Marsha P. Johnson was an African-American transgender woman and LGBT rights activist. Despite the 2015 film “Stonewall” crediting a young, white, straight acting man with doing so, Marsha is known to be one of the main instigators of the Stonewall riots in 1969.

New York in the 50s and 60s was a pretty unpleasant place to be for LGBT+ people:

* The FBI kept lists of known homosexuals, where they liked to go and their friends
* Gay bars were raided, shut down and their patrons exposed in newspapers
* Cities performed “sweeps” to rid neighbourhoods, parks, bars and beaches of gay people
* It was unlawful to wear clothes that weren’t “gender appropriate”
* Thousands of gay men and women were publicly humiliated, physically harassed, fired, jailed, or institutionalised in mental hospitals

In the early hours of 28 June 1969, one of the regular police raids went wrong and a large crowd began to gather outside the Stonewall Inn. Rumours spread that patrons in the bar were being beaten and bottles and pennies started being thrown. Things got more violent as police used brutal means to put the crowd down and eventually barricaded themselves inside the Inn.

Sylvia Rivera, a self-identified “street queen” and friend of Marsha P. Johnson said of the riots:

*“You've been treating us like shit all these years? Uh-uh. Now it's our turn! It was one of the greatest moments in my life.”*

Marsha took energy from Stonewall and the momentum building in the gay liberation movement and, together with Sylvia Rivera, formed Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) which provided services and shelter to homeless transgender youth.

She continued to battle for LGBT+ rights throughout her life despite enduring mental health problems, periodic homelessness and having to work as a prostitute to make ends meet. She did however find success as a drag queen, Andy Warhol model and actress.

At the age of 46 on 6 July 1992, Marsha’s body was found in the Hudson River off West Village Piers. The police quickly ruled her death a suicide despite a widely held belief among her friends and others that she was in fact murdered. The recent Netflix documentary “The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson” tells to the story of Marsha and of her friend and trans activist Victoria Cruz’s battle to uncover the truth behind her death.

You can hear Marsha being interviewed as part of the Making Gay History podcast series: <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-11-johnson-wicker/> and <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/bonus-episode-from-the-vault-sylvia-rivera-marsha-p-johnson-1970/>

