

Handout 2 - Sylvester Biography

Sylvester was born September 6, 1947, in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. He spent most of his childhood in a church until his preteen years, when news of his sexuality spread throughout the community. Sylvester, whose childhood nickname was “Dooni,” was not completely accepted by his mother and eventually left home as a teenager, but returned home several times before leaving Watts by 1970.



Sylvester found acceptance from his grandmother and as a member of the group the Disquotays, which featured black drag queens and trans women. In the late 1960s, Sylvester accompanied members of the Disquotays around Los Angeles. He began to dress in drag, even appearing in his graduation picture in a blue chiffon dress and beehive hairdo. His style was often described as androgynous, combining both feminine and masculine influences.

After the Disquotays disbanded, Sylvester moved to San Francisco, and soon joined the drag troupe the Cockettes. After the Cockettes gained some popularity from San Francisco locals, celebrities, and publications like Rolling Stone, the show went on the road, travelling to cities with prominent drag and LGBTQ+ scenes. Sylvester’s performance during the Cockette’s shows often attracted the most attention. He claimed to have sought inspiration from black performers and singers Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday, and was offered his own recording contract after he left the Cockettes.

Sylvester began recording and performing with a rock band known together as Sylvester and the Hot Band. And while they opened for famous musicians such as David Bowie, Sylvester and the Hot Band were commercially unsuccessful. The band broke up, prompting Sylvester to go solo. He found success with his second solo album, *Step II*, released in 1978, which featured the disco hit “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).” The album proved to be a success, achieving global recognition and positions on the Billboard charts. Sylvester’s success in Disco, however, was short lived, primarily due to the backlash of Disco spurred by primarily white male DJs.

Sylvester continued making music in the 1980s, even though disco fell out of favor, and performed throughout San Francisco. Sylvester eventually ended his musical career to live with his partner Rick Cranmer, who soon was diagnosed with HIV. Cranmer died from AIDS related complications in 1987, and Sylvester soon learned that he had the virus. Even with deteriorating health, he continued making appearances around San Francisco, where he often used his health condition to speak about HIV/AIDS’s affects on the Black community, which wasn’t receiving as much attention as white patients.

On December 16, 1988, Sylvester passed away. His androgynous style reflected through his music, persona, and fashion is often celebrated. In 2005, Sylvester was inducted into the Dance Hall of Fame and in 2019, “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” was added to the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry.