

Sylvester

Disco. The Disquotays. The Cockettes. Stars.

Words Andy Thomas

IN MARCH 1979, in the dressing room of the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, Sylvester is making some final adjustments to one of his many fabulous outfits while peaking on acid. Amongst the equally fabulous crowd waiting in front of the gardenia-adorned stage, sits City Supervisor Harry Britt, the openly gay successor to Harvey Milk, who had been assassinated in 1978.

"If Harvey Milk had been the 'Mayor of Castro Street', Sylvester was its undisputed first lady," said Joshua Gamson in his biography of the disco legend. The same prestigious venue had held Milk's memorial service; tonight's show was "a big fat, juicy kiss-my-ass" to his killer Dan White. "You are a star. Everybody is one. You only happen once," Sylvester sang on the title track to new LP *Stars*. And stardom was something he was, by now, revelling in. The Patrick Cowley-produced 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' had reached number 8 on the UK Singles Chart – it thrust the singer out of his underground status as a Castro legend into the global spotlight, a place he'd felt destined for through his humble early days in South Central LA.

Born in Watts in 1947, Sylvester James was raised by his strict but doting churchgoing mother Letha, and the local Palm Lane Church of God in Christ was where he felt the full force of sanctified gospel music. By the time Sylvester was

five, he was being put on a milk crate to sing spirituals like 'Never Grow Old' for an adoring congregation. "Church is where he learned the spiritual power of music, music that makes you move your body," says Gamson. "And he would later bring that power to disco."

Sylvester's other love was dressing up – he was particularly fond of high heels, fox furs and hats, for which he increasingly turned to his grandmother Juju. She had been a blues singer and, said Sylvester, "She knew some queens in the 1930s, and they were her running buddies." Through his teens he flitted in and out of his mother's house, where he'd dress up his sisters as his movie heroines, like Mae West. But he needed a bigger stage to act out his fantasies.

The Disquotays were a group of black LA drag queens who had made partying an art form. "It was like Folies Bergère in the ghetto," one member said. Even in this fabulous crowd, Sylvester stood out. According to Gamson, "In a world where 'ridiculous' was the highest of compliments, he was the most ridiculous of them all." Creating a perfect rear and hips out of foam, scribbling designs from old films or obsessively scanning *Vogue* for ideas, Sylvester was meticulous. "That environment was the first place he really got to play around with gender and drag," says Gamson. "To have fun with it, to feel what it could be like to unapologetically

cross gender." With the Disquotays, he was honing his act, always aware of the future that awaited him – still a dream when the Disquotays split in late 1969.

By this point, Sylvester was hanging out at venues like the Whisky a Go Go in an androgynous flower-child look – bell-bottom Levi's, floral shirts, platform shoes. With his head full of ideas, life in his hometown was increasingly stifling. "I could be any kind of person at all, and no one cared," he later remarked about his move to San Francisco. A psychedelic theatre/drag troupe called the Cockettes had recently been founded there in the creative fallout of the Summer of Love. "We were freak theatre and avant-garde," says founding member Fayette Hauser. "It was about a creative vision through psychedelics. The fantasies we had while tripping were what we wanted to express." In the words of writer Alice Echols, the Cockettes "pioneered a hippie-inflected drag in which the masculine and feminine purposefully collided." It was to prove a perfect outlet for Sylvester.

Arriving at the Cockettes' Haight Street Chateau commune in early 1970, he immediately felt at home. "The hippie sensibility was a new thing for him, and broadened his sense of what the freedom to 'be strange', as he'd put it, was like," says Gamson. "It also gave him a platform and an audience, and he really started developing as a performer, and probably >





Live at the Whisky a Go Go, Los Angeles, 1972

first realised that he might actually be able to have a career as a singer.”

Hauser recalls the first time the collective heard him sing: “He came to a rehearsal one day for one of the shows and we had a piano. He came on stage and started singing and everyone was bowled over. Sylvester became a real star for us. He would come out and sing these fantastic songs. When we were on stage everyone was going crazy and throwing things at us, but when Sylvester came on there was a big hush. Everyone was spellbound because he was so magical.”

By the summer of 1970, Cockettes shows with names like *Elephant Shit*, *The Circus Life* and *Journey to the Centre of Uranus* were causing people like Truman Capote to exclaim, “The Cockettes are where it’s at!” It coincided with Sylvester’s own creative quest as he obsessively studied “the transition of black music from gospel to spiritual music to blues and jazz,” says Hauser. When performing in the Cockettes he

imagined himself as “Billie Holliday and other torch singers. He was forever singing around the house. He would sing while cooking in drag. He’d wear these great 1940s dresses and cook soul food, singing ‘Sleepy Time Down South.’”

