

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

SYLVESTER, THE SOUL OF A MUSICAL ERA, SUCCUMBS TO AIDS

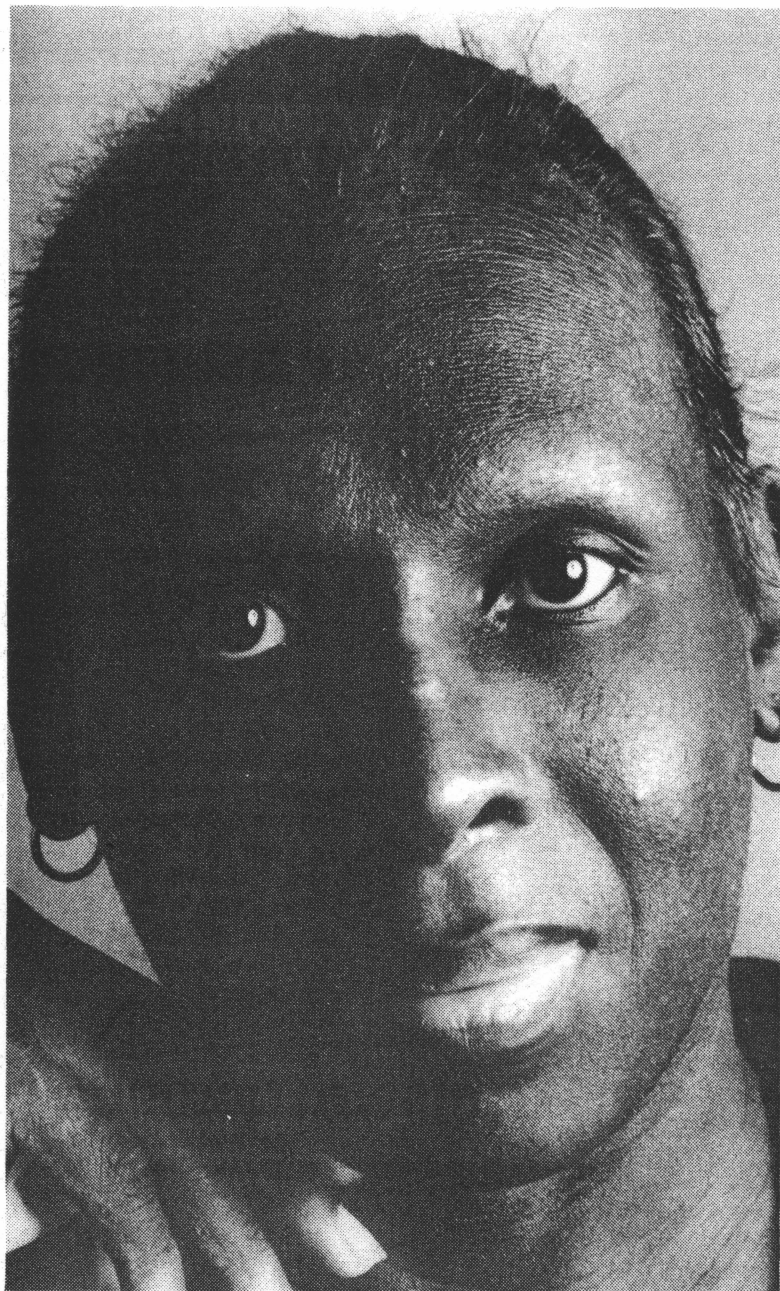
The heavenly choir got a mighty boost just before Christmas, with Roy Orbison's death at 58 from a heart attack—followed on Dec. 16 by Sylvester's death at 42 from AIDS complications. Orbison, swept up in the birth of rock and roll, became its most haunting male vocalist. Sylvester, swept up by the birth of gay lib, became the most incandescent male vocalist in gay disco.

Both men had unearthly falsettos—voices that seemed to belong to another world—but where Orbison's bled loneliness and isolation, Sylvester's was a celebration and a communal exhortation. Where Orbison brought the panic and desolation of back roads to the transistor radio, Sylvester brought the panic and gospel of the church to beat boxes and discos. And if Orbison looked almost invisible and sounded like all the brash impulses of rock were shaking loose within him, Sylvester looked bold and outrageous and sounded as explosive as a queen kicking a closet door off its hinges with a stiletto heel.

