willing to do so in the future.^[81]

3 Highlights



May performing in Frankfurt in 2005.

Brian May began composing in 1968 to 1969, and through the years he has collaborated with other songwriters, including Frank Musker, with whom he wrote "Too Much Love Will Kill You", and with Elizabeth Lamers, whose music won the Ivor Novello Award for Best Song Musically & Lyrically in 1996.^[82] A meticulous arranger, he focuses on multi-part harmonies, often more contrapuntal than parallel – a relative rarity for rock guitar. Examples are found in Queen's albums *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races*, where he arranged a jazz band for guitar mini-orchestra ("Good Company"), a vocal canon ("The Prophet's Song") and guitar and vocal counterpoints ("Teo Torriatte").

May explored a wide variety of styles in guitar, including sweep picking ("Was It All Worth It", "Chinese Torture"), tremolo ("Brighton Rock", "Stone Cold Crazy", "Death on Two Legs", "Sweet Lady", "Bohemian Rhapsody", "Get Down Make Love", "Dragon Attack"), tapping ("Bijou", "It's Late", "Resurrection", "Cyborg", "Rain Must Fall", "Business", "China Belle", "I Was Born To Love You"), slide guitar ("Drowse", "Tie Your Mother Down"), Hendrix sounding licks ("Liar", "Brighton Rock"), tape-delay ("Brighton Rock", "White Man") and melodic sequences ("Bohemian Rhapsody", "Killer Queen", "These Are the Days of Our Lives"). Some of his solos and orchestral parts were composed

by Freddie Mercury, who then asked May to bring them to life ("Bicycle Race", "Lazing on a Sunday Afternoon", "Killer Queen", "Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy"). May also performed notable acoustic works, including the acoustic guitar live version of "Love of My Life" from 1975's *A Night at the Opera*, the finger-picked solo of "White Queen" and the skiffle-influenced "39".

In January 2007, the readers of *Guitar World* voted May's guitar solos "Bohemian Rhapsody", "Brighton Rock" into the "top 50 Greatest Guitar Solos of all time" ("Bohemian Rhapsody" was voted No. 20 and "Brighton Rock" was voted #41).^[83]

Aided by the uniqueness of his guitar – the Red Special – May was often able to create strange and unusual sound effects. For example, he was able to imitate an orchestra in the song "Procession"; in "Get Down, Make Love" he was able to create various sound effects with his guitar; in "Good Company" he used his guitar to mimic a trombone, a piccolo and several other instruments for the song's Dixieland jazz band feel. Queen used a "No synthesizers were used on this album" sleeve note on their early albums to make this clear to the listeners.^[84] May also used his guitar to create the chime effect in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.^[85]

4 Other instruments

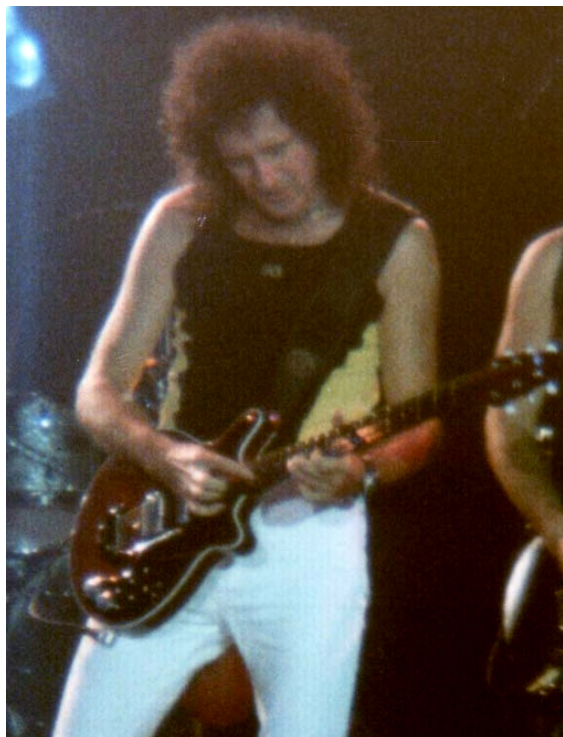
The first instrument May learned to play was the banjo, which he played on Queen's song "Bring Back That Leroy Brown" (live and in the studio). For "Good Company", he used a regular baritone ukulele which he had bought in Hawaii on a holiday. Occasionally, May would also record on other string instruments such as harp (one chord per take, then copied and pasted by the engineer to make it sound like a continuous performance) and bass (on some demos and many songs in his solo career, and the Queen + Paul Rodgers album).