He chose the name Ruby Blue for his blues-jazz persona and his performances for the Cockettes were met with much acclaim. *Rolling Stone* described him as “a beautiful black androgynous who has a gospel sound with the heat and shimmer of Aretha’s.” But Sylvester was already thinking of his next venture even before fractures appeared in the Cockettes after critics panned their Manhattan shows in 1971. “Sylvester was always on his own in his vision, while we were more about a group consciousness,” explains Hauser.

“They have to be hot,” he told then-manager Dennis Lopez as they looked for a backing band. He found it in a group of sisters well known around the hip spots of Haight-Ashbury. “They come strutting on stage dressed up like inmates of a

Honolulu bordello: flower print, halter-top dresses; enamelled fruit, paper flowers and junk jewellery at strategic spots between their breasts,” was how one news report described a Pointer Sisters show. They were invited to one of Sylvester’s rehearsals where his voice blew them away. “I was just amazed at how hard and how high and how strong he sang,” Anita Pointer recalled.

The sisters provided the backing for his shows in support of the Cockettes. Sylvester’s performance of numbers like ‘God Bless the Child’ had *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner begging him to put out a record. Under the name Sylvester and his Hot Band, they cut two tracks for Blue Thumb Records compilation *Lights Out: San Francisco*. By 1972 the Pointer Sisters had set out on their own disco path and Sylvester followed them with his 1973 Blue Thumb debut *Scratch My Flower*, now backed by a group of serious R&B musicians. On the cover, the singer looks seductively at the camera

in sequined trousers and outrageous platforms below a gardenia-scented scratch-n-sniff flower: a heady cover for an LP that found Sylvester mining all his influences to date – from gospel and blues to psychedelic rock. It opened with a version of Neil Young’s ‘Southern Man’, the band’s soul rock providing a heavy backdrop for Sylvester’s towering falsetto.

A future DJ at seminal San Francisco gay clubs, Lester Temple was working as a radio DJ in Sacramento. “Sylvester would stay at my house when he would play at Crabshaw Corner, the rock club in downtown Sacramento,” he says. “He and the band were fabulous, bringing a gender-bending barrage of energy to the rock crowd.” On tour, the band played other covers like Allen Toussaint’s ‘Play Something Sweet’ and Otis Redding’s ‘Nobody’s Fault But Mine’ that would appear on second LP *Bazaar*. Meanwhile, the free-spirited artist grew bored of the recording process. With his label and management struggling to market him, and sales stagnating, Sylvester was dropped shortly after *Bazaar*’s release.

Having spent the money that came in from Blue Thumb, he was forced to sell his possessions and play basements for a few dollars a night. But something was stirring in San Francisco that would give him a tailor-made platform. By 1975, the Castro had become the gay centre of the world. While Harvey Milk’s political campaigning played a vital role for gay rights, the cultural progressions of the period were of equal importance. In the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, a host of gay bars and clubs had opened. The new freedoms were being celebrated at spaces like Toad Hall, the City Disco, the Shed, and the Elephant Walk, where Sylvester played every Sunday with his new backing singers Two Tons o’ Fun.

“I want two big girls that can sing,” he declared as he put together his new band. Like Sylvester, Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes (who went on to become the Weather Girls) were raised on church music. The group was a hit, but Sylvester had broader horizons. His big break was thanks to Wash recently meeting record executive Harvey Fuqua, who she invited to a show at the Elephant Walk. “I want to work specifically on this man here,” he said backstage. Fuqua had an agreement with Fantasy Records – he brought them talent in exchange for acting as producer.

Sylvester’s self-titled debut LP for Fantasy was released in summer 1977. It began with ‘Over & Over’, a popular

Sylvester and the Tons live track – but it became an anthem when it reached the underground clubs. “I remember hearing ‘Over & Over’ at the Gallery, the Loft and the [Paradise] Garage,” says New York DJ Danny Krivit. However much he enjoyed his stature as an underground legend, Sylvester wasn’t going to remain a cult artist. “Everything I’d been looking and working for did come,” he said.

Despite ‘Over & Over’ being a hit in Europe, the album sold poorly in the US, but the lack of mainstream attention didn’t effect the adoration he received in the Castro. At the time, a divide was appearing between the Castro clones (Levi’s, checked shirts and buffed bodies) and the transvestites and queens who had done so much for the cause of liberation. But Sylvester symbolised freedom to all the disparate groups: “He took the crowd to a middle where everyone was included,” says Joshua Gamson.

