

Funk Pioneer Sly Stone Showing Signs of Life (Again)

By Tim Wilton

Earlier this year, in the days leading up to the announced March 31st concert at the Flamingo Las Vegas by music visionary turned legendary recluse **Sly Stone**, bookmakers across Sin City were offering 45-1 odds that the leader of the seminal **Sly and the Family Stone** would be a no-show. Given the 1993 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee's reputation for skipping dozens of concerts and scheduled television appearances throughout his career, smart money sided with the bookies.

But Stone did make it to the stage that night to perform--albeit for just over thirty minutes--and perhaps finally shaking off the moss that he had gathered during the past two decades of his J.D. Salinger-like seclusion.

And just in time, too.

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of the release of Sly and the Family Stone's first LP, *A Whole New Thing*, **Sony/Legacy** has remastered and re-released the group's first seven albums, including the back-to-back landmark releases *Stand!* (1969) and *There's a Riot Goin' On* (1971), in a limited edition seven-CD boxed set titled *Sly and the Family Stone: The Collection*. Additionally, Sly has formed a new version of the Family Stone and is scheduled to tour parts of Europe this summer for the first time in more than thirty years.

Born **Sylvester Stewart** on March 15 1943--Sly (originally called "**Syl**" by his family and friends, he would adopt the "Sly Stone" moniker in 1963)-- is the second of five children born into the deeply religious household of K.C. and Alpha Stewart in **Denton, Texas**. Each of the Stewart children--eldest sister Loretta, younger brother

Freddie, younger sisters **Rose** and **Vaetta**, and Sly--were encouraged by their parents to learn and play music, primarily gospel.

By 1951, the Stewart family had relocated to Vallejo, California. Shortly thereafter, Sly and his three younger siblings formed **The Stewart Four**, performing gospel music at the church their family attended. The following year, The Stewart Four released a 78 RPM single, *On the Battlefield of the Lord*. By the time Sly was a teenager, he had become proficient on many instruments, but favored the guitar.

In high school, Sly joined a doo-wop group called **The Viscaynes**, an all-white band except for Sly and a Filipino teen, and a likely source of inspiration for Sly's eventual formation of the integrated Family Stone. The Viscaynes would go on to release a couple of local singles that didn't get a lot of airplay, while at the same time Sly had recorded and released a couple of singles locally under the name "**Danny Stewart**."

By 1963, Sylvester Stewart had officially morphed into Sly Stone when he began working as a disc jockey at KSOL, a San Francisco R&B radio station. Additionally, Sly became a record producer for Autumn Records, producing San Francisco bands **The Beau Brummels**, **Great Society** and **The Mojo Men**, as well as producing and releasing his own material.

In 1966, he brought together some local musicians, including acquaintance **Cynthia Robinson** on trumpet, and formed **Sly & the Stoners**. Around the same time, his brother Freddie had formed his own band, **Freddie & the Stone Souls**, which included **Gregg Errico** on drums.

In 1967, saxophonist and mutual friend **Jerry Martini** suggested that Sly and Freddie combine their bands. Along with Martini, the brothers retained Robinson, Errico and recruited bassist **Larry Graham**. Because the brothers both played guitar, Sly taught himself how to play the electric organ, while Freddie became the guitarist for the newly

formed Sly and the Family Stone. More importantly, Sly and the Family Stone was America's first fully integrated rock band, along both racial and gender lines.

For backing vocals, Sly brought aboard younger sister Vaetta and her teenage friends **Mary McCreary** and **Elva Mouton**, and promptly named them **Little Sister**. For added effect, Stewart siblings Freddie and Vaetta followed their older brother's lead and adopted the last name "Stone."

Signed to Loadstone Records, the group's debut single *I Ain't Got Nobody* became a regional hit, which caught the eye of CBS Records executive **Clive Davis**. Newly signed to CBS subsidiary Epic Records, Sly and the Family Stone released their debut album *A Whole New Thing* in mid 1967 to high praise but low sales. However, the album is remarkable for the simple fact that Sly and the Family Stone had introduced a hybrid mix of rock, soul and R&B that became known as "psychedelic soul."

Spurred by Davis to write and record a hit single, Sly and the Family Stone released their break out hit *Dance to the Music* in February 1968.

Just prior to the single's release, sibling Rose joined the Family Stone as a vocalist and keyboardist, and also adopted the last name "Stone." According to Joel Selvin, author of the 1998 biography *For the Record: Sly and the Family Stone: An Oral History* (1998), Rose was originally reluctant to join the group because she liked the security of her job at a local record store.

The frenetic groundbreaking *Dance to the Music* climbed to #8 on Billboard's Hot 100 sales chart, and would be included in the group's next album, also titled *Dance to the Music* (1968). Despite the album's lackluster sales, Sly and the Family Stone had become seasoned live performers who were well-known for their exuberant playing and their outlandish costumes.

