



Leslie Feinberg interviews Sylvia Rivera

'I'm glad I was in the Stonewall riot'

Workers World Managing Editor Leslie Feinberg interviewed Sylvia Rivera. Rivera, a Puerto Rican drag queen, was a combatant at the Stonewall Rebellion in June 1969 that ignited the young gay liberation movement.

Sylvia Rivera and African American drag queen Marsha P. Johnson co-founded STAR: Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries in New York City in 1970. In this interview, which is included in Feinberg's upcoming non-fiction book "Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue" (Beacon, Oct. 1998), Rivera describes memories of life on the streets of New York as a drag queen, the uprising in Greenwich Village, and the era that followed:

I left home at age 10 in 1961. I hustled on 42nd Street. The early 60s was not a good time for drag queens, effeminate boys or boys that wore makeup like we did.

Back then we were beat up by the police, by everybody. I didn't really come out as a drag queen until the late 60s.

When drag queens were arrested, what degradation there was. I remember the first time I got arrested, I wasn't even in full drag. I was walking down the street and the cops just snatched me.

We always felt that the police were the real enemy. We expected nothing better than to be treated like we were animals-and we were.

We were stuck in a bullpen like a bunch of freaks. We were disrespected. A lot of us were beaten up and raped.

When I ended up going to jail, to do 90 days, they tried to rape me. I very nicely bit the shit out of a man.

I've been through it all.

In 1969, the night of the Stonewall riot, was a very hot, muggy night. We were in the Stonewall [bar] and the lights came on. We all stopped dancing. The police came in.

They had gotten their payoff earlier in the week. But Inspector Pine came in-him and his morals squad-to spend more of the government's money.

We were led out of the bar and they catted us all up against the police vans. The cops pushed us up against the grates and the fences. People started throwing pennies, nickels, and quarters at the cops.

And then the bottles started. And then we finally had the morals squad barricaded in the Stonewall building, because they were actually afraid of us at that time. They didn't know we were going to react that way.

We were not taking any more of this shit. We had done so much for other movements. It was time.

It was street gay people from the Village out front-homeless people who lived in the park in Sheridan Square outside the bar-and then drag queens behind them and everybody behind us. The Stonewall Inn telephone lines were cut and they were left in the dark.

One Village Voice reporter was in the bar at that time. And according to the archives of the Village Voice, he was handed a gun from Inspector Pine and told, "We got to fight our way out of there."

This was after one Molotov cocktail was thrown and we were ramming the door of the Stonewall bar with an uprooted parking meter. So they were ready to come out shooting that night.

Finally the Tactical Police Force showed up after 45 minutes. A lot of people forget that for 45 minutes we had them trapped in there.

All of us were working for so many movements at that time. Everyone was involved with the women's movement, the peace movemen

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