Exclusive interview

Brian May plays “God Save the Queen” from the roof of Buckingham Palace to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II’s Golden Jubilee on June 3, 2002.

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As a teenager, Brian Harold May was shy, uncertain, insecure. “I used to think, ‘My God, I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to wear, I don’t know who I am,’” he says. For a kid who didn’t know who he was or what he wanted, he had quite a future in store. Deep, abiding interests and worldwide success would come on several levels, from both science and music. Like all teenagers beset by angst, it was just a matter of sorting it all out.

Skiffle, stars, and 3-D

A postwar baby, Brian May was born July 19, 1947. In his boyhood home on Walsham Road in Feltham on the western side of London, England, he was an only child, the offspring of Harold, an electronics engineer and senior draftsman at the Ministry of Aviation, and Ruth. (Harold had served as a radio operator during World War II.) The seeds for all of May’s enduring interests came early: At age 6, Brian learned a few chords on the ukulele from his father, who was a music enthusiast. A year later, he awoke one morning to find a “Spanish guitar hanging off the end of my bed.” At age 7, he commenced piano lessons and began playing guitar with enthusiasm, and his father’s engineering genius came in handy to fix up and repair equipment, as the family had what some called a modest income. “We were very, very poor,” says May.

As he explored music, Brian also discovered scientific pursuits at school. “In the school library, there was this little book called The Earth,” he says. “It was written by the man who is now Sir Patrick Moore, who has become a good friend in recent times. It had a picture of Earth on the cover and gave a history of Earth from its formation all the way through the beginnings of life, and I was just enthralled. I read it from cover to cover again and again.”

The discovery of Moore, England’s famous astronomy television presenter, led to Brian staying up late to watch Moore’s show, The Sky at Night, on the BBC. “I begged my parents to stay up far enough into the night,” he says, “and I just became captivated by the whole story of the universe. It’s been a lifelong passion, something that’s never left me. There’s always a part of me who just likes to go out and gaze up at the heavens if I’m fortunate enough to have a clear sky.”

David J. Eicher is editor of Astronomy. He has been a Queen fan since his early teenage years, and enjoys being in the same group of fans of both music and astronomy as Brian May.
One night in 1955, Harold May brought home a Lonnie Donegan record and shared it with his son. This was in the midst of the skiffle craze of the mid-1950s, when homemade instruments and American blues, folk, and pop coalesced with a new generation of British kids turning on to the new music. “I used to lie under the bed covers with my little crystal set listening to Radio Luxembourg and all this stuff that seemed very exciting and dangerous and forbidden,” he says.

May excelled in school, and he readily says, “I had a lot of application, and I liked achieving.” His was an intellect that was mathematical, ordered, and also quite creative. Astronomy and music each found a comfortable home here. He entertained his parents by writing a monologue about the stars and speaking it over a playing of “Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age” from Gustav Holst’s The Planets. A collector, he acquired toys, comics, matchboxes, and before long a camera and telescope, the latter homebuilt. The scope, which he still has, is a 4-inch reflector.

“It was just a kit we bought at Tottenham Court Road,” he says, “which was famous for bits of recycled stuff, ex-government lenses, and electrical bits and pieces. Me and my dad used to go down there and find things, and we located a kit for making a telescope that must have cost 10 pounds, I don’t know, and we made it together. It’s a small scope, but it still gives me pleasure because even though I have a bigger telescope now, the 4-incher can be wheeled out in 10 seconds flat if there’s something interesting in the sky.”

Another interest emerged to coexist with astronomy and music. All May had to do to acquire this fixation was to sit down as a kid to breakfast. Weetabix, compressed wheat in the form of a biscuit, is served with milk at many an English table. “It was a big thing when I was a kid,” says May, “and when you got your packet of Weetabix in those days, you would get a free card inside. An incentive for kids to badger their mums to buy it!”

