

# **Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries**

**Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle**

Untorelli Press

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# QUEENS AGAINST SOCIETY BY EHN NOTHING

## INTRODUCTION

It seems obvious that the study of history is a necessary element of continued war against the present world. There are tools lying in every failed insurrection, every temporarily-established zone of free play, every campaign of sabotage that ended in a jail cell or shootout. To ignore these lessons is to forfeit valuable weaponry and strategic insight. History is a weapon.

Additionally, creating a narrative of revolt against the constraints of civilization gives us a lineage to draw motivation from, to keep us warm when we feel broken under the weight of this miserable world. By understanding ourselves as part of an ongoing war that has been raging for 12,000 years, we dynamite a history that would keep us as either spectators or pawns in a theater created by bosses, politicians, and police. History is a compass.

As we search the past for weapons and inspiration, we must also be careful. Every “revolutionary” murderer has been made into martyr by historians trying to “reclaim” the past. The end result of that path is establishment of political cults, with their own party purity and sacred texts. As individuals who would like to see the entire tradition of managed revolution go up in flames, it is not for us to establish the dead as heroic martyrs, but rather to understand them as individuals like us, exemplary in the context of pacified contentment, but flawed nonetheless. To “honor our dead,” then, cannot take the form it takes for the religious purists (whether they be Catholic or Leninist in nature), but can only exist as sustained attack against society and the proliferation of spaces and relationships from which that attack can be realized.

Currently, this strategy is elaborated upon in the vandalism, sabotage, and arson taken up by individuals or informally-organized groups of individuals in solidarity with prisoners of war, deceased comrades, or others lost to or harmed by the operations of power. Underlying these attacks is an ecology of revolt that extends far beyond any specific smashed window, glued lock, or torched police car. Our relationships of support, our solidarity with imprisoned comrades, our criminal intimacies, our squats, our syntheses of survival and attack are the materials from which our insurrectional practice springs forth.

It is with this in mind that I wish to critically engage with STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) and its activities in the post Stonewall gay liberation movement. As a broke, gender-variant person who desires an insurrectional break with the existent, the activities of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson hold valuable lessons on revolt, survival, street-level self-organization, the failure of leftism and feminism, and the interruption of the gender order. I do not wish to make martyrs out of Sylvia or Marsha, nor do I wish to uncritically valorize their activities; the failures and limits of STAR are of more interest to me than mythologized stories of Sylvia Rivera throwing shoes or bricks or Molotov cocktails at police during the Stonewall

riots. I hope to engage STAR as a historical weapon and as a precedent of contemporary queer insurrectional projects.

I am not the first to engage with STAR or attempt to rescue its activities from the dustbin of history. Beginning with Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* in 1993, there has been a renewed interest in STAR, including academic essays, anthology contributions, documentary films, and archiving. While this may seem like a lot of attention for a group that existed for just a few years in the early 1970s, the lack of critical engagement or archiving of gay street culture and the self-organized networks that existed within it makes material hard to come by. So while much of the wider current that made ruptures like the Stonewall and Compton's Cafeteria riot<sup>1</sup> possible has been lost to history or remains uninvestigated and unarchived, STAR exists as a relatively well-documented example of street queens' resistance.

This renewed interest in STAR is not without its problems. Much of the critical writing and archiving is coming from professional academics or activists: positions whose prejudices affect the interpretations of STAR's history. In addition, the main audience for this work is the self-described "radical queer" milieu, which is often also coming from positions within academia, the non-profit industrial complex, or gay activism. While I am reluctant to level accusations of appropriation against middle-class, white leftist queers, this transference of history from "radical queer" academia/activism to "radical queer" academia/activism traps that history in a framework completely divorced from the reality Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson existed in. So we see an attempt to pull STAR into a framework of feminism, communism, or "radical queer;" and a reduction of lived experiences to facts one can repost on the internet to maintain one's image in the "radical queer" subculture. What we are left with is individuals scrambling to mobilize STAR to reinforce their ideologies, political positions, or self-constructed images, no matter how divorced those things may be from the lives of street queens or the methodology of resistance embodied by STAR.

It could be said that, in my writing, I too am guilty of appropriation. Admittedly, I am not a sex worker, in quite the same position of economic precarity, or oppressed by white supremacy in the way Sylvia and Marsha were. However, my approach to STAR is not in service of protecting or reinforcing any ideology. Unlike the academics and activists who wish to position STAR in a context of charitable social work (Benjamin Shepard), or "transgender" liberation (Leslie Feinberg and others), my goal is to draw out currents within STAR's praxis and relate them to a project insurrection, allowing Marsha and Sylvia to speak for themselves and refusing to situate STAR within frameworks, such as anarchism, that I identify with. I feel that Marsha and Sylvia's words, while I may ethically diverge from them significantly at times, speak their own truths.

In the following essay, I draw out particular attitudes, positions, and issues embodied in STAR and the culture of gay liberation that they fought in: conflict with the white gay left, street-level survival, self-defense, anti-police and anti-prison politics, direct action, and anti-assimilationist queerness.

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<sup>1</sup> The Compton's Cafeteria riot was an uprising against police repression of queer people that occurred in 1966 in San Francisco. After a queen fought back against police who attempted to arrest her, queers and street people destroyed furniture, smashed out the windows of the business, smashed out the windows of a police car, and burned down a sidewalk newsstand. The next night a picket occurred, during which the replacement windows of the cafe were again smashed. For more on this, see Susan Stryker's film *Screaming Queens*.

## **ASSIMILATIONIST AMNESIA, IDENTITY INSOMNIA**

In order to understand STAR's practices and ideas, it is important to understand the context they existed in, both within the wider society and within the gay subculture. With the increase in historical studies of Stonewall, the fact that gender-variant people, queers of color, and gay street kids were at the front lines has become more evident. However, the continued resistance to this narrative by assimilationist gays and the view of Stonewall as a disconnected, exceptional moment of gay revolt, has allowed only traces of the wider context of white supremacy, class oppression, transphobia, and hegemonic reformism to be brought to light. The resistance that STAR faced as a multi-racial group of revolutionary street queens illuminates the wider dynamics of the gay liberation movement, and allows us to understand the foundation upon which the current white supremacist, cissexist, middle-class gay assimilationist movement is built upon.

### ***Race, Class, Revolution***

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson were not respectable queers, nor were they poster-children for the modern image of "gay" or "transgender." They were poor, gender-variant women of color, street-based sex workers, with confrontational, revolutionary politics and, in contrast to the often abstract and traditionally political activists of Gay Activists Alliance, focused on the immediate concerns of the most oppressed gay populations: "street gay people, the street homeless people, and anybody that needed help at that time" (Sylvia Rivera quoted in Feinberg). Within the predominantly white, non-gendervariant, middle-class, reformist gay liberation movement, Sylvia and Marsha were often marginalized, both for their racial, gender, and class statuses, and for their no-compromise attitudes toward gay revolutionary struggle.

After the initial rupture of Stonewall – which, as Sylvia describes, "was street gay people from the Village out front – homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar – and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us" (Feinberg interview) – the gay liberation movement had to deal with uppity street queens who rejected abstract politics in favor of streetlevel concerns. Those with nothing to lose are often those who push hardest when the time comes; this was true at the Stonewall riots, and continued into the gay liberation movement, much to the dismay of those whose idea of "gay liberation" was either inclusion in straight society or managed revolution. These forces of gay normativity and revolutionary management marginalized, erased, and silenced those whose bodies, histories, or ethical orientations refused dominant models. Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance meetings became battlefields. As Martin Duberman describes in Stonewall: "If someone was not shunning [Sylvia's] darker skin or sniggering at her passionate, fractured English, they were deploring her rude anarchism as inimical to order or denouncing her sashaying ways as offensive to womanhood." The particular position Sylvia and Marsha occupied was, by nature of their very identities, resistant to the goals of the increasingly-assimilationist gay movement. Revolutionary street queens of color were an impediment to the goal of assimilation into the white straight capitalist world, leaving the general membership of GAA "frightened by street people" (Arthur Bell quoted in Gan).

This marginalization continues today in the revisionist history favored by the modern equivalents of GAA assimilationists. The presence of gendervariant people, people of color, poor people, and street people at Stonewall and in the gay liberation movement that followed has been erased

or minimized by assimilationists who wish to present a respectable movement of reformist white gays seeking inclusion in capitalism and state institutions.

### ***“Transgender Liberation”***

This selective history has also been reconfigured and replicated by the burgeoning transgender movement. The activists and politicians of this movement, seeking the same inclusion of transgender individuals into white capitalist society that the GAA assimilations sought in the 1970s, have created a generalized “transgender” subject in the narrative of Stonewall and the gay liberation movement. As Jessi Gan points out, “the claim that ‘transgender people were at Stonewall too’ enacted its own omissions of difference and hierarchy within the term ‘transgender’” and, as they celebrated Sylvia Rivera’s visibility as transgender, concealed her status as a broke woman of color. This erasure of the complexities of Sylvia and Marsha’s lives is one example in an ongoing white supremacist, colonialist project taken up by transgender activists, who wish to subsume all variations from Western binary gender under the umbrella of “transgender,” regardless of the origins of the term or the self-understanding of gender-variant individuals. This flattening of complex experiences also allows for transgender individuals who are white, middle or upper class, assimilationist, or institutionally educated to appropriate the experiences and struggles of radical gender-variant people of color as part of a grand narrative of “transgender,” thereby separating themselves from any responsibility to engage and attack systems of oppression outside of the vague “transphobia.” The “transgender” or “genderqueer” movements, true to their origins within academia and activism, remain dominated by – to utilize Sylvia’s characterization of the gay liberation movement at the 1973 Liberation Day rally – “a white, middle-class, white club.”

### ***Feminist & Assimilationist Betrayal***

In a similar move, some feminists have celebrated STAR as an early example of trans women’s participation in feminist organizing, but usually without acknowledgement of both the history of feminism’s violence against male-assigned-at-birth gender-variant people, or how this violence played out against STAR and Sylvia in particular. While both Sylvia and Marsha noted respectful treatment by lesbians situationally (see the interview with Marsha in this zine and Duberman’s Stonewall), the growing tide of radical feminism and lesbian separatism played out violently against STAR, specifically at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally in Washington Square Park. Blocked from speaking and physically attacked by lesbian feminists for parodying womanhood, Sylvia stormed onto the stage, grabbed the mic, and confronted the audience for its whiteness, class privilege, and lack of concern for prisoners. As Sylvia describes it: “I had to battle my way up on stage, and literally get beaten up and punched around by people I thought were my comrades, to get to that microphone. I got to the microphone and I said my piece.” The betrayal, led by lesbian-feminist Jean O’Leary, caused Sylvia to drop out of the movement for decades and attempt suicide.

While the incident proved to be the dramatic end to STAR, it occurred within a context of betrayal by the gay liberation movement and growing hatred for male-assigned gender-variant people within feminist theory and activism. With the dropping of transvestites from the New York antidiscrimination bill – which Sylvia was arrested climbing the walls of City Hall in a dress and high heels to crash a meeting on (Wilchins) and which she attacked a Greenwich Village

councilwoman with a clipboard in the service of (Highlyman) – the gay liberation movement turned toward assimilation and reform and began to distance itself from revolutionaries, street people, queers of color, and gendervariant individuals. STAR’s politics – “picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary” (see Marsha interview in this zine) – could find no harmony with a movement of white middle-class gays seeking inclusion in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy

## **STREET SURVIVAL**

It is no surprise that STAR would come into conflict with a gay movement turning its focus onto integration into capitalist society. From the beginning, STAR’s concerns were not for sloganeering, posturing, masturbatory intellectualism, or “movement building.” Survival, as both an attempt to provide for basic needs of living and as a tension toward self-defense and offensive struggle against a society that threatened them, was central to all of STAR’s activities, and is key in understanding their positions in the conflict within the gay liberation movement.

