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Joshua Gamson

University of San Francisco, gamson@usfca.edu

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Sylvester

Joshua Gamson

Sylvester James was perhaps an unlikely star: an androgynous, cross-dressing, openly gay, African American, falsetto-singing, unapologetically flaming man-diva influenced primarily by church women, black blues singers, drag queens, hippies, and homos. Like very few before him, and quite a few after, Sylvester rode his marginality right into the mainstream: a star not despite the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality he eagerly crossed, but because of them. What society saw as flaws and failings, he turned into flawlessness and success—fabulous! What society used to deny rights and freedoms, he used as the basis for international superstardom—fabulous! He was, of course, an icon of gay liberation, providing its most recognizable soundtrack with hits like “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real),” “Dance (Disco Heat),” and “Do Ya Wanna Funk.” But his diva persona also symbolized, more broadly, the 1970s subcultures of glittery, druggy, self-celebrating fantasy worlds where gender was something you could try on and race was an exploding costume, where your body’s sex and desires and color would not matter if you wore them imaginatively, where flaming was neither a stigma nor a joke but an art form. Indeed, he rode to stardom on the wave of liberation movements that

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shared with him a taste for the strange, the over-the-top, the fantastic, and that aimed, like him, for pleasure, self-determination, shamelessness, and the ecstasy of blurred boundaries.

In 1979, when Sylvester was an international disco star and AIDS was still a few years from making questions about one's legacy seem a bit too close for comfort, the legendary DJ Frankie Crocker on the radio station WBLS asked him how he would want to be remembered. "For being fabulous," Sylvester said without hesitation. Fabulousness was Sylvester's highest goal and achievement. The word *fabulous* comes from the Latin for "celebrated in fable," and the life Sylvester wrote for himself often had the feel of a demented fable or bent movie musical. Like Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, and many a diva, he imagined a script and then stepped into its reality. It is no wonder, then, that Sylvester's life, distilled into moments, flashes by like a stream of melodramatic movie scenes—high-emotion soundtrack and all. Shot one: Little Sylvester, known then as "Dooni," stands on a milk crate at the Palm Lane Church of God in Christ in South Central Los Angeles singing "Never Grow Old," a crowd of worshippers getting happy and cheering him on. Set to the blues, cut to Sylvester wandering the streets of Hollywood, having left home as a young teen; then a quick cut to Sylvester partying with the Disquotays, a gaggle of black teenage drag queens who were a cross between a street gang and a sorority. Cut next to Dooni gliding down the streets of South Central on roller skates, in pigtails and an A-line dress, licking a big sucker.

Fade in on Sylvester and a handsome white boy holding hands in white wedding tunics in Golden Gate Park; cut to Sylvester onstage with the San Francisco hippie-glitter-drag-gender-fuck performance troupe the Cockettes, wearing eight-foot gauze wings and an egret-feather headdress and singing an old Ethel Waters tune while the hippie children, passing jugs of wine and joints, go wild. Cut to Sylvester, backed by a band of scruffy, white, long-haired rock and rollers, singing Neil Young and Leonard Cohen tunes; wipe to Sylvester and his two jumbo background singers, the Two Tons of Fun, standing in front of studio microphones, singing "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" to a disco beat. Cut to Sylvester hearing the song on the radio for the first time, and then

to a montage of Sylvester's star rising as he sings "Mighty Real" and "(Dance) Disco Heat" to screaming fans at the Hollywood Bowl, at Madison Square Garden, at London's Palladium, in a Rio de Janeiro stadium, and back home at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. Cut to Sylvester, in a gown and blonde wig, telling flustered music executives, who have demanded that he tone himself down, that he "ain't changing shit"—fade out. Fade in on Sylvester in a small Atlantic City club, singing "Do Ya Wanna Funk" as a few people dance.

After a few calendar pages float by, cut to Sylvester as he is wheeled through a gasping crowd at the 1988 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade, wearing a too-big hat and a suede jacket with fringes, holding a balloon and waving a gloved hand. Cut to a dying Sylvester eating a chocolate chip cookie and watching the Home Shopping Network, and then cut to a church in Oakland, where a ragtag crowd of ex-lovers, family members, high-powered music producers and performers, Tenderloin drag queens, friends from his life in the Castro, disco fans who barely knew him, aging hippies, and gay and AIDS activists weep to the sound of Sylvester singing "Oh, Holy Night" in his yelping falsetto. Finally, dissolve to Sylvester's body, hair bright red, lips painted pink, and face made up flawlessly for an evening occasion, lying in his coffin in a gold-embroidered red kimono, looking like a film star tragically taken before her time.

Although Sylvester was known for being, as mainstream journalists consistently put it, "flamboyant" and "outrageous"—on the *Merv Griffin Show* in 1978 he wore a pelt skirt over leather pants—he was actually more interested in transcendence than transgression: in the social transcendence of norms and categories, in the spiritual and physical transcendence found in church, on the dance floor, in good sex, and of course, in his own fabulousness as a diva. He purveyed a philosophy of muchness and moreness. "Whenever you think you have on too much," he liked to say, "you should put on more, just to be safe." He modeled a philosophy of majesty. "What's a queen to do?" he would say when things were difficult or ugly, and then bring his right hand spiraling up into the small-circled, two-fingered wave of the queen, raise his chin, and answer his own question: "Be royal." He articulated a philoso-

phy of strangeness. “When I was little, I used to dress up, right?” he told Joan Rivers once on her show. “And my mother said, ‘You can’t dress up. You can’t dress up. You’ve gotta wear these pants and these shoes, and you have to, like, drink beer and play football.’ And I said, ‘No, I don’t,’ and she said, ‘You’re very strange,’ and I said, ‘That’s okay.’” He embodied and demonstrated a simple set of diva-driven inspirational imperatives: be free, be strange, be real, be fabulous, get up and dance. Sylvester’s legacy is the call to live by those principles, and some music to live them by. Plus, he could really *sang*.

Joshua Gamson is a professor of sociology at the University of San Francisco and the author of *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (1994); *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (1998); and, most recently, the Stonewall Book Award–winning *The Fabulous Sylvester* (2005). He lives in Oakland with his partner, Richard, and their daughter, Reba Sadie.

Sylvester in concert at the Roxy, Los Angeles, 1978.
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