As a child, he was also trained on classical piano. Although Freddie Mercury was the band's primary pianist, May would occasionally step in (such as on "Save Me", "Flash", "Who Wants To Live Forever"). From 1979 onwards, he also played synthesisers, organ ("Wedding March", "Let Me Live") and programmed drum-machines for both Queen and outside projects (such as producing other artists and his own solo records).

May is also an accomplished singer. From Queen's *Queen II* to *The Game*, May contributed lead vocals to at least one song per album. May co-composed a mini-opera with Lee Holdridge, *Il Colosso*, for Steve Barron's 1996 film, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. May performed the opera with Jerry Hadley, Sissel Kyrkjebø, and Just William. On-screen, it was performed entirely by puppets.

5 Musicianship

5.1 Influences



May tapping.

He's a class act from head to toe, and it shows in his playing. I can listen to any player and pantomime their sound, but I can't do Brian May. He's just walking on higher ground.

—Steve Vai^[86]

His tone immediately grabbed me. Brian has his own style and sound, so you can always tell his work. Even in 1971 he had incredible finesse, amazing fluidity.

—Andy Powell, Wishbone Ash^[24]

May has been referred to as a virtuoso guitarist by many publications and musicians.^{[87][88][89][90][91]} He has featured in various music polls of great rock guitarists, and in 2011 was ranked number 26 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time".^[2] Former Van Halen vocalist Sammy Hagar stated, "I thought Queen were really innovative and made some great sounding records.. I like the rockin' stuff. I think Brian May has one of the great guitar tones on the planet, and I really, really love his guitar work."^[91] May mainly used the "Red Special", which he designed when he was only 16 years old.^[92] It was built with wood from an 18th century fireplace. His comments on the guitar:

I like a big neck – thick, flat and wide. I lacquered the fingerboard with Rustin's Plastic Coating. The tremolo is interesting in that the

arm's made from an old bicycle saddle bag carrier, the knob at the end's off a knitting needle and the springs are valve springs from an old motorbike.

— Brian May^[93]

In addition to using his home-made guitar he prefers to use coins (especially a *sixpence* from the farewell proof set of 1970), instead of a more traditional plastic *plectrum*, on the basis that their rigidity gives him more control in playing.^[94] He is known to carry coins in his pockets specifically for this purpose.^[94]

May's early influences were *Cliff Richard* and *The Shadows*, who he says were "the most metallic thing(s) out at the time." Many years later he gained his opportunity to play on separate occasions with both Cliff Richard and Shadows lead guitarist *Hank Marvin*. He has collaborated with Cliff Richard on a re-recording of the Cliff Richard and The Shadows (then known as The Drifters) 1958 hit "Move It" on the Cliff Richard duets album *Two's Company* which was released on 6 November 2006.^[95]

May always stated that *The Beatles*, *Led Zeppelin*,^[96] *The Who* and *Jimi Hendrix* were the greatest influences on him. On 2 June 2010, on BBC Radio 2, Brian May said, "I would put *Rory Gallagher* way up there; he is one of the people who inspired me most." On *Queen for an Hour* 1989 Interview on BBC Radio 1, May listed *Jimi Hendrix*, *Jeff Beck* and *Eric Clapton* as his guitar heroes. In a 1991 interview for *Guitar World* magazine, May referred to the *Who* as "my inspiration", and on seeing *Led Zeppelin* stated, "We used to look at those guys and think, "That's the way it should be done."^[97] May told *Guitarist* in 2004: "I don't think anyone has epitomised riff writing better than *Jimmy Page* – he's one of the great brains of rock music".^[98] May was also influenced by *Steve Hackett*, guitarist of progressive rock band *Genesis*,^[99] in particular his harmony guitar solo at the end of the band's epic 1971 song "The Musical Box".^[100]

While May and his father were building the *Red Special*, May also produced plans to build a second guitar. However, so successful was the *Red Special*, that May had no need to build another guitar.^[101] These plans were eventually given to guitar luthier Andrew Guyton in around 2004/05, some slight modifications were made and the guitar was built. It was named "The Spade", as the shape of the body resembled the form shown on playing cards. However the guitar also came to be known as "The Guitar That Time Forgot".^[101]

