



image © Harvey Wang

**Sylvia Rae Rivera (1951 - 2002)** co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a group dedicated to helping homeless young trans women of colour with her close friend Marsha P. Johnson. Sylvia was the first 'trans activist' to call for a Gay Liberation movement inclusive of trans and queer people.

Born male-bodied, latino Ray Rivera was raised by her Venezuelan grandmother after her mother's suicide and her father walked out. Disapproved of by her grandmother, Ray left home to be taken in by a New York community of those who refused to conform to the gender norms of the time, and adopted the name Sylvia. Transgender was an unknown concept; people like Ray were 'drag queens', 'transvestites', 'queers'. Sylvia survived poverty by becoming a sex worker.

Sylvia became committed to justice for the marginalised. She campaigned for African-American Civil Rights, and against the Vietnam war. Sylvia's political, as well as personal, life was framed in the discrimination she and her fellow Black and Latino trans community experienced.

Sylvia claimed to have been outside the Stonewall Inn in 1969 during the police raid which resulted in the Riots. Alongside her friend, black trans woman Marsha P. Johnson she became a key player in the demonstrations which led to the creation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). Six months later, Sylvia was falsely charged with soliciting. Sylvia and Marsha, angry at the failure of the GLF membership to support Sylvia, formed the Gay Activists Alliance.

"I'm tired of sitting on the back of the bumper. It's not even the back of the bus anymore — it's the back of the bumper."

In 1970, frustrated with the failure of activists to defend themselves after a sit-in was abandoned on the arrival of the Police, and the GAA's willingness to drop 'trans' from proposed anti-discrimination legislation 'in order to get it passed', Sylvia and Marsha founded STAR, focusing on advocacy for those left out by orthodox LGBT politics. A permanent home, help-line, and legal service did not materialise. Sylvia's endured long periods of homelessness and substance abuse. In 1995, three years after Marsha was found in the Hudson River – a death police were quick to rule suicide - Sylvia tried to commit suicide at the same spot.

Sylvia lived to see her role and Marsha's recognised by the activist trans community; later by the LGBT community, and was present at the opening of New York's Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

"I don't even like the label transgender. I'm tired of living with labels. I just want to be who I am. I am Sylvia Rivera. Ray Rivera left home at the age of 10 to become Sylvia. And that's who I am"

Sylvia chose not to have gender reassignment surgery, referring to herself, variously, as a gay man, a transgender woman, and 'half-sister' to the LGBT community. Aged 61, Sylvia died of liver cancer, in 2002, knowing her place in history had been remembered. "Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned"

**Stephen Whittle OBE - Professor of Equalities Law, Manchester Metropolitan University & Head of Legal Advice & Training at Press For Change**



# Faces of 2017: Sylvia Rivera



Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans  
**History Month**