

SYLVESTER



Sylvester  
*Step II*  
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Fantasy

# Sylvester's Step II: Sylvester Taught Me How to Be Queer

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I'm an atheist, but I believe that Sylvester is my guardian angel. I believe he watches over all of us nelly queens, sissies, nancyboys, and marys who sought solace and escape on a dance floor. Sylvester is no mere disco diva, but our Francis Scott Key. The United States has The Star Spangled Banner but we have "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)."

That song – six and a half minutes of thumping, pulsing glory – was the first song that I remember speaking to me directly as a queer man. It was explicitly queer and unapologetically so. It encapsulated a moment in time in queer history before AIDS destroyed the hedonistic innocence enjoyed by gay guys who partied hard, took recreational drugs, and had lots of sex. Sylvester – born Sylvester James, Jr. – was part of the rich tradition of black soulful singers who found success with disco. *Step II* is his fourth album and his best. It's the kind of album that wedded the frivolity of disco with the church-steeped gospel that informed Sylvester's gravity-defying voice.

*Step II* is easily dismissed and ignored by music and rock critics because it's a disco record and disco supposedly sucks. It's not a coincidence that mainstream music criticism takes a dim view of a genre of music dominated by queer folks and people of color. Disco has an unfortunate reputation because of "Disco Duck" and *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*, but "respectable" genres of popular music like prog rock, rap, and rock all have their embarrassing nadirs. Few have inspired such animosity that people staged rallies in which piles of records were burned and after which a riot ensues.

But *Step II* is a fantastic record because it works insulated from trying to be "good" music. It ignores respectability politics and instead urges its listeners to have a good time. It opens with the iconic "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)." It celebrates a moment in every gay man's life when he goes to the local gay bar, spots some cutie's eye from across a smoky and crowded dance floor, and takes him home. What the song does is elevate that experience from merely sex to something more profound, more political. Because after all, being queer – being *openly* queer is often a political act (even more so back in 1977 when Sylvester wrote/recorded the song). The song is revolutionary because it cast being gay not as some affliction to be shouldered bravely (but pitifully), but instead, it celebrated being queer.

The first time I heard "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" was when watching Rob Epstein's 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*. The movie was moving enough, but I was hypnotized by the throbbing synthesizer, and was entranced with Sylvester's bouncy falsetto. The song had an urgency and gravitas that belied its lyrics of feeling one's oats on a dance floor. Harvey Milk urged people to come out, insisting that being openly queer was necessary for the queer rights movement to succeed – "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" wasn't merely a party record, it was a call to arms for all of us to strap on our dancing shoes. To the outside world, the gay bar was simply a place for queers to get together – but it was so much more for those of us who found the gay bar to be a safe place, free of bigotry. It's a defiant song because when Sylvester is singing it, he's not asking for permission to be queer. He's boasting, refusing to use coded language to make it more palpable for a straight audience. Being queer is often a revolutionary act –

RuPaul, the most direct descendant of Sylvester, once proclaimed on *The Arsenio Hall Show* that “Every time I bat my eyelashes, it’s a political act.”

So after hearing “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” I had to get the record. This was the mid-1990s before the Internet was a regular thing, so I had to go to a used record store – 2<sup>nd</sup> Hand Tunes in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood. I asked the guy behind the counter if he knew the song. I didn’t know the title, so I just hummed it a bit and described it to him. “It’s a disco song by this guy with a really high voice.”

He nodded and walked over to the disco LPs and pulled out a slightly-worn record. I was hoping Sylvester would be on the cover, but he wasn’t. Instead it was a close-up of a man’s foot, wearing an expensive-looking loafer, while another foot – bare, with red nail polish – was kicking over a glass of champagne. I assumed the foot with the nail polish was a woman’s foot, but later realized that *both* feet would’ve been Sylvester’s. He played with androgyny, predicting its artistic potential long before New Wave would make it commercially viable.

I took that record home and wore it out. I played it on an old record player I stole from my grandmother’s house during a visit (I played Whitney Houston’s debut album and Barbra Streisand’s *Memories* album on that player as well). Initially, I only listened to “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)”, stopping the album by lifting the needle and putting back to the beginning of the song, so that I could hear it again.

It’s easy to see why the album—and Sylvester’s discography—is overwhelmed by the song. It’s brilliant and it’s tempting to reduce the album to that one hit song. But that would be a mistake. The rest of the album is a brilliant mix of dance songs that awoke in me a fierce drag queen diva that I never knew was there. The combination of Sylvester’s crazy voice with the giant-voiced backup singers, all wailing their hearts out over percolating beats was too much for me, and I couldn’t sit still.

“Dance (Disco Heat)” is almost a duet, with Sylvester singing alongside The Weather Girls. It was a song, which, like “Mighty Real”, made me imagine a life of fun, partying, hanging out with hot guys. At the time, I was still figuring out who and what I was (and who and what I was into), and “Dance (Disco Heat)” was aspirational.

The song has a programmed synthesizer that sounded like something Giorgio Moroder would’ve crafted for Donna Summer. There were weird swirling sound effects, like lasers and gurgling synths that sounded like Foley from a sci-fi movie. The joy was infectious. When the leather-lunged divas shouted from the speakers to “be yourself and choose your feelin’” I wanted to be in that space that existed in that song. I didn’t know how I would go about getting to that space, but I knew that it existed because a large vinyl record told me so.

“Grateful” always reminded of Diana Ross and the Supremes’ “You Keep Me Hangin’ On.” Unsurprisingly, I idolized Ross, too, and like a lot of clichés, I sang “Endless Love” and “It’s My Turn” into a hairbrush in front of a mirror. There is some neat, quick stuttering of an electric guitar that mimics the clarion call guitar riff that makes “You Keep Me Hangin’ On” so memorable and iconic. When I made mixtapes (which back then meant me holding up a tape recorder in front of my record player), I paired “Grateful” with “You Keep Me Hangin’ On.” I didn’t appreciate at the time, the obvious link between Ross and Sylvester, both of whom would loom so large in queer culture as well as Black queer culture. Ross seemingly set out a blueprint for drag queens to follow, and at the time, I was immersing myself in Black queer culture without even knowing it (it took having an older gay

brother of a Black classmate of mine to appraisingly ask me, "How do you know so much about *this*?"

The remaining three songs on the album were ballads and didn't get as much play. I felt as if they were a let down from the dance songs, and I didn't listen to them quite as much. A shame because they were fantastic in their own way. "I Took My Strength From You" has some nifty Spanish guitar strumming, and the female vocalists do some great whistle-register trilling. "Was It Something I Said" was great because Sylvester and his backup vocalists start off with some funny dialogue that sounds lifted from a sitcom, and "Just You and Me Forever" has the singer doing some goose bump-inducing scales.

But it's the dance songs which stayed with me. Sylvester died of AIDS in 1988. Knowing this gives the songs a new sense of urgency, pathos, and gravitas. That his death occurred at the height of the disease's indiscriminate decimation of queer communities throughout the United States, in the face of a hostile government's indifference, made the songs even more important. When I feel I'm getting complacent now, because of the gains of the queer community, I always go back to listening to Sylvester's *Step II* to remind me of a time when I didn't take my out-ness for granted. Listening to *Step II* now reminds me of a time when I was gingerly and carefully stepping into a queer community, not wholly sure of myself, nor my place. *Step II* acted as inspiration, succor, and escapism.