5.2 Equipment

5.2.1 Guitars and keyboards

Most of May's electric guitar work live and in the studio was done on the **Red Special**, which he built with his father, an electronics engineer, during his teenage years.^{[10][102][103][104]} From 1975 onwards, he has also had some replicas made, some of which were also used for live and recording purposes, others were mainly spares. The most famous replicas were made by John Birch in 1975 (May actually smashed it during a concert in the States in 1982), **Greco** BM90 (featured in the promo video of "Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy" in 1977), Guild (back-up from 1984 to 1993), Fryers (1997–1998, used both live and in the studio) and Guyton^[105] (back-up from 2003 to present). On stage, May used to carry at least one back-up guitar (in case he broke a string) and occasionally would use others for certain songs or parts, such as alternate tunings. Currently, May owns a company which makes guitars whose design is modelled after the original Red Special guitar.

- July 1973 – May 1974: **Fender Stratocaster** CBS era (thought to be a 1972)
- October 1974 – May 1975: **Gibson Les Paul** Deluxe, and the Stratocaster from the previous tour.
- November 1975 – May 1976: Same two guitars as before, plus a natural finish John Birch replica of the Red Special.
- September 1976: Same three as before, plus a Martin D-18 acoustic for "'39".
- January 1977 – August 1979: Just the Birch replica plus an Ovation Pacemaker 12-string acoustic on some numbers ("39", "Love of My Life", "Dreamer's Ball").
- November 1979 – June 1982: Birch replica (back-up), **Fender Telecaster** ("Crazy Little Thing Called Love" 2nd verse, middle-eight and solo), Ovation (acoustic numbers).
- July – November 1982: Added a **Gibson Flying V** as second back-up. On 9 August 1982 Brian smashed the Birch guitar, so the Flying V became the only spare.
- August – October 1984: The Flying V became a second back-up again as his main spare was the Guild replica. He also used Roger Taylor's Gibson Chet-Atkins Classical Electric.
- July 1985 – August 1986: Gibson Flying V no longer used. The rest remained the same.
- In 2012 he received a double-neck replica of the Red Special with the second neck having 12-strings. He used this guitar at a few gigs with **Adam Lambert** now being able to play the 12-string part from the studio version of Under Pressure live.^[106]

He currently has a Guild 12-string to replace his Ovation Pacemaker. Some of the non-RS electric guitars he used in the studio included:

- **Burns** Double Six on "Long Away" (1976) and "Under Pressure" (1981).
- Fender Telecaster on "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" (1979). It was used for the video (but not the recordings) of "Back Chat" (1982).
- Gibson Firebird on "Hammer to Fall" and "Tear It Up" (album versions only, not on stage).
- **Ibanez JS** on "Nothing But Blue" (1991).
- **Parker Fly** on "Mother Love" (1993–1995).

For acoustic, he favoured Ovation, Martin, **Tōkai** Hummingbird, Godin and Guild. On a couple of videos he also used some different electric guitars: a Stratocaster copy on "Play the Game" (1980) and a **Washburn RR2V** on "Princes of the Universe" (1986).

In 1984 **Guild** released the first official Red Special replica for mass production, and made some prototypes specifically for May. However the solid body construction (the original RS has hollow cavities in the body) and the pick-ups (DiMarzio) that were not an exact replica of the Burns TriSonic did not make May happy, so the production stopped after just 300 guitars. In 1993 Guild made a second replica of the RS, made in just 1000 copies, of which May has some and used as a back-up. At the moment, he uses the two guitars made by Greg Fryer—the luthier who restored the Old Lady in 1998—as back-up. They are almost identical to the original, except for the Fryer logo on the headstock (May's original one has a sixpence).

In the studio, May used **Yamaha DX7** synths for the opening sequence of "One Vision" and the backgrounds of "Who Wants to Live Forever" (also on stage), "Scandal" and "The Show Must Go On". He mostly used Freddie Mercury's 1972 Steinway piano and reportedly now owns the instrument in question. May was keen on using some toys as instruments as well. He used a **Yamaha** plastic piano in "Teo Torriatte" and a toy mini **koto** in "The Prophet's Song". He also used a "genuine George Formby Ukulele-Banjo" in "Bring Back That Leroy Brown" and "Good Company".

