

WHEN I MET SYLVIA RIVERA

As a young journalist in the late 1980s, **Eric Marcus** traveled across America recording the stories of queer pioneers. Here, he recounts his meeting with an iconoclastic Stonewall veteran.

ON JUNE 28, 1969, Ray “Sylvia Lee” Rivera was a 17-year-old street kid and self-described drag queen just looking for a good time on a hot summer night in Greenwich Village—a night that would mark a key turning point in the nearly two-decade-old gay civil rights movement. When I met her 20 years later, Rivera was on her way to becoming an iconic symbol of the Stonewall uprising—a symbol almost as indelible as the Stonewall Inn itself.

It was December 1989. I was a youngish gay journalist from Queens who was dressed for a winter’s day in my own straitlaced drag of corduroy and down. Standing at the bottom of a long, rickety staircase in the entry hall of Rivera’s tenement building in Tarrytown, N.Y., I looked up to see her in the open doorway of her apartment, bathed in the harsh glare of a bare lightbulb. After a year of traveling the country conducting interviews for *Making History*, my 1992 oral history of the gay civil rights movement, I should have been prepared for anything: I’d seen and heard it all. Yet the truth was that Sylvia scared the shit out of me.

I can’t recall what it was that made me want to back out the front door and run for the train station, but I think it was a combination of Rivera’s gender-bending outfit and overall appearance. She had lightly made-up wide-spaced eyes, a prominent nose, and high cheekbones, all framed by thick, wavy brown hair that tumbled onto her shoulders. Her broad, gap-toothed smile was set off by full, bright red lips. She was dressed in something my sister might have worn to a 1970s disco—a black halter top, tied at the waist, over a skintight black undershirt, and hot-pink spandex pants tucked into beige knee-high boots with chunky heels. She had one arm raised, her large hand clasping the door frame, while the other rested on her cocked hip. “You made it,” she said. I took a deep breath and climbed the stairs.

Until a couple of months ago, I hadn’t heard Sylvia’s voice in more than a quarter-century. And despite her rising star in the 14 years since her death as an emblem of the Stonewall riots and



Gay Liberation Front demonstration at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, 1970. Photography by Richard C. Wandel

the drag queens who fought back against police repression, I’d largely forgotten the details of her heartbreaking story. However, when I recently started work on a series of mini-podcasts drawn from my archive of a hundred recorded interviews that I’d conducted for *Making History*—and its second edition, *Making Gay History*—I had occasion to revisit our 1989 conversation.

As I was reading over the interview transcript to highlight excerpts for my podcast producer, Sara Burningham, to stitch together into a coherent narrative, the details of Sylvia’s hardscrabble story came back to me. But it wasn’t until a week later, when I listened to the rough cut and heard Sylvia’s voice—a voice colored by her native Bronx and alcohol—that she came fully alive again. Sitting at my desk on West 20th Street in Chelsea, I was transported back to Sylvia’s modest, steamy kitchen where she prepared chili as we talked. In the audience, occasionally lobbing an aside, were Sylvia’s lesbian friend Rennie, who was Sylvia’s non-gender-conforming analogue, and Sylvia’s boyfriend of 10 years, who was as nondescript as Sylvia was front and center. The darkened windows were fogged with condensation, and the bottle of vodka that sat on the kitchen table was well on its way to being emptied. My tape recorder was set to RECORD. ■

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