The card inside was a photographic stereo card. Stereoscopy (stereoscopic, or 3-D, imaging) was invented by Sir Charles Wheatstone in England in 1838. The technique employs two nearly identical images made from a slightly different angle that, when combined by viewing through a special device, appear to merge together to produce a three-dimensional scene. The process was huge in the United States during and after the Civil War era, and was still a novelty of sorts in the Great Depression era when kids could drop a penny in the grocery store stereoscope to see the wonders of the world in 3-D.

The 3-D imagery produced by stereoscopy was a delight to the young May. “Suddenly, these two little flat pictures became one in-depth view of whatever it was,” he says, “an animal or a city or a car, and to me this was just magic. I thought, ‘If people can do this with photography, why don’t they do it all the time?’” And May had always been fond of animals — yet another passion that would rise up throughout his later life.

**Enter the Red Special**

As May began his teenage years, he continued to play guitar, borrowing one here and there, a friend’s Fender Telecaster or Gibson SG. His talent was expanding by leaps and bounds, and he had no instrument of his own, unable to afford one. By the spring of 1963, when May was 15, he and his father decided to build their own guitar. Designing and building an electric guitar from scratch was no easy undertaking, although Harold’s engineering background and Brian’s methodical, mathematical mind helped the process along. The project comprised 18 months, producing one of the most famous guitars in the history of rock ‘n’ roll.

“Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age” from Gustav Holst’s The Planets. A collector, he acquired toys, comics, matchboxes, and before long a camera and telescope, the latter homebuilt. The scope, which he still has, is a 4-inch reflector.

Nothing like this instrument existed, and it conspired to give May a unique tone in playing pop music. The guitar’s body is made from oak, the neck from an
18th-century mahogany fireplace mantle, the fret markers from mother-of-pearl buttons taken from Ruth May’s sewing box, and the valve springs used to balance the string tension were salvaged from a 1928 motorcycle. The Mays produced a carefully considered instrument, and after varnishing in deep red mahogany, the guitar took on the name “Red Special.”

The guitar’s clean tone also came from the Vox AC30 amplifier, and Irish rocker Rory Gallagher showed May how to set it up and drive it to achieve that tone. Another part of the equation was a treble booster, which, as May says, “drives the amp into smooth distortion as it gets rid of a little of the low end.” Couple that with Burns’ pickups that May installed into the Red Special, and you came out with a unique sound in rock ‘n’ roll.

Another part of May’s approach was the unusual habit of using a British sixpence coin as a pick. “I discovered the old sixpence coin, which had a reeded edge, and found that if I held it parallel to the strings, it would produce a smooth, nice, warm sound. If I held it at an increasing angle, I’d get this rasp that mimicked the consonants from articulating a voice. That was another ingredient in making the guitar talk.”

A fellow student, Dave Dilloway, also played guitar, and together with some other schoolmates, they formed an early band. The coverage included music from the Beatles, Manfred Mann, the Moody Blues, and other groups. By 1964, May was getting used to his new guitar and continued trying out new personnel, forming a band called 1984, the name taken from the George Orwell novel. His principal partner was vocalist and bassist Tim Staffell.

In the same year, British colonial rule in the far-off African Republic of Zanzibar was weakening. Now part of Tanzania, Zanzibar was then separate, and the island nation was cast into political chaos. One of the many families moving away to other locales to avoid potential violence was that of 17-year-old Farrokh Bulsara, a Parsi who had grown up in Zanzibar and also in India. (His father worked for the British Colonial Office.) Nicknamed Freddie, this young man was an accomplished pianist and aspiring artist and musician. With the revolution in Zanzibar, the Bulsara family moved to London to start life anew. In fact, they moved to a small house in Feltham only a few hundred yards away from that of Brian May.