Before exploring STAR’s projects and revolt, I would like to complicate the narrative – favored today by those who would like to ignore the necessity of struggle in their immediate lives – of Stonewall as the origin of queer struggle against society. Stonewall, like the Compton’s Cafeteria riot before it, was only possible because of pre-existing conflictual zones – metropolitan neighborhoods “where social tolerance for sexual difference was high and police interference with neighborhood life was lax or nonexistent” and in which queers shared money from hustling, food, housing, self-defense, and tricks of the trade (Freidman). STAR, therefore, should be seen as one particularly visible manifestation of a wider network of self-organization amongst street queens and poor queer people. Their true origins, then, are not necessarily “political” in nature, but rooted in an informal type of solidarity and mutual aid, often linked to criminality and hatred for the police.

STAR as an organization came out of the occupation of NYU’s Weinstein Hall in 1970. The university had refused to allow gay dances, organized by a gay student group, to occur on campus, so gay liberationists occupied the hall and held a sit-in. The arrival of the Tactical Police Force caused the gay liberationists to abandon the occupation. STAR, initially called Street Transvestites for Gay Power, was born of the frustration with the gay liberation movement for its refusal to defend itself and be committed to struggle against the police (see STAR NYU statement in this zine).

The immediate concerns of life – food, housing, money, safety – were central to all of STAR’s projects. Sylvia and Marsha – who, in a common practice amongst street queens and queer sex workers, had secretly turned hotel rooms into temporary communal living spaces, sometimes for 50 or more people (Feinberg) – began work on self-organizing spaces and projects to provide for their needs and those of other street kids. Prior to the formation of STAR House, Sylvia and Marsha had a trailer truck in a parking lot in Greenwich Village, housing two dozen street kids. This was short lived, as Sylvia and Marsha came home one day with food for the kids, only to discover that their home was driving away, with 20 kids still sleeping in it. (Duberman). They then formed STAR House: “We fed people and clothed people. We kept the building going. We went out and hustled the streets. We paid the rent. We didn’t want the kids out in the streets hustling. They would go out and rip off food. There was always food in the house and everyone

had fun” (Feinberg). This living situation proved to be temporary, and they were evicted for not paying rent. Before leaving, however, they destroyed any work they had done on the building and removed the refrigerator (Duberman). With the members of STAR in precarious living situations, STAR had difficulty actualizing its planned projects, which included dance fundraisers, another STAR home, a telephone line, a recreation center, a bail fund for arrested queens, and a lawyer for queer people in jail (see Marsha interview).

Equally important to establishing living situations and securing food was the need for self-defense against bashers and police. The generalized sharing of skills amongst queer street kids and sex workers focused heavily on discerning what situations were safe and which weren't, and protecting each other from police. Police and imprisonment were violent and intense, especially for broke street queens. Marsha recalled one transvestite being “grabbed right out of her lover's arms” while on the street (see Marsha interview). In jail, gender-variant prisoners faced rape and abuse by police and inmates, and legal manipulation that caused some queens to have to wait years to get a court date. It is no surprise then, that STAR originated in the frustration with gay liberationists' failure to confront police at NYU; that STAR's first public appearance was at a Young Lords demonstration against police repression (Feinberg) ; that Sylvia's impassioned 1973 speech indicted the gay liberation and women's movements for forgetting its prisoners of war; or that, upon reentering gay struggle in the 90s, Sylvia focused on police violence against Amadou Diallo and Abner Louima, in addition to the murders of Matthew Shepard and Amanda Milan. Sylvia's attitudes on the police are clear: “We always felt that the police were the real enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals and we were.” (see Feinberg's interview with Sylvia)

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to address others with whom I share common enemies and common projects. STAR is just one historical note in a legacy of queer insurgency. With the rise of queer theory and transgender history as respectable subjects of study, other accounts of queer and gender-variant revolt are being rescued from oblivion. Much of the time, those doing this historical rescue work have little more in mind than furthering academic careers or reforming systems of exploitation and control. For queer insurgents, then, recovering our history from obscurity and recuperation is a necessary element of struggle. If we do not critically engage this history, we not only lose analytical tools that could aid the spread and sharpening of our revolt, but also abandon the dead to vultures who reduce everything to image and commodity. Everywhere we falter in our analysis or fail to recognize the tools and weapons lying in history, queer academics, “radical queer” scenesters, assimilationist filth, and all other types of gay managers and cops will turn those struggles toward their ends.

The struggle for queer liberation, fed on the sweat and blood of individuals like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, continues. Many in the gay world today would have us abandon struggle as an antiquated reaction to domination. If they speak of Stonewall, it is to cordon it off as an antique to be admired. This gay pacifism is not merely the result of gays and lesbians seeing their revolution come to be via gay marriage and hate crime legislation; it is an attempt by newly-integrated bosses and police to prevent revolt in their ranks. Our war, then, is against the gay defenders of society as much as it is against the straight ones.



But it is not only gay capitalists and professional politicians who seek to stifle revolt. Time and again, we have seen the partisans of “radical queer” one moment celebrate queer riots of the past, and the next mobilize identity politics to condemn queer riots today. We have seen these careerists use images of past queer insurrection to sell their books and further their art careers, all with a barely contained hatred for all forms of struggle outside of their control. For those of us who, through our ethical inclination toward insurrection, have come into conflict with these perennial enemies, the distinction is clear. Glitter is not a basis for affinity. We prefer to forge our friendships in a shared practice of revolt, because we can only truly know each other when we cease to be servile, that is, when we are destructive together.

## SOURCES

(Below is a list of secondary sources cited in this essay. All other sourced material is reprinted later in this zine.)

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# **‘I’M GLAD I WAS IN THE STONEWALL RIOT’: AN INTERVIEW WITH SYLVIA RIVERA**

I left home at age 10 in 1961. I hustled on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. The early 60s was not a good time for drag queens, effeminate boys or boys that wore makeup like we did. Back then we were beat up by the police, by everybody. I didn’t really come out as a drag queen until the late 60s. when drag queens were arrested, what degradation there was. I remember the first time I got arrested, I wasn’t even in full drag. I was walking down the street and the cops just snatched me.

We always felt that the police were the real enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals-and we were. We were stuck in a bullpen like a bunch of freaks. We were disrespected. A lot of us were beaten up and raped. When I ended up going to jail, to do 90 days, they tried to rape me. I very nicely bit the shit out of a man.

I’ve been through it all.

In 1969, the night of the Stonewall riot, was a very hot, muggy night. We were in the Stonewall [bar] and the lights came on. We all stopped dancing. The police came in. They had gotten their payoff earlier in the week. But Inspector Pine came in-him and his morals squad-to spend more of the government’s money.

We were led out of the bar and they catted us all up against the police vans. The cops pushed us up against the grates and the fences. People started throwing pennies, nickels, and quarters at the cops.

And then the bottles started. And then we finally had the morals squad barricaded in the Stonewall building, because they were actually afraid of us at that time. They didn’t know we were going to react that way.

We were not taking any more of this shit. We had done so much for other movements. It was time. It was street gay people from the Village out front: homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar-and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us. The Stonewall Inn telephone lines were cut and they were left in the dark. One Village Voice reporter was in the bar at that time. And according to the archives of the Village Voice, he was handed a gun from Inspector Pine and told, “We got to fight our way out of there.” This was after one Molotov cocktail was thrown and we were ramming

It was street gay people from the Village out front: homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar-and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us. The Stonewall Inn telephone lines were cut and they were left in the dark.

One Village Voice reporter was in the bar at that time. And according to the archives of the Village Voice, he was handed a gun from Inspector Pine and told, “We got to fight our way out of there.”

This was after one Molotov cocktail was thrown and we were ramming the door of the Stonewall bar with an uprooted parking meter. So they were ready to come out shooting that night.

Finally the Tactical Police Force showed up after 45 minutes. A lot of people forget that for 45 minutes we had them trapped in there.

All of us were working for so many movements at that time. Everyone was involved with the women's movement, the peace movement, the civil-rights movement. We were all radicals. I believe that's what brought it around.

You get tired of being just pushed around.

STAR came about after a sit-in at Weinstein Hall at New York University in 1970. Later we had a chapter in New York, one in Chicago, one in California and England.

STAR was for the street gay people, the street homeless people and anybody that needed help at that time. Marsha and I had always sneaked people into our hotel rooms. Marsha and I decided to get a building. We were trying to get away from the Mafia's control at the bars.

We got a building at 213 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. Marsha and I just decided it was time to help each other and help our other kids. We fed people and clothed people. We kept the building going. We went out and hustled the streets. We paid the rent. We didn't want the kids out in the streets hustling. They would go out and rip off food. There was always food in the house and everyone had fun. It lasted for two or three years. We would sit there and ask, "Why do we suffer?" As we got more involved into the movements, we said, "Why do we always got to take the brunt of this shit?"

Later on, when the Young Lords [revolutionary Puerto Rican youth group] came about in New York City, I was already in GLF [Gay Liberation Front]. There was a mass demonstration that started in East Harlem in the fall of 1970. The protest was against police repression and we decided to join the demonstration with our STAR banner. That was one of first times the STAR banner was shown in public, where STAR was present as a group. I ended up meeting some of the Young Lords that day. I became one of them. Any time they needed any help, I was always there for the Young Lords. It was just the respect they gave us as human beings. They gave us a lot of respect. It was a fabulous feeling for me to be myself-being part of the Young Lords as a drag queen-and my organization [STAR] being part of the Young Lords.

I met [Black Panther Party leader] Huey Newton at the Peoples' Revolutionary Convention in Philadelphia in 1971. Huey decided we were part of the revolution — that we were revolutionary people.

I was a radical, a revolutionist. I am still a revolutionist. I was proud to make the road and help change laws and what-not. I was very proud of doing that and proud of what I'm still doing, no matter what it takes.

Today, we have to fight back against the government. We have to fight them back. They're cutting back Medicaid, cutting back on medicine for people with AIDS. They want to take away from women on welfare and put them into that little work program. They're going to cut SSI. Now they're taking away food stamps. These people who want the cuts-these people are making millions and millions and millions of dollars as CEOs. Why is the government going to take it away from us? What they're doing is cutting us back. Why can't we have a break?

I'm glad I was in the Stonewall riot. I remember when someone threw a Molotov cocktail, I thought: "My god, the revolution is here. The revolution is finally here!"

I always believed that we would have a fight back. I just knew that we would fight back. I just didn't know it would be that night.

I am proud of myself as being there that night. If I had lost that moment, I would have been kind of hurt because that's when I saw the world change for me and my people.

Of course, we still got a long way ahead of us.

# EVERY DESTRUCTIVE THING A 'DIALOGUE' BETWEEN SYLVIA RIVERA AND SOME PIGS

**SYLVIA RIVERA:** My name is Sylvia Rivera. My name before that was Ray Rivera, until I started dressing in drag in 1961. The era before Stonewall was a hard era. There was always the gay bashings on the drag queens by heterosexual men, women, and the police. We learned to live with it because it was part of the lifestyle at that time, I guess, but none of us were very happy about it.

**SOME PIG:** My name is Seymour Pine. In 1968, I was assigned as Deputy Inspector in charge of public morals in the first division in the police department, which covered the Greenwich Village area. It was the duty of Public Morals to enforce all laws concerning vice and gambling, including prostitution, narcotics, and laws and regulations concerning homosexuality. The part of the penal code which applied to drag queens was Section 240.35, section 4: "Being masked or in any manner disguised by unusual or unnatural attire or facial alteration; loiters, remains, or congregates in a public place with other persons so masked..."

(Pine continues reading under Rivera's voice and then fades out.)

**RIVERA:** At that time we lived at the Arista Hotel. We used to sit around, just try to figure out when this harassment would come to an end. And we would always dream that one day it would come to an end. And we prayed and we looked for it. We wanted to be human beings.

**PIG:** You felt, well, two guys – and that's very often all we sent in would be two men – could handle two hundred people. I mean, you tell them to leave and they leave, and you say show me your identification and they all take out their identification and file out and that's it. And you say, okay, you're not a man, you're a woman, or you're vice versa and you wait over there. I mean, this was a kind of power that you have and you never gave it a second thought.

**RIVERA:** The drag queens took a lot of oppression and we had to ... we were at a point where I guess nothing would have stopped us. I guess, as they say, or as Shakespeare says, we were ladies in waiting, just waiting for the thing to happen. And when it did happen, we were there.

**PIG:** There was never any reason to feel that anything of any unusual situation would occur that night.

**RIVERA:** You could actually feel it in the air. You really could. I guess Judy Garland's death just really helped us really hit the fan.

**PIG:** For some reason, things were different this night. As we were bringing the prisoners out, they were resisting.

(Riot sounds in the background.)

**RIVERA:** People started gathering in front of the Sheridan Square Park right across the street from Stonewall. People were upset – "No, we're not going to go!" and people started screaming and hollering.

**PIG:** One drag queen, as we put her in the car, opened the door on the other side and jumped out. At which time we had to chase that person and he was caught, put back into the car, he made another attempt to get out the same door, the other door, and at that point we had to handcuff the person. From this point on, things really began to get crazy.

**PIG:** Well that's when all hell broke loose at that point. And then we had to get back into Stonewall.

**MEDIA PIG:** My name is Howard Smith. On the night of the Stonewall riots I was a reporter for the Village Voice, locked inside with the police, covering it for my column. It really did appear that that crowd – because we could look through little peepholes in the plywood windows, we could look out and we could see that the crowd – well, my guess was within five, ten minutes it was probably several thousand people. Two thousand easy. And they were yelling “Kill the cops! Police brutality! Let's get 'em! We're not going to take this anymore! Let's get 'em!”

**PIG:** We noticed a group of persons attempting to uproot one of the parking meters, at which they did succeed. And they then used that parking meter as a battering ram to break down the door. And they did in fact open the door – they crashed it in – and at that point was when they began throwing Molotov cocktails into the place. It was a situation that we didn't know how we were going to be able control.

**RIVERA:** I remember someone throwing a Molotov cocktail. I don't know who the person was, but I mean I saw that and I just said to myself in Spanish, I said. oh my God, the revolution is finally here! And I just like started screaming “Freedom! We're free at last!” You know. It felt really good.

**PIG:** Remember these were pros, but everybody was frightened. There's no question about that. I know I was frightened, and I'd been in combat situations, and there was never any time that I felt more scared than I felt that night. And, I mean, you know there was no place to run.

**RIVERA:** Once the tactical police force showed up, I think that really incited us a little bit more. Here this queen is going completely bananas, you know jumping on, hitting the windshield. The next thing you know, the taxicab was being turned over. The cars were being turned over, windows were shattering all over the place, fires were burning around the place. It was beautiful, it really was. It was really beautiful.

**RIVERA:** I wanted to do every destructive thing that I could think of at that time to hurt anyone that had hurt us through the years.

**RIVERA:** A lot of heads were bashed. But it didn't hurt their true feelings – they all came back for more and more. Nothing – that's when you could tell that nothing could stop us at that time or any time in the future.

Today I'm a 38-year-old drag queen. I can keep my long hair, I can pluck my eyebrows, and I can work wherever the hell I want. And I'm not going to change for anybody. If I changed, then I feel that I'm losing what 1969 brought into my life, and that was to be totally free.

# STREET TRANSVESTITES FOR GAY POWER STATEMENT ON THE 1971 NYU OCCUPATION

GAY POWER WHEN DO WE WANT IT? OR DO WE?

This is the question that is running through our minds. Do you really want Gay Power or are you looking for a few laughs or maybe a little excitement. We are not quite sure what you people really want. IF you want Gay Liberation then you're going to have to fight for it. We don't mean tomorrow or the next day, we are talking about today. We can never possibly win by saying "wait for a better day" or "we're not ready yet" If you're ready to tell people that you want to be free, then your ready to fight. And if your not ready then shut up and crawl back into your closets. But let us ask you this, Can you realliy live in a closet? We cant.

So now the question is, do we want Gay Power or Pig Power. We are willing to admit that we need pigs. But we only need t hen for crime control. We do not need them to beat and harass our gay brothers and sisters. The pigs are not helping the people who are being robbed on the streets and being murdered. How can they when theyre to busy trying to bust a homosexual over the head. Or theyre to busy trying to catch someone hustling so they can arrest t hem. But they do give us an alternative. All we have to do is commit sodomy with them and they'll forget they were saw us. Until next time that is. So again we ask you, do you want pig power or gay power? This is up to each and every one of you.

If you want gay power then youre going to have to fight for it. And youre going to have to fight until you win. Because [striked through] once you start youre not going to be able to stop because if you do youll lose everything. You wont just lose this fight, but all the other fights all over the country. All our brothers and sisters all over the world will return to their closets in shame. So if you want to fight for your rights, then fight till the end.

We would also like to say that all we fought for at Weinstein Hall was lost when we left upon request of the pigs. Chalk one up for the pigs, for they truly are carrying there victory flag. And realize the next demonstration is going to be harder, because they now know that we scare easily.

You people run if you want to, but we're tired of running. We intend to fight for our rights until we get them.

Street Transvestites For Gay Power

# **TRANVESTITES: YOUR HALF SISTERS AND HALF BROTHERS OF THE REVOLUTION, BY SYLVIA RIVERA IN *COME OUT!*, 1971**

Transvestites are homosexual men and women who dress in clothes of the opposite sex. Male transvestites dress and live as women. Half sisters like myself are women with the minds of women trapped in male bodies. Female transvestites dress and live as men. My half brothers are men with male minds trapped in female bodies. Transvestites are the most oppressed people in the homosexual community. My half sisters and brothers are being raped and murdered by pigs, straights, and even sometimes by other uptight homosexuals who consider us the scum of the gay community. They do this because they are not liberated.

Transvestites are the most liberated homosexuals in the world. We have had the guts to stand up and fight on the front lines for many years before the gay movement was born.

As far back as I can remember, my half sisters and brothers liberated themselves from this fucked up system that has been oppressing our gay sisters and brothers – by walking on the man's land, defining the man's law, and meeting with the man face to face in his court of law. We have liberated his bathrooms and streets in our female or male attire. For exposing the man's law we are thrown into jail on charges of criminal impersonation; that dates back as far as the Boston Tea Party when the English dressed up as Indians because the motherland had raised the taxes. We have lost our jobs, our homes, friends, family because of lack of understanding of our inner-most feelings and lack of knowledge of our valid life style. They have been brainwashed by this fucked up system that has condemned us and by doctors that call us a disease and a bunch of freaks. Our family and friends have also condemned us because of their lack of true knowledge.

By being liberated my half sisters and brothers and myself are able to educate the ignorant gays and straights that transvestism is a valid life style.

Remember the Stonewall Riots? That first stone was cast by a transvestite half sister June 27, 1969 and the gay liberation movement was born. Remember that transvestites and gay street people are always on the front lines and are ready to lay their lives down for the movement. Remember the transvestite half sister that was out gathering signatures for the Homosexual Civil Rights Bill petition and was arrested on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Remember the NYU sit-in? Transvestites and gay street people held the fort down and didn't want to give in that Friday night after we had been removed from the sub-cellar.

So sisters and brothers remember that transvestites are not the scum of the community; just think back on the events of the past two years. You should be proud that we are part of the community and you should try to gain some knowledge of your transvestite half brothers and



sisters and our valid life style. Remember we started the whole movement that 27<sup>th</sup> day of June of the year 1969!

Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries meet Friday at 6:00 p.m. at Marsha Johnson's, 211 Eldridge Street, New York, N.Y., apt. 3. For information write: S.T.A.R., c/o Marsha Johnson, at the same address.

Power to all the people!

# RAPPING WITH A STREET TRANSVESTITE REVOLUTIONARY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARSHA P. JOHNSON

*You were starting to tell me a few minutes ago that a group of STAR people got busted. What was that all about?*

Well, we wrote an article for Arthur Bell, of the Village Voice, about STAR, and we told him that we were all “girlies” and we’re working up on the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street area. And we all gave our names – Bambi, Andorra, Marsha, and Sylvia. And we all went out to hustle, you know, about a few days after the article came out in the Village Voice, and you see we get busted one after another, in a matter of a couple of weeks. I don’t know whether it was the article, or whether we just got busted because it was hot.

*Were they arresting a lot of transvestites up around there?*

Oh, yes, and they still are. They’re still taking a lot of transvestites and a lot of women down to jail.

*How do they make the arrests?*

They just come up and grab you. One transvestite they grabbed right out of her lover’s arms, and took her down. The charges were solicitation. I was busted on direct prostitution. I picked up a detective – he was in a New Jersey car. I said, “Do you work for the police?” And he said no, and he propositioned me and told me he’d give me fifteen dollars, and then told me I was under arrest. So I had to do twenty days in jail.

*Was the situation in jail bad?*

Yes, it was. A lot of transvestites were fighting amongst each other. They have a lot of problems, you know. They can’t go to court, they can’t get a court date. Some of them are waiting for years. You know, they get frustrated and start fighting with one another. An awful lot of fights go on there.

*How are relations between the transvestites and the straight prisoners? Is that a big problem?*

Oh, the straight prisoners treat transvestites like they’re queens. They send them over cigarettes and candy, envelopes and stamps and stuff like that – when they got money. Occasionally they treat them nice. Not all the time.

*Is there any brutality or another like that?*

No, the straight prisoners can’t get over by the gay prisoners. They’re separated. The straight prisoners are on one side, and the gay prisoners are on another.

*Can you say something about the purpose of STAR as a group?*

We want to see all gay people have a chance, equal rights, as straight people have in America. We don’t want to see gay people picked up on the streets for things like loitering or having sex or anything like that. STAR originally was started by the president, Sylvia Lee Rivera, and Bubbles

Rose Marie, and they asked me to come in as vice president. STAR is a very revolutionary group. We believe in picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary. Our main goal is to see gay people liberated and free and have equal rights that other people have in America. We'd like to see our gay brothers and sisters out of jail and on the streets again. There are a lot of gay transvestites who have been in jail for no reason at all, and the reason why they don't get out is they can't get a lawyer or any bail. Bambi and I made a lot of contacts when we were in jail, and Andorra, she went to court and she walked out.

***What do you mean she walked out?***

Well, when you're picked up for loitering and you don't have a police record, a lot of times they let you go, and they let your police record build up, and then they'll go back there and look at it – and then they give you a lot of time. That's how they work it down there at the courthouse. Like my bail was \$1,000, because I have a long record for prostitution, and they refused to make it lower than \$500. So when I went to court they told me they'd let me go if I pleaded guilty to prostitution. That's how they do it, they tell you ahead of time what you're going to get. Like before you even go before the judge, they try to make an agreement with you, so that they can get your case out of court, you know.

***What would have happened if you'd pleaded not guilty?***

I would still be there. They gave me 20 days to serve. And a lot of people do that a lot of times. That's how come their record is so bad, because they always plead guilty just so they can come out, cause they can't get no lawyer or no money or no kind of help from the streets.

***What are you doing now about these people who are still in there who need lawyers?***

We're planning a dance. We can help as soon as we get money. I have the names and addresses of people that are in jail, and we're going to write them a letter and let them know that we've got them a lawyer, and have these lawyers go down there and see if they can get their names put on the calendar early, get their cases put out of court, make a thorough investigation.

***I remember when STAR was first formed there was a lot of discussion about the special oppression that transvestites experience. Can you say something about that?***

We still feel oppression by other gay brothers. Gay sisters don't think too bad of transvestites. Gay brothers do. I went to a dance at Gay Activist Alliance last week, and there was not even one gay brother that came over and said hello. They'd say hello, but they'd get away very quick. The only transvestites they were very friendly with were the ones that looked freaky in drag, like freak drag, with no tits, no nothing. Well, I can't help but have tits, they're mine. And those men weren't too friendly at all. Once in a while, I get an invitation to Daughters of Bilitis, and when I go there, they're always warm. All the gay sisters come over and say, "Hello, we're glad to see you," and they start long conversations. But not the gay brothers. They're not too friendly at all toward transvestites.

***Do you understand why? Do you have any explanation for that?***

Of course I can understand why. A lot of gay brothers don't like women! And transvestites remind you of women. A lot of gay brothers don't feel too close to women, they'd rather be near men, that's how come they're gay. And when they see a transvestite coming, she reminds them of a woman automatically, and they don't want to get too close or too friendly with her.

