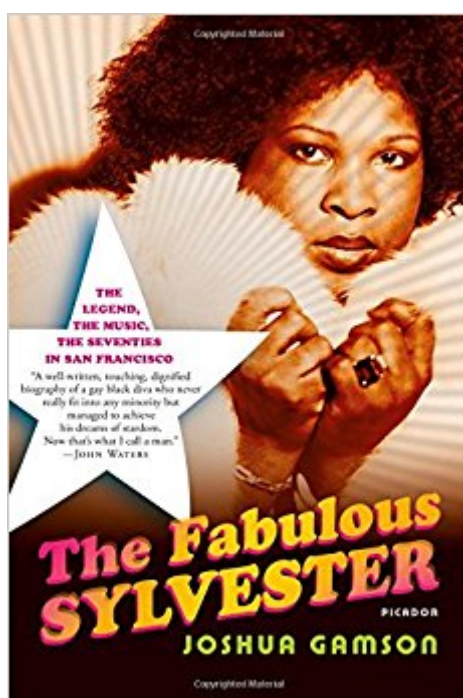


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# The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, The Music, The Seventies In San Francisco



## Synopsis

Imagine a piper singing in falsetto, wearing sequins, and leading the young people of the nation to San Francisco and on to a liberation where nothing was straight-laced or old-fashioned. And everyone, finally, was welcome--to come as themselves. This is not a fairy tale. This was real, mighty real, and disco-sensation Sylvester was the piper. Yale-trained sociologist Joshua Gamson uses Sylvester's life to lead us through the story of the 1970s, when a generation took off its shame. Celebrity, sociology, and music history mingle in this endlessly entertaining story of a singer who embodied the freedom, spirit, and flamboyance of a golden moment in American culture.

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## Customer Reviews

In the world of that most disparaged of musical genresâ "discoâ "the subject of this biography commanded respect. By conventional standards, Sylvester James was an outsiderâ "he was an out, gay, African-American who dressed in drag and sang with a thundering falsettoâ "but he found mainstream success in the late 1970s and early '80s with three Top 40 hits, Dance (Disco Heat), You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real) and I Who Have Nothing, and an international #1 sensation (Do Ya Wanna Funk). At times, Gamson's (Freaks Talk Back) extensively researched volume is a vibrant and moving oral biography, with firsthand conversations with virtually everyone who knew or worked with Sylvester, from his youth in South Central L.A. through his successful music career, to his death from AIDS in 1988 at 41. The richness of this material (Sylvester's background singers Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes Armstead, who later became the Weather Girls, are particularly amusing and insightful raconteurs) reveals all the shadings of Sylvester's diva persona: he was

fierce but generous, caustic but caring, temperamental but talented. Gamson's pulsating use of song lyrics, sounds and descriptions also creates a tangible history of San Francisco as it changed from a joyous oasis of liberation to the epicenter of the AIDS pandemic. Seventeen years after his death, this gay icon gets the celebratory biography he deserves. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Hot on the heels of Pam Tent's book on the Cockettes, *Midnight at the Palace* [BKL N 15 04], Gamson limns another gender-bending San Francisco entertainment phenomenon, whose career arced high without quite denting general national consciousness. Sylvester James Jr. came from nearly all-black South Central L.A. As a teen, he started cross-dressing and sneaking out to glitzy parties. Possessed of a remarkable singing voice, he advanced from the antics of his cross-dressing street-gang-cum-sorority the Disquotays to become immortalized onscreen when a scene in the Bette Midler vehicle *The Rose* called for a drag Diana Ross. "The producers thought it would be hilarious to have a Diana who tipped the scales at around two-fifty, so Sylvester was hired." The seventies were a cornucopia of glitz and success for Sylvester. When he died of AIDS in 1988, even his funeral was a show full of singing, sermonizing, and an audiotape of the deceased cutting loose--in falsetto, of course--on Christmas carols. "Most people in the church were overcome