Sylvester got his start in music—and his start in sex—in church. As a Pentecostal prodigy, he would accompany his

mother to churches in Los Angeles, where he would wail out Aretha's first single, "Never Grow Old." An evangelist introduced him to gay sex when he was 7.

Syl studied interior design for two years at the Leimert Park Beauty College. After what one biographer describes as "two years of living as a woman on Los Angeles's Sunset Strip," he came to San



Sylvester, age 42. "I'm dying, and it's not pretty. That's it!"

Francisco and discovered tolerance, extravagance, and The Cockettes.

It was the year after the Stonewall riots, and the hippie troupe was already notorious for its gender-fuck drag and trash-camp midnight shows. Syl debuted with them as a Caribbean mammy in *Hollywood Babylon*. He belted "Big City Blues" and brought down the house.

By the time the troupe had made its ill-fated trip to New York, Sylvester and his Hot Band were its opening act. The homemade high jinks bombed in Manhattan, but Syl was soon back in San Francisco with a contract from Blue Thumb Records. As a glitter-rock star, well, Sylvester was no David Bowie. Onstage he looked like one of R. Crumb's Big Butt cartoon characters, shouting gamely over a generic white-boogie band.

By 1973, after two misguided LPs (one with a scratch-and-sniff flower on the cover; the other coyly titled *Bazaar*), Syl could be found in piano lounges, performing "Blackbird" in demure drag. He headed for Europe.

Sylvester's real success didn't happen until 1978. After signing with Fantasy Records in 1977 and releas-

ing *Sylvester*, he recruited a pair of ladies with voices as big as their girths (Martha Walsh and Izora Rhodes—who later became The Weather Girls), dubbed them the Two Tons of Fun, and began playing San Francisco clubs with a vengeance. Next, he asked Patrick Cowley (the lighting director at the City Disco, who had produced a wicked homemade remix of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love") to

turn his synthesizer on two of Syl's new tunes—then to join his band.

The two cuts, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" and "Dance (Disco Heat)," became Top 40 hits, boosting sales of the *Step III* LP. At 32, Sylvester had a gold record. As disco and black pop were turning slick and urbane, Syl came on brash and brazen with his gospel shouters. Riding the disco boom in 1979, he toured Europe and South America, returning triumphant to San Francisco for a sold-out show at the classy War Memorial Opera House. The mayor declared the date, March 11, 1980, Sylvester Day.

When the disco market collapsed, labels panicked. At Fantasy, execs tried to package Syl for black radio and barred Cowley from the studio. The strategy, pursued through two LPs (*Sell My Soul* and *Too Hot to Sleep*), never worked.

"They were trying to turn me into Teddy Pendergrass," Syl later told me, "and I told them, 'I won't lie to my fans, and I can't be what I'm not!' Finally, I threw a fit—went in there in spiked heels, a blond wig, a negligee—and just shrieked! They couldn't handle it."

Meanwhile Marty Bleckman (who had worked as a disco-promo man at Fantasy) had joined forces with Cowley. They knew that disco wasn't dead; it had just retreated to the gay clubs that had birthed it. Bleckman knew the deejays, and Cowley could structure a song to climax in perfect tandem with blasts of amyl nitrite. In 1981 the two pressed Cowley's salacious anthem "Menergy" on a shoestring budget. It went to number 1 on the U.S. dance charts and launched Megatone Records.

In 1982, freed from his Fantasy contract, Syl called Cowley. The two wrote and cut "Do You Wanna Funk?" in one day. Syl's first disc for Megatone was a smash. Sadly, six months later, AIDS claimed Cowley.

Sylvester produced three LPs for Megatone, scoring club hits with "Don't Stop," "Hard Up," and a nervy cover of Freda Payne's "Band of Gold." Syl did AIDS benefits, toured Europe, and in 1986 signed with Warner Bros., releasing *Mutual Attraction* and the single "Someone Like You." His delight at having a major label behind him was curtailed by the death of his lover of two years, Rick Crammer, in 1987.

Sylvester shared his grief publicly without concern that it might hurt his career. He continued to play and to plan an upcoming LP.

"After Rick died," Marty Bleckman notes, "Syl refused to check up on his immune system. He left it up to fate. I'd like to tell others *not* to do that. If he had monitored his blood and sought early intervention, he might have forestalled the illness. I hope that message gets out."

