

# “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)”—Sylvester (1978)

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Essay by Joshua Gamson (guest post)\*



*Sylvester*

Sylvester James (1947-1988) was in some ways an unlikely star: an androgynous, cross-dressing, openly gay, African American, falsetto-singing, unapologetically flaming man-diva influenced primarily by church women, black blues singers, drag queens, hippies, and homosexuals. In the 1970s and 80s, Sylvester rode his marginality right into the mainstream--a star not despite the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality he crossed but because of them--becoming an international disco sensation and an enduring icon of queer self-determination.

Sylvester rode to stardom on the wave of liberation movements that shared with him a taste for the strange, the over-the-top, the fantastical, and that aimed, like him, for pleasure, self-determination, shamelessness, and the ecstasy of blurred boundaries. He embodied a simple set of diva-driven inspirational imperatives that have continued to inspire: be free; be fabulous; be real. The San Francisco-based singer's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" became the soundtrack of sexual and gender liberation movements largely because it articulated a revolution you could dance to.

It almost didn't. The song dominated the disco charts in 1978 and has had a vibrant life since then, but it actually began as a mid-tempo rhythm and blues ballad written by Sylvester's bandmate and keyboard player James ("Tip") Werrick. As recounted by Werrick and other band members, Sylvester blew in late to a rehearsal, heard the tune, and impatiently waved for the band to stop. "No, no, no," he said, shaking his head. He apparently had disco on his mind, perhaps not surprising given that by then disco made up about two-fifths of "Billboard's" Top 100 singles and albums. "What are you doing? Like this." He stomped his foot fast and hard, signaled to the band to pick up the beat, instructed the drummer to pound the kick drum on the quarter notes, *psss-psss-psss* the high hat cymbals on the offbeat eights, hit the snare on two and four. Bob Kingson, the bass player, made up a bouncing bassline an octave below the piano. *Ouila*: disco.

While the band played, Kingson says, "Sylvester proceeded to create the melody and lyrics on the spot. He just blasted this thing out of himself." He sang words on the chorus, but on the verses he just *la-la-la'd*. Sylvester was blasé about the whole thing. "We put this disco beat on it, and I really didn't think much about it," he said later. "I didn't think the song was that hot." For weeks, he didn't even bother writing down the lyrics he'd come up with. "There weren't a lot of words," Sylvester said later, "but they said exactly what was going on: to dance and sweat and cruise and go home and carry on and how a person feels." Sylvester meets someone on the

dance floor, brings him home where it's "nice and dark." The music is in him and he's still "real hot," and he gets kissed and it feels real good, and he knows "you'll love me like you should."

It might be said that "Mighty Real" began its life in the Palm Lane Church of God in Christ in South Central Los Angeles, where Sylvester was born and raised. As a church kid, he sang and banged the piano, pushed himself into the choir before he was old enough, and experienced and elicited ecstatic heights while perched on a milk crate singing "Never Grow Old." He left the church as a young teenager when, as his friend Yvette Flunder later put it, it became clear that he was "too real" for the church and "he was invited out of the church in the ways that church folks can invite you out." A quick listen to "Mighty Real" will tell you, though, that the church never left Sylvester.

As a teenager, Sylvester spent much of his time with a group of LA drag queens--a cross between a street gang and a sorority--who called themselves the Disquotays. The Disquotays lived and partied by one primary dictum: be fabulous and be free. By the late 1960s, the Disquotays were going their separate ways, Sylvester had drifted from his family, and he was tiring of the LA scene. One trip north was all it took. In 1970, Sylvester moved to the center of San Francisco hippie counterculture, living and performing for a couple of years with the Cockettes, a glitter-dripping, gender-defying, drag-and-drugs, anarchist-musical-comedy performance troupe. The Cockettes lived by one primary dictum: be strange and be free. The guiding principles of freedom, strangeness, fabulousity, defiance, self-celebration that informed Sylvester's music and performances had deep and varied roots.

The sound that became Sylvester's signature--raw, gospel falsetto riding a bouncing synthesizer--was developed and tested in the vibrant subcultural scenes of San Francisco. When producer Harvey Fuqua signed him to Fantasy Records in 1976, Sylvester had hired Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes--the Two Tons of Fun, who later became the Weather Girls--and together with the Hot Band they served up gospel-fied Neil Young and Leonard Cohen covers and party music like "Down, Down, Down" to sweaty crowds in the newly super-gay Castro. He met the synthesizer whiz Patrick Cowley at the Cabaret, a San Francisco gay disco where Sylvester sometimes performed and often danced, and recruited him to play synthesizers on "Mighty Real." Cowley, who later collaborated with Sylvester on other songs, was instrumental in the development of the hi-NRG dance music sound that characterizes "Mighty Real."

By 1978, when "Mighty Real" hit the scene, disco had moved considerable gayness, camp, and androgyny into the American mainstream. It was a pretty good bet that, in a time and place where the Village People dominated and it would soon be possible to boogie to Ethel Merman, nobody was going to run screaming from a black guy wearing womanly clothing and singing gospel disco like a sexed-up church girl. The song, which, at first, Fantasy did not much promote in the United States, by the end of the summer 1978, became the number one disco song in most major cities in the United States. It hit the top ten in England, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Holland, Switzerland, Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela and Hong Kong. The album on which it appeared, "Step II," went gold, and Fantasy released a special promotional pressing of "Mighty Real" on bright pink vinyl. In mid-August, Fantasy rushed Sylvester to London with only four hours notice to pounce on the quick ascent of "Mighty Real" in Europe. That night he sang at three London discos, where he was met by mobs. People followed him from club to club, so the crowds got bigger as the night went on. "Sylvester caused riots," said a reporter, Sharon Davis, who hung out with him that week.

Although Sylvester didn't set out to become a disco star, he and disco were made for each other. Disco was, at its roots, as black and as gay as you could possibly get. Disco culture was in favor of pretty, shiny things; elevated the party to an art form; was nearly inseparable from drugs; revered strangeness, grandeur, ridiculousness, excess, fantasy, sexual freedom, and ecstasy. Good disco, like a good church service or a good hippie gathering, could melt away differences

for a while and send you flying outside of yourself. Disco was oddly essential for gay liberation. Disco and the collective experience of the dance floor were bodily reminders of freedom: the individual and collective throwing off of stigma, the devotional embrace of strangeness, joy, and queer pleasure, the making of the fantasy self into an actual being. “Mighty Real,” with its falsetto realness, was the sound of disco preaching.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.