5.2.2 Amplifiers and effects

May has used **Vox AC30** amplifiers almost exclusively since a meeting with his long-time hero **Rory Gallagher** at a gig in London during the late 1960s/early 1970s.^[107] In the mid-1970s he used six of them, with an **Echoplex** delay (with extended delay time) plugged into a separate amplifier, and a second Echoplex plugged into yet another amp; he used a homemade booster, his only effects



The Vox AC30 amplifier

pedal, which was on all the time.^[108] His choice is the model AC30TBX, the top-boost version with Blue Alnico speakers, and he runs the amp at full volume on the Normal channel.^[109] He also customises his amps by removing the circuitry for the Brilliant and Vib-trem channels (leaving only the circuitry for the Normal), and this alters the tone slightly, with a gain addition of 6–7 dB. He always used a **treble booster** which, along with the AC30 and his custom 'Deacy Amp' transistor amp, built by Queen bass player John Deacon, went a long way in helping to create many of his signature guitar tones.^[110] He used the Dallas Rangemaster for the first Queen albums, up to *A Day at the Races*. Effects guru **Pete Cornish** built for him the TB-83 (32 dB of gain) that was used for all the remaining Queen albums. He switched in 2000 to the Fryer's booster, which actually gives less boost than the TB-83.

When performing live, he uses banks of Vox AC30 amplifiers keeping some amps with only guitar and others with all effects such as delay, flanger and chorus. He has a rack of 14 AC30s, which are grouped as Normal, Chorus, Delay 1, Delay 2. On his pedal board, May has a custom switch unit made by Cornish and subsequently modified by Fryer that allows him to choose which amps are active. He uses a BOSS pedal from the '70s, the Chorus Ensemble CE-1, which can be heard in "In The Lap of The Gods" (*Live at Wembley '86*) or "Hammer to Fall" (slow version played live with P. Rodgers). Next in the chain, he uses a Foxx Foot Phaser ("We Will Rock You", "We Are the Champions", "Keep Yourself Alive", etc.), and two delay machines to play his trademark solo in "Brighton Rock".

6 Personal life

From 1974 to 1988, May was married to Chrissie Mullen and they had three children: James (aka Jimmy), born on 15 June 1978; Louisa, born on 22 May 1981 and Emily Rose, born on 18 February 1987. May and Chrissie sep-



May in 2010

arated in 1988. He met *EastEnders* actress Anita Dobson in 1986; she inspired him to write the 1989 hit "I Want It All". They married on 18 November 2000.^[111]

He has stated in interviews that he suffered from severe depression in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the point of contemplating suicide,^[112] for reasons having to do with his troubled first marriage, his perceived failure as a husband and a father, his father Harold's death and Freddie Mercury's illness and death.^[113]

May's father Harold worked as a **draughtsman** at the **Ministry of Aviation** and was a long-time heavy cigarette smoker.^[10] As a result, May dislikes smoking,^[114] even to the point where he has prohibited smoking indoors at his more recent concerts.^[115] According to *The Sunday Times* Rich List he is worth £85 million or around \$135 million as of 2011.^[116]

Brian May is a vegetarian. He has homes in **London** and **Windlesham, Surrey**.^[117] He is an active **animal rights** advocate, and was appointed a vice-president of animal welfare charity, the RSPCA, in September 2012.^[118]

May describes himself as agnostic.^[119]

7 Astrophysics

May studied physics and mathematics at **Imperial College London**, graduating with a BSc (Hons) degree and ARCS



May in 2015 at *Paranal Observatory*

in physics with **Upper Second-Class Honours**. From 1970 to 1974, he studied for a PhD degree at Imperial College, studying reflected light from interplanetary dust and the velocity of dust in the plane of the Solar System. When Queen started to have international success in 1974, he abandoned his doctoral studies, but co-authored two scientific research papers,^[120] which were based on his observations at the **Teide Observatory** in **Tenerife**.

In October 2006, May re-registered for his PhD at Imperial College and submitted his thesis in August 2007 (one year earlier than he estimated it would take to complete). As well as writing up the previous work he had done, May had to review the work on zodiacal dust undertaken during the intervening 33 years, which included the discovery of the zodiacal dust bands by NASA's **IRAS** satellite. After a viva voce, the revised thesis (entitled *A Survey of Radial Velocities in the Zodiacal Dust Cloud*) was approved in September 2007, some 37 years after it had been commenced.^{[121][122][123][16][124]} He was able to submit his thesis only because of the minimal amount of research on the topic during the intervening years and has described the subject as one that became “trendy” again in the 2000s. He graduated at the awards ceremony of Imperial College held in the **Royal Albert Hall** on 14 May 2008.