I enjoyed this book so much that I read it twice, then a year later, read it again!--FANTASTIC!! It captures the times, the people, places and things that made Sylvester, San Francisco, that music and that era such a golden & magical time!! I love the stories of the young Sylvester growing up in South Central L.A. in the 50's and 60's, FLAMING THE CHILDREN!! Giving them fabulousness and outrageousness at every turn, from his soul-stirring falsetto rendition of the black gospel classic "Never Grow Old", to the rawkus "DISQUOTAYS", a rag-tag gang of young black drag queens that he hung out with, to the off-the-charts outfits that must've stopped traffic in the hood big time! (LOL!!) It was evident to all who knew him even then, that this pretty black child with the high voice was way different and way way special!! (-: Some didn't know how to take Sylvester or even know what to do with him, yet he pressed on!--Carving out his own space within the harsh realities of ghetto life as best he could. Sylvester was a true pioneer in every way! He didn't see race, gender, the expectations of others, the taunts of hateful & ignorant people, etc., as obstacles or boundaries he needed to respect. He was a true original!--Uncut, undiluted, young, black, gay, gifted, stylish, full of charm and ambition, with the soul of a torch singer or a blues shouter infused by a rock-n-roll rebel

spirit and soul singer's chops! What a combination!! myself can attest to Sylvester's impact, as both a fan and as young gay black kid who was coming of age and into self-awareness at the very time that his star was reaching it's zenith!! had just started partying and experimenting sexually by the age of 14 in 1978 when "Dance (Disco Heat)" and "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real!)" burst onto the music charts, in the clubs and in house parties across the country and eventually, the world!! I couldn't yet get into the disco clubs, but oh boy!--I could sure get into house parties!! I was hanging out with people who were 5 to 10 yrs older than me and I was learning MANY INTERESTING THINGS!! Of course, back then you had "FAIRY GODMUTHAZ", older gays who would take us young "up & comings" under their chiffon wings and school us on the do's and don't's of gay life, sex & survival in the late 70's and early 80's!! PRE-AIDS and in the last writhing throws of the SEXUAL REVOLUTION, it was a great time to be alive!! grew up in the south during this time, which already had it's issues with race and sexuality, so the gay world of that time, on that end of the country, was still very underground, hypocritical and always hush-hush!! There were a lot of secret stares, codes, slangs, etc. to let those who needed to know, what you wanted them to know. But though it was very repressed and subterfuge, MAN, DID WE HAVE SOME FUN TIMES IN OUR LITTLE NETHERWORLD!! And yes, as is now, back then, straight men did venture into our world quite frequently!! Anywayz, enter THE FABULOUS SYLVESTER from the legendary and exotically far reaches of a city they called "the gay shangri-la"... aka SAN FRANCISCO!! It was the summer of 1978, and here was this strong, proud, black, beautiful, talented, androgynous gay man telling us, by the very nature of his existence, that it was not only alright to be what you were out in full view of the world, but it was also our duty to be FABULOUS & JOYOUS!! (-: Sylvester was more than just a disco diva, HE WAS A WHOLE MOVEMENT!!--Every time he would perform, it was part church revival, part circus, part drag pageant and part gay pride celebration!! TRUE STORY!!---Picture It!!--Greenville, SC in May of 1979...I had just turned 15 yrs old, and me and two young gay friends of mine, one 16 and one 18, hear through the grapevine that none other than THE FABULOUS SYLVESTER would be appearing at a club called SAN SOUCCI's in Atlanta, GA (which was 200+ miles away, and well on it's way to becoming the southern San Francisco!) and we go absolutely nuts!! It becomes our mission, our sole purpose for existing!! Our quest, to somehow, obtain fake ID's, fabulous disco-era outfits replete with lots of glitter, dripping fox tail off the lapels & double belts, shoes called "crayons" that had a clear amber heel that had lights in them that blinked in rhythm as you danced your booty off on the dance floor, either Sassoon or Jordache jeans which had a little stretch fabric blended in with the denim to hug your firm perky teen-aged azz and tiny waist to perfection, outlining your package in the front, and making the local guys salivate with lust