***Are you more comfortable around straight men than around gay men sometimes?***

Oh, I'm very comfortable around straight men. Well, I know how to handle them. I've been around them for years, from working the streets. But I don't like straight men. I'm not too friendly with them. There's only one thing they want – to get up your dress, anything to get up

that dress of yours. Then when you get pregnant or something, they don't even want to know you.

***Do you find that there are some "straight" men who prefer transvestites to women?***

There are some, but not that many. There's a lot of gay men that prefer transvestites. It's mostly bisexual type men, you know, they go both ways but don't like anybody to know what's happening. Rather than pick up a gay man, they'll pick up a gay transvestite.

***When you hustle on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, do they know you're a transvestite, or do they think you're a woman? Or does it depend?***

Some of them do and some of them don't, because I tell them. I say, "It's just like a grocery store; you either shop or you don't shop." Lots of times they tell me, "You're not a woman!" I say, "I don't know what I am if I'm not a woman." They say, "Well, you're not a woman." They say "Let me see your cunt." I say, "Honey, let me tell you something." I say "You can either take it or leave it," because, see, when I go out to hustle I don't particularly care whether I get a date or not. If they take me, they got to take me as I want 'em to take me. And if they want to go up my dress, I just charge them a little extra, and the price just goes up and up and up and up. And I always get all of my money in advance, that's what a smart transvestite does. I don't ever let them tell me, "I'll pay you after the job is done." I say I want it in advance. Because no woman gets paid after their job is done. If you're smart, you get the money first.

***What sort of living arrangements has STAR worked out?***

Well, we had our STAR home, at 213 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, and you know, there was only one lesbian there, and a lot of stuff used to get robbed from her and I used to feel so sorry for her. People used to come in and steal her little methadone, because she was on drugs. I seen her the other day. She was the only lesbian who was staying with us. I really felt bad. She's back on drugs again. And she was really doing good. The only reason I didn't take her from STAR home and bring her here was the simple reason that I couldn't handle it. My nerves have been very bad lately, and I've been trying to get myself back together since my husband died in March. It's very hard for me. He just died in March. He was on drugs. He went out to get some money to buy some drugs and he got shot. He died on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and First Avenue. I was home sleeping, and somebody came and knocked at the door and told me he was shot. And I was so upset that I just didn't know what to do. And right after he died, the dog died, and the lesbian that was staying there was nice enough to pick the dog up out of the street for me. I couldn't hardly stand it. I had two deaths this year, my lover and then the dog. So I've just had bad nerves; I've been going to the doctor left and right. And then to get arrested for prostitution was just the tops!

***What about job alternatives? Is it possible to get jobs?***

Oh, definitely. I know many transvestites that are working as women, but I want to see the day when transvestites can go in and say, "My name is Mister So-and-So and I'd like a job as Miss So-and-So!" I can get a job as Miss Something-or-Other, but I have to hide the fact that I'm a male. But not necessarily. Many transvestites take jobs as boys in the beginning, and then after a while they go into their female attire and keep on working. It's easier for a transsexual than a transvestite. If you are a transsexual it's much easier because you become more feminine, and you have a bust-line, and the hair falls off your face and off your legs, and the muscles fall out of your arms. But I think it will be quite a while before a natural transvestite will be able to get a job, unless she's a young transvestite with no hair on her face and very feminine looking.

***Isn't it dangerous sometimes when someone thinks you're a woman and then they find out you're a man?***

Yes it is. You can lose your life. I've almost lost my life five times; I think I'm like a cat. A lot of times I pick up men, and they think I'm a woman and then they try to rob me. I remember the first time I ever had sex with a man, and I was in the Bronx. It was a Spanish man, I was trying to hustle him for carfare to come back to New York City. And he took my clothes off and he found out I was a boy and he pulled a knife off of his dresser and he threatened me and I had to give him sex for nothing. And I went to a hotel one time, and I told this young soldier that I was a boy, and he didn't want to believe it and then when we got to the hotel I took off my clothes and he found out I was a boy for real and then he got mad and he got his gun and he wanted to shoot me. It's very dangerous being a transvestite going out on dates because it's so easy to get killed. Just recently I got robbed by two men. They robbed me and tried to put a thing around my neck and blindfold around my face. They wanted to tie my hands and let me out of the car, but I didn't let them tie me up. I just hopped right out of the car. There was two of them, too. I cut my finger my accident, but they snatched my wig. I don't let men tie me up. I'd rather they shoot me with my hands untied. I got robbed once. A man pulled a gun on me and snatched my pocketbook in a car. I don't trust men that much any more. Recently I haven't been dating. I've been going to straight bars and drinking, getting my money that way, giving people conversation, keeping them company while they're at the bar. They buy you a drink, but of course they don't know you're a boy. You just don't go out with any of them. Like my friend; she gets paid for entertaining customers, talking to them, getting them to buy a drink. I'm just learning about this field. I've never been in it before. That's what I've been doing. I've been getting a lot of dollar bills without even doing anything. I tell them I need money for dinner.

***Is one of the goals of STAR to make transvestites closer to each other? Do transvestites tend to be a close-knit group of friends?***

Usually most transvestites are friendly towards one another because they're just alike. Most transvestites usually get along with one another until it comes to men. The men would separate the transvestites. Because a lot of transvestites could be very good friends, you know, and then when they get a boyfriend... Like when I had my husband, he didn't allow me to hang around with transvestites, he wanted me to get away from them all. I felt bad, and I didn't get away from them. He didn't like me to speak to them and hang around with them too much. He wanted me to go in the straight world, like the straight bars and stuff like that.

***Do you think there's been any improvement between transvestites and other gay men since the formation of STAR, within the gay world, within the gay movement?***

Well, I went to GAA one time and everybody turned around and looked. All these people that spoke to me there were people that I had known from when I had worked in the Gay Liberation Front community center, but they weren't friendly at all. It's just typical. They're not used to seeing transvestites in female attire. They have a transvestite there, Natasha, but she wears boys' clothes with no tits or nothing. When they see me or Sylvia come in, they just turn around and they look hard.

***Some of the transvestites aren't so political; what do they think about your revolutionary ideas?***

They don't even care. I've talked to many of the transvestites up around the Times Square area. They don't even care about a revolution or anything. They've got what they want. Many of them are on drugs. Some of them have lovers, you know. And they don't even come to STAR meetings.

***How many people come to STAR meetings?***

About 30, and we haven't even been holding STAR meetings recently. Like Sylvia doesn't have a place to sleep, she's staying with friends on 109<sup>th</sup> St.

***Is there something you'd like to add?***

I'd like to see STAR get closer to GAA and other gay people in the community. I'd like to see a lot more transvestites come to STAR meetings, but it's hard to get in touch with transvestites. They're at these bars, and they're looking for husbands. There's a lot of transvestites who are very lonely, and they just go to bars to look for husbands and lovers, just like gay men do. When they get married, they don't have time for STAR meetings. I'd like to see a gay revolution get started, but there hasn't been any demonstration or anything recently. You know how the straight people are. When they don't see any action they think, "Well, gays are all forgotten now, they're worn out, they're tired." I would like to see STAR with a big bank account like we had before, and I'd like to see that STAR home again.

***Do you have any suggestions for people in small towns and cities where there is no STAR?***

Start a STAR of their own. I think if transvestites don't stand up for themselves, nobody else is going to stand up for transvestites. If a transvestite doesn't say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite, then nobody else is going to hop up there and say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite for them, because they're not transvestites. The life of a transvestite is very hard, especially when she goes out in the streets.

***Is it one of the goals of STAR to create a situation so transvestites don't have to go out in the street?***

So we don't have to hustle any more? It's one of the goals of STAR in the future, but one of the first things STAR has to do is reach people before they get on drugs, 'cause once they get on drugs it's very very hard to get them off and out of the street. A lot of people on the streets are supporting their habits. There's very few transvestites out on the streets that don't use drugs.

***What about the term "drag queen?" People in STAR prefer to use the term "transvestite." Can you explain the difference?***

A drag queen is one that usually goes to a ball, and that's the only time she gets dressed up. Transvestites live in drag. A transsexual spends most of her life in drag. I never come out of drag to go anywhere. Everywhere I go I get all dressed up. A transvestite is still like a boy, very manly looking, a feminine boy. You wear drag here and there. When you're a transsexual, you have hormone treatments and you're on your way to a sex change, and you never come out of female clothes.

***You'd be considered a pre-operative transsexual then? You don't know when you'd be able to go through the sex change?***

Oh, most likely this year. I'm planning to go to Sweden. I'm working very hard to go.

***It's cheaper there than it is at Johns Hopkins?***

It's \$300 for a change, but you've got to stay there a year.

***Do you know what STAR will be doing in the future?***

We're going to be doing STAR dances, open a new STAR home, a STAR telephone, 24 hours a day, a STAR recreation center. But this is only after our bank account is pretty well together. And plus we're going to have a bail fund for every transvestite that's arrested, to see they get out on bail, and see if we can get a STAR lawyer to help transvestites in court.

***What's that thing going to be?***

What thing?

***That thing you just made.***

It's a G-string. Want to see? This is so that if anybody sticks their hand up your dress, they don't feel anything. They wear them at the 82 Club. See? Everybody that's a drag queen knows how to make one. See, it just hides everything.

***If they reach up there, they don't find out what's really there!***

I don't care if they do reach up there. I don't care if they do find out what's really there. That's their business.

***I guess a lot of transvestites know how to fight back anyway!***

I carry my wonder drug everywhere I go – a can of Mace. If they attack me, I'm going to attack them, with my bomb.

***Did you ever have to use it?***

Not yet, but I'm patient.

# Y'ALL BETTER QUIET DOWN!: SYLVIA RIVERA'S SPEECH AT THE 1973 LIBERATION DAY RALLY

Y'all better quiet down.

I've been trying to get up here all day, for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail! They're writing me every motherfuckin' week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a god damn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped in jail? Now think about it. They've been beaten up and raped, after they had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and try to get their sex change. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes, or to become women of the women's liberation. And they write STAR, not the women's group. They do not write women. They do not write men. They write STAR, because we're trying to do something for them. I have been to jail. I have been raped and beaten many times, by men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But do you do anything for them? No!

You all tell me, go and hide my tail between my legs.

I will no longer put up with this shit.

I have been beaten.

I have had my nose broken.

I have been thrown in jail.

I have lost my job.

I have lost my apartment

For gay liberation, and you all treat me this way?

What the fuck's wrong with you all?

Think about that!

I do not believe in a revolution, but you all do. I believe in the gay power. I believe in us getting our rights or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights. That's all I wanted to say to your people. If you all want to know about the people that are in jail — and do not forget Bambi l'Amour, Andorra Marks, Kenny Messner, and the other gay people that are in jail — come and see the people at STAR House on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, on 640 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street between B and C, apartment 14. The people who are trying to do something for all of us and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class, white club. And that's what y'all belong to.

REVOLUTION NOW!

Give me a G!

Give me an A!

Give me a Y!

Give me a P!

Give me an O!



Give me a W!  
Give me an E!  
Give me an R!  
GAY POWER!  
Louder!  
GAY POWER!

# BITCH ON WHEELS: A SPEECH BY SYLVIA RIVERA, JUNE 2001

We did have connections with the Mafia. You must remember, everyone was doing drugs back then. Everyone was selling drugs, and everybody was buying drugs to take to other bars, like myself. I was no angel. I would pick up my drugs at the Stonewall and take them to the Washington Square Bar on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and Broadway, which was the drag queen third world bar. Even back then we had our racist little clubs. There were the white gay bars and then there were the very few third world bars and drag queen bars.

The night of the Stonewall, it happened to be the week that Judy Garland had committed suicide. Some people say that the riots started because of Judy Garland's death. That's a myth. We were all involved in different struggles, including myself and many other transgender people. But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts. The only reason they tolerated the transgender community in some of these movements was because we were gung-ho, we were front liners. We didn't take no shit from nobody. We had nothing to lose. You all had rights. We had nothing to lose. I'll be the first one to step on any organization, any politician's toes if I have to, to get the rights for my community.

