

Long Island Rocks: Almost Queen, A Kind Of Magic For Queen Fans

Article and live photos by Gail Flug

When it comes to seeing live music on Long Island, tribute acts are becoming very popular. Think of them as Elvis impersonators with a modern twist; in addition to playing the music of one specific band or artist, many of these 'cover bands' dress in costume and have centered their shows around elaborate stage sets.

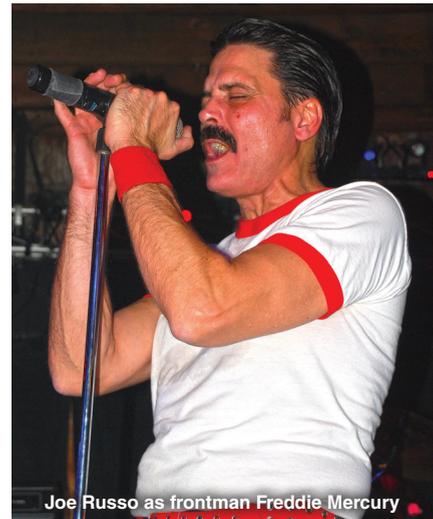
One of the most popular Long Island-based tribute bands is Almost Queen, who as their name suggests, pays homage to the classic rock band Queen. Formed in 2005, the quartet featuring frontman Joe Russo, bassist Randy Gregg, drummer John Cappadona and guitarist Steve Leonard has been performing regularly for the past decade up and down the East Coast and throughout New England as well as the Midwest. Being one of the few bands in the U.S. able to capture the Queen experience (and do it very well), they have also traveled to Mexico and Central America, and according to Randy, have had offers to perform in Europe, India, Dubai and Qatar.

A good reason for their success, as well as for many other tribute bands, is fans' longing to see bands who no longer exist. Queen did their final tour in 1986 and their frontman Freddie Mercury died in 1991. Being that the band's music is still popular, many fans who never got the chance to see them in concert can 'almost' experience it, and those who did can reminisce. But most important there are the classic Queen songs everyone loves to hear. "We think the legacy that Freddie and Queen left is the main reason for our success," says Randy. "Queen wrote some of the greatest rock songs of all time and have been engrained in popular culture for decades. From television commercials,

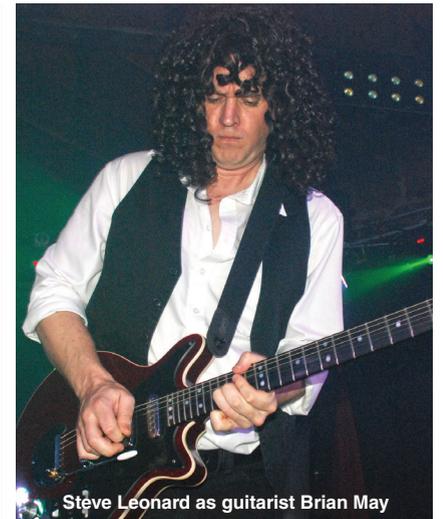
to blockbuster movies, to sporting events around the world, Queen still reigns."

There is also a need to satisfy all who come to their shows. While the band always play Queen's biggest hits such as "We Will Rock You", "We Are The Champions", "Another One Bites The Dust" and of course, "Bohemian Rhapsody", they are notorious for slipping in some surprises for diehard fans. An Almost Queen show can include such obscure Queen songs like "Ogre Battle", "Brighton Rock" and "Need Your Loving Tonight." Randy explains, "We take that route knowing that there are always some hardcore fans in the crowd, but then there's the inquiring minds first time in, the curious. We feel giving people the hits really establishes what the band is all about. After that we always mix the set lists up with requests, dedications and some deep cuts to indulge the hardcore fans and even ourselves... You have to keep in mind, we are pretty big Queen fans ourselves!"

As most people know, Queen's music could be quite complex and intricate to play, especially in a live setting. Almost Queen do not use pre-recorded backing tracks and handle Queen's signature four part harmonies and arrangements with ease. Guitarist Steve Leonard uses many of the same effects and equipment as Queen guitarist Brian May, including a replica of May's infamous Red Special guitar. They once boasted that all they do is real, including frontman Joe Russo's Freddie-like mustache. As Randy states, not only do they have to rely on spot-on musicianship, there is an element of theater to it as well. "Some of us have been watching Queen videos our entire lives, but you could watch videos all day long and still never be prepared for something this immense. The members



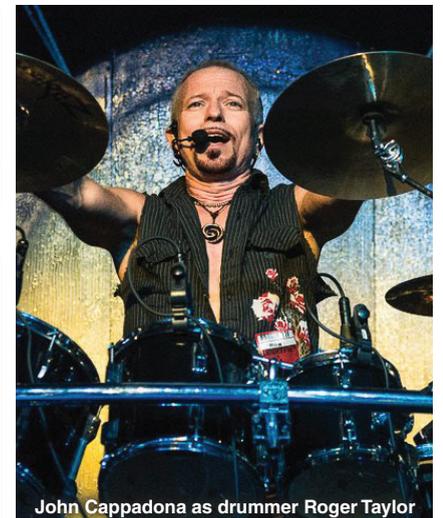
Joe Russo as frontman Freddie Mercury



Steve Leonard as guitarist Brian May



Randy Gregg as bassist John Deacon



John Cappadona as drummer Roger Taylor



of Queen are four incredibly talented and distinct personas and this is some of the greatest music ever written. These are some massive shoes to fill! Obviously we studied the albums and videos with a fine-toothed comb and we're still tweaking things to this day. The fact is Almost Queen can never be an exact replica of Queen, no one can, hence why we called the band Almost Queen."

Not surprisingly, the band's reputation has reached the surviving members of Queen and their management. They also work with the Mercury Phoenix Trust – a charity organization that provides AIDS education and awareness projects throughout the world. Almost Queen perform annually to celebrate the organization's "Freddie For A Day" worldwide event on the late singer's

birthday. Fans dress up like Mercury, or at the very least adorn a false mustache, and do something to remember Freddie. Mark September 5th on your calendars. "This year will be our 3rd annual concert in New York City," says Randy. "Last year we raised \$2,000.00 from a combination of Almost Queen merchandise sold that night along with sales throughout the year. We love to raise awareness for the MPT and they have been very supportive of our band. They post our video from the show every year along with a very nice post on their website."

For more information about Almost Queen, visit their website, www.almostqueen.com, or follow them at www.facebook.com/almostqueen.