

# Slyvester Changes His Tune

## 'We've Come Of Age'

by John Bryan

Slyvester -- the former Cockette whose legendary drag was a show in itself -- has decided to "come out" a second time. Now he's playing himself and letting his music speak for itself.

In the process, he's put together one of the most energetic and moving gospel-oriented shows yet seen in this area and, for the first time in 13 years, he's gotten involved again in politics -- this time the growing campaign to stop Anita Bryant's anti-homosexual "crusade" dead in its tracks.

This exclusive Barb interview with Slyvester appears just as his first Fantasy LP hits the stores and as he prepares for the final appearance in a fast round of local gigs -- he "headlined" in the June 26 Gay Pride Day parade, did a pair of July 4 concerts in California Hall and will stage a big production one-nighter at the Old Waldorf on July 20.

Then San Francisco's best-known former drag queen will hit the road for a tour of the East and Europe. We reminisced about the "good old days" of the early seventies when Slyvester spent at least \$10,000 a year on outrageous costumes and, "I had 30 or 40 wigs, always pairs of eyelashes. . . I had my nails done twice, three times a week like Cher's nails. . . Designers in Los Angeles would do a line of costumes for me, fabulous things, you know -- the best fabrics, the best cuts which sometimes cost, you know, \$3000 or \$4000. But then I needed more costumes because my record company was selling the image.

"A lot of times the music would get lost because there was so much to see. I would design my sets where everything would focus and I would be even more outrageous than the sets. . . And so people would come to see what I was wearing or what my show was going to look like and great performances were totally lost in all that glitter. . . Sometimes, after a show, I'd change into regular street clothes and out in the lobby people would be talking about me to me. Now that's what I call strange!"

Those days are -- for the most part -- over.

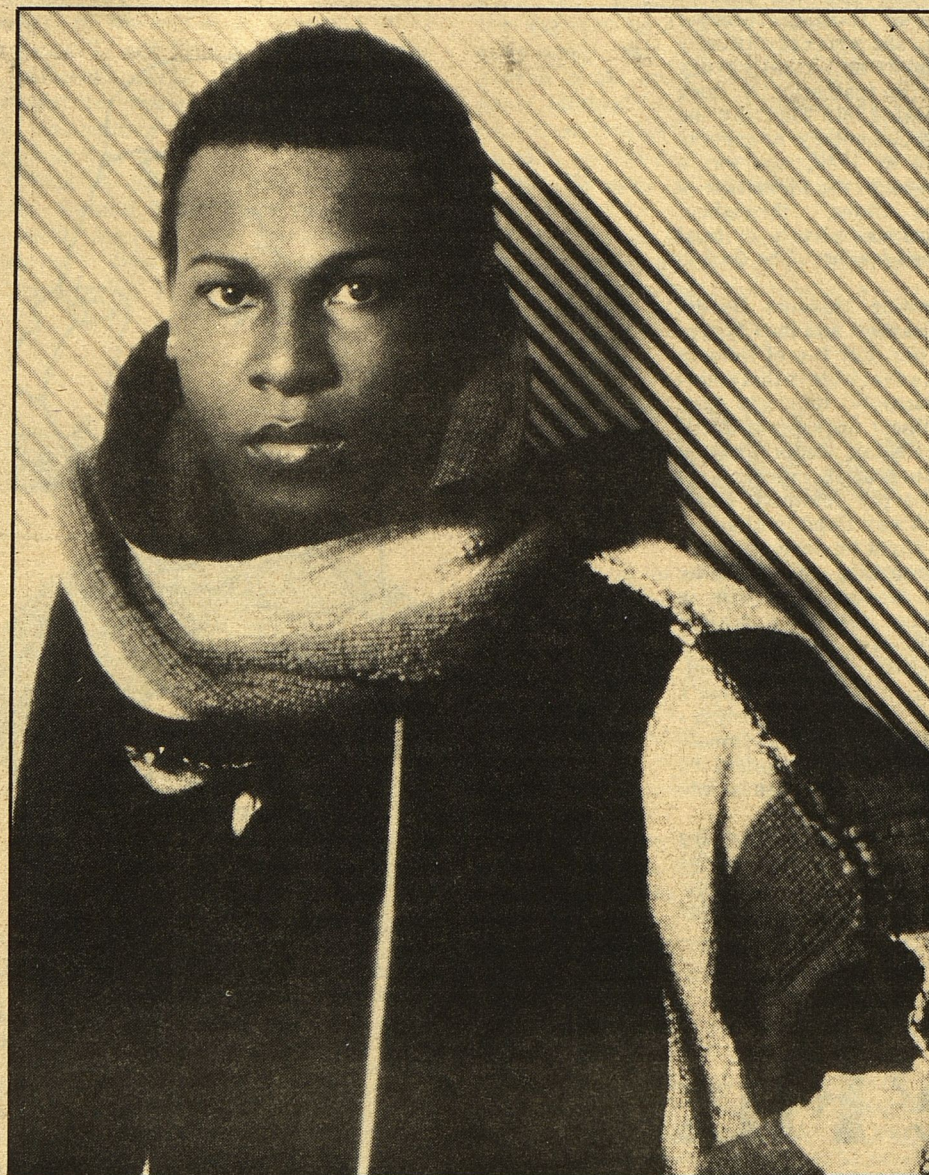
During our interview, Slyvester wore nothing more elaborate than a pair of old army fatigues. His round, full face was devoid of make-up. He wore no jewelry and his mannerisms were neither shrill nor particularly feminine. He wanted to talk more about music and his politics than about costumes. The man has changed.