‘Over & Over’ had provided a taste of fame but Sylvester was still unsure

‘SYLVESTER REPRESENTS AN IDEAL VERSION OF WHO AND WHAT WE COULD BE’

which road to take. “It was only in 1978, after attending *Billboard* magazine’s Disco Forum that Sylvester, tired of obscurity, resolved to transform himself into a disco diva,” wrote Alice Echols. The track that signalled the arrival of his new persona in all its fabulousness was ‘You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)’. Written as a mid-tempo blues number by band member Tip Werrick, it was transformed by young blonde synthesiser geek Patrick Cowley, who’d recently made an epic bootleg of Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’. Sylvester was hooked. After an introduction at the City Disco, the two began discussing the new electronic possibilities. “I totally flipped out,” Sylvester said of hearing the music Cowley produced with this new equipment. He immediately invited him to the studio where the seed grew into

the flower that bloomed on dance floors across the world. “‘You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)’ was something I would hear at almost every club I would go to,” says Danny Krivit. The video was shot at London’s most glamorous gay spot, the Embassy Club on Old Bond Street. At the Sundowner and Global Village (now Heaven), Sylvester’s shows caused riotous scenes. DJ Mark Moore recalls what he meant to London’s gay scene at the time: “Sylvester belonged to us. Sexuality no longer seemed complex but playful and uncomplicated when dancing to ‘Mighty Real.’” While it rang out of mainstream discos worldwide, the message in the music (of being real) was heard loudest at the underground gay clubs where Sylvester went to party. Despite his fame, when not performing he would go to the club to dance with friends just as he did back home.

Then the Trocadero Transfer opened in San Francisco in 1978, setting a new standard for theatrics in gay discos of the era. DJ Bobby Viteritti’s epic, atmospheric sets fit Sylvester’s fabulous disco, and his mix of ‘Mighty Real’ and ‘Dance (Disco Heat)’ – the other notable track from 1978’s *Step II* – is about as dramatic as disco gets. “Sylvester was at the club all the time, he would just be there dancing with his entourage,” he recalls. “And everybody just gave him his own space because it was an educated dance floor.” Sylvester played regularly at the club, as well as at gay hot spots like Dreamland, I-Beam and Music Hall. I-Beam DJ Steve Fabus (who runs San Francisco club Go BANG) explains why he meant so much. “Sylvester represents, in many ways, an ideal version of who and what we could be as human beings, artists, and as a community,” he says. “He was always himself and never tried to hide any of it. He was comfortable in his own skin; that made others feel comfortable.”

The city paid tribute to Sylvester in 1979 with the launch of *Stars* at the prestigious Opera House. “It’s my first completely disco record,” he said. Made up of just four extended songs, it was perfect for the period’s hedonistic dance floors. It begins with the empowering message of the title track, written by Cowley, who also provides synthesiser riffs throughout and penned moody dub disco track ‘I Need Somebody to Love Tonight’. It was, in the words of writer Peter Shapiro, “along with the Peech Boys ‘Don’t Make Me Wait’, one of disco’s greatest expressions of longing.” >

Mark Moore says that for gay clubbers thousands of miles away in London, “‘I Need Somebody to Love Tonight’ told us we were not alone, even though we sometimes danced alone.” *Stars* also captured Sylvester at his most dramatic, with an 11-minute version of Leiber and Stoller’s ‘I (Who Have Nothing)’.

The Opera House gig was recorded and released as *Living Proof* (1979), a fascinating document of the power and theatre of Sylvester’s live shows. It also includes one of his finest arrangements on ‘In My Fantasy (I Want You, I Need You)’. Alongside Martha Wash on background vocals was Jeanie Tracy. “That was an incredible show,” she says. “I really cannot listen to that album too much now because it really takes me back. And it makes me cry because it was such a glorious night.” Tracy went on to be a regular backing singer alongside the Two Tons. “He was a fantastic vocal arranger,” she says. “He had ideas way beyond his years.” The two became close friends and shopping partners while on tour. “He was my brother, I adored him. We would always be laughing and talking. He loved dressing me and said I was his alter ego – the way he would dress if he was a lady.”

Weeks after the Opera House gig, Harvey Milk’s killer Dan White walked free on grounds of depression. At the Gay Freedom Day parade soon after, Sylvester gave one of his most powerful performances. “It was like coming home to family for him,” says Joshua Gamson, “That was especially important after Milk’s assassination, such a horrifying reminder of how hostile the society at large could still be to gay people.”

With pressure from his label to tone down the act and move away from disco, 1980’s *Sell My Soul* found Sylvester at a confusing junction. But alongside the ballads and an incongruous version of ‘Cry Me a River’ sat one of his classic disco tracks. “I would hear ‘I Need You’, particularly at the Garage, peak time,” says Danny Krivit. The track was just as big in the clubs of San Francisco, as DJ Steve Fabus recalls. “I remember ‘I Need You’ was special to the I-Beam. It’s probably my favourite Sylvester song because it’s such an emotional record, deep but also hopeful and optimistic.”

The Two Tons o’ Fun were pursuing their own career, culminating in a 1980 self-titled LP that had Sylvester’s stamp

all over it, and Cowley’s subsequent mix of ‘I Got the Feeling’ was much in the vein of his work with Sylvester. “‘I Got the Feeling’ and ‘Just Us’ were played at all the underground clubs and, though they’re credited to Two Tons o’ Fun, they were considered Sylvester records,” says Krivit. Sylvester released *Too Hot to Sleep* in 1981, spawning the classic ‘Give it Up (Don’t Make Me Wait)’ and tender ballad ‘Here is My Love’, both featuring Tracy. “That was one of my favourite songs I did with him,” she says. But the outing was to be his last for Fantasy.

With disco rapidly sidelined by major labels, some artists in San Francisco set up their own labels. Free of interference, Patrick Cowley and Marty Blecman’s Megatone Records captured the music bursting out of underground gay clubs. The robotic, electronic San Francisco

‘I ADORED HIM. THERE HAS BEEN NO ONE LIKE HIM SINCE’

sound that became known as Hi-NRG had been anticipated by Cowley’s work on ‘Mighty Real’. His pioneering work would peak on seminal LPs like 1981’s *Menergy* and *Megatron Man*. According to producer Casey Jones, “Patrick created a synthesised sound that would enhance a drug high and the track that really launched that sound was ‘Menergy’.”

Hi-NRG’s pounding synthetic soul was to soundtrack the last days for many in the community. Patrick Cowley was one of the first of Sylvester’s friends to fall ill with HIV. The two recorded one last LP before he passed away, *All I Need*, one of the iconic Hi-NRG albums and a world away from the pop direction the genre would take. “Bring me out of the darkness, baby,” Sylvester implores on the title track, over Cowley’s electronic pulsations. With its heavy use of cowbells and synthetic hand claps, ‘Do Ya Wanna Funk’ set the scene for the throbbing Hi-NRG that dominated the gay scene for the next few years. “‘Do Ya Wanna

Funk’ was the sound of gay London for the early to mid-1980s,” says Mark Moore. “At the time it felt so modern – futuristic and fierce, rather than the watered-down Hi-NRG that came later.”

During a show at London’s Heaven, Sylvester was told of Cowley’s death.

He recorded *Call Me* for Megatone but it missed the magical dust his partner had scattered on previous work. More successful was 1984’s *M-1015*, with ‘Take Me to Heaven’ and ‘Sex’ – wonderfully dramatic Hi-NRG that stands up next to Cowley productions. Lester Temple remembers one Sylvester performance: “The best party I ever played was at the Music Hall, sponsored by one of the record pools in town. Sylvester was the headliner. It was a magical night. ‘Take Me to Heaven’ was his current hit and it brought the house down.” The track appeared with ‘Sex’ on a Megatone 12” remixed by Ian Levine to become a classic at London’s Heaven.

‘Trouble in Paradise’ off *Call Me* was, Sylvester said, his “AIDS message to San Francisco.” When his partner, architect Rick Cramner, died in September 1987, Sylvester was already sick. “He had been trying to tell me and I just figured it out,” says Jeanie Tracy. “It was devastating.” Two months before he died, he appeared at a Dreamland party where Steve Fabus was playing. “He was brought into the club on a wheelchair and taken to an overlook above the DJ booth,” he recalls. “I started to play a medley of his songs that lasted just over an hour. When I finished with ‘Take Me to Heaven’, the record faded out and, with a spotlight on Sylvester, he said to the crowd ‘I love you’. It was goodbye and we all knew it. Applause and stomping and cheering went on for 20 minutes.” Sylvester passed away in December 1988. He had asked Jeanie Tracy to sing at his funeral at Love Centre Church in East Oakland, where he had become a regular since the early 1980s. “I sang ‘Never Grow Old’, a song he had sang as a five-year-old in church,” she says. “I adored him. There has been no one like him since.” ■

Mighty Real: A Fabulous Sylvester Musical runs at Theatre at St Clements, 423 W 46th St, New York from 5 September
stclementsny.org

Sylvester and his dog Princess Terri Debonaire, at Fantasy Records, 1980