In October 2007, May was appointed a Visiting Researcher in Imperial College and continues his interest in astronomy and involvement with the Imperial Astrophysics Group.

He is co-author, with **Sir Patrick Moore** and **Chris Lintott**, of *Bang! – The Complete History of the Universe* (published in 2006)^[125] and “The Cosmic Tourist” (published in 2012).

Asteroid **52665 Brianmay** was named in his honour on 18 June 2008 on the suggestion of **Sir Patrick Moore** (probably influenced by the asteroid’s provisional designation of 1998 **BM₃₀**).^{[92][126]}

In 2014, May co-founded **Asteroid Day** with Apollo 9 astronaut **Rusty Schweickart**, **B612 Foundation COO Danica Remy** and German filmmaker **Grigorij Richters**. **Asteroid Day** is a global awareness campaign where peo-

ple from around the world come together to learn about asteroids and what we can do to protect our planet.^[127]

May appeared on the 700th episode of *The Sky at Night* hosted by **Sir Patrick Moore**, along with **Chris Lintott**, **Jon Culshaw**, **Prof. Brian Cox**, and the **Astronomer Royal Martin Rees** who on departing the panel, told **Brian May**, who was joining it, “I don’t know a scientist who looks as much like **Isaac Newton** as you do”.^[128] May was also a guest on the first episode of the third series of the BBC’s *Stargazing Live*, on 8 January 2013.

On 17 November 2007, May was appointed Chancellor of **Liverpool John Moores University**,^[129] and installed in 2008.^[130] He held the post until 2013.^[128]

During the **New Horizons Pluto flyby** NASA press conference held on 17 July 2015 at Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab, **Brian May** was introduced as a science team collaborator. He told the panel “You have inspired the world.”^{[131][132]}

8 Activism



May filming for the BBC’s *The One Show* in 2011 for an anti badger culling campaign.

May has formed a group to promote animal welfare. Though a **Conservative Party** voter most of his life,^[133] he has stated that their policies on fox hunting and the culling of badgers meant he did not vote for them at the 2010 General Election. His group, **Save Me** (named after the May-written Queen song), campaigns for the protection of all animals against unnecessary, cruel and degrading treatment; with a particular emphasis on preventing hunting of foxes and the culling of badgers.^[9] The group’s primary concern is to ensure that the **Hunting Act 2004** and other laws protecting animals are retained in situ.^[36]

In an interview in September 2010 with [Stephen Sackur](#) for the BBC's *HARDtalk* program, May said that he would rather be remembered for his animal rights work than for his music or scientific work.^[134] May is a staunch supporter of the [RSPCA](#), the [International Fund for Animal Welfare](#), the [League Against Cruel Sports](#), [PETA UK](#) and the [Harper Asprey Wildlife Rescue](#).

In March 2012, May contributed the foreword to a target paper published by the think tank the [Bow Group](#), urging the government to reconsider its plans to cull thousands of badgers to control [bovine TB](#), stating that the findings of Labour's major badger culling trials, several years earlier, show that culling does not work. The paper was authored by [Graham Godwin-Pearson](#) with contributions by leading [tuberculosis](#) scientists, including [Lord Krebs](#).^{[135][136][137]}

In 2013, Brian May joined French guitar player [Jean-Pierre Danel](#) for a charity Danel launched to the benefit of animal rights in France. The guitarists signed guitars and art photos together, and were joined by [Hank Marvin](#).^[138]

In May 2013, May teamed up with actor [Brian Blessed](#) and [Flash](#) cartoonist [Jonti "Weebl" Picking](#), as well as animal rights groups including the [RSPCA](#), to form Team Badger, a "coalition of organisations that have teamed up to fight the planned cull of badgers".^[139] With Weebl and Blessed, May recorded a single, "'Save The Badger Badger Badger'" – a mashup of Weebl's viral 2003 [Flash](#) cartoon meme, "Badger Badger Badger", and Queen's "Flash", featuring vocals by Blessed. Weebl animated the music video on YouTube, parodying both Weebl's original animation on YouTube and a scene from *Flash Gordon*, a film featuring music by Queen, and in which Blessed played Prince Vultan. On 1 September 2013, "Save The Badger Badger Badger" charted at No. 79 on the [UK Singles Chart](#), No. 39 on the [UK iTunes chart](#)^[140] and No. 1 on the [iTunes Rock chart](#).^[141] In June 2013 renowned naturalist [David Attenborough](#) and rock guitarist [Slash](#) joined May to form the supergroup, [Artful Badger and Friends](#), and released a song dedicated to badgers, "Badger Swagger".^[142]

