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SYLVIA RIVERA'S TALK AT LGMNY, JUNE 2001 LESBIAN AND GAY COMMUNITY
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Sylvia Rivera's Talk at LGMNY, June 2001 Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City

SYLVIA RIVERA

*Introduction by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes
Transcribed by Lauren Galarza and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes*

Latino Gay Men of New York (LGMNY), a social group established in 1991, invited the Bronx-born, Venezuelan/Puerto Rican Stonewall veteran, transgender activist, and Young Lords member Sylvia Rivera (1951–2002) to be a guest speaker at its monthly “First Friday of the Month” meeting in June 2001. This meeting was organized as a celebration of LGBT Pride month, in commemoration of the Stonewall riots of 1969, a landmark event in the history of gay liberation. The meeting was held at the temporary building that the Lesbian and Gay Community Center was occupying near Gansevoort Street while its main building on 13th Street was being renovated. Since Sylvia was banned from entering the Center (see transcription), we had to secure a special permit in order for her to gain admittance. She came with her life partner Julia Murray. The meeting began with small group discussions of the legacy of Stonewall, followed by Sylvia’s talk. The gathering concluded with a surprise rendition of “Happy Birthday” and the eating of cake and strawberries, an advance celebration of Sylvia’s 50th birthday, which was to occur in July. Sylvia passed away from liver cancer several months later, in February 2002. The recording of Sylvia’s talk unfortunately does not include the very beginning of her presentation. Particularly interesting, in addition to Rivera’s recollection of the Stonewall riots, of early 1970s activism, and of the 1973 schism regarding the inclusion of drag queens in the broader movement, is her discussion of current trans politics in New York and of her participation in World Pride (Italy, 2000), her critique of gay normalization and gay marriage, and her comments on the activism generated by the murders of Matthew Shepard (1976–1998) and Amanda Milan (1975?–2000).

*Top: Cristina Hayworth (Stonewall veteran and organizer of the first Parada de Orgullo in Puerto Rico), Sylvia Rivera and Julia Murray (Sylvia's life partner) at the 2000 Gay Pride Parade. Photographer Luis Carle. Reprinted, by permission, from Luis Carle.
Bottom: Sylvia Rivera (right) and Marsha Johnson (left) holding the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.) banner at the Christopher Street Liberation Day, Gay Pride Parade, NYC (25 June 1972). Photographer Leonard Fink. Reprinted, by permission, from National History Archives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center.*

Note on the editing: We have attempted to limit editing solely to clarify meaning and eliminate redundancy. Some (minimal) rearrangement of phrases in sentences has been done, to simplify syntax. Otherwise, we have respected the talk as it was presented. We have also attempted to maintain Rivera's distinctive grammatical usage, such as the plural of you (yous) and her occasional use of double negatives. Also please note that the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center was renamed in July 2001 and is now known as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center.

[Sylvia is explaining the antecedents to and the context of the Stonewall riots.]



We did have connections with the Mafia. You must remember, everyone was doing drugs back then. Everybody was selling drugs, and everybody was buying drugs to take to other bars, like myself. I was no angel. I would pick up my drugs at the Stonewall [Inn] and take them to the Washington Square Bar on 3rd Street and Broadway, which was the drag queen third world bar. Even back then we had our racist little clubs. There were the white gay bars and then there were the very few third world bars and drag queen bars.

The night of the Stonewall [riots], it happened to be the week that Judy Garland had committed suicide. Some people say that the riots started because of Judy Garland's death. That's a myth. We were all involved in different struggles, including myself and many other transgender people. But in these struggles, in the Civil Rights movement, in the war movement, in the women's movement, we were still outcasts. The only reason they tolerated the transgender community in some of these movements was because we were gung-ho, we were front liners. We didn't take no shit from nobody. We had nothing to lose. *You* all had rights. We had nothing to lose. I'll be the first one to step on any organization, any politician's toes if I have to, to get the rights for my community.

Back to the story: we were all in the bar, having a good time. Lights flashed

on, we knew what was coming; it's a raid. This is the second time in one week that the bar was raided. Common practice says the police from the 6th Precinct would come in to each gay bar and collect their payoff. Routine was, "Faggots over here, dykes over here, and freaks over there," referring to my side of the community. If you did not have three pieces of male attire on you, you were going to jail. Just like a butch dyke would have to have three pieces of female clothing, or *be* was going to jail. The night goes on, you know, they proof you for ID, you know, back then you could get away with anything. Fake IDs were great back then (*audience laughter*), because I wasn't even 18 yet; I was gonna turn 18. We are led out of the bar. The routine was that the cops get their payoff, they confiscate the liquor, if you were a bartender you would snatch the money as soon as the lights went on because you would never see that money again. A padlock would go on the door. What we did, back then, was disappear to a coffee shop or any place in the neighborhood for fifteen minutes. You come back, the Mafia was there cutting the padlock off, bringing in more liquor, and back to business as usual.

