

Finding Aid to Sylvester collection

(#2018-05)

Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society

Collection Title: Sylvester collection

Collection Number: 2018-05

Physical Description: 14 linear feet (1 carton, 1 manuscript box, 9 oversize boxes, 1 artifact)

Creator: Sylvester, 1947-1988

Date (inclusive): circa 1970-2011

Language of Material: English

Abstract:

Sylvester (born Sylvester James Jr.) was a disco-soul singer-songwriter known for his androgenous appearance, falsetto singing voice, and the moniker the “Queen of Disco.” The collection is arranged into four series: Photographs, Publicity and Event Materials, Audiovisual Materials, and Garments and Artifacts.

Preferred Citation:

[Identification of item], Sylvester collection (#2018-05), The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Conditions Governing Access:

Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights:

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Acquisition Information:

The collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society by Positive Resource Center and Project Open Hand, in the care of Bernadette Hurde, Sylvester’s sister, in January 2018.

Processing Information:

Finding Aid created by Megan Needels in 2021 with funding provided by the National Historical Publications & Records Commission. Biographical Note revised by Sailor Galaviz and Devin McGeehan Muchmore in May 2025.

This finding aid uses terminology for LGBTQ people that was in current use at the time of its creation. Descriptive language for queer identities evolves quickly and some of these terms may now be dated or even offensive. Finding aids are themselves historical documents; they reflect the moment in which they were written and often reflect the terms that subjects used for themselves. Please contact the GLBT Historical Society Archivist with questions or comments.

Biographical/Organizational History Note:

Sylvester (born Sylvester James Jr.) was a disco-soul singer-songwriter known for his androgynous appearance, falsetto singing voice, and the moniker the “Queen of Disco.” He was born September 6, 1947 in the Watts district of Los Angeles and developed a passion for singing through the gospel choir of the Pentecostal church he attended as a child. Sylvester left the church after the congregation expressed disapproval of his homosexuality. Around this time, he became involved with a group called the Disquotays, which included Black transwomen and people who identified as cross-dressers. In 1970, Sylvester moved to San Francisco where he performed with the avant-garde psychedelic theatre group, the Cockettes. During this time, he performed in solo segments of their shows, largely influenced by female soul and jazz musicians such as Billie Holiday. In 1977, Sylvester released his eponymous first solo album. A year later, he released the disco record, *Step II* which included two of his most famous songs, “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “Dance (Disco Heat).” The album was certified gold and praised worldwide. In the years to follow, Sylvester recorded eight additional albums with Fantasy Records and Megatone Records, the latter of which was owned by his friend and longtime collaborator, Patrick Cowley. In the early 1980s, Sylvester became involved in AIDS/HIV activism, performing in charity benefits to raise money and awareness to combat the spread of the disease. In 1987, after losing his boyfriend to the disease, Sylvester was diagnosed with AIDS. As his health deteriorated rapidly, he used his platform as a celebrity to speak openly about his condition and the impact that the disease was having on the Black community. Sylvester died December 16, 1988, at the age of 41. In his will, he left royalties from the future sales of his music to two HIV/AIDS charities, Project Open Hand and the AIDS Emergency Fund.

Scope and Content:

The collection documents the life and work of the disco-soul singer-songwriter, Sylvester. The records span from circa 1970-2011, with a primary focus on 1974-1988. The collection is arranged into four series: Photographs, Publicity and Event Materials, Audiovisual Materials, and Garments and Artifacts. Photographs contain photographic prints of Sylvester with friends and family, publicity photographs, performance photographs, and a signed portrait of Sylvester. It also includes photographs of Steve Fabus, a DJ that has been active in San Francisco since the 1970s, and nightclub events during that time. Publicity and Event Materials contain Sylvester related ephemera such as a program for his memorial service, news clippings, obituaries, and

awards. It also contains materials such as postcards, posters, a scrapbook, and ephemera relating to Steve Fabus and the San Francisco nightclub scene. Audiovisual Materials contain a Living for the City LP. Garments and Artifacts contain stage wear and costumes, branded t-shirts, and artifacts such as a framed collection of Sylvester's gloves.

Indexing Terms:

Gay Men

Music

Fashion

African Americans

Black people

People of color

Container Listing

Series I: Photographs, circa 1970-1987

Physical Description: 1 box, 1 oversize box

Scope and Content: This series contains photographic prints of Sylvester with friends and family, publicity photographs, performance photographs, and a signed portrait of Sylvester. It also includes photographs of Steve Fabus and San Francisco nightclub events.

Arrangement: Series is arranged chronologically.