**Music+astronomy**

For May, the balance between school and music was a fine line that sometimes teetered one way or the other. Described at the time as “serious-minded” or even “sheltered,” May was expected to excel at his studies and then perhaps branch out and play and experience the world a bit by the time he was about 20. But many teenage
musical groups were moving away from their studies and following the Beatles’ path to glory, or so they thought. “I completed my studies, O-levels [high-school-level exams], and applied for various universities,” says May. Astronomy and space science had become increasingly attractive to him through his schoolwork.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, May did it all. In the music world, he saw Jimi Hendrix play in London, which transformed and inspired his idea of guitar playing and what it ought to be. 1984 was busy playing gigs, May adorned in Hendrix-style clothes and sporting Beatle-like hair. On May 13, 1967, the band played at Imperial College in London on the same bill as The Jimi Hendrix Experience, the day after the latter released its first album, *Are You Experienced?* Just after the new year, however, May quit 1984. A new band formed by May and Staffell recruited a blond-haired drummer they had met in the bar at Imperial College, Roger Taylor, age 18, who hailed from Cornwall. They wanted a “high-energy” drummer in the mold of Mitch Mitchell or Ginger Baker, and Taylor would produce admirably. The new band that started forward in 1968 would be called Smile.

“Jimi Hendrix really opened up the heavens,” says May. “It’s really hard to imagine the world without Jimi because he changed it so much. All of us thought we knew what guitar playing was. Jimi tore asunder all the limitations that none of us really knew were there.” May saw Hendrix several times and sometimes went with Freddie. “And it was always the same — things would just be falling to bits around him, but it was the sound of heaven coming from the stage. Absolutely unreasonably colossal.”

Academics rolled forward, too. May attended Imperial College, studying mathematics and physics among other subjects, and was graduated with an upper second-class degree. The physics was clearly leading to astronomy. On October 24, 1968, May received his Bachelor of Science degree in physics from the Queen Mother at the Royal Albert Hall. Two days later, Smile picked up considerable steam by opening for Pink Floyd.

Operating on all cylinders, May now applied for several academic posts. “I was offered a job in Jodrell Bank, which was just beginning to be an important radio astronomy facility in England,” he says. “And Sir Bernard Lovell was there. That was a dream, really, but — being the kid that I was — I was so involved with music in London and didn’t want to leave my friends. So I turned it down. I’m not proud of it because I’m not sure it was the right thing to do.”

Instead, May accepted an offer to go to Imperial College, which would keep him in London, able to play music. May thought he was going to do infrared astronomy, which was really just beginning at the time. “The strange thing is that Professor Jim Ring, the
department head, was involved in optical spectrometry at the time and looking to radial velocities,” says May. “And so I somehow got hooked into this whole program!” May thought he would be interested in working on radial velocities, but “was a little scared at the time because then spectrometry was a little arcane, or so I thought.”

Ring and his colleagues were interested in a novel idea: looking at the radial velocities of particles in the zodiacal dust cloud and beginning to understand how dust in the plane of the solar system is moving. “This appealed to me,” he says, “so I said, ‘Yes, I’m your man — I’ll take this on as a project!’” The researchers were looking for “clean” spectral lines that would allow them to detect Doppler shifts, indicating motion, and they settled on magnesium I, which corresponds to the easiest transition line of the magnesium atom.

“We looked for it in the zodiacal light,” says May, “and, of course, the zodiacal light is not a very well-known phenomenon even to this day. But we were looking at this green line reflected in the dust and looking for a shift in the frequency of that line, which would then show us how the dust was moving.” May and his colleagues were able to make a velocity map of the dust as opposed to what everyone else was doing, simply making positional maps. It was somewhat revolutionary at the time.

And when he wasn’t working away on the dynamics of the zodiacal dust cloud, May kept hammering away with Smile. Throughout 1969, the band played gigs around London, and they picked up, from early on, an “ardent fan” who was “full of suggestions.” This fan desperately wanted to be in the band and was quite a promising singer. “No,” said May at the time. “Tim [Staffell] is the lead singer. He’d never wear it.” The kid kept hanging around and slowly began to be noticed more and more by everyone. He was very shy but “cloaked in a persona,” May recalls. The kid was Freddie Bulsara.