Back to the story: we were all in the bar, having a good time. Lights flashed on, we knew what was coming; it's a raid. This is the second time in one week that the bar was raided. Common practice says the police from the 6<sup>th</sup> Precinct would come in to each gay bar and collect their payoff. Routine was, "Faggots over here, dykes over here, freaks over there," referring to my side of the community. If you did not have three pieces of male attire on you, you were going to jail. Just like a butch dyke would have to have three pieces of female clothing, or he was going to jail. The night goes on, you know, they proof you for ID, you know, back then you could get away with anything. Fake IDs were great back then, because I wasn't even 18 yet; I was gonna turn 18. We are led out of the bar. The routine was that the cops get their payoff, they confiscate the liquor, if you were a bartender you would snatch the money as soon as the lights went on because you would never see that money again. A padlock would go on the door. What we did, back then, was disappear to a coffee shop or any place in the neighborhood for fifteen minutes. You come back, the Mafia was there cutting the padlock off, bringing in more liquor, and back to business as usual.

Well, it just so happened that that night it was muggy; everybody was being, I guess, cranky; a lot of us were involved in different struggles; and instead of dispersing, we went across the street. Part of history forgets, that as the cops are inside the bar, the confrontation started outside by throwing change at the police. We started with the pennies, the nickels, the quarters, and the dimes. "Here's your payoff, you pigs! You fucking pigs! Get out of our faces." This was started by the street queens of that era, which I was part of, Marsha P. Johnson, and many others that are not here. I'm lucky to be 50 in July, but I'm still here, and I'll be damned if I won't see 100.

One thing led to another. The confrontation got so hot, that Inspector Pine, who headed this raid, him and his men had to barricade themselves in our bar, because they could not get out. The people that they had arrested, they had to take into the bar with them, because there was no police backup for them. But seriously, as history tells it, to this day, we don't know who cut the phone lines! So they could not get the call to the 6<sup>th</sup> precinct. Number one, Inspector Pine was not welcome in the 6<sup>th</sup> precinct because he had just been appointed to stop the corruption and, you know, what they called back then, we were a bunch of deviants, perverts. So he was there for that purpose, so who knows if one of his own men didn't do it, that was, you know, taking a payoff himself.

The police and the people that were arrested were barricaded inside this bar, with a Village Voice reporter, who proceeded to tell his story, in the paper, that he was handed a gun. The cops were actually so afraid of us that night that if we had busted through the bar's door, they were gonna shoot. They were ordered to shoot if that door busted open. Someone yanked a parking meter out of the ground. It was loose, you know, I don't know how it got loose. But that was being rammed into the door.

People have also asked me, "Was it a pre-planned riot?" because out of nowhere, Molotov cocktails showed up. I have been given the credit for throwing the first Molotov cocktail by many historians but I always like to correct it; I threw the second one, I did not throw the first one! And I didn't even know what a Molotov cocktail was; I'm holding this thing that's lit and I'm like "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" "Throw it before it blows!" "OK!"

The riot did get out of hand, because there was Cookie's down the street, there was The Haven, there was the Christopher's End. Once word of mouth got around that the Stonewall had gotten raided, and that there's a confrontation going on, people came from the clubs. But we also have to remember one thing: that it was not just the gay community and the street queens that really escalated this riot; it was also the help of the many radical straight men and women that lived in the Village at the time, that knew the struggle of the gay community and the trans community.

So the crowds did swell. You know, it was a long night of riots. It was actually very exciting cause I remember howling all through the streets, "The revolution is here!", you know? Cars are being turned over, windows are being broken, fires are being set all over the place. Blood was shed. When the cops did finally get there, the reinforcements, forty five minutes later, you had the chorus line of street queens kicking up their heels, singing their famous little anthem that up to today still lives on: "We are the Stonewall girls/ we wear our hair in curls/ we wear our dungarees/ above our nelly knees/ we show our pubic hairs," and so on and so forth.

At the time, there were many demonstrations. They were fierce demonstrations back then. I don't know how many people remember those times, or how many people read of the struggle in this whole country, what was going on. So then the tactical police force came and heads were being bashed left and right. But what I found very impressive that evening, was that the more that they beat us, the more we went back for. We were determined that evening that we were going to be a liberated, free community, which we did acquire that. Actually, I'll change the 'we': You have acquired your liberation, your freedom, from that night: Myself: I've got shit, just like I had back then. But I still struggle, I still continue the struggle. I will struggle til the day I die and my main struggle right now is that my community will seek the rights that are justly ours.

I am tired of seeing my children — I call everything including yous in this room, you are all my children — I am tired of seeing homeless transgender children; young, gay, youth children. I am tired of seeing the lack of interest that this rich community has. This is a very affluent

community. When we can afford to re-renovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about your homeless children from your community, and I know this for a fact, because the reason I have to get clearance every time to come into this building is because I saw many of the kids before the building was renovated up the street, many of the children are sleeping on the steps of that church. I went in there with an attitude. I raised hell. Yes, maybe I did try to destroy the front desk, but I did not attack anybody. But what did this community center do to me? My thanks for everything I have done for this freakin' community? Had me arrested and put in Bellevue! So I'm supposed to kiss their asses? No, I don't kiss nobody's ass cause I haven't lived this long, because I don't kiss nobody's ass.

That night, I remember singing "We Shall Overcome," many a times, on different demonstrations, on the steps of Albany, when we had our first march, when I spoke to the crowds in Albany. I remember singing but I haven't overcome a damn thing. I'm not even in the back of the bus. My community is being pulled by a rope around our neck by the bumper of the damn bus that stays in the front. Gay liberation but transgender nothing! Yes, I hold a lot of anger. But I have that right. I have that right to have that anger. I have fought too damn hard for this community to put up with the disrespect that I have received and my community has received for the last thirty-two years.

And a point of history, you know that it took the Gay Rights Bill here in New York seventeen years to pass. [It was approved in 1986.] But I'll go through the beginning. When we were petitioning for the Gay Rights Bill, there was only one person that was arrested. That was me. Because I had the guts to go into the Times Square area on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and petition the people to sign that petition. And the only reason I did it was because that bill did include the transgender community. Two or three years into the movement and the bill is being presented and we're going back and forth to City Hall. They have a little backroom deal without inviting Miss Sylvia and some of the other trans activists to this backroom deal with these politicians. The deal was, "You take them out, we'll pass the bill." So, what did nice conservative gay white men do? They sell a community that liberated them down the river, and it still took them seventeen years to get the damn bill passed! And I hate to say it, but I was very happy. Every time that that bill came up for a vote, I said, "I hope it doesn't pass," because of what they did to me. As badly as I knew this community needed that bill, I didn't feel it was justified for them to have it on my sweat and tears, or from my back.

So Stonewall is a great, great foundation. It began the modern day liberation movement, like we spoke before about the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. Yes, there were lots of other little groups but you had to be what they called themselves the "normal homosexuals." They wore suits and ties. One of the first demonstrations that they had, lesbians who'd never even worn dresses were wearing dresses and high heels to show the world that they were normal. Normal? Fine.

One of my best friends now, who has employed me for the last seven years before I changed jobs, is Randy Wicker. Randy Wicker was a very well-known gay male activist in 1963. He was the first gay male — before any real movement was there — to get on a talk show and state to the world that he was a normal homosexual. I give him credit for that. He has done a lot of different things, but he also in 1969 and for many years trashed the transgender community. It took him a lot of years to wake up and realize that we are no different than anybody else; that we bleed, that we cry, and that we suffer.

But this has been going on for the longest time. I mean, before gay liberation, it was the same thing: “drag queens over there; we’re over here.” The world came tumbling down in 1969 and on the fourth anniversary of the Stonewall movement, of the Stonewall riot, the transgender community was silenced because of a radical lesbian named Jean O’Leary, who felt that the transgender community was offensive to women because we liked to wear makeup and we liked to wear miniskirts. Excuse me! It goes with the business that we’re in at that time! Because people fail to realize that — not trying to get off the story — everybody thinks that we want to be out on them street corners. No we do not. We don’t want to be out there sucking dick and getting fucked up the ass. But that’s the only alternative that we have to survive because the laws do not give us the right to go and get a job the way we feel comfortable. I do not want to go to work looking like a man when I know I am not a man. I have been this way since before I left home and I have been on my own since the age of ten.

Anyway, Jean O’Leary started the big commotion at this rally [Christopher Street Liberation Day, 1973]. It was the year that Bette Midler performed for us. I was supposed to be a featured speaker that day. But being that the women felt that we were offensive, the drag queens Tiffany and Billy were not allowed to perform. I had to fight my way up on that stage and literally, people that I called my comrades in the movement, literally beat the shit out of me. That’s where it all began, to really silence us. They beat me, I kicked their asses. I did get to speak, I got my points across.

There was another speaker that day, Lee Brewster (she passed a year ago), very well known to the trans community and to the cross dressing community. She got up on stage, threw her tiara to the crowd and said, “Fuck gay liberation.” But what people fail to realize was that Lee Brewster put up a majority of the money for the Gay Pride March of 1970, which was our first one. And it was once again, out of maybe two or three hundred of us that started from the Village, up 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, up two little lanes of traffic, that we were the visible ones. We were the visible ones, the trans community. And still and yet, if you notice where they keep pushing us every year, we’re further and further towards the back. I have yet to have the pleasure to march with my community, for the simple fact that I belong to the Stonewall Live Veterans group, I march in the front.

But until my community is allowed the respect to march in the front, I will go march with my community because that’s where I’m needed and that’s where I belong. And yes, I’ll wear my big sash that says “Stonewall.” And people are gonna ask. And I’m gonna tell why; because this is where the Heritage of Pride [the group that organizes the march] wants to keep us. You see, I don’t pull no punches, I’m not afraid to call out no names. You screw with the transgender community and the organization Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries will be on your doorstep. Just like we trashed the HRC for not endorsing the Amanda Milan actions, and then when they threw us a piece of trash, we refused to accept it. How dare you question the validity of a transgender group asking for your support, when this transgender woman was murdered? No. The trans community has allowed, we have allowed the gay and lesbian community to speak for us. Times are changing. Our armies are rising and we are getting stronger. And when we come a knocking (that includes from here to Albany to Washington) they’re going to know that you don’t fuck with the transgender community.

Mainstreaming, normality, being normal. I understand how much everybody likes to fit into that mainstream gay and lesbian community. You know, it used to be a wonderful thing to be avant-garde, to be different from the world. I see us reverting into a so-called liberated closet

because we, not we, yous of this mainstream community, wish to be married, wish for this status. That's all fine. But you are forgetting your grass roots, you are forgetting your own individual identity. I mean, you can never be like them. Yes we can adopt children, all well and good, that's fine. I would love to have children. I would love to marry my lover over there [ Julia Murray], but for political reasons I will not do it because I don't feel that I have to fit into that closet of normal, straight society which the gay mainstream is always going towards.

This is why they don't want the transgender people to have rights. This is why they always tell us, "Oh let us get ours, and then we'll help you get yours." If I hear that one more time, I think I'll jump off the Empire State building. But I'm sure a lot of people would like that, especially the old-timers, because I have actually mellowed down through the years. I used to be a bitch on wheels.

But these are days that we have to reflect on. This is a month that's very important. I may have a lot of anger but it means a lot to me because after being at World Pride last year in Italy, to see 500,000 beautiful, liberated gay men, women, and trans people and being called the mother of the world's transgender movement and gay liberation movement, it gives me great pride to see my children celebrating. But I just hope that — and I've heard a lot of positive things in this room tonight, as far as people realizing that the trans community was your benefactor and that people are opening up their eyes. But you got to remember, don't just say that because we're here; show your support when we send out a call for action to support our actions, the things that we plan to do.

I mean, it was a hurting feeling that on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001 we had history-breaking civil rights in for city council. Our bill was finally introduced. Wow! We waited this long! But where were my sisters and brothers? Where were my children that I liberated? Very few allies showed up. But what made me proud was that the trans community showed up in numbers, and the girls that work these corners even got the nerve enough to come into public and go onto something that they would never consider doing, which was to walk on City Hall because they are all afraid of the police, but they were there. So, that goes to show the rest of the community, that technically when we ask for your support, we want your support. But in the long run, if it's not there, we will acquire what we need.