Prior to the 2015 general election, it was reported that May was considering standing as an [independent Member of Parliament](#). It was also revealed that May had started a "Common Decency" project "to re-establish common decency in our lives, work and Parliament". May said he wanted to "get rid of the current government" and wished to see a [House of Commons](#) containing "individuals voting according to their conscience".^[143] May was one of several celebrities who endorsed the parliamentary candidacy of the [Green Party's](#) [Caroline Lucas](#) at the election.^{[144][145]} He also endorsed a Conservative Party candidate, [Henry Smith](#), on the grounds of his animal welfare record.^[146]

In July 2015, May criticized British prime minister [David Cameron](#) for giving Members of Parliament a free vote on

amending the ban on fox hunting in England and Wales. During a live television interview, he also attacked the pro-hunting organisation the [Countryside Alliance](#) as "a bunch of lying bastards" for their support for a change to the law.^[147] The vote was postponed by the government following the intervention of the [Scottish National Party's](#) Westminster MPs, who committed to vote to keep the ban as it existed. May told anti-hunt protesters in a rally outside Parliament that it was "a very, very important day for our democracy" but added "we have not yet won the war, there's no room for complacency".^[148]

A new damselfly species of the genus *Heteragrion* (Odonata : Zygoptera) from Brazil was named *Heteragrion brianmayi* in honour of him.^[149]

9 Stereophotography

May has had a lifelong interest in collecting Victorian stereophotography. In 2009, with co-author [Elena Vidal](#), he published his second book, *A Village Lost and Found*, on the work of English stereophotography innovator [T. R. Williams](#).^[150] He was awarded The Royal Photographic Society's Saxby Medal in 2012 for achievement in the field of three-dimensional imaging.^[151]

May made a significant technical contribution to the book to accompany the exhibition 'Stereoscopic Photographs of Pablo Picasso by [Robert Mouzillat](#)', held at the [Holburne Museum](#) in Bath, UK from February to June 2014. The book provides a cross-section of photographs of Picasso in his studio, at the bullfight at Arles and in his garden. May's 3D 'Owl viewer' is used to view the photographs in 3D.

The purchase of his first card in 1973 started May on a lifelong and worldwide search for [Les Diableries](#),^[152] which are stereoscopic photographs depicting scenes of daily life in Hell. On 10 October 2013^[153] the book *Diableries: Stereoscopic Adventures in Hell* by [Brian May](#), [Denis Pellerin](#) and [Paula Fleming](#) was published.^[154]

10 Discography

With Queen

Main article: [Queen discography](#)

- "Keep Yourself Alive" (1973) vocal bridge with Taylor, rest sung by Mercury
- "Some Day, One Day" (1974)
- "She Makes Me (Stormtrooper in Stilettoes)" (1974)
- "'39" (1975)
- "Good Company" (1975)

- "Long Away" (1976)
- "All Dead, All Dead" (1977)
- "Sleeping on the Sidewalk" (1977)
- "Fat Bottomed Girls" (1978) chorus vocals
- "Leaving Home Ain't Easy" (1978)
- "Sail Away Sweet Sister" (1980) Mercury sings the bridge
- "Flash" (1980) with Freddie Mercury
- "Put Out the Fire" lead on falsetto lines
- "Las Palabras de Amor" (1982) harmony vocals on chorus
- "I Go Crazy" (1984) lead bridge vocals
- "Who Wants to Live Forever" (1986) first verse, harmony and other lines throughout
- "I Want It All" (1989) with Mercury
- "Lost Opportunity" (1991)
- "Mother Love" (1995) lead vocals on final verse
- "Let Me Live" (1995) lead vocals on third verse
- "No-One but You" (1997) with Taylor

Solo discography

Main article: Brian May discography

- *Back to the Light* (1992)
- *Another World* (1998)
- *Furia* (2000) soundtrack

Collaborations

- Acoustic by Candlelight (with Kerry Ellis) (2013)
- *Golden Days (Brian May & Kerry Ellis)* (2017)

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13 External links

- Brian May’s official homepage
- Brian May at the Internet Movie Database
- Brian May’s PhD thesis
- Brian May’s astronomy book
- Scientific paper with Brian May as co-author

14 See also

Famous musician scientists

- Brian Cox (physicist)

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