**Here comes Queen**

Freddie Bulsara spent the next few months looking for a band to sing with. He spent stints in Ibex and Sour Milk Sea, but by early 1970 spats and lineup changes left him looking for a band again. He and Roger Taylor each had a stand, selling clothes and gear, at London’s hippy-fashionable Kensington Market. May, although still involved with Smile, was away, studying astronomy in Tenerife in the Canary Islands. He had a Spanish guitar on the mountain he had recently bought, and his professors, among them Jim Ring and Ken Reay, found his playing amusing. “I think Ken thought it was quite funny,” says May. “He had a sly little smile on his face that said, ‘Obviously, you’ll never get anywhere.’”

When May returned to London, he found that Tim Staffell wanted to move on, and after some coaxing, Freddie wound his way into a new band that consisted of May, Taylor, Bulsara, and, for some months to come, a rotation of bass players. Eventually, by mid-1971, the guys found a bassist who would stay in John Deacon, a 19-year-old electronics student from central England who had played with some other London groups.

Well before then, two big name changes had occurred. Freddie suggested the new band’s name, Queen, taken from the hippy world centered on Kensington Market, which prominently included gay culture — and Freddie would himself have gay relationships, although at this time he was still ensconced with his live-in lover, Mary Austin. Secondly, Freddie had written a song he really liked called “My Fairy King,” which included the line “Oh Mother Mercury what have you done to me?” Freddie decided on a dramatic stage name change, and the world was introduced, slowly at first, to Freddie Mercury.

The band’s first demo led to a first album, _Queen_, released in 1973. Its moderate success produced a tour mostly in England later that year.
Goodbye, for now, to astronomy
During the Queen years, astronomy remained a passion in May's mind, but professional astronomy went dormant. “If I could ever maneuver my way into a place where there were clear skies at night, I would always do that on tour,” he says. “I kept in touch with the guys at Imperial College and read some of the literature, but I wasn't really a student of astronomy during those years.”

And yet he became a tour guide, showing the sky to many other musicians. “Lots of people really like that, and, of course, it’s incredible how many people who live in cities rarely get to see the Milky Way, for instance,” May says. “There were so many times when people have said, 'My God, I've never seen that!' when seeing the planets, or star clusters, or M31. It's nice to be able to share that with people who don't know about it.”

As with many bands of the era, despite successful album releases and touring, Queen’s individual members were slow to accumulate the benefits. This was partly due to the crazy system of the companies essentially fronting monies to the bands that had to be paid back to the labels, and to the dealings of the band's first manager, Norman Sheffield, who would be savagely remembered in Mercury’s delightfully nasty song “Death on Two Legs (Dedicated to ...),” from the 1975 album A Night at the Opera. But the band was achieving success and becoming famous, so May abandoned his astronomy, for the time being, to get on with rock 'n' roll. And Queen caught a big break when they toured with the established act Mott the Hoople.

A second album, Queen II, followed in 1974. The band toured England, Germany, and other parts of Europe in support in 1974 and continued their moderate success. Queen then went into its first tour of the United States, Canada, and Japan, which was planned for the first half of the year. But waking up in Boston, Massachusetts, one April morning, May found he was barely able to move. He gazed in the mirror, and his face was yellow. Doctors diagnosed him with hepatitis, and the tour stopped, Queen flying back to England and May recuperating in bed. A late 1974 tour concentrated on Europe.

Released near year’s end, Sheer Heart Attack offered several hit songs, but it was the album’s second track, “Killer Queen” — often claimed as “the most beautiful song ever written about a prostitute” — that really helped the band. At the time, Brian lived in a single room apartment in Earl’s Court with his girlfriend, Christine Mullen. “We mainly lived on fish in a bag and cod fingers,” he says. A London attorney, Jim Beach, began extricating Queen from its contracts, and soon the band signed with EMI and had new management. Now its success could move forward fairly. May and Mullen married in 1974, and the couple produced three children, James (now 34), Louisa (31), and Emily (25).

The next release, A Night at the Opera, made Queen international superstars. Not only was the album full of memorable and electric hits, but one of them, Freddie’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” exploded as a huge smash. It began years earlier in Freddie's mind as “The Cowboy Song,” a simple ditty that commenced with, “Mama, just killed a man.” Inspired by the Beatles’ “A Day in the Life,” the song became a three-part “mock opera,” in Freddie's words, whose middle operatic section married references to Galileo, the 17th-century Italian clown Scaramouche, Rossani and Mozart’s operatic character Figaro, the Arabic prayer expression “bismillah,” and the Spanish and Portuguese folk dance known as the fandango.