Well, it just so happened that that night it was muggy; everybody was being, I guess, cranky; a lot of us were involved in different struggles; and instead of dispersing, we went across the street. Part of history forgets, that as the cops are inside the bar, the confrontation

started outside by throwing change at the police. We started with the pennies, the nickels, the quarters, and the dimes. “Here’s your payoff, you pigs! You fucking pigs! Get out of our faces.” This was started by the street queens of that era, which I was part of, Marsha P. Johnson, and many others that are not here. I’m lucky to be 50 in July, but I’m still here and I’ll be damned if I won’t see 100 (*laughter*).

One thing led to another. The confrontation got so hot, that Inspector [Seymour] Pine, who headed this raid, him and his men had to barricade themselves in our bar, because they could not get out. The people that they had arrested, they had to take into the bar with them, because there was no police backup for them. But seriously, as history tells it, to this day, we don’t know who cut the phone lines! So they could not get the call to the 6th precinct. Number one, Inspector Pine was not welcome in the 6th precinct because he had just been appointed to stop the corruption and, you know, what they called back then, we were a bunch of deviants, perverts. So he was there for that purpose, so who knows if one of his own men didn’t do it, that was, you know, taking a payoff himself.

The police and the people that were arrested were barricaded inside this bar, with a *Village Voice* reporter, who proceeded to tell his story, in the paper, that he was handed a gun. The cops were actually so afraid of us that night that if we had busted through that bar’s door, they were gonna shoot. They were ordered to shoot if that door busted open. Someone yanked a parking meter out the floor, which was loose, because it’s very hard to get a parking meter out of the ground (*laughter*). It was loose, you know, I don’t know how it got loose. But that was being rammed into the door.

People have also asked me, “Was it a pre-planned riot?” because out of nowhere, Molotov cocktails showed up. I have been given the credit for throwing the first

Molotov cocktail by many historians but I always like to correct it; I threw the second one, I did not throw the first one! (*laughter*) And I didn’t even know what a Molotov cocktail was; I’m holding this thing that’s lit and I’m like “What the hell am I supposed to do with this?” “Throw it before it blows!” “OK!” (*laughter*)

The riot did get out of hand, because there was Cookie’s down the street, there was The Haven, there was the Christopher’s End. Once word of mouth got around that the Stonewall had gotten raided, and that there’s a confrontation going on, people came from the clubs. But we also have to remember one thing: that it was not just the gay community *and* the street queens that really escalated this riot; it was also the help of the many radical straight men and women that lived in the Village at that time, that knew the struggle of the gay community and the trans community.

So the crowds did swell. You know, it was a long night of riots. It was actually very exciting cuz I remember howling all through the streets, “The revolution is here!” (*laughter*), you know? Cars are being turned over, windows are being broken, fires are being set all over the place. Blood was shed. When the cops did finally get there, the reinforcements, forty five minutes later, you had the chorus line of street queens kicking up their heels, singing their famous little anthem that up to today still lives on, “We are the Stonewall girls/ we wear our hair in curls/ we wear our dungarees/ above our nelly knees/ we show our pubic hairs,” and so on and so forth.

At that time, there were many demonstrations. They were fierce demonstrations back then. I don’t know how many people remember those times, or how many people read of the struggle in this whole country, what was going on. So then the tactical police force came and heads were being bashed left and right. But what I found very impressive that

evening, was that the more that they beat us, the more we went back for. We were determined that evening that we were going to be a liberated, free community, which we did acquire that. Actually, I'll change the 'we': *You* have acquired your liberation, your freedom, from that night. Myself, I've got shit, just like I had back then. But I still struggle, I still continue the struggle. I will struggle til the day I die and my main struggle right now is that my community will seek the rights that are justly ours.

I am tired of seeing my children—I call everybody including you in this room, you are all my children—I am tired of seeing homeless transgender children; young, gay, youth children. I am tired of seeing the lack of interest that this rich community has. This is a very affluent community. When we can afford to renovate a building for millions and millions of dollars and buy another building across the street and still not worry about your homeless children from your community, and I know this for a fact, because the reason that I have to get clearance every time to come into this building is because I saw many of the kids before the building was being renovated up the street, many of the children are sleeping on the steps of that church. I went in there with an attitude. I raised hell. Yes, maybe I did try to destroy the front desk, but I did not attack anybody. But what did this community center do to me? My thanks for everything I have done for this freakin' community? Had me arrested and put in Bellevue! So I'm supposed to kiss their asses? No, I don't kiss nobody's ass cuz I haven't lived this long, because I don't kiss nobody's ass.