But, we must remember: Amanda Milan's actions are coming up. I hope to see a lot of you there. But remember one thing, when you fell out en masse, including myself, for Matthew Shepard, and many of us went to jail, I only got to see maybe five minutes of the whole thing because being the person who I am, a front liner, as soon as I sat down in the street, one of the white shirts that has known me for years, the person says, "When the order goes down, get that bitch right there, get her off the street and into the paddy wagon." So that's the way that went.

But it seemed like everybody and their mother came out for Matthew Shepard. A white, middle class gay boy that was effeminate! Amanda Milan got killed last year, five days before Gay Pride. We waited a month to have a vigil for her. Three hundred people showed up. What kind of a — doesn't the community have feelings? We are part of the gay and lesbian community! That really hurt me, to see that only three hundred people showed up. And it's not like it was gonna be a long vigil, I mean we went from 36<sup>th</sup> Street to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. So, when we call people, not only to sponsor our actions, we expect to see bodies there. I mean, but like I said, we're capable of doing it on our own because that's what we're learning now, after thirty-two years, that we cannot depend on nobody, except our own trans community, to keep pushing forward.

But remember that as you celebrate this whole month, of how you are liberated. And I feel so sorry for those that are not able to read the history of the Stonewall around the world. And we have to blame once again all the publishers and whatnot. I tried to push Martin Duberman's publishers [Plume/Penguin] to have the Stonewall book translated into Spanish. But they felt that the book would not sell in Third World countries, in Latin countries. Which is a lot of crap! Because the only way that you're going to learn the history, especially if you're far away and just coming out, is to be able to pick up a book and read about the history of the Stonewall and how you were liberated. I know many of our countries are not as liberated as the United States, as far as the gays are concerned, especially Latin American countries, because once again you got to remember that we have to play that big macho role, you know, men, we have to make lots of babies! But it's a shame that it has taken thirty-two years for people to finally realize how much we have given to you, to realize the history of the trans involvement in this movement. And in that note, I hope to see you when I send out the emails to you, and I hope you pass that on. That I hope to see a lot of you there for the Amanda Milan actions and I once again wish you all a very happy gay pride day but also think about us.

# QUEENS IN EXILE, THE FORGOTTEN ONES

## BY SYLVIA RIVERA

My mother was 22 when she decided to off herself. She was having a shaky second marriage; my stepfather was a drug dealer, and that was one of the reasons the marriage was on shaky grounds. He threatened to kill her and me and my sister. I was 3 years old.

She mixed rat poison into milk, drank it, and gave some to me. I believe the brand was JR Rat Poison, and it came in a light reddish-orange tin. When they took me off to get my stomach pumped was the last time I saw my mother alive, because after being in the hospital three days, she died.

She drank her poison, and I drank only part of what she gave me because I didn't like the taste of the milk. I added sugar to it. I didn't know what it was, but it just didn't taste right. I remember seeing her laid out in the coffin. Back in those days you had to wake a body for three days. It was like sheer torture, but in my mind she was sleeping. My grandmother told me after I was grown up more that I tried to wake her up, that I disturbed her in her coffin. One of the last things she told my grandmother on her deathbed was that she wanted to kill me because she knew I was going to have a hard life. And she pinpointed it, because it has not been an easy road. I've enjoyed the struggles, but I've also had my bouts with trying to off myself.

I was very effeminate as a young child. Life wasn't easy with my grandmother because she always told me that she never really wanted me, that she wanted my sister. My sister was taken away from her when my stepfather put her up for adoption. My grandmother never forgave me for that; she wanted my sister because she was a girl, and I was a boy.

I basically grew up without love. I guess in her own strict way my grandmother loved me. She did want me to acquire a good education. She insisted in putting me in all-white Catholic schools. And she didn't want me to learn the Spanish language. It upset her when I spoke to her in Spanish.

She wanted me to be a white child. She was a prejudiced woman. I mean, dark people, African-American people, would scare her. She came from Venezuela. She would have a little gesture or say something when black people would come on the subway or something; she would either rub her arm and say, "Look at them, they're coming," or she would call them "blonds" and look dead in their direction. She was a very racist woman.

She did not approve of my mother's marriages because both men were Puerto Ricans. My father was a very dark-skinned Puerto Rican. My stepfather was not as dark. My grandmother didn't like the idea of me having Puerto Rican blood. It would have been better if I had just been a Venezuelan child.

I was wearing makeup in the fourth grade. I did it because I liked makeup, and I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. I remember being questioned about it by my teacher, and I said, "Yeah, my grandmother knows." Of course it was a lie. She didn't know because there was a woman who was taking care of me out on Long Island, and I would put on my makeup on



my way to school. I knew I would wear it home and take it off by 5 o'clock without having any problems because there was nobody in the house.

So to me it was normal. I really didn't get much of a slacking from the kids. I remember only one child, and he was the sixth-grade bully, who called me a faggot because I always played with the girls. At the time, I was either playing hopscotch or doing double Dutch. And I just went off on him. I beat the daylights out of him, and I don't remember much of it, but I do remember the confrontation in front of our principal. The principal asked me, "Why did you beat him up?" I said, "He called me a faggot. Do I look like a faggot to you?" I was painted, you know, and had on these tight, tight pants. I didn't know what a faggot was, but I felt insulted. I had already had sex, but I thought it was all part of just being who you were.

I only felt how unusual this was when I was back on the lower east side with my grandmother where I had to go on the weekends. It was a maledominant culture. Of the boys I hung around with, I slept with one. The other boys knew where I was coming from. Every once in a while there were remarks. A lot of the women would make innuendos. A woman once time patted me on my ass and said, "Huh, your ass is getting big, that means you're getting pumped," and I took offense at that because I knew when I was home — you know, on the lower east side — that there was something wrong with what I was doing. My grandmother used to come home and it smelled like a French whorehouse, but that didn't stop me. I got many ass-whippings from her.

Before I even left home, I was turning tricks with my uncle for money. We didn't have much money, and I wanted things my grandmother couldn't buy. In the beginning I didn't know who I was attracted to. I'd look at men in old movies and get fascinated by them, but my sexuality was aroused when I was 7 years old. My cousin was baby-sitting me, and I always found him attractive. He offered and I accepted.

As I've grown up, I've realized that I do have a certain attraction to men. But I believe that growing up the way I did, I was basically pushed into this role. In Spanish cultures, if you're effeminate, you're automatically a fag; you're a gay boy. I mean, you start off as a young child and you don't have an option — especially back then. You were either a fag or a dyke. There was no inbetween. You have your journey through society the way it is structured. That's how I fit into it at that time in my life. Those were the words of that era. I was an effeminate gay boy. I was becoming a beautiful drag queen, a beautiful dragqueen child. Later on, of course, I knew that Christine [Jorgensen] was already around, but those things were still waiting in the backs of people's minds.

Being on my own at 10 years old, on the street in Times Square, was frightening. I had to be resourceful. I had already experienced the hustling scene with my uncle. I had found my way to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street by the comments made when my family used to go to Coney Island. The adults would say about people who got on at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street who were effeminate and wearing makeup, "Oh, look at the maricóns," and I would have to turn my face away because it hurt me to hear that. They would say, "This is where the maricóns come and they make money." Of course, that registered in my head, and I found my way back there and dipped and dabbed and made money selling my body. So when I left home to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street for good I wasn't seasoned, but I knew what I had to do to survive.

I was adopted by a few young (but older than I was) drag queens. They helped me out. We hung out all night. Chickie lived with her mother in Brooklyn somewhere and she knew that her mother went to work at a certain time, so she'd bring three or four queens home and we'd crash

and get out of there before her mother came home. It was like roaming from house to house, or I'd stay in the hotel room the trick would rent.

I was afraid, but I didn't really think of it because I needed to survive. I found it disgusting, though. I used to go home and scrub myself clean. This was in the early '60s. The drag scene was a night life. We basically didn't go out during the day. I guess we had to hide. Also, if you're out all night, you don't want to be out during the day.

But it was dangerous on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. We all stuck together. The police were constantly chasing us. We had a code: If one of the girls or one of the boy hustlers spotted a cop, word was passed down that "Lily in blue" was coming. This meant we would disappear. So a warning of "Alice in the blue gown" or "Lily" meant to disperse.

I was too young to go to the few clubs that existed, but there were many house parties. They were called rent parties. There was always something going on. And it was fun, you know, because people needed money for their rent. Fifty cents, a dollar...you helped somebody out and you might end up crashing there some time. That was basically the scene for the youth back then, except for the drag balls. But you had to be a little older than I was to start going with that group of people.

You had drag balls up in Harlem and you had them downtown. We had the Phil Black's ball, we had the April in Paris ball...those were the two main ones. And there were balls constantly going on. I know the April in Paris ball used to be held at the Manhattan Center on 34<sup>th</sup> Street.

Balls gave us a social affair. If you didn't go, you just weren't part of the in crowd. And what talent you saw there! There were women who spent a year sewing and designing their costumes, just to get ready for one ball. And the hairstyles with 20 wigs...I'm exaggerating — we'll say seven or eight piled on top of one another. Being brought in in a gilded cage carried by half-naked young men. It was something extravagant and beautiful, something you don't see in balls today.

We had cross-dressers, but I didn't even know what cross-dressers were until much later. The street queens have always been prostitutes to survive, because some of us left home so early, or it just wasn't feasible to be working if you wanted to wear your makeup and do your thing. But there was that division at the balls where you had drag queens who were not from the same side of the tracks we were. Some of them were very affluent.

There were always drugs on the streets. In the early '60s there were a lot of ups. I got my Benzedrine supply from my truck driver customers. I was fascinated by speed. Besides alcohol. But those were my drugs of preference back in the mid '60s and early '70s. And then I changed around. I did a lot of heroin. I did heroin for about five years. Actually I've done everything that's been put out, especially in the '70s...LSD...basically everything, even to modern-day crack. But I haven't done ecstasy. And most everything I've kicked on my own.

I just sobered up off booze two years ago. I'm sober for the first time in my life without any alcohol in my body, and I've been drinking since before I left home. I started dipping at home, drinking booze about the age of 8. I always drank booze, besides taking all the other drugs. I'd mix my drugs and my booze together. It was something I thought was going to kill me. I thank my lucky stars. Somebody must be watching. Some higher power has been watching me cause I've tried to off myself at least six or seven times. It just wasn't meant to be.

I met Marsha Johnson like a year after I hit the streets. Marsha, I believe, was seven years my senior. It was Halloween night and she had just come out of the Port Authority because she still lived in Jersey with her family. She was dressed up in drag. A bunch of Spanish queens

started going, "Oh, look at Marsha," and this one queen named Louisa snatched Marsha's wig. Well, Marsha wasn't going to have it. When she caught up to Louisa up on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Sixth Avenue she beat the living daylight out of her

Then one time I was walking across Sixth Avenue and she was standing there on the corner. She called me to her side, we introduced ourselves, and a very strong sistership was born. She took me out to eat. She was standing there hustling even though she was working as a waiter at Childs' Restaurant. But she always had to make extra change, as she always said.

And later on we would see each other at clubs or at different gatherings. She knew my first lover and came to my apartment out in Jersey. We stood by each other, had each other's back for many years. And even back in the days of pre-Stonewall, we would sit on 44<sup>th</sup> Street, a lot of us girls like Marsha and Vanessa; Miss Edwina, Miss Josie, a whole bunch of us, would sit around in a room. We'd be getting high or something and we'd start talking politics. We'd start talking politics and about when things were going to change for us as human beings.

After Stonewall, Marsha and I just kept up the struggle. We saw the need after being out on the streets at our ages. We needed to help our own people. Even when we were living on 44<sup>th</sup> Street, Marsha always took in people, gave them a place to stay. At that time, before Stonewall, everyone always had a house full of people, people crashing because there was no room. If one queen had a place and you were her friend, she would gladly let you sleep on her floor or share her bed. There would be not just the two of us; there would be maybe four or five. And everybody was sneaking around not wanting to get caught by whoever we were renting from.