There was also Brian's great sci-fi folk song “’39,” about interstellar travel; Roger’s rocked-out “I’m in Love with My Car”; and John’s sentimental “You're My Best Friend.” Not to mention Freddie’s lasting “Love of My Life” and Brian’s working of “God Save the Queen,” which would be used again and again as a live concert coda. Now Queen had arrived with unrelenting momentum, careening success, big money, unbounded critical acclaim, and another major touring romp in 1975 through Great Britain. From then on, the mere first keystrokes of Freddie’s, hammering out the intro to “Rhapsody,” would produce screams and cheers in concert. The sky was now the limit.

The next album, A Day at the Races, contained one of May's best straight-out rockers in “Tie Your Mother Down,” which became a live favorite. It also contained a spectacular vocal gospel anthem, inspired by Aretha Franklin and written by Mercury, in “Somebody to Love,” one of Freddie’s
favorites. “Freddie certainly loved that song at the time,” says May. “It was all about Aretha Franklin for Freddie. She was a huge influence. I said to some people that I think sometimes Freddie wants to be Aretha in pretty clothes. So it was very much gospel construction and allowed him to sing in the way which he loved.”

The band toured the United States, Japan, and Australia in early 1976. The following year saw an enormously long tour schedule around the world and the release of News of the World, a spectacularly successful album that contained two explosive hits. Having challenged each other to write “anthems” in which concertgoers could participate to the fullest, Brian composed “We Will Rock You,” which since has become one of the best-known arena rock songs of all time. Its recording with the double thump followed by single hand clap came about when May found a bunch of loose boards in a studio hallway and the guys experimented with stomping on them followed by a clap. Freddie produced the anthem “We Are the Champions,” a song so bold and outrageous in its ego that at first the other band members thought they simply couldn’t do it.

The next album, Jazz, was released in 1978 and again contained some high-powered hits. Just as “We Will Rock You” and “We Are the Champions” were linked, Brian and Freddie created a twosome of songs for this release. Brian’s tongue-in-cheek “Fat Bottomed Girls” was lyrically linked to Freddie’s curious and poetic “Bicycle Race.” The album also contained “Let Me Entertain You,” which became a live favorite, and Freddie’s “Don’t Stop Me Now,” which symbolized his increasingly rambunctious and reckless lifestyle in the gay community. When asked about his flamboyant and wild antics, Freddie simply retorted, “I sleep with men, women, cats, you name it.”

The greatest band of the 1980s

Queen entered the 1980s with a new album, The Game, and a new and ambitious tour plan. This included the hits by Freddie “Play the Game” and one of Queen’s biggest songs, “Crazy Little Thing Called Love.” It also featured May’s “Save Me,” a hit and one that in later years would be used as a symbol for his campaigns against animal cruelty. Deacon’s funk-inspired “Another One Bites the Dust” would also be a huge hit for the band all over the world. The band also recorded an album to serve as the soundtrack for the sci-fi film Flash Gordon. 1982’s Hot Space included a big hit that resulted from a chance session with old London friend David Bowie. “Under Pressure” was an effort between Deacon, who came up with the repeating bass line, Bowie, and the other three Queen members — although at first May was unenthusiastic. The song and its famous scat singing by Mercury nonetheless caught on and became a huge concert staple.

Queen now routinely filled huge outdoor stadiums, and the band’s incredible musicianship, Freddie’s outrageous stage persona and amazing voice, and great songs had it riding high as the greatest band of the era. The pace was crushing, though, and things had to slow down a little. In 1984, The Works included May’s hard-rocking “Hammer to Fall” and “Tear It Up,” as well as Taylor’s “Radio Ga Ga,” inspired by his infant son’s words. “Is This the World We Created ... ?,” co-written by May and Mercury, soared in concert as an acoustic ballad. Deacon’s “I Want to Break Free” was a big success that didn’t fare well in the United States. The band’s video featuring the guys in drag didn’t work in the American Bible Belt, and Queen lost steam in America because of it.