That night, I remember singing "We Shall Overcome," many a times, on different demonstrations, on the steps of Albany, when we had our first march, where I spoke to the crowds in Albany. I remember singing but I haven't overcome a damn thing. I'm not even in the

back of the bus. My community is being pulled by a rope around our neck by the bumper of the damn bus that stays in the front. Gay liberation but transgender nothing! Yes, I hold a lot of anger. But I have that right. I have that right to have that anger. I have fought too damn and too hard for this community to put up with the disrespect that I have received and my community has received for the last thirty-two years.

And a point of history, you know that it took the Gay Rights Bill here in New York seventeen years to pass. [It was approved in 1986.] But I'll go through the beginning. When we were petitioning for the Gay Rights Bill, there was only one person that was arrested. That was me. Because I had the guts to go into the Times Square area on 42nd Street and petition the people to sign that petition. And the only reason I did it was because that bill did include the transgender community. Two or three years into the movement and the bill is being presented and we're going back and forth to City Hall. They have a little backroom deal without inviting Miss Sylvia and some of the other trans activists to this backroom deal with these politicians. The deal was, "You take them out, we'll pass the bill." So, what did nice conservative gay white men do? They sell a community that liberated them down the river, and it still took them seventeen years to get the damn bill passed! And I hate to say it, but I was very happy. Every time that that bill came up for a vote, I said, "I hope it doesn't pass," because of what they did to me. As badly as I knew this community needed that bill, I didn't feel it was justified for them to have it on my sweat and tears, or from my back.

So Stonewall is a great, great foundation. It began the modern day liberation movement, like we spoke before about the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. Yes, there were lots of other little groups but you had to

be what they called themselves the “*normal* homosexuals.” They wore suits and ties. One of the first demonstrations that they had, lesbians who’d never even worn dresses were wearing dresses and high heels to show the world that they were normal. Normal? Fine.

One of my best friends now, who has employed me for the last seven years before I changed jobs, is Randy Wicker. Randy Wicker was a very well-known gay male activist in 1963. He was the first gay male —before any real movement was there— to get on a talk show and state to the world that he was a *normal* homosexual. I give him credit for that. He has done a lot of different things, but he also in 1969 and for many years trashed the transgender community. It took him a lot of years to wake up and realize that we are no different than anybody else; that we bleed, that we cry, and that we suffer.

But this has been going on for the longest time. I mean, before gay liberation, it was the same thing: “drag queens over there, we’re over here.” The world came tumbling down in 1969 and on the fourth anniversary of the Stonewall movement, of the Stonewall riot, the transgender community was silenced because of a radical lesbian named Jean O’Leary, who felt that the transgender community was offensive to women because we liked to wear makeup and we liked to wear miniskirts. Excuse me! It goes with the business that we’re in at that time! Because people fail to realize that—not trying to get off the story—everybody thinks that we want to be out on them street corners. No we do not. We don’t want to be out there sucking dick and getting fucked up the ass. But that’s the only alternative that we have to survive because the laws do not give us the right to go and get a job the way we feel comfortable. I do not want to go to work looking like a man when I know I am not

a man. I have been this way since before I left home and I have been on my own since the age of ten.

Anyway, Jean O’Leary started the big commotion at this rally [Christopher Street Liberation Day, 1973]. It was the year that Bette Midler performed for us. I was supposed to be a featured speaker that day. But being that the women felt that we were offensive, the drag queens Tiffany and Billy were not allowed to perform. I had to fight my way up on that stage and literally, people that I called my comrades in the movement, literally beat the shit out of me. That’s where it all began, to really silence us. They beat me, I kicked their asses. I did get to speak. I got my points across.

There was another speaker that day, Lee Brewster (she passed a year ago), very well known to the trans community and to the cross dressing community. She got up on stage, threw her tiara to the crowd and said, “Fuck gay liberation.” But what people fail to realize was that Lee Brewster put up the majority of the money for the Gay Pride March of 1970, which was our first one. And it was once again, out of maybe two or three hundred of us that started from the Village, up 6th Avenue, up two little lanes of traffic, that we were the visible ones. We were the visible ones, the trans community. And still and yet, if you notice where they keep pushing us every year, we’re further and further towards the back. I have yet to have the pleasure to march with my community, for the simple fact that I belong to the Stonewall Live Veterans group, I march in the front.

But until my community is allowed the respect to march in the front, I will go march with my community because that’s where I’m needed and that’s where I belong. And yes, I’ll wear my big sash that says “Stonewall.” And people are gonna ask. And I’m gonna tell why; because this is where the Heritage of Pride [the group that organizes the march] wants to keep

us. You see, I don't pull no punches, I'm not afraid to call out no names. You screw with the transgender community and the organization Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries [STAR] will be on your doorstep. Just like we trashed the HRC [Human Rights Campaign] for not endorsing the Amanda Milan actions, and then when they threw us a piece of trash, we refused to accept it. How dare you question the validity of a transgender group asking for your support, when this transgender woman was murdered? No. The trans community has allowed, we have allowed the gay and lesbian community to speak for us. Times are changing. Our armies are rising and we are getting stronger. And when we come a knocking (that includes from here to Albany to Washington) they're going to know that you don't fuck with the transgender community.