Now he's working with two full-bodied, rich-voiced gospel singers -- Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes -- who are known as the "Two Tons of Fun." They add so much punch to Slyvester's already driving, highly-animated style that his shows (like the series of recent appearances in the Palms Cafe) are a sure shot of energy and

joy, danceable to the point where the whole tight-packed place starts to swing and sway.

He described how he met the two women about a year ago.

"We were having auditions," he recalled. "I just have this thing about singers, you know. I don't think skinny, beautiful girls can sing. They really look so



"If I want to be a woman, I can be a woman," proclaims Slyvester. "If I want to be a man, I can be one."

good, so they really don't want to sing and carry on. And Martha came in and I looked at her and the moment I saw those size 58 tits, I knew she could sing.

"And I said, 'Do you know any other girls that are like you? You know, big like you?' And she said, 'Ya. I've got a friend, Izora. She's got seven kids. I don't know how she'll react to you and your trip but I'll bring her.' And the moment I saw her, she didn't even have to open her mouth and I knew she could sing.

"And she's been carrying on ever since. She's even more outrageous than I am. Sometimes, you know, if it wasn't for her

carrying on, I couldn't keep going. She's always doing something and we're going to stick together through thick and thin. I'll never get rid of them."

When Slyvester initially appeared on the local entertainment scene it was often singing the songs and wearing the costumes of great black singers like Bessie Smith or Billy Holiday. He'd become expert on early jazz and blues in his home town of Los Angeles some years before he moved permanently to San Francisco in the late sixties. Now he's moving into gospel-oriented soul and disco music.

"My first love is jazz, of course," he explained. "So there is some jazz flavoring in there. Not really any abstract stuff like I like, but that will come, you know. I've written five songs on the new album.

tune although it doesn't look like one. . . I'm very into Moroccan costumes now. I don't wear wigs anymore. . . Sometimes do-rags or my own short hair. Sometimes I make-up. Sometimes I don't, depending, you know, on how much of an illusion I can create from the stage."

I asked if this shift in image is a good reflection of a psychological change that Slyvester has gone through as well.

"Of course. Ya," he said. "I don't have to do all that anymore. I'm more focused on the music.

"Did you ever want to go the whole route?" I asked. "You know, become a woman completely through a transsexual operation?"

"No," he replied. "I'm glad I didn't. I've changed too much. I would have been stuck in one form and I wouldn't have liked it. This way, if I want to be a woman, I can be a woman. If I want to be a man, I can be one. Whatever I want to be, I can be. Whatever I feel like being when I wake up in the morning, I can be.

"And to have Anita Bryant and her whole crusade put a damper on me is ridiculous. That's her trip. If it works for her, that's good. But who is she to tell me that it's wrong for me?"

Anita's widely-publicized brand of bigotry has gotten Slyvester hopping mad and he's doing benefits to raise money to fight her.

"If she gains ground," he said, "it will affect me as a performing artist. It will make me feel intimidated. I'm not going to feel like that. I refuse to. I think she's being just awful to have gone through and done everything she's done. Who's she going to go after when she's through with the queens? And knowing that nine times out of ten queens have created the whole illusion she's about. If by nothing other than doing her hair and her makeup and making her clothes. You know, gays are known for creating illusions. All the illusions for everyone to enjoy.

"I just don't understand her trip, saying that you've got to watch out for the homosexuals -- they're coming to your town, 10 million homosexuals stomping across the United States in spikes. She's saying just ridiculous things, completely absurd things. I mean, I was never recruited and I don't know anyone who is gay who was ever recruited into homosexuality.

"I mean, she just completely puts down the mentality of human beings. Period. I mean, even me -- as outrageous as I've been or as outrageous as I can be -- there are many things I just would not do. I've always been able to go anywhere.

"I mean, I could go to the Beverly Hills Hotel or the Fairmont or anywhere with anyone, you know, without them being scared that I'm going to embarrass them or that I'm going to be hot-cocking with some guy under the table. You know, it's just not done."

Slyvester feels that his current change of image reflects not only his own maturation but that of the entire gay movement.

"I think it's time to prove that we, as people, are people," he said. "Now everyone knows that there are gay people in the world. It's not hushed-up now.

"Now is the time to show where we are and how much political power and how much financial power there is in the gay community. We've come of age."

Two are discos."

Although he's no longer wearing elaborate costumes, Slyvester still believes that "there always has to be a separation between the stage and the audience. I strongly believe in that. Josephine Baker says that the illusion you create from the stage is all that people know of you. . . I never wear dresses anymore. Always trousers of some sort, even if they're cloth of gold or sequined or something, you know. They're always trousers and tops.

I have one Chinese costume from the Peking Opera that's a man's cos-