

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

SYLVIA RIVERA

LGBTQ+ activist

"We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are."

Page | 1



PHOTO BY VAL SHAFF

Background Information

Born July 2, 1951; Died February 19, 2002

Sylvia was born and raised in New York City and is of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan descent. She identified as a drag queen during her youth and as transgender in her later life. She became an orphan at three years old and lived with her grandmother until 11 years old. Her grandmother disapproved of the way Sylvia expressed her gender identity, and she began living on the streets. She was taken in by a group of drag queens who gave her the name Sylvia¹.

Sylvia's Resistance

Rivera's experience growing up with systemic poverty and racism made her more focused on advocacy for queer people who were low-income and people of color. Because she advocated for drag queens, incarcerated queer individuals, and transgender people, she faced a lot of discrimination from the predominantly white, middle class, gay men who held the most power in queer activism². Rivera's fought against the erasure of Black, Latinx, homeless voices in the queer community, which was not welcome at the time. She inspired a more inclusive future for the LGBTQ+ community.

Achievements

In 1970, Rivera co-founded the Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries (STAR) with Marsha P. Johnson, to provide resources for queer youth who were homeless. Rivera and Johnson were among the first people to care for communities of marginalized queer people. Later, after meeting Julia Murray, she also fought to enact the New York state Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, public accommodations, housing, education, and the exercise of civil rights³. Her legacy includes the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, which was established in 2002 to provide education, social, health, and legal services for transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming people.

¹ Rosenthal, Michele. "Sylvia Rivera." Queer Portraits in History. 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.queerportraits.com/bio/griffin-gracy>. Obtained 29 October 2019.

² Goodman, Elyssa. "Sylvia Rivera Changed Queer and Trans Activism Forever." *Them.us*. 18 March 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.them.us/story/transvisionaries-miss-major>. Obtained 29 October 2019.

³ Rivera, Sylvia, "Queens In Exile, The Forgotten Ones" in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle*. Untorelli Press, 2013. Accessed 29 October 2019.

Essential Questions

1. How did Sylvia Rivera make a difference in the LGBTQ+ community?
2. Sylvia fought for the NY state Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act during her lifetime which was highly impactful for the LGBTQ+ community in New York state. Do you think these laws should be up to states to enact or should be at the federal level? Why?
3. ***“We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are.”***
 - a. Have you ever been made to feel ashamed of who you are? What can you or others do to feel proud of parts of yourself that other people may look down on?