Mainstreaming, normality, being normal. I understand how much everybody likes to fit into that mainstream gay and lesbian community. You know, it used to be a wonderful thing to be avant-garde, to be different from the world. I see us reverting into a so-called liberated closet because we, not we, *yous* of this mainstream community, wish to be married, wish for this status. That's all fine. But you are forgetting your grass roots, you are forgetting your own individual identity. I mean, you can never be *like them*. Yes we can adopt children, all well and good, that's fine. I would love to have children. I would love to marry my lover over there [Julia Murray], but for political reasons, I will not do it because I don't feel that I have to fit in that closet of normal, straight society which the gay mainstream is going towards.

This is why they don't want the transgender people to have rights. This is why they always tell us, "Oh let us get ours, and then we'll help you get yours." If I hear that one more time, I think I'll jump off the Empire State building.

(*laughter*) But I'm sure a lot of people would like that, especially the old-timers, because I have actually mellowed down through the years. I used to be a bitch on wheels. (*laughter and applause*)

But these are days that we have to reflect on. This is a month that's very important. I may have a lot of anger but it means a lot to me because after being at World Pride last year in Italy, to see 500,000 beautiful, liberated gay men, women, and trans people and being called the mother of the world's transgender movement and the gay liberation movement, it gives me great pride to see my children celebrating. But I just hope that—and I've heard a lot of positive things in this room tonight, as far as people realizing that the trans community was your benefactor and that people are opening up their eyes. But you got to remember, don't just say that because we're here; show your support when we send out a call for action to support our actions, the things that we plan to do.

I mean, it was a hurting feeling that on May 4th [2001] we had history-breaking civil rights in for city council. Our bill was finally introduced. Wow! We waited this long! But where were my sisters and brothers? Where were my children that I liberated? Very few allies showed up. But what made me proud was that the trans community showed up in numbers, and the girls that work these corners even got the nerve enough to come into public and go onto something that they would never consider doing, which was to walk on City Hall because they are all afraid of the police, but they were there. So, that goes to show the rest of the community, that technically when we ask for your support, we want your support. But in the long run, if it's not there, we will acquire what we need.

But, we must remember: Amanda Milan's actions are coming up. I hope to see a lot of you there. But remember one thing, when you all fell out en masse,

including myself, for Matthew Shepard, and many of us went to jail, I only got to see maybe five minutes of the whole thing because being the person who I am, a front liner, as soon as I sat down in the street, one of the white shirts that has known me for years, the person he says, “When the order goes down, get that bitch right there, get her off the street and into the paddy wagon.” So that’s the way that went.

But it seemed like everybody and their mother came out for Matthew Shepard.

A white, middle class gay boy that was effeminate! Amanda Milan got killed last year, five days before Gay Pride. We waited a month to have a vigil for her. Three hundred people showed up. What kind of a—doesn’t the community have feelings? We are part of the gay and lesbian community! That really hurt me, to see that only three hundred people showed up. And it’s not like it was gonna be a long vigil, I mean we went from 36th Street to 42nd Street. So, when we call people, not only to sponsor our actions, we expect to see bodies there. I mean, but like I said, we’re capable of doing it on our own because that’s what we’re learning now, after thirty-two years, that we cannot depend on nobody, except our own trans community, to keep pushing forward.

But remember that as you celebrate this whole month, of how you are liberated. And I feel so sorry for those that are not able to read the history of the Stonewall around the world. And we have to blame once again all the publishers and whatnot. I tried to push Martin Duberman’s publishers [Plume/Penguin] to have the Stonewall book translated into Spanish



Stonewall Inn a few weeks after the riots (1969). Photographer Richard C. Wandel. Reprinted, by permission, from National History Archives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center.

[*Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1994)]. But they felt that the book would not sell in Third World countries, in Latin countries. Which is a lot of crap! Because the only way that you’re going to learn the history, especially if you’re far away and just coming out, is to be able to pick up a book and read about the history of the Stonewall and how you were liberated. I know many of our countries are not as liberated as the United States, as far as the gays are concerned, especially Latin American countries, because once again you got to remember that we have to play that big macho role, you know, men, we have to make lots of babies! But it’s a shame that it has taken thirty two years for people to finally realize how much we have given to you, to realize the history of the trans involvement in this move-ment. And in that note, I hope to see you when I send out the e-mails to you, and I hope you pass that on. That I hope to see a lot of you there for the Amanda Milan actions and I once again wish you all a very happy gay pride day but also think about us (*the audience claps*).