Following another major tour, Queen was convinced to play in a fundraising event organized by Bob Geldof of the Boomtown Rats, who hoped to raise significant monies to combat widespread famine in Ethiopia. Called Live Aid, the event would consist of two concerts July 13, 1985, one at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the other at Wembley Stadium in London.
Exclusive interview

Brian May rocks out on a solo in 2005 during the Queen+Paul Rodgers tour. © Queen Productions Ltd.

Amid an all-star lineup, Queen stole the show during its 21-minute set that opened with “Bohemian Rhapsody” and closed with “We Are the Champions.” It was the band’s greatest moment, witnessed by 1.9 billion people, and played out on its favorite stage at Wembley. May and Mercury closed out the show later in the day by playing and singing “Is This the World We Created ...?,” which seemed to have been made for the cause. “We wrote that song together as a rare event,” says Brian. “We just sat down and said we need something personal and intimate, and talked about the state the world was in. It was one of those great moments when you can just feel it coming out. That was one of the few times we collaborated directly in that way.”

But what was May’s biggest memory of Live Aid? “Well,” he says. “I think the moment when everyone’s hands went into the air to ‘Radio Ga Ga’ was one, because the audience had not paid to see us. It was a great confirmation that people not only knew the song, but also had seen the video and knew what to do. The power of the video was amazing because the whole seventy thousand in the Old Wembley Stadium just erupted into that synchronized arm movement.”

Live Aid reinvigorated Queen, and the band launched into another album, A Kind of Magic, and subsequent tour in 1986. Some of the songs had been written for the movie Highlander, and the hits were “One Vision,” written as a shared credit by all four; Taylor’s “A Kind of Magic”; “Friends Will Be Friends,” written by Deacon and Mercury; and May’s “Who Wants to Live Forever.” The tour, though limited to Europe, was the most extravagant stadium outing yet — and it would be the last one with Freddie Mercury. The last show all four would play together came August 9, 1986, at Knebworth Park, north of London.

In 1988, rumors swirled around Mercury’s health as he appeared increasingly thin and gaunt. Denials came out quickly to protect him, but the truth was that he had contracted HIV and was increasingly ill. The band continued with albums but stopped touring. 1988’s The Miracle presented special highlights in May’s “I Want It All” and Mercury’s “The Miracle.” Two years later, Innuendo was released. The album featured three songs that struck a special chord with fans, especially watching a clearly ill Mercury working through the videos “I’m Going Slightly Mad,” “The Show Must Go On,” and “These Are the Days of Our Lives.” In November 1991, as he was terribly sick and bedridden, Mercury issued a statement confirming he did have AIDS, and he died 24 hours later.

The band’s final album featuring all four musicians, Made in Heaven, was released four years after Freddie’s death.

A new beginning — and back to astronomy

During the late 1980s, May had many challenges. Mercury’s illness had a depressing effect on the band. “There was all that time when we knew Freddie was on the way out,” he says, “we kept our heads down.” Moreover, May’s first marriage ended in 1988, and he fell into a serious depression that lasted into the early 1990s. He has even stated that he contemplated suicide. “My life was falling apart,” he says. And, in a way, astronomy was responsible for bringing him back into a new life, one that came together after his struggles.

“I was deeply depressed,” he says of this period. “I suppose I would call myself a spiritual person in a sense, but I don’t really subscribe to any of the formal religions,” says May. “I went to this clinic in Tucson, Arizona, when I was very down, and they said, ‘We have to find your spirituality — what you most enjoy.’ At the time, I couldn’t think of anything I enjoyed. I was just in a very black place. And then eventually I figured out, because of the beautiful skies there, that one of my greatest joys was just looking at the stars. So I feel anchored to the universe in some way. It’s quite a powerful force in my life.”

May says that seeing the dark night sky from Tucson was a driving force in getting him back on track. “I would look up at the stars and see Orion and the winter Milky Way and call them the brave stars because there seemed to be such strength up there that I could hook onto.”