There are two stories of how Marsha died. One is that she supposedly committed suicide, and the other is that somebody murdered her. They fished her body out of the Hudson River at the end of Christopher Street nine years ago. It was very shocking for me when I got the telegram. Actually I was really pissed at her because our pact was that we would cross the Jordan together. She would get angry with me when I tried to off myself, so we made a pact. That's why I find it hard to believe she committed suicide.

Marsha had been on SSI (Social Security Disability) for quite some time because she had several nervous breakdowns. She had been locked up several times in Bellevue and Manhattan State. Her mind started really going. She had a doctor who did not diagnose her syphilis right away. So when they finally caught it, it was in the second stages. Marsha lived in her own realm, and she saw things through different eyes. She liked to stay in that world, so with that and the syphilis infection...and then her husband, Cantrell, was shot by an off-duty officer. He was shot to death and she really went over the edge.

She managed to come out of that one, and then she lost it again. She came over to my house dressed like the Virgin Mary, in white and blue, and she was carrying a wooden cross and a Bible. She came in and started preaching the Bible to me and we had a few words. Then she took the wooden cross and hit me upside the head with it. If it had been any other queen, I would probably be in jail, cause I would have killed her. She drew blood because the nail wasn't completely bent, and she put a gash in my head.

The next day I heard they arrested her and locked her up again. So she had several breakdowns. Bob Kohler, who was very close to her and to me, says that she committed suicide. He was closer to her the last few months. She always would go down to the end of Christopher Street, supposedly talking to her brother and wanting to go talk to her father in the water.

And there is testimony that some guys were messing with her and they threw her in the river. The police couldn't prove it. So I'm still stuck in the middle. When I heard that she was murdered,

I couldn't understand why anybody would kill her. Marsha would give the blouse off her back if you asked for it. She would give you her last dollar. She would take off her shoes. I've seen her do all these things, so I couldn't see someone killing her. I know there are crazy people out there. I know there are transphobic people out there. But it's not like she wasn't a known transperson. She was loved anywhere she went. Marsha was a great woman.

Being arrested for "loitering with the intention of prostitution" became a routine, you know, cause I knew I was getting out the next day. The process is that they'll keep you, they'll process you, and you'll go in front of a judge. The judge will most likely dismiss the charge cause they go by your record. In all the years I was out there hustling — and that's between hustling and still doing politics — I was blessed because I was never arrested for prostitution. It was always "with the intention" or just standing out on a corner, loitering. So I never got arrested or did time for prostitution.

The judge paid people like me no mind because I had no convictions. Cases would be thrown out, so it would never be on my record. Most of the girls had records, so that's what the judge would go by. To get busted for pros you had to do a solicitation — or they entrapped you. A lot of the girls would ask me how come I wouldn't go with a customer, and I suppose it was because I got the wrong vibe. I believed he was the Man.

"Aw," they'd say, "you always saying that."

"All right, when he comes back around you take him. I'm not jumping in the Man's car." Of course I'd see them 15 or 30 days later and I'd say, "Oh, so we were on vacation again, huh?"

"Yeah, I shoulda listened to you, Sylvia."

I go by what I feel. What my spirits tell me, I'm following. Every time I went with what my spirits told me (except for two times, and both times I had to fight my way out of a situation), I was right. My instincts would say no, I'd rather starve to death. And the girls wouldn't listen. And Marsha used to be the same way, I would tell her, "Don't go with that man."

"Aw, Miss Thing, stop..."

"I'll see you when you get home in 30 days."

But I was lucky. The only time I did time was for possession of heroin. And the cops who arrested me told me, "We couldn't get you one way, so we figure we had to get you another way." The cops in the area I worked at the time, which was downtown on Chrystie Street by the Bowery, were angry because they could never bust me for pros.

I did get into cars with undercover agents, not realizing until too late. I had one cop pull a gun out on me and say, "You're gonna do me or I'm gonna take you in."

I'm like, "Fine, take me in, I don't care." Then I pop the door open to jump out of the car.

He says, "If you get out of the car, I'll shoot..."

I say, "Aw, you'll be doing the world a favor, one less queer in the world, one less junkie...one less ho!" And I got out very grandly, walked to the corner, and then ran like a bat out of hell.

I was bold; I would take these chances. Why should I give this man a blow job, not knowing whether he's going to take me to jail or not? I don't like the idea of giving free service. I'm not out there to give anyone free service. At that time I was a heroin addict and I had a bunch of kids to support in STAR House. I had no time for games.

And there was another incident. I told the man where to park and he didn't, just kept on going and running through red lights. He said, "I'm taking you in for pros." And I said, "No, you're

not.” And he was going at a high speed. I popped the door open and threw myself out of the car, rolled, then hit the street running.

I was untouchable until the heroin thing. For that I got sentenced 90 days. That first night I fall asleep and my bullpen is packed with men. I wake up sick as a dog because I need a fix and I think, Aw, shit, I’m fucked. And there’s one guy I know from the streets, so he gives me some protection, for a while. But when they take him upstairs to the Tombs, I’m left alone with all these other men. And suddenly they start hitting on me. “Come on, mama. I been in here for a year. I need a good piece of pussy,” and blah, blah, blah...and I’m like, “Oh, no, we’re not having this.”

So I get knocked around a couple of times. I fight back, I holler for the C.O., and he comes to the cell. “What’s the problem?” And I say, “These guys are trying to take me off,” and he very nicely tells them, “Enjoy yourselves, boys, have fun.” So I have to think fast. “O-o-okay...but we only suck dick. I’m sorry, I just don’t get fucked up.” Well, I guess they were dumb, because if some ho — you have a woman cornered and this woman is telling you that all she does is suck dick — then you know she must have an ulterior motive.

The one I ended up giving head to regretted it. I didn’t stop biting that boy’s dick until I drew blood, and they beat me so hard on my head for me to let go. That gave me a reputation. By the time I got to Rikers Island that evening, it was, “That’s the crazy bitch that bit that boy’s dick. Leave her alone.” It’s always good to play crazy.

But it is rough for some of the girls, because they give it up. And once you give it up, you gotta give it up to every Tom, Dick, and Harry. So automatically you try to protect yourself in the hope that you don’t get killed in the process, or you give it up and be used for all the time you’re in jail. So I’d rather take the easy way out. I’d rather be dead than be subject to that. I’d always managed to protect myself.

Jail is not a happy place for trans women and gay boys. It’s a very unhappy place. Even though you’re segregated, kept out of the general population, you have boys who would sign the papers that they were homos. I used to find that fascinating, that every time I’d been arrested, they’d have this big stamp that stamps all your records homo in big red letters. I used to crack up about that. I said, “Jesus, couldn’t you just put it in a little box?” No, they got to put it all over in red letters.

You asked to be segregated. Drag queens didn’t have to ask for it. We were automatically segregated. But anyone could say they were gay and they’d let them through. So the boys would try to run your quad, except that when you had a bunch of queens on one floor, it was very hard for the men to dominate. A lot of times there were fights on the quad with the boys cause they would try to rule and the girls would not have it. It’s like, “This is our property and we don’t wish to be here, but this is our vacation spot and you are here...I guess... because you want to get your dick sucked...” Many of those boys who claimed to be straight and signed the papers as homos were the first ones to fall down to their knees when you were in the cell with them or turn on their stomachs wanting to get fucked. There’s a reason behind everything.

I thought about having a sex change, but I decided not to. I feel comfortable being who I am. That final journey many of the trans women and trans men make is a big journey. It’s a big step and I applaud them, but I don’t think I could ever make that journey. Maybe it comes of my prejudice when so many in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s ran up to the chop shop up at Yonkers General. They would get a sex change and a month, maybe six months, later they’d

kill themselves because they weren't ready. Maybe that made me change my mind. I really don't know, but I always like to be an individual. In the beginning I decided that not getting the operation was because I wanted to keep the "baby's arm."

My first lover taught me how to make love to another man, and in my youth I was always supposed to be the bottom. This is the way I thought a relationship was...an effeminate gay boy was solely to be the bottom. My lover was a butch-looking boy, very butch. Actually, no one even knew he was gay.

He showed me how to make love. He said, "When you're with another man, this is the way men make love." It was very hard in the beginning. He would ask me and I would refuse to make love to him cause I didn't think he was telling me the truth. But he knew exactly what I was doing. After we would make love he'd go out, and he'd tell me, "You wait for me to leave to masturbate, to jerk off when we can be doing that together. That's what love is about."

People now want to call me a lesbian because I'm with Julia, and I say, "No. I'm just me. I'm not a lesbian." I'm tired of being labeled. I don't even like the label transgender. I'm tired of living with labels. I just want to be who I am. I am Sylvia Rivera. Ray Rivera left home at the age of 10 to become Sylvia. And that's who I am.

I will be 50 years old this coming Monday. I don't need the operation to find my identity. I have found my niche, and I'm happy and content with it. I take my hormones. I'm living the way Sylvia wants to live. I'm not living in the straight world; I'm not living in the gay world; I'm just living in my own world with Julia and my friends.

The night Stonewall happened everybody was out partying. People were mourning, even me. We were mourning Judy Garland's death. Some authors have said that the riot came out of Judy Garland's death, but that's not true. Judy had nothing to do with the riot. Nor was any of it planned. It was something that just happened.

I guess there was tension in the air. It was a hot, muggy night, in the 80s or 90s, like when most riots happen. I don't know how many other patrons in the bar were activists, but many of the people were involved in some struggle.

I had been doing work in the civil rights movement, against the war in Vietnam, and for the women's movement.

The bar paid off the cops at the beginning of the week, supposedly, on Monday night. A lot of bars were run by the Mafia. They paid off the police in the sixth precinct. Inspector Pine, who officiated the raid on Stonewall, had just been given his job as head of the morals squad. They were out to bust all the corruption in the police department and also close down these bars.

So the Stonewall was the first place he hit on in his new job. I'm in a book with him by David Isay. He says he thought it was going to be a routine bust. That's why they went in with only a few men. But to his surprise, we fought back. As he put it, "Those people would never give us any problem, because they had a lot to lose." So this night was different. This was the start of our talking back, speaking up for ourselves.

They came in; the lights went on. People ran for the bathrooms and got rid of their drugs. We stopped dancing. People started pairing off with someone of the opposite sex to try to make it look as "normal" as we could. And here the law walks in and it's, "Faggots here, dykes here, and freaks over there." The queens and the real butch dykes were the freaks.

Then we were proofed. You had to have on three articles of clothing that accorded to your gender. That was a law. So females had to have three pieces of women's clothing. It could be

whatever, as long as the cop decided to accept it. At that time, the '60s, we called it scare drag. We were out a lot during the day with makeup, blouses, women's slacks — but no tits. We called it scare drag so we could say we weren't in drag.

To that point it was a typical bust. They proofed us. We went out the door. But no one dispersed. Cause usually we'd go somewhere and have coffee and come back in 15, 20 minutes. The padlock was cut off, and it was back to business — drinking watered-down booze, buying drugs, and dancing.

What people fail to realize is that the Stonewall was not a drag queen bar. It was a white male bar for middle-class males to pick up young boys of different races. Very few drag queens were allowed in there, because if they had allowed drag queens into the club, it would have brought the club down. That would have brought more problems to the club. It's the way the Mafia thought, and so did the patrons. So the queens who were allowed in basically had inside connections. I used to go there to pick up drugs to take somewhere else. I had connections.

The main drag queen bar at that time was the Washington Square Bar on Third Street and Broadway. That's where you found diesel dykes and drag queens and their lovers. Oh, yeah, we mixed with lesbians. We always got along together back then. All that division between the lesbian women and queens came after 1974 when Jean O'Leary and the radical lesbians came up. The radicals did not accept us or masculine-looking women who dressed like men. And those lesbian women might not even have been trans. But we did get along famously in the early '60s. I've been to many a dyke party. And transgendered men back then were living and working. I met many who were working and living as men with their female lovers. They were highly respected. The lesbian community today has a lot to learn from the old ways of the lesbian community.

I didn't really get involved in gay politics until 1970. After Stonewall, I was getting my news from the Gay Power newspaper, and I was at the founding of the Gay Activists Alliance. That was the first real political meeting I went to. They were just getting their platform statement, their mission statement. I saw an ad in the paper, and I called the number and said, "Hello, do you take drag queens?"