In late 1968, the band released their third album, *Life*. Once again, sales expectations were not met, and the two singles that were released from the album, the title track and *M'Lady*, did not chart.

However, Sly and the Family Stone were laying down a strong foundation of superbly produced music that fused rock and soul with lyrics that preached love, peace, tolerance and inclusion. All they needed was a record buying audience. Their next album would provide just that.

Stand!, their 1969 offering, broke the band nationally in a huge way. The album sold millions of copies and placed two singles at or near the top of the sales charts: *Everyday People* (#1), and *Hot Fun in the Summertime* (#2), as well as taking their third single, *Stand!*, to #22. This was followed by their legendary appearance at Woodstock that same year.

Encouraged by the Woodstock crowd's enthusiastic response to their songs *I Want to Take You Higher* and *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)*, the band released them as stand alone singles in 1970. *Thank You* reached #1 and *Higher* (originally the b-side to *Stand!*) went to #38.

Their *Greatest Hits* came out in 1970 and it settled in at or near the top spot of the national sales charts for most of the year, also selling millions of copies.

By this time, the band had moved to Los Angeles where each of the members became more and more distracted by the various things that came with their sudden fame and wealth: alcohol and drug abuse, bitter in-fighting, and pressure from Epic to churn out more product.

The most affected member of the Family Stone was Sly himself. According to Selvin, Sly was being strong-armed by the Black Panther Party to make more militant music that was reflective of the black power movement; they also wanted him to replace

the two lone white members of the group, Errico and Martini, with black musicians. Additionally, he spent most of his waking hours high on drugs. Erratic and moody, Sly began missing tour dates and television appearances. He would hole up in his mansion for weeks at a time, staying up all night and day making, mixing and remixing new music tracks while snorting mountains of cocaine.

Despite the slow but steady disintegration of the band (drummer Errico had left in a dispute earlier in the year while), Sly and the Family Stone released *There's a Riot Goin' On* in the fall of 1971.

A complete departure from the group's earlier albums, *Riot* was filled with dark instrumentation and even darker lyrics, and was not widely accepted by the group's fan base. The first single from the album, *Family Affair*, did reach #1 on the charts and was followed by two more charted singles, *Runnin' Away* and *(You Caught Me) Smilin'*. Today, most music critics consider *There's a Riot Goin' On* a masterpiece.

After *Riot*, more lineup changes followed. Graham left to form his own version of the Family Stone, Graham Central Station, and would experience a good deal of success during the 70s.

The band's output continued with 1973's *Fresh* and its follow up the next year, *Small Talk*. However, the group's escalating use of drugs and Sly's proclivity to skip concert dates deemed the band too unreliable to book for concert dates. Without the steady and lucrative income generated by touring, the original Family Stone slowly but surely disintegrated. Rose quit the band and began a solo career; Freddie joined Graham Central Station, and eventually quit the music business altogether to become a church pastor; and Little Sister was disbanded.

After that, according to Selvin, the quality of Sly's output diminished in direct relation to his increasing drug addiction and paranoia. By the 1980s, and after a couple of

highly publicized drug arrests and a short stay in prison, Sly went into self-imposed seclusion, occasionally resurfacing as a guest artist on an album here and there.

In 1993, Sly and the Family Stone were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, along with **Cream**, **Creedence Clearwater Revival** and **The Doors**. After being introduced by **Parliament/Funkadelic** founder **George Clinton**, each of the original members of the Family Stone took to the stage to accept their award. Noticeably absent (he was not expected to appear) was Sly. However, at the last minute and to everyone's surprise, a long-clean and sober Sly did make it to the ceremony to give a hasty speech, and then left the podium--not to be seen again until last year's surprise appearance at the all star Grammy salute to the Family Stone.

A Sly and the Family Stone tribute album, *Different Stroke by Different Folks*, was released in 2005 by Starbucks' Hear Music label. But attempts to reunite the original line up following their Hall of Fame induction have not been successful, although various reunion tours and line ups headed by Martini, Errico and Rose Stone have surfaced throughout the years. In fact, there will be two competing Family Stone tours playing this summer.

Observers doubt that the original Family Stone will ever reunite entirely. But if Sly's public appearances of late are any indication of things to come, one should never fully discount the notion of a long-awaited reunion of one of the most innovative and important bands in the history of rock and roll. For now, we'll have to make due with the dueling Family Stone tours.

In the meantime, be sure to take a listen to the remastered set from Sony/Legacy. Additionally, Joel Selvin's outstanding bio on the band, *For the Record: Sly and the Family Stone: An Oral History*, is available in paperback on Amazon.com.