over a hot piece of TENDERONI like you! (LOL!!--we were too much!) We pooled our allowances, our summer jobs, etc. to obtain tickets through an older bisexual cousin of mine who lived down in Atlanta at the time, who also arranged the fake ID's as well. Keep in mind, I had just turned 15, one friend was 16 and the other was 18...none of our parents even knew we were gay, and there was no way in the hell that they would've sanctioned us (under-aged) going all that way to Atlanta...and to see this gender-inspecific weirdo named SYLVESTER!! (Boy George and Ru Paul were still a ways off yet!) So me and my friends, being rife with teenaged angst, secretiveness and resourcefulness, concoct the half-baked scheme to hitchhike from Greenville to Atlanta with duffelbags in tow filled with our outfits, toiletries, etc., use our fake ID's to get into the club and party with Sylvester & Two Tons O' Fun into the wee hours, get my older bi cousin to rent us a hotel room in Atlanta, have us a slam bang good time with some local fellas overnight and then hitch it back to Greenville by Sunday evening before 5 pm!! (LMAO!!) Anywayz, long story short, as is with all half-cocked and scantily thought out teenaged schemes, we did pull it off, got in the club and got down with Sylvester, got high, got the boys, got the hotel room, etc. But what we didn't bargain on was our mothers not being born yesterday and the loose lips of the jealous young queens who wished they had the balls to pull off what we did! (We got ratted out big time!) We also had a hell of a time trying to hitch it back from Atlanta to Greenville on a Sunday morning, and after our mothers up in SC found out what we had done, they got in a car and headed for us like heat-seeking/search & destroy SCUD missiles with fire in their eyes! Man, did we get our teenage closeted gay behinds handed to us! My older cousin caught it too from my uncle in Atlanta for his hand in our scheme, and we didn't even have time to put concealer on over the many "hickies" on our necks and chests from our Atlanta frolic in the hotel from the night before! Boy, it was a mess! We wound up being forced out of the closet to our mothers (which was then a horror to them!) We were all immediately grounded for a month to our respective residences, were banned from socializing with each other, (which we still would sneak and hang out!) and we all got the butt whippings of our young lives! (Yes, parents still whipped butt back in those days!) BUT OH MAN!--We didn't care! It was well worth it, because we got to see THE GODDESS, THE DISCO DIVA...SYLVESTER, live and up close!! (LOL!!) Now, here I sit...a 44 yr old, well-traveled, successful, proud and fortunate gay black man who has had my fun, relished the memories of those far away magical days, and if there is any bittersweetness to the story, it's that I have outlived not only my two friends from that teenaged excursion, but Sylvester and about 30 more friends and acquaintances from the late 70's to the mid 90's...all lost to the scourge of AIDS. As we grow older, we reflect and long for things that were familiar to our particular generation as things are being torn down, people die or move, and the world of our past is erased. This

wonderful book, along with Sylvester's music playing in the background as I was reading it, brought all the magic back for awhile! This book would make an excellent movie and I hope someone will make it happen someday in the near future. In the meantime, enjoy the book folks! R.I.P. To Sylvester, Izora Rhodes, Patrick Cowley, and to all my friends and acquaintances who have made their transitions in the prime of their lives!--I'll see you again one day!! LOVE & PEACE 2 ALL!!

Magic happens where reality and fantasy overlap. It's a space that dance music star Sylvester effortlessly occupied during the outrageous and flamboyant club scene of the mid-70s to early 80s, when those lines were happily blurred on a nightly basis. Gamson does an excellent job of showing Sylvester's 'six-degrees of separation' influence - he worked with emerging stars like Bette Midler, Patti LaBelle, The Weather Girls ("It's Raining Men"), American Idol judge Randy Jackson and Patrick Cowley (Megatone Records). By focusing mainly on Sylvester, Gamson gives the reader an inside look and feel of the gay club scene that was a mix of Broadway and Bowery Row. Sylvester epitomized that drama and contrast with his falsetto voice but powerful vocals and androgynous but commanding stage presence. He created a propulsive musical genre ("Do Ya Wanna Funk?" "You Make Me Feel") that defined the era's manic, raw and pulsating energy. AIDS turned the party lethal, killing off both his audience and the mood for high energy music. Soon, Sylvester, along with hundreds of others in the arts and entertainment community, was dead. There are lots of devil-may-care musicians whose audiences escape through their lives and music, but there will probably never again be a time when the audience and the artist were so intimately in synch, both feeling and living the beat.

I am pleased to once again take this opportunity to tell the world, how wonderful Sylvester was. We attended the same church, in Oakland California and I met and spoke with him on more than one occasion, I own all of his music and a few pictures of him and Me together. I always thought he was a grand diva; he was before RuPaul, and Sylvester laid the foundation, very talented, brave, with lots of courage. The Fabulous Sylvester, The Legend, The music, is a great read and lets the reader in on many unknown secrets about the diva's life. It's funny, sad at times and spell bounding it will keep you wanting more. From his first breath to his last it's all there, with lots of passion for the world of entertainment. Long live the Queen, "The Fabulous Sylvester, The Legend, The Music".

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