

Document Set - Sylvia Rivera

Document 1: Biography

Sylvia Rivera was born July 2, 1951 in New York City. Rivera, who is of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan descent, was raised by her grandmother after her mother died by suicide and her father left. Rivera left home at 11 years old due to her grandmother's abuse and disapproval towards her feminine behavior. She found refuge from a community of drag queens who took care of her, and she often relied on sex work to support herself.



As a teen, Rivera became involved in several causes. She attended protests and demonstrations for the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Rights Movement, along with demonstrations denouncing the Vietnam War. She also was involved with the Young Lords activist group and the Black Panther Party.

With her friend Marsha P. Johnson, Rivera was present at the Stonewall rebellions, and a year later co-founded with Johnson the Street Transvestite Action Revolution (STAR) organization. STAR provided shelter and food to homeless queer and trans youth and sex workers. By 1973, STAR struggled to finance its services, and meetings started to occur less, leading to its eventual demise. At the 1973 Christopher Street Day Liberation Rally, Rivera gave her now famous speech "Y'all Better Quiet Down" where she jumped onstage to passionately describe the sacrifices, work and abuse of trans women and their exclusion from the gay rights movement. Until the end of her life, Rivera continued to criticize LGBTQ+ organizations that centered on white, middle-class, cis gender, gay men. In the 1990s, Rivera advocated for legislation to be passed that granted protection to the LGBTQ+ community and outlawed gender discrimination.

Rivera passed away February 19, 2002 from liver cancer. She is often referred to as the "Rosa Parks of the Trans Right movement." Rivera's life and legacy has been commemorated in numerous ways. In 2002, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, an organization that provides legal services to low income trans, gender nonconforming, non binary, and intersex people, was established. In 2005, the corner of Christopher and Hudson St. in New York City in the Village was named Sylvia Rivera Way. In 2019, it was announced that New York City would honor Rivera and her friend Marsha P. Johnson with a monument, making it one of the first monuments in the world dedicated to trans women.



Document 2: "Y'all Better Quite Down" speech, June 24, 1973

"I may be... You all better quiet down. I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a goddamn 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've had to spend much of their money in jail to get their self home and to try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women's Liberation and they write STAR, not to the women's groups, they do not write to 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 me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not 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 you people. If you all want to know about the people in jail – and do not forget Bambi L'Amour, Andorra Marks, Kenny Messner, and other gay people in jail – come and see the people at STAR House on Twelfth Street on 640 East Twelfth Street between B and C apartment 14. The people 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 you all belong to! Revolution now! Gimme a 'G'! Gimme an 'A'! Gimme a 'Y'! Gimme a 'P'! Gimme an 'O'! Gimme a 'W'! Gimme an 'E'! Gimme an 'R'! huh— Gay power. Louder! Gay Power!"

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the issues Rivera raises?
2. Who is Rivera addressing? Who is she advocating for?
3. What is Rivera's motivation?