They said yes and I got Miss Josie, and off to this meeting we go. First thing we get there it's "What's your name?" and I'm, like, "Sylvia." And the guy at the door said, "Don't you have a boy's name?" And I'm like, "Who? What?" So right away that was a setback. But I got involved, and the reason I stayed with them was for the gay rights bill. That's when we started petitioning for the gay rights bill, the New York City bill. And I felt comfortable being there.

That first meeting was where I met one of my best girlfriends even today: Bebe. She was sitting there, and I started talking to Josie in Spanish. I said, "Hmm...she looks like one of us," referring to her as a drag queen. She was a young child. We were just 19 years old. She turned and answered me in English, "I understand everything you said about me, and, yes, I'm one of you. I'm like you." And we became the best of friends.

The reason I stayed in GAA was the simple fact that I liked the idea that we, as an organization, were going to change the world. And there was a place for us. I fell right into the grand scheme of things. I remember I was out petitioning, I'd been doing it for a couple of weeks, and I remember that on April 15, 1970, I was petitioning on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. I hadn't picked up why no gay men had come into the Times Square area. I figured that while they were up on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, where most of the gay men were living at that time, or in the Village, I could take care of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street — my home turf.

There was a “Stop the War in Vietnam” demo and people started coming. The cops had dispersed the demo, and I’m standing out there collecting signatures, and two cops come by, and they say, “You have to move.” And I’m like, “Why? All I’m doing is collecting signatures. I’m petitioning for gay rights.”

“It’s against the law.”

I said, “What? I thought it said in the Constitution we have the right to acquire signatures...”

“You don’t have an American flag.”

“What does an American flag have to do with my collecting signatures?”

“You have to have an American flag.”

I said, “It wouldn’t make a difference. I’ve been to jail with poor Rosie over there, who is always being arrested with her American flag and her Bible for preaching the gospel.” Rosie was a right-wing Bible-thumper. Well, I got arrested for petitioning for gay rights.

That’s how my whole activist career started. Besides, I didn’t consider that night at Stonewall to be so important out of all the other movements going on. Getting that first arrest for something that I believed in was...wow, what a rush!

I bailed myself out of jail, and went to GAA the following day and told them what happened. We had a press conference, and Arthur Bell – may his soul rest in peace – grabbed me out of that meeting and dragged me to his apartment up in the 60s. And he says, “I’m going to put you up on a pedestal. You will be a star.” I’m like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah...” So we did an interview on the bus, and then he followed me for about a week on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, collecting signatures from people: mature women and men, couples, heterosexuals, and gay people. That’s how things started for me.

And I was happy at GAA for a while. But it wasn’t my calling. I found out later on that they only believed in acquiring civil rights for the gay community as a whole. Which is fine. They did a lot of good just concentrating on the gay issue. But they left the queens behind.

I enjoyed Gay Liberation Front better because we concentrated on many issues for many different struggles. We’re all in the same boat as long as we’re being oppressed one way or the other, whether we are gay, straight, trans, black, yellow, green, purple, or whatever. If we don’t fight for each other, we’ll be put down. And after all these years, the trans community is still at the back of the bus.

I despise that. I’m hurt and get depressed a lot about it. But I will not give up because I won’t give the mainstream gay organizations the satisfaction of keeping us down. If we give up, they win. And we can’t allow them to win. The reason we, right now, as a trans community, don’t have all the rights they have is that we allowed them to speak for us for so many damn years, and we bought everything they said to us: “Oh, let us pass our bill, then we’ll come for you.”

Yeah, come for me. Thirty-two years later and they’re still coming for me. And what have we got? Here, where it all started, trans people have nothing. We can no longer let people like the Empire State Pride Agenda, the HRC in Washington, speak for us. And it really hurts me that some gay people don’t even know what we gave for their movement.

It’s like I was saying all this year during pride month: “It’s not my pride, it’s their pride. It’s your pride, not mine. You haven’t given me mine yet.” I have nothing to be proud of except that I’ve helped liberate gays around the world. I have so many children and I’m still sitting on the back of the bus, still struggling to get kids into proper housing, and to get them education, to get them off drugs.



That's why we decided to resurrect STAR at the beginning of the year. Something has to be done. You need a grassroots organization that's willing to ruffle feathers and step on toes. STAR was born in 1971 right after a sit-in we had at New York University with Gay Liberation Front. We took over Weinstein Hall for three days. It happened when there had been several gay dances thrown there, and all of a sudden the plug was pulled because the rich families were offended that queers and dykes were having dances and their impressionable children were going to be harmed.

So we ended up taking that place over. That's another piece of history that is very seldom told, even in regular gay history, about that sit-in. Maybe that's because it was the street queens once again who were still hanging around from 1969 with some of the radicals like Bob Kohler. He is a radical who is 75 years old and still out there working very hard doing his thing. He's been an ally to the trans community since I knew him and before I knew him. He's insulted and offended when the gay community doesn't turn out for our demos.

STAR house was born out of the Weinstein Hall demonstration, because there were so many of us living together, with Marsha and myself renting two rooms and the hotel room, and even then we still didn't have enough room to house people. With the help of GLF and Gay Youth, we threw our first fundraiser and raised enough money to go to the Mafia and rent our first building. You can say anything you want about the Mafia — yes, they took advantage of us, but when we needed them, they were there.

They did open up tacky places for us to party in. And they got us a building for \$300 a month. They were there for us. Marsha and I and Bubbles and Andorra and Bambi kept that building going by selling ourselves out on the streets while trying to keep the children off the streets. And a lot of them made good. A lot of them went home. Some of them I lost; they went to the streets. We lost them, but we tried to do the best we could for them. The contribution of the ones who didn't make it out into the streets, who wanted something different, was to liberate food from in front of the A&P and places like that, because back then they used to leave everything out in front of the store before it opened.

So the house was well-supplied, the building's rent was paid, and everybody in the neighborhood loved STAR House. They were impressed because they could leave their kids and we'd baby-sit with them. If they were hungry, we fed them. We fed half of the neighborhood because we had an abundance of food the kids liberated. It was a revolutionary thing.

We died in 1973, the fourth anniversary of Stonewall. That's when we were told we were a threat and an embarrassment to women because lesbians felt offended by our attire, us wearing makeup. It came down to a brutal battle on the stage that year at Washington Square Park, between me and people I considered my comrades and friends.

This was at pride. It was the year Bette Midler came to sing "Happy Birthday" for us. It was happy for the mainstream community, but it was not happy for us. They tried to stop drag queen entertainers from performing. It was angry because I had been scheduled for many months to speak at that rally. So I'm stubborn, and I wasn't going to have it. Because for four years we were the vanguard of the gay movement, and all of a sudden it was being taken away. We were being pushed out of something we helped create.

I remember this man telling me, a straight man who was my boss at the time, when I was working in Jersey — he said, "Ray, the oppressed becomes the oppressor. Be careful. Watch it." And I saw it. And I still see it. I literally had to fight my way up onto that stage. I was beat. I got

to speak. I said my piece. And I basically left the movement for many years. I didn't come back into view until the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And that was with David Isay's Remembering Stonewall.

He found me where I was in Tarrytown. I was living and working there. And then along came Martin Duberman and Stonewall. But I was really hurt in 1974. I tried to kill myself. I had 60 stitches on this arm after that incident. And I wasn't ever going to come back to the movement. But you know who held fast to her word was Lee Brewster. When she got up and spoke after I did, she took off her tiara, threw it into the crowd and said, "Fuck gay liberation!"

What people fail to remember is, here's another drag queen who has not been recognized as a hero in our community. She put a majority of the money up for the first march in 1970. Lee Brewster changed the drinking laws for gay men to be able to be served in public at a regular bar instead of an afterhours club. She did this. Lee Brewster, with her own money, changed the laws on the books in New York against criminal impersonation that was held over drag queens' heads.

When she died and I wrote an obituary for her, these freaking gay rag newspapers didn't even have the balls to put in her accomplishments — even after her death. Yes, I'm angry with this fucking community. I wish sometimes that 1969 had never happened, they make me so angry. But it happened, and I have a whole lot of children. One of my most beautiful moments, all these years, was in 2000 at world pride when the Italian transsexual organization in Bologna invited Julia and me to participate. I got to speak to all those people that have oppressed our community. Because it's not just here in the United States with the mainstream community but all over.

It's astonishing to see how history repeats itself. But I reminded all those 500,000 children out there that day that if it wasn't for us, they would not be where they're at today. They wouldn't have anything, none of them, from one corner of the world to the other. Because it was our community, the street kids, the street queens of that era, who fought for what they have today. And they still turn around and give us their backs.

So STAR has been officially restarted since January 6, 2001. What happened is, we were at church services at the Metropolitan Community Church and they were calling for monitors for the upcoming trial of Amana Milan's<sup>1</sup> assassins. So I spoke to Julia during this whole thing, and Reverend Pat was giving a sermon about it, and I thought, *We can't let this just die. What are courtroom monitors going to do?* I said we got to keep Amanda in the public's eye. That's the only way people are going to realize the plight we're going through.

And during the sermon Reverend Pat talked about the three kings. And he said, "Who are we to say that the three kings were not three queens? Only queens would get up in the middle of the night and throw elaborate stuff into bags and travel to the other ends of the earth not knowing where they're going, but they knew they had to be there. And they followed the star."

So I told her, "We have to do it."

That whole day was telling me what to do — the sermon and the fact that Amanda's murderers were coming up for trial and we had not kept pressure and visibility on it. We were three queens following the STAR. And that's it. The only word I changed was *Transvestite to Transgender*.

We raised a lot of hell back when STAR first started, even if it was just a few of us. We ate and slept demonstrations, planning demonstrations. We'd go from one demo to another, the same day. We were doing what we believed in. And what we're doing now, the few of us who are willing to unsettle people and ruffle up feathers, is what we believe in doing. We have to do it

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<sup>1</sup> 25-year-old trans woman murdered on Manhattan street June 20, 2000, by assailants who cut her throat.

because we can no longer stay invisible. We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are. We have to show the world that we are numerous. There are many of us out there.

Unfortunately, many of us have to live by night, because of the lack of laws or protections. A lot of trans women are standing out on street corners and working clubs. And many of them are highly educated, with college degrees. Many of us have to survive by selling our bodies. If you can't get a job, you have to do whatever it takes to live.

I live at Transy House now with Julia. We've lived there for four years. It's a communal house run by Rusty [Mae Moore] and Chelsea [Goodwin]. They started it eight years ago and run it after the model of STAR House. Chelsea was one of my original children at STAR House. It's a safe house for girls who are still working the streets. It gives them a roof over their heads without having to hustle for money. They pay \$50 a week if they can afford it. If not, they help out around the house. One girl cleans up for her board. The only rules are no drugs and no business done on the premises by working girls. And one of the political things we do is lobby for the legalization of medical marijuana for cancer patients and AIDS patients, along with the struggle for transgender rights.

It's a shame that more people in the trans community don't open up houses like Rusty and Chelsea are doing with Transy House. We get calls all the time from city and state agencies looking to place people, and we have to tell them, "Look, we're constantly filled up and we're doing this by ourselves without support from anyone." There are lots of shelters for people with AIDS but no safe house for people without AIDS. There's no safe shelter for these kids, so they end up sleeping on the streets. It hurts to see this still going on after 30 years, when Marsha and I first started trying to do something about it.

I'm happy that I've seen this new civil rights legislation introduced in the New York city council. It's historic, and I'm glad that we all came out in numbers at the hearing because it made an impression, even though the major news media didn't cover us. Octavia St. Laurent said it last year at Amanda's funeral: "Men have rights, women have rights, children have rights, gays have rights, lesbians have rights, animals have rights...we ain't got shit."

Before I die, I will see our community given the respect we deserve. I'll be damned if I'm going to my grave without having the respect this community deserves. I want to go to wherever I go with that in my soul and peacefully say I've finally overcome.

"I WANTED TO DO EVERY DESTRUCTIVE THING THAT I COULD THINK OF AT THAT TIME TO HURT ANYONE THAT HAD HURT US THROUGH THE YEARS."

SYLVIA RIVERA

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