Music, of course, continued after Mercury’s death. There was the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert at Wembley in 1992. May also recorded several works with a changing lineup dubbed the Brian May Band. For several years starting in 2005, Queen+Paul Rodgers toured with the former lead singer of Free and Bad Company. One of May’s biggest musical moments came in 2002 when he and Taylor played on the roof of Buckingham Palace to help celebrate Queen Elizabeth’s Golden Jubilee — and something like a billion people saw it.

More recently, the band celebrated its 40th anniversary with a release of its whole catalog with numerous bonus tracks and with a special book, 40 Years of Queen. And May has many other musical activities,
playing here and there with British singer Kerry Ellis and recording with rap singer Dappy among them. A short time ago, May and Taylor announced concert dates this year as Queen, playing with American Idol vocalist Adam Lambert. And May married again in 2000, this time to Anita Dobson, actress on the British drama EastEnders, whom he had met in the late 1980s.

When asked about his own musical legacy, May replies, “Well, I suppose ‘We Will Rock You’ will be written on my tombstone because that’s the one which connected so many people around the world. You know, every day people send me clips of their babies on YouTube singing it. Soon there will be a fetus in the womb going ‘boom boom boom chick’ with its feet and hands. I feel happy that it encircled the globe like that.”

Meanwhile, astronomy reemerged into May’s life with great force in the form of his old friend Sir Patrick Moore. “Patrick has been such a huge force in my life,” he says. “We met for the first time when Patrick was playing himself in a radio drama that my friend Dirk Maggs was making for the BBC. So we actually did meet, and we did get on like a house on fire and have been firm friends ever since.”

May had been out of astronomy for some time, and Patrick “invited me back in,” he says. “I appeared on his Sky at Night program, the very program I’d been allowed to stay up late and watch as a kid. And from time to time, Patrick would just say, ‘Why don’t you finish off your Ph.D.’?”

May was skeptical. Hadn’t the field changed too much in 30 years? Moore told him that in his particular area of motions in the zodiacal dust cloud, the research hadn’t moved too much. “And the strange thing is,” says May. “I started to talk about it in interviews, just as one of the things that was on my mind, and somehow the head of a research group, the very program I’d been allowed in, ‘invited me back again’ in January 2012 issue of Astronomy.”

When he’s not playing music, worrying about astronomy, or fiddling with stereo photography, May is passionate about animal welfare, and he blogs about it on his website, www.brianmay.com. Fox hunting, badger culls, and other activities raise May’s ire and keep him focused on journalists, members of Britain’s Parliament, and the public with his energetic activism. “The interest in animals was always there,” he says, “and I always promised myself that the time would come when I could devote time to doing something about it.”

May is as busy as ever these days. “I’m ashamed to say I get so little time to observe the sky,” he says. “I live in England, where you don’t get clear skies very often, and if you do, you rush out with the first telescope that comes to hand.” His favorite sky objects? “I get most excited about planets, so I’m a local man, really. I never get tired of Jupiter and Saturn.” He was also a bit of a total solar eclipse addict for a while, seeing four or five eclipses out of eight or nine attempts. “That first time you see totality, you really understand where you are,” he says, “on a piece of rock hurtling around the Sun. It’s an awesome feeling — a life-changing experience.”

Where does May see the next generation of astronomy enthusiasts, with so many young kids straying away from science? “Well, I guess we’re entering a phase where knowledge for its own sake is not something that’s amassed in the brain,” he says. “In the days of Patrick Moore, you would learn lots of facts and figures and details about everything you came across. But I think things have changed an awful lot. There’s more emphasis on using your smarts to analyze what the facts mean, and more checking of such a huge mass of data from references that are so easily available now. I think we’re moving toward looking for the meaning in things rather than just the pictures.”

He adds, with a laugh: “Although I love the pictures.”

In recent years, Brian May has found a comfortable mixture of music, astronomy, stereography, and animal welfare activism — all of which were childhood passions. Brian May Archive