"Syl's next album was to be commercial, but he had always seen himself as a blues-gospel-torch singer. He wanted to bring in Nelson Riddle's orchestra and do a record like Ronstadt's. We talked about those plans. We laid down four tracks for the new LP, but when it came time to cut the vocals, Sylvester was too ill."

Last June, Sylvester announced that he had AIDS and joined the Gay Freedom Parade in a wheelchair. By early October, when the Castro Street Fair staged a tribute to him two blocks from his apartment, Sylvester was too frail to attend.

Bleckman notes, "A lot of people write about Sylvester 'living powerfully with AIDS,' but the fact of the matter is that the illness was painful and grotesque—and Syl was angry."

"Near the end, Jim Wigler came to shoot a portrait of Syl for his *Faces of AIDS* project. Syl, who had set such store by glamour, agreed to the session, looking a lot more like Mahatma Gandhi than Patti LaBelle. When Jim asked for a quote to accompany the shot, Syl just stared blankly into space and said, 'I'm dying, and it *ain't* pretty.'"

"People don't want to talk about the anger. They'd like to embalm Sylvester in nostalgia. But AIDS is something to be angry about! We need that anger to stop our friends from dying."

"Syl agreed with me that people are dying of genocide—that the government considers gay and black people expendable. He used to say, 'If it was 40,000 white, suburban housewives with this disease, they would've gotten off their butts *long* ago,'" says Bleckman.

Sylvester worked for AIDS outreach into the black community, calling it his "crusade." He requested that his memorial service be held not in the Castro but at *his* church, the Love Center in Oakland. Proud to be black, proud to be gay, and proud of his faith, Sylvester reached out boldly even in death.

Bleckman recalls, "The service blew everyone away. This black church has the best gospel choir in the world—the Edwin Hawkins Singers; the whole congregation dressed up and turned out. When they all sang, the decibel level was unbelievable. They were all going full-tilt—women having fainting spells, folks speaking in tongues, people falling in the aisles. And there was Sylvester, laid out in an open casket, with his mother, Letha Hurd, at his side. He was dressed in a red kimono and matching lipstick (what he used to call his 'afternoon makeup'). And the whole congregation descended, clapping and parading by his casket at the end, roaring out 'I'll Fly Away.' It was a scene—the ultimate Sylvester bon voyage! I tell you, he couldn't have written it better himself."

Sylvester's influence will easily outlast him. Papers quoted Bruce Springsteen on the impact that Roy Orbison had had on him. I called Jimmy Somerville (gay lead singer with Bronski Beat and The Communards), who vividly remembered his first glimpse of Syl.

"It was when I was still in school. He came on *Tops of the Pops*, singing 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).' I thought it was the wildest, most brilliant thing I'd ever seen on television. First the image amazed me—to me, was an image of liberation and self-determination."

It was an image that inspired lots of homos. As critic Barry Walters wrote, "If he could be that wild, glittery, unreal thing up there, you could simply be you."

Somerville admitted his debt to Sylvester. "I think my whole style comes from having sung along with his records all those years ago. My favorite was 'Epilogue,' his gospel version of 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).' Those soaring vocals were almost scary. They made everything seem so passionate. It used to make me giggle."

It's a voice that can still make folks laugh with shivering delight, both carnal and celestial, a filament of panic illuminating its ecstatic flights. Walters called it the "ability to convey both the joy of the party and the horror behind it. With the same phrase, Sylvester could evoke the delirious escape the party gave you and the fear of what you're partying to avoid."

Sylvester's is a voice that folks still need to hear, and it's a voice that lives on, as does Roy Orbison's—both conduits to the heart.

For the Lonely (Rhino) collects 24 of Orbison's classics, and a new LP (with contributions from Bono and Elvis Costello), *Mystery Girl*, will be released soon.

12 X 12 (Megatone) collects 13 of Syl's strongest dance-track 12-inch cuts for the label. Megatone has licensed "Do You Wanna Funk?" to the Dutch label Mega, which has commissioned British deejay Les Adams to prepare new mixes of the tune Sylvester and Cowley crafted nearly seven years ago. It is due out this month.

I'm hoping to hear it on the dance floor—a rapacious battle cry from two soldiers fallen in battle, which I hope serves as a reminder to not give up the fight.

—Adam Block