



## Sylvester (1946?-1988)

by Nathan G. Tipton

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By the time Sylvester died on December 16, 1988 of AIDS-related complications, he had firmly cemented his reputation as one of the most original and talented musicians to come out of the disco arena.

According to Anthony Lamar Rucker, while Sylvester represented to mainstream America the Black and gay cultural origins of disco music, his body of work included not only crucial contributions to the disco songbook, but also ballads that proved he was a versatile stylist who brought a realness and depth to all his material.

Inspired himself by flamboyant musical icon Little Richard (Richard Penniman), Sylvester's own wild and outrageous personality influenced contemporaries such as Bette Midler and The Village People and paved the way for gender-bending performers such as Prince and RuPaul.

In tandem with his brazenly showy onstage personality, however, Sylvester's unique voice and skilled musical arrangements bestowed a lasting quality on his work, which remains a seminal hallmark of disco and dance music.

Sylvester was born Sylvester James into a middle-class family in Los Angeles, California, probably in 1946, though 1944 and 1947 are sometimes given. He was raised by his grandmother, blues singer Julia Morgan, who taught him to sing and exposed him to a wide variety of music, including blues, jazz, and gospel.

At age eight he entered the gospel circuit and began building a career as a gospel singer, but as he entered adolescence he found it increasingly difficult to hide his burgeoning homosexuality.

In 1967 Sylvester moved to San Francisco and joined the Cockettes, an androgynous experimental theater troupe, with whom he made his debut on New Year's Eve, 1970. As part of the Cockettes, Sylvester took the persona "Ruby Blue" and soon embarked on a solo career before helping form the Hot Band in 1973 and signing with Blue Thumb Records.

Over the next few years the Hot Band underwent several lineup changes, including the important addition of two backup vocalists, Izora Rhodes and Martha Wash, who would later become world famous, first as Two Tons of Fun and later as The Weather Girls. Sylvester and the Hot Band, aided by an outrageous live show, secured their local reputation in San Francisco.

However, a chance discovery by former Motown producer Harvey Fuqua, who recognized Sylvester's stage presence and obvious talent, led to Sylvester's exposure to a much wider audience. In 1977 Sylvester once again went solo and, aided by Fuqua, signed with Fantasy Records.

Although his self-titled Fantasy debut album appeared in 1977 with little fanfare, a particular track, Sylvester's remake of Ashford and Simpson's "Over and Over," garnered critical and popular admiration.

The next year Fantasy released *Step II*, an album marked by fierce performances showcasing what Colin Larkin calls Sylvester's unswerving urgency, as well as his soaring falsetto.

Supported by synthesizer overlays provided by remixer Patrick Cowley, two particular songs from *Step II*, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" and "Dance (Disco Heat)" became instant disco classics. The standout track "You Make Me Feel" was originally a gospel song but, after being given the "disco treatment," grew into a worldwide club hit and an eventual gay anthem.

*Step II* garnered three Billboard Disco Forum awards and, in 1979, coinciding with his all-disco release *Stars*, *Disco International Magazine* crowned Sylvester Best Male Disco Act. By 1980, however, disco's influence had waned severely, and Fuqua urged Sylvester to tone down his outrageousness and branch out into other, ostensibly "straighter" musical styles.

After releasing three more albums that included torchy covers of "Ooh Baby Baby" and "Cry Me a River," Sylvester, citing creative differences, split from Harvey Fuqua and joined Patrick Cowley's fledgling record label, Megatone, in 1981.

Produced by Cowley, *All I Need*, Sylvester's Megatone debut, featured another high energy dance classic, "Do You Wanna Funk?," which was released to thundering acclaim.

Cowley, however, died in 1982, soon after the record appeared, making him one of the first celebrities to die of AIDS.

Although Sylvester subsequently continued to release albums solidly produced by Ken Kessie and Morey Goldstein, and replete with hit singles such as "Take Me To Heaven," "Sex," and a classic cover of Freda Payne's "Band of Gold," the songs did not compare to those produced by Cowley.

By 1986, however, Sylvester's work had attracted major label attention, and he soon found himself at Warner Brothers, for whom he recorded *Mutual Attraction*. That same year he also realized an early dream by singing backup on Aretha Franklin's album *Who's Zoomin' Who?*, including the hit single "Freeway of Love."

Also in 1986, Sylvester was diagnosed with AIDS.

In the summer of 1987 he made his final public appearance as part of the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade.

Sylvester died of AIDS-related complications on December 16, 1988 and was eulogized by San Francisco writer Armistead Maupin as "one of the few truly gay celebrities to have never renounced their gayness along the ladder to success."

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### **About the Author**

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