Mighty Real

Reclaiming an era through legendary disco queen Sylvester, who died of AIDS in 1988

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The gender-bending, openly gay African-American disco legend Sylvester was born Sylvester James in South Central Los Angeles in 1947. But he was pretty much always that other Sylvester, the one who stormed the world's discos with his 1978 anthem "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)": As a teen in the mid-'60s, he belonged to the Disquotays, a clique of hard-partying drag queens. "Even among the Disquotays you would notice Sylvester first," writes Joshua Gamson in The Fabulous Sylvester, a moving new biography of the singer published in March.

While Sylvester first gained notoriety as a member of the Cockettes, San Francisco's celebrated troupe of freaky flower children, his haunting falsetto and unbridled sexuality were a perfect fit for disco. His second record, Steps II, spawned two hits, "Mighty Real" and "Dance (Disco Heat)," and made him an international celebrity. He had only a few minor hits after Steps II, but as the following excerpts from Gamson's book show, Sylvester remained fiercely fabulous, whether onstage in the prime of his career or at one of his last public appearances, leading a PWA contingent at San Francisco gay pride. Sylvester's leap from libertine to activist—he insisted AIDS was a black issue—and his too-early death make The Fabulous Sylvester a powerful tribute to both the singer's life and his entire era.

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On March 11, 1979, Sylvester gave a concert at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House to celebrate, Stars, the follow-up to his smash album Steps II.

People arrived at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco like everybody was a star. Tickets had sold out long before, 3,252 of them, and outside the Opera House people were offering $500 for any extras. Many wore the dresses and tuxedoes they'd wear to an actual opera, but a lot of them took to heart the "optional" part of "black tie optional." There were men in leather and in boas, women in jeans and in pearls. A Rolls-Royce dropped off one crew; another piled out of a garbage truck.

Like many other Opera House shows, Sylvester's had three acts and lasted nearly three hours. It began with a gospelized version of the Beatles' "Blackbird." Sylvester asked Patrick Cowley to give him some blackbirds. Cowley made a cooing on his synthesizer. "Child, that sound like seagulls,"

Sylvester said. “I want blackbirds.” Some folks laughed. But when Sylvester and his famed backup singers Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes, started in—“Y’all ready, girls?”—singing about the blackbird who was just waiting for his moment to arise, people got goose bumps. “Did y’all get the message? We’re going to do it for y’all again, just to be sure you got the message,” Sylvester said, and their voices shot around each other and around the room. Blackbird singing in the dead of night! Take these broken wings and learn to fly! You didn’t have to know that the young Sylvester had buried birds with broken wings in rhinestone shoebox caskets or that he was high as a bird himself right now. Blackbird, fly! Blackbird, fly! All you needed to know was that it was the dead of night and you were broken and free and that Sylvester and Martha and Izora were flying around you like beautiful birds. You were only waiting for this moment to be free!…

In the final act, as “Dance (Disco Heat)” was getting going, Sylvester asked his audience why the hell they were still in their seats. “I could just hear this big roar,” the drummer Kelvin Dixon recalls, “and I knew everything was just gone. He just set everybody free. The room started to shake.” Sylvester, Martha and Izora exchanged glances that said, “OK, we know where this is going.” They grabbed tambourines. Disco sound takes me higher. They started soul clapping in double time. “Tonight is Sun-day night,” Sylvester said as the spirit started to rise. “That’s why we carryin’ on like we do.” Dance with me in the disco heat. Dance with me in the disco heat. “It’s church, y’all,” Sylvester called out. “We goin’ to church.” Get up and dance. The spirit got higher and higher, and people were shouting and clapping and dancing like it was gospel hour. “If you didn’t feel nothing that night, you would never feel nothing in your life,” Izora says.

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On June 26, 1988, Sylvester announced he was HIV positive by leading PWAs at San Francisco’s Gay Freedom Day parade.

June is not gene-rally the sunniest month in San Francisco, but the sun always seems to come out for Gay Day. So it did on the day of Sylvester’s last Gay Freedom Day parade on earth.

Sylvester declined to serve as grand marshal: He had just gotten out of the hospital and had not yet officially announced that he had AIDS, although a lot of people had guessed. That Sunday morning, friends gathered at Sylvester’s apartment, waiting to see if he was up for the parade. Sylvester put on a large black hat, white pants and a blue denim jacket with long suede fringe. “Get me in my wheelchair,” he said.

Sylvester was anxious before the parade, friend Tim McKenna said afterward, “but once we started to move, it was wonderful.” Tim pushed the wheelchair in front of the People With AIDS banner; he had lost his lover to AIDS two years before and was looking a bit gaunt himself. Sylvester smiled and waved a glove like a queen. He carried a balloon in his lap. “It was such a small thing, for one person to be pushed in a wheelchair,” the reporter Allen White says, “but it was so real.”

A lot of people didn’t recognize Sylvester at first, what with the hat, the wheelchair, the

emaciation, but then the response moved through the crowd like spooky waves lapping Market Street. “It’s Sylvester,” you’d hear, and cheers would begin. “It’s Sylvester.” Then silence or the sudden intake of breath as he approached. “Obviously he was very sick, obviously he had AIDS, obviously he was dying,” says friend Tony Elite. “You’d see people put their hands on their mouths, in tears.” “Sylvester!” cheers, breaths, “Sylvester!” silence, cheers, breaths, “Sylvester!”

Sylvester had been speaking publicly about AIDS in his I’m-not-really-political political manner for years. He’d taken to attaching safe-sex booklets to the backs of his autographed photos. After his appearance at the parade, he talked with more frequency and authority about AIDS—now using his own illness and his status as the first black celebrity with AIDS as a hook. “It bothers me that AIDS is still thought of as a gay, white male disease,” Sylvester told the Los Angeles Times last September, citing statistics to the contrary. He also spoke matter-of-factly about his symptoms, his sex life and his attitude toward death. “I don’t regret a thing,” he told one magazine. Sometimes, tired of talking, he kept it simple. “I’m dying,” Sylvester told the gay magazine The Advocate, “and it’s not pretty.”

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