

**The following interview with
JAMES WIRRICK
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 7, 2019**



James Wirrick

Library of Congress: How did you meet Sylvester? Did you audition for him? Can you tell us about the actual writing session for “Mighty Real”?—for example, did it take place in the studio?

James Wirrick: Sylvester’s drummer at the time, Jack Reiner, called and asked me to come hear the band where they were playing that week--they needed a guitar player. The first time I saw the band, Sylvester was flanked in front by two background singers, both fully-bearded drag queens in full drag. I told Reiner I wasn’t interested; the two bearded drag queens would never fly “mainstream”--it was just too much. Months later, Reiner called again and said, “Syl has toned it down a bit--he got rid of the drag queens.” So I auditioned for the band and was hired on the spot.

The writing for “Mighty Real” was actually done in three stages: I wrote the music in my modest little Duncan Street apartment in San Francisco--we were all dirt-poor then. Syl wrote the lyrics and melody--almost all on the spot--at a rehearsal. Synthesist Patrick Cowley then got hold of a rehearsal tape and added the bouncy synth bass lines and all his effects. Syl heard that demo recording and immediately said, “I want that on my record.” So later they added Cowley’s synths and effects to the track in the studio at Fantasy Records. Harvey Fuqua produced the track and the album, “Step II.”

LOC: At the time of its creation, did you (and Sylvester) view “Mighty Real” as a “disco” song? “Disco,” as a term if not as a type of music, would soon start to fall out of favor--was that being felt at the time by the two of you?

JW: No, we didn’t view it as a “disco” song; that soon became a pejorative term. However, almost all the artists and producers who were on the radio at the time were doing the characteristic quarter-note kick drum and octave bass lines--it was simply fashionable. So we never liked the term [“disco”], even though that style was working on the radio. That “style” really has never left the radio--as a matter of fact, it’s all over the radio even today; it’s just called dance music now or EDM instead.

LOC: I have read that, originally, the song was meant to be more mid-tempo. Is this correct? If so, how and why did it change?

JW: The song was not intended to be slower, but at the initial rehearsals, the band wanted to play it with a more syncopated R&B type bass line, and with a more R&B style drum beat. Sylvester and I just wanted to get a single on the radio and we finally convinced the guys to play it with the then-fashionable octave bass lines and quarter-note kick drum patterns.

LOC: Now, of course, the song is a gay anthem with the use of the word/term “Real” being interpreted by many as a statement about being true to one’s self. Was that your intent in the beginning, or did audiences find something there that even you and Sylvester didn’t know existed?

JW: Sylvester wrote all the lyrics, so this is pure conjecture on my part; my guess is that, originally, he chose “Real” simply because it rhymed with “Feel”--it wasn’t that complicated. However, his verses do sort of suggest ideas about being true to one’s self--but mostly he was trying to be provocative and controversial, pushing the envelope at the time.

LOC: To what do you credit “Mighty Real’s” extraordinary endurance?

JW: Those of us who are involved in the managing of my song catalog still wonder about that. Certainly pop songs which endure over decades have many commonalities--they’re usually “catchy” in some way or another, and they tend to be a bit different than the ones that don’t endure as long. But ask the writers of any “classic” pop song that has endured over decades that same question and they’ll probably say the same thing: “We really don’t know.”