

MARSHA P. JOHNSON

b. August 24, 1945

d. July 6, 1992

STONEWALL VETERAN

**Marsha P. Johnson
was a well-known
New York City drag queen
who fought police at the
Stonewall Riots.**

“I may be crazy but that don’t make me wrong.”

Born Malcolm Michaels, Marsha P. Johnson was a well-known New York City drag queen who fought police at the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and became a trailblazing transgender, gay rights and AIDS activist.

Immediately after Stonewall, Johnson joined the nascent Gay Liberation Front. In 1970 she cofounded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.) with fellow Stonewall agitator, Sylvia Rivera. At the time, transvestitism was illegal in

New York. Gender-nonconforming people, particularly those of color, faced intolerance, harassment and violence. Like Johnson, many lived on the streets and resorted to sex work for their survival.

S.T.A.R. created a shelter where transgender adults and youth could share food, clothing and support in relative safety. At the residence, Johnson’s maternal behavior earned her the nickname “queen mother.”

Johnson performed at local clubs and became a visible presence at gay rights events and protests. Andy Warhol photographed her and produced screen prints of her portrait. Although she favored the pronoun “she,” Johnson described herself as a “gay transvestite.” When asked about her middle initial, she would reply that “P” stood for “pay it no mind”— words that helped her persevere.

Johnson struggled with drug addiction. She contracted AIDS and joined ACT UP, an organization founded in the 1980s to combat the epidemic. She was instrumental in raising awareness about issues impacting people with the virus.

In 1992, shortly after New York’s Gay Pride Parade, Johnson’s body was found floating in the Hudson River. Although police initially ruled the death a suicide, she was last seen being harassed by a group of men. Despite a grassroots campaign to investigate her death, the N.Y.P.D. did not reopen the case until 2012. It remains unsolved.

Johnson has been the subject of multiple plays and films. Ten days before she died, she was interviewed for what became the 2012 documentary, “Pay it No Mind: The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson.” Johnson was also featured in the Oscar-nominated 2012 documentary “How to Survive a Plague,” about the early years of the AIDS crisis. A new documentary, “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson,” premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2017.



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