

Kindred Transmissions Episode 1 – Frequency of Aliveness - On Marsha P Johnson with Tourmaline

Audio Transcript

[Music]

Jules Gill-Peterson:

Welcome to Kindred Transmissions, a new podcast where we tune into the voices of trans people from history to find kindred spirits across time. On the heels of Pride this year, we're looking back at the history of the Stonewall Uprising in New York City, a place where trans struggles with state repression continue to this day.

Marsha P. Johnson came to New York from New Jersey in the 1960s and quickly saw the injustices faced by people like her. With Sylvia Rivera. She founded STAR—Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries—which provided shelter for unhoused trans youth. Together with her sisters, Marsha advocated on behalf of the most vulnerable in their midst. She spent decades engaged in direct actions campaigns and mutual aid. Marsha also performed as a member of the off-Broadway Theater Company, Hot Peaches.

In this episode, artist and filmmaker Tourmaline sits down with us to tell us about the revolutionary magic of Marsha. Tourmaline is also the author of a [recently published biography about Marsha P. Johnson](#). Tourmaline will take us on a tour through some archival recordings of Marsha and her siblings, and dial into what she sees as the transformative power of Marsha's aliveness.

I am Jules Gill-Peterson. I'm a historian and your host of Kindred Transmissions by the Digital Transgender Archive, a podcast that transmits the echoes of kinship across generations. Before we start, here's a content warning. What you're about to hear contains mentions about self-harm and death.

And now here's the frequency from Marsha P. Johnson.

Archival Recording:

Marsha P. Johnson: When I first went to the Stonewall I was in drag. As you can see, I'm not doing much drag anymore but I'm thinking about going back in because I just got on the cover of Earth, Wind, and Fire and I'm thinking about, you know, doing some more drag. 'cause I'm going to beauty school now.

Tourmaline:

Marsha was a Virgo; that's a mutable sign. Mutable signs are about dispersing something into

the world. In its best form, in its most generative form, I find the archive to be a way to disperse information and be in relationship with those who are on a similar frequency.

[Music]

Tourmaline:

My name is Tourmaline. I'm an artist. I use archival material and history to create stories about aliveness and pleasure and calibrating to the fullness of who we are. I've made 20 years of work about Marsha P. Johnson starting back in the early 2000s.

I was living in Sunset Park in Brooklyn, and it was the 40th anniversary of Stonewall and I remember the New York Public Library uploaded a whole suite of work from Diana Davies covering those early years of gay liberation. You saw Marsha in black and white at NYU, Marsha and Sylvia and friends in Albany protesting, and you also saw Marsha in color in Washington Square Park. It just felt so alive.

Marsha, her aliveness extends well beyond when she was in a physical body. And so, her spirit, her influence, her frequency or energy, the vibe, her magic are actually very present in my life and are kind of like radio stations that I can tune to and I can tell if I am on the path because it feels really good. It feels like a beautiful invitation to be the most unedited version of myself. It feels like a really wonderful reminder to just like be with my community and be in the care and be in the sharing and being in that generosity.

[Music]

Tourmaline:

It's so interesting spending this much time around Marsha. And recently I've just been thinking about her performances. She was a performer in the Angels of Light and then in Hot Peaches. And some of the most magnetic Marsha moments for me are watching her perform on stage.

Archival Recording:

Jimmy Camicia: And now ladies and gentlemen, the queen of the island, and the Saint of Christopher Street...Marsha P. Johnson.

That's Jimmy Camicia, who was the director of the Hot Peaches. I took that line and I put it in my film, *Happy Birthday, Marsha*. Jimmy, founded the Hot Peaches and I really think it's so wonderful whenever I get to, you know, see footage like this, for all of these stars like Marsha to exude their celestialness.

Archival Recording:

Marsha P. Johnson: I'd like to thank Jimmy, who's been saying all these wonderful things about me who have made me a star for the last 14 years in New York City Hot Peaches

and I'd like to thank Margo Howard. Howard, my oldest and dearest friend in New York City. And I'd like to thank you ladies and gentlemen for coming to see us tonight..

This practice of thanking everyone is so a part of the quality of Marsha P. Johnson. There's been so much audio and so much footage that I've just watched her kind of really list the people who have supported her being. And underneath that is such a lesson that we are deeply woven into the fabric of community, and people, I think, were really responding to was how Marsha reflected that back through a really sincere and generous, litany of "thank you"s

while doing it kind of dressed like, the iconic gold Lemay, the earring, things, the hair. And Marsha used to pray to Saint Lucie and Saint Barbara and you know many others. Marsha, to me, is like dressed as the Saint of Christopher Street, of Queer life.

I think the audience is responding to such a larger than life figure, recognizing them, reflecting them back, and that to me, is part of the Marsha magic.

Archival Recording

[Marsha singing a show tune over piano accompaniment]

Tourmaline:

Marsha really was deeply influenced by Glinda, the Good Witch, that kind of vaudeville performance. She said, in an interview, "I love when people think I'm just a dumb little blonde because I can work them out of their money." And so that's part of, you know, how I understand Marsha's performance. And then another aspect is she navigated what she called a tangled computer. That's what she called her mind—her computer. And she used to say, like, "my computer is getting all tangled up." The audience loves her for it, the kind of unedited-ness of her performance and her being and is right there with her when she says...

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: Can I start again?

Audience: Yeah!

*Marsha P. Johnson. You can be a leather angel on a sleek black Harley bike. Or a redhead screaming f*ggot or a dazzling d*ke. You can lock yourself in a closet in a fine mink stole, but it really doesn't matter if you ain't got soul.*

They loved it. The audience loved it. You can really see why they loved it from the aesthetic of her outfit, from her tone, to the delivery just like the power of her voice and the quality of her spirit.