Box 1, Folder 1	Photographs [1], circa 1970-1985
Box 1, Folder 2	Photographs [2], circa 1975-1985
Box 1, Folder 3	Photographs from Steve Fabus, circa 1975-1995
Box 1, Folder 4	Nightclub photographs, circa 1975-1990
Oversize box 2, Folder 1	Mounted Sylvester photograph, circa 1980-1985
Oversize box 2, Folder 2	Signed Sylvester photograph, circa 1986-1987

Series II: Publicity and Event Materials, 1974-2011

Physical Description: 1 box, 1 carton, 3 oversize boxes

Scope and Content: This series contains Sylvester related ephemera such as a program for his memorial service and a postcard for one of his performances, news clippings, obituaries, and awards. It also contains materials such as postcards, posters, a scrapbook, and other ephemera relating to Steve Fabus and the San Francisco nightclub scene.

Arrangement: Series is arranged in the original order of the creator.

Box 1, Folder 5	Sylvester news clippings, circa 1974-1980
Box 1, Folder 6	Sylvester ephemera, 1982,1988
Box 1, Folder 7	San Francisco Sentinel cover story, 1988
Box 1, Folder 8	Obituaries, 1988-1989
Box 1, Folder 9	Letter from Harry Britt, 1988
Box 1, Folder 10	San Francisco nightclub postcards, 1980-2006
Box 1, Folder 11	Steve Fabus at Theatre 1839 poster, 1980
Box 1, Folder 12	San Francisco nightclub ephemera, 1981-2001
Box 1, Folder 13	SPKR - Evolution of the Queer Dance Floor materials, 2011
Carton 1, Item 1	South California Disco DJ Best Male Vocal Artist, 1978
Carton 1, Item 2	South California Disco DJ Male Vocalist of the Year award, 1982
Carton 1, Item 3	South California Disco DJ Overall Best Record of the Year award, 1982
Carton 1, Item 4	Ontario Disco Awards Best Male Artist of the Year placard, 1978-1979
Carton 1, Item 5	Cable Car Award Concert of the Year, 1985
Carton 1, Item 6	AIDS/Kaposi Sarcoma Benefit placard, 1983
Carton 1, Item 7	David Award Recording Artist of the Year base, 1984

Carton 1, Item 8	David Award Recording Artist of the Year, 1984
Carton 1, Item 9	The Dance Music Hall of Fame award, 2005
Carton 1, Item 10	Billboard's Disco Forum Dance Disco Heat award, 1979
Oversize box 1, Item 7	Framed You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real) record, 1978
Oversize box 1, Item 8	Framed You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real) - 250,000 copies record, 1978
Oversize box 3, Item 2	Mounted Bazar album cover, 1974
Oversize box 4, Item 1	David Peterson's Rhythm at Townsend scrapbook, 1993

Series III: Audiovisual Materials, 1986

Physical Description: 1 oversize box

Scope and Content: This series contains a Living for the City LP.

Arrangement: This series is collected without further arrangement.

Oversize box 3, Item 1	Sylvester Mentone Records – Living for the City LP, 1986
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Series IV: Garments and Artifacts, circa 1977-1986

Physical Description: 7 oversize boxes, 1 artifact

Scope and Content: This series contains stage wear and costumes, branded t-shirts, and artifacts such as Sylvester's framed collection of gloves.

Arrangement: This series is collected without further arrangement.

Oversize box 1, Item 1	Set of five hair pins, undated
Oversize box 1, Item 2	Green bolo tie, undated
Oversize box 1, Item 3	Black bolo tie, undated
Oversize box 1, Item 4	Brooch [1], undated
Oversize box 1, Item 5	Brooch [2], undated

Oversize box 1, Item 6	Earing, undated
Oversize box 3, Item 3	Mounted New Year letter, 1986
Oversize box 5, Item 1	White/cream costume in satin and tulle netting, wire under structure with small mirrors, undated [1]
Oversize box 6, Item 1	Peach costume with white and silver crane sequin motif, undated
Oversize box 6, Item 2	The City tank top, undated
Oversize box 6, Item 3	End Up t-shirt, undated
Oversize box 6, Item 4	Sylvester Living Proof on Fantasy Records t-shirt, circa 1979
Oversize box 7, Item 1	Vertical black/white striped suit coat with translucent sequins by Pat Campano, undated
Oversize box 7, Item 2	Royal Blue sequined suit coat by Pat Campano, undated
Oversize box 8, Item 1	Black crepe with pink sequin cape, undated
Oversize box 8, Item 2	Pink sequined pant suit coat by Pat Campano, undated
Oversize box 9, Item 1	White/cream costume in satin and tulle netting, wire under structure with small mirrors, undated [2]
Artifact 1	Framed collection of gloves, undated