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: [singing] Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, til you find your dream.

Tourmaline:

Yeah, I just love what she's wearing. Randy wrote in one of his newsletters about how Marsha

sometimes looked like someone dumped a Christmas tree on top of her and with the candy cane and the tinsel. And I just think that's so brilliant.

Marsha brings that larger than life, feeling and dimension that is found on stage to the mundane. So when people walked by Marsha and she was doing her spare change for a starving actress bit outside of the Christopher St. subway station that Augusto Machado told me once that that was the signal that you could be more free in the Village because someone like Marsha was dressed so fabulously and it was a big sign and symbol. But then when she was performing, she turned that look all the way up. So if that was other people's stage looks and she was doing that on the street. Her stage looks would be out of this world, just like truly iconic.

[Music]

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: And in 1969, this mayor threatened to close every gay bar in New York and at the Stonewall I was just one of the patrons that used to visit the place they had this great big raid and they had everybody line up against the wall and show all of our identification.

Tourmaline:

So one of the chapters that I wrote in *MARSHA*, the biography, is about Stonewall, and I talk a little bit about this really beautiful way that Marsha talks about when Stonewall happened.

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: But everybody says it was uh June that they had the Stonewall riots, cause I remember it was August cuz I think I was giving a birthday party there and I came downtown and they were rioting. But it was like August 28 or something. Cuz everybody has a hard time remembering what day the Stonewall riots was..all you have to do is go to.

So it's nearly 20 years out from the Stonewall riots. She was talking about how it happened in August or on her birthday.

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: And in 1969, it was the last gay bar to be raided by Mayor Beam in the village.

And my friend Leah Lakshmi, who is a poet and a writer and a disability justice organizer and activist writes about how a riot and especially Stonewall was not a neurotypical event. it was a neuro queer event, right?

It wasn't a sane event. It was a maddening event, which makes so much sense as it aligns to you remembering the date in multiple different ways. And I think that's just such a powerful way to remember through trauma in the midst of the HIV and AIDS crises how trauma also shapes our memory, like we don't all remember in the same way.

[Music]

Archival Recording

Marsha P. Johnson: Oh, my dear Sylvia. Sylvia was, was a, a real revolutionary person as far as, you know. Fighting for, uh, rights and street people and stuff like that. But she, uh, she had a lot of problems of her own in between. I mean that's why I was the one that advised her she should give up street transvestite action revolutionaries banner, and, uh, take a rest for a while and decide whether she wanted to pick it up again, because it was very, very hard for her like, everybody was against the transvestites just about in the movement.

Tourmaline:

After the 1973 Gay Pride, where Sylvia got on stage and roared y'all better quiet down.

Archival Recording

Sylvia Rivera: Y'all better quiet down.[crowd: shut the fuck..] I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every mother fucking week, and ask for your help and y'all don't do a goddamn thing for them.

And navigate and survived a lot of attacks, transphobic attacks and class-based attacks she went home and she attempted to commit suicide.

Archival Recording

Sylvia Rivera: We were both fighters and we. I am a survivor. Marsha's not here to survive with me. Marsha unfortunately had to, she passed on, but she's with me in spirit and she gives me a lot of hope.

And Sylvia talks about to Randy on, on the Pier in 1995 how Marsha and her friend Terry broke down the door and saved her life and said, "You and I are going to cross the River Jordan together. You're not going right now." And that really helped turn up the dial of Sylvia Rivera's commitment to stay in her physical body and keep experiencing life like that.

Archival Recording

Sylvia Rivera: Every time I look at that damn river and I sit there and meditate on the river she gives me, I actually feel her spirit telling me, you gotta keep fighting girly. 'cause it's not time for you to cross. The river Jordan, and we were supposed to cross it together.

To me, it's just such a beautiful way of Marsha talking about kind of the non-dichotomy between life and death. There's not a binary between life and death. It's just life, and a different kind of life, and a different kind of life, and a different kind of life.

Just a month before her body was found in the Hudson River which she called the River Jordan, she talked about how she was soon gonna go across the River Jordan and then just be born again and come on back and meet, you know, her billionaire husband.

Crossing the River Jordan was leading to an extension of a different kind of life, one outside of the physical.

[Music]

Tourmaline:

I think Marsha really was tuned in to her full awareness of how maybe the smallest part of life was in her physical body. Life was happening before she was in it and her life continues as she's not in it, just like those dials on a radio station.

To me, the archive has been dials to help tune to my tuner, to that frequency of aliveness.

[Music]

Jules Gill-Peterson:

Tourmaline understands better than anyone how captivating and surreal recordings of Marsha can be all these years later. They feel so vivid because of Marsha's performance talent. And so even after her passing, her spirit lives on. The life and context behind the recordings are just as remarkable.

And if you wanna explore them more, you can dive into the Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera collection on the [Digital Transgender Archive](#) website. That's where you'll find the archival media recordings and photographs that Tourmaline shares with us in this episode.

This episode of ***Kindred Transmissions*** is produced by Umi Hsu; Associate Producer Shei Yu. Editor: Evan Ibarra. Scripted by Umi Hsu and Shei Yu. Music composed by Imogen Teasley-Vlautin. Research by Rachel McIntosh. Graphic Design by Ariel Huang. Special thanks to Loni Shibuyama, Devlyn Camp, Quincy Surasmith, Krissy Clark, Ash Nichols, Jacob Alden Sargent, Lou McCarthy, ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in New York, L.O.V.E. Collective, and the Digital Transgender Archive.

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This is ***Kindred Transmissions*** by the Digital Transgender Archive. And I'm Jules Gill-Peterson. Listen to ***Kindred Transmissions*